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Citizenship, Work and The Global Age

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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**Citizenship, Work and The
Global Age**

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The Host Organisations' Point of View on Italian School-Work Alternance Programs

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ABSTRACT: *This contribution presents some first results from the research by the Milan-Bicocca unit, within the Project of Relevant National Interest (PRIN)-2017 Evaluating the School-Work Alternance: a longitudinal study in Italian upper secondary schools. In-depth interviews to privileged witnesses in host organisations as well as to institutional representatives were conducted to investigate their point of view on school-work alternance and paths for transversal skills and orientation programs. Through the support of interview excerpts, a reflection upon relevant themes regarding on-the-job experiences will be presented. The analysis was carried out with a predominantly exploratory intent, focusing on the role that host organisations might have on preparing students to labour market demands for soft skills as well as on sustaining their self-orientation competence. All interviewees agree on the relevance of a training experience design that would give space to transversal skills, facilitating students' self-consciousness, as well as awareness on their interests, their aspirations, and, consequently, promoting an attentive entrance into the labour market. The interviews highlight some practical experiences (e.g., time management, teamwork, different styles in relating to colleagues) that represent examples of transversal skills, possibly useful in the school to work transition. Furthermore, a work environment emerges as a fundamental training place for enhancing these skills, in the perspective of learning-by-doing and situated learning. Finally, characteristics of the various productive contexts emerged as crucial in shaping the features of proposals for SWA or PTSO programs available to students.*

KEYWORDS: *High School, School-Work Alternance, Transversal Skills, Career Orientation, Host Organisations.*

Introduction

To effectively address young adults' difficulties in the transition from secondary school to either tertiary education or the labour market and to improve their career orientation, since 2005 Italy adopted School-Work Alternance (SWA) programs as a part of their scholastic curriculum. SWA is a pedagogical approach that aims to improve on-

the-job experience, which is useful for promoting young adults' employability and strengthening the connection between learning content and the demands of the labour market. Host organizations are central players in the training process, since they endure the significant task of providing, through learning-by-doing and situated learning, a context and active approaches to enhance students' soft skills and their self-orientation capacity towards the labour market, either directly or passing by tertiary training relevant for the desired position.

In order for SWA to be functional, actions of coordination and connection between schools and host organizations are necessary. Nevertheless, the literature shows that the adaptation to organizational and political aims is greater for schools than for host organizations (Camera di Commercio Lombarda, 2015; Assolombarda, 2016; Pinna, Pitzalis, 2020).

This contribution presents some first results from the research by the Milan-Bicocca unit, within the Project of Relevant National Interest (PRIN)-2017 *Evaluating the School-Work Alternance: a longitudinal study in Italian upper secondary schools*. In-depth interviews to privileged witnesses in host organisations as well as to institutional representatives were conducted to investigate their point of view on SWA and Paths for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PTSO) programs. Through the support of interview excerpts, a reflection upon relevant themes regarding on-the-job experiences will be presented. The analysis was carried out with a predominantly exploratory intent, focusing mainly on the role that host organisations might have on preparing students to labour market demands for soft skills as well as on sustaining their self-orientation competence.

1. From School-Work Alternance to Paths for Transversal Skills and Orientation

The provisions included in the President of the Council of Ministers Decree of November 3, 2020, recalled by the Ministry of Education with the note 1990 of November 5, 2020, adds, among the many prohibitions resulting from the COVID-19 health emergency, educational trips and outings planned by the educational institutions, with a single exception that is activities related to the PTSO. In a historical moment in which the uncertainty for the school activities has been and still is maximum, it has been considered important to continue to plan and realise this type of formative activities. The Guidelines for PTSO were published by the Ministry of Education on October 8, 2019. However, they originated from the provisions of Law no. 145 of December 30, 2018 (Budget Law 2019) which, in art. 1, paragraph 785, provides for their adoption by decree of the Minister of Education. This Decree (no. 776) was issued, with a considerable delay with respect to the Budget Law, on September 4, 2019, the last day of life of the first Conte Government.

It is precisely the Budget Law 2019 that disposes the first important change, decreeing the renaming of the activity from SWA to PTSTO. SWA had been introduced by the Legislative Decree No. 77 of April 15, 2005, pursuant to Article 4 of Law No. 53 of March 28, 2003 (the so-called Moratti's Reform). Nonetheless, it was made compulsory for students in the last three years of upper secondary schools by the Law 107 of 2015 (the so-called Good School Law). The latter envisioned SWA as an innovative teaching modality allowing, through practical experience, to help students consolidate the knowledge acquired at school, to field-test their aptitudes and to enrich their training. The name change can be read as an attempt by the Conte I government to detach itself from its predecessors, namely the Gentiloni government and before that the Renzi government, signatory of the Law 107/2015.

Yet, which are the main differences between SWA and PTSTO? Firstly, the number of hours that students must complete for this training activity in the last three years of their course of study has been more than halved:

- 210 hours for Professional Institutes instead of the previous 400;
- 150 hours for Technical Institutes instead of 400;
- 90 hours for Lyceums instead of the previous 200.

Schools that wish to have their students engaged for more hours have full freedom to do so. However, the resources available to the program have been cut. It has gone from the 100 million euros of state contributions provided by the Good School Act to 42.5 million. Schools can try to take advantage of regional calls or other types of funding to make up for the missing resources, just as host companies can obtain funds to support company tutoring through calls issued by the Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Crafts and Agriculture or other funding bodies. However, the most competitive schools and those located in economically richer areas have an advantage over the others, which see greatly reduced the possibility of bridging the gap through activities carried out with state funding. In fact, PTSTO programs, in order to be effective, require careful planning, management and evaluation to be set up in a flexible manner and made functional to the territorial context in which the school is located. Moreover, general choices of the school with regard to transversal skills need to be in continuous connection with the Three-Year Plan of the Educational Offer (PTOF) of the school, according also to the different nature and type of study courses (lyceums, technical institutes and professional institutes).

Although the planning of PTSTOs must balance the curricular, experiential and orientational dimensions, the most important change is connected with the shift of focus on the orientational purposes of PTSTOs. If the purpose of SWA was to integrate technical and disciplinary skills with practical work experience, bringing the school closer to the labour market and holding students responsible for their work obligations, the purpose of the PTSTO is rather to develop transversal and interdisciplinary skills, so that students can understand

what is the branch of work best suited to their aptitudes and thus engaging in more informed choices when it comes to start a career or to select the university educational path. Indeed, through the 2016 New Skills Agenda for Europe, the Commission and the Council of Europe have focused attention on the centrality of quality competency-based education. The Council Recommendation of May 22, 2018 updates the 2006 version on *Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning* and frames key competence as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ajello, Sannino, 2013; Decataldo, Fiore, 2018).

The eight competences for lifelong learning are interdependent and equally important: 1) functional literacy; 2) multi-lingual competence; 3) mathematical competence and basic competence in science and technology; 4) digital competence; 5) personal, social and learning-to-learn competence; 6) social and civic competence in citizenship; 7) entrepreneurial competence; 8) competence in cultural awareness and expression. Personal and social competencies deserve a closer examination, i.e. transversal and transferable skills through the operational dimension of doing: the ability to interact and work with others, problem-solving skills, creativity, critical thinking, awareness, resilience and the ability to identify the forms of guidance and support available to deal with the complexity and uncertainty of change, preparing for the changing nature of modern economies and complex societies.

The PTSO would aim precisely at improving the learner's basic skills while simultaneously investing in more complex skills to ensure resilience and adaptability. Doing-oriented projects and reality tasks allow the development of learning outcomes connected to the real world.

2. The Preliminary Research: Interviews to Privileged Witnesses

This contribution presents some first results from the preliminary exploratory phase of a research by the Milan-Bicocca unit, within the PRIN Project *Evaluating the School-Work Alternance: a longitudinal study in Italian upper secondary schools*.

In-depth interviews to privileged witnesses in host organisations as well as to institutional representatives were collected to investigate their point of view on SWA and PTSO programs. Interviews were conducted in Italian and the extracts presented here in English are an accurate translation made by one of the authors of this paper.

Table 1 presents the main features of the twelve interviews conducted, dividing interviewees between institutional representatives and referents in host organisations. For each interviewee the role in their organization, the way the interview was conducted, and the code given to the interview text are reported.

TAB. 1. *List of interviewees, by institution and host organisations*

	Role of the interviewee	Interview Conduction	Code
<i>Institutional representatives</i>	Assolombarda - Chair of the Training Department	Face-to-face	ist1
	Chamber of Commerce of Genova - Chair Department of Orientation to Work and Chair of Liguria Centre for productivity	Online – double interview	ist2 (ist2.a, ist2.b)
	Confartigianato Lombardia – Vice President	Online	ist3
	CNA Piemonte - President	Online	ist4
	University 'La Sapienza' - Vice Dean for Rights to Study and Teaching Quality	Online	ist5
	University of Genova – Vice Dean for Training	Online	ist6
<i>Referents in host organisations</i>	University of Milan-Bicocca - Ex SWA Representative	Online	org1
	University of Genova - Ex Orientation Representative	Online	org2
	University of Genova - Representative for the Orientation to university studies Area	Online	org3
	University 'La Sapienza' – Representative for the project 'Lab2GO'	Online	org4
	Large company based in Bologna - Human Resources	Online	org5
	Small company based in Manerbio (BS) - Owner	Face-to-face	org6

The analysis was carried out with a predominantly exploratory intent, focusing mainly on the role that host organisations might have on preparing students to labour market demands for soft skills as well as on sustaining their self-orientation competence. We looked primarily at the characteristics delineating the condition of PCTOs in host organizations¹. It was decided to proceed with a thematic analysis of the interviews (Boyatzis, 1998), which involves the emergence of themes² from the interview texts, while maintaining the basic structure defined by the interview outline. Coding of texts portions, based on thematic elements, was facilitated by the CAQDAS (Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) Software Nvivo. The various codes connected with themes emerging from the interviews were, in many cases, grouped into thematic categories with a larger semantic meaning. In Figure 1 codes assigned to themes (either thematic categories or themes that were not grouped into categories) are shown. Figure 2 focuses on the 'actors' category, with related codes assigned to the category. This category was considered as a 'meta-category' composed by 'meta-codes' that were useful for the analysis process – allowing to understand who the portion of text was referring to – even though they do not refer to any substantial theme. Finally, Figure 3 shows the remaining categories with their thematic codes.

¹ The first interviews were conducted in February 2020, even though we completed them in June 2020, due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Nevertheless, interviewees were asked to focus on the pre-pandemic period.

² Themes are either explicit or implicit ideas emerging from the empirical material.

FIG. 1. Codes used for themes during the analysis with Nvivo (categories and themes not included in any categories). We report the number of documents – 'files' – and text portions – 'references' – wherein the code is used.

Name	Files	References
actors	12	330
bureaucracy	5	6
companies propensity	6	20
competences	12	67
compulsoriness	6	7
cooperation among actors	12	43
employability	5	16
evaluation	7	18
gap between the school and the labour market	8	34
initiative actions	6	15
organisational aspects	10	38
orientation	10	36
out of the classroom	6	13
projection toward the labour market or the universit	4	7
relationship with the territory	9	22
resistance	5	15
risks and issues	11	62
simulated enterprise	3	7
time evolution	6	20

FIG. 2. Focus on the 'actors' category, with a look at all codes which are part of the category

Name	Files	References
actors	12	330
companies	11	84
institutions and associations	12	61
other_families	2	2
other_general public	1	1
other_university teachers	2	4
schools	12	75
students	12	76
teachers	9	27

Moreover, the element of intersubjectivity was also taken into account (Finlay, 2003), through control activities in the internal research group of the Milan-Bicocca unit.

FIG. 3. Focus on the various categories, with a look all codes grouped into each category

Name	Files	References
bureaucracy	5	6
companies propensity	6	20
scouting - recruiting	4	11
competences	12	67
competences_technical professional	7	14
competences_transversal	11	32
competences_digital	5	7
competences_entrepreneurship	5	7
competences_certification	2	2
compulsoriness	6	7
cooperation among actors	12	43
employability	5	16
employability_hiring	4	8
employability_individual	3	5
evaluation	7	18
gap between the school and the labour market	8	34
initiative actions	6	15
Name	Files	References
organisational aspects	10	38
proposals	3	3
orientation	10	36
out of the classroom	6	13
projection toward the labour market or the univers	4	7
relationship with the territory	9	22
resistance	5	15
risks and issues	11	62
available time_not enough	5	17
issues_costs for companies	8	22
issues_minors	3	3
issues_mobility	1	1
issues_no educational outcome	7	17
issues_no incentives	1	1
Name	Files	References
simulated enterprise	3	7
time evolution	6	20
improvements in time	4	5
legal evolution	9	15
worsening in time	2	8

3. Preliminary Results

In the following paragraphs, we will enter more thoroughly into the themes that emerged from the interview texts in the thematic analysis phase with reference to the functions of the PCTOs, highlighting the aspects of importance to the privileged witnesses interviewed.

3.1. Transversal skills

Within all of the interviews, there is agreement on the importance of including in training a range of soft skills that can facilitate entry into the labour market. The interview passages reported below, moreover, all highlight practical examples of the acquisition of transversal skills (from time management and teamwork to knowing how to relate to colleagues). In addition, a work environment emerges as fundamental as a formative place for learning these skills, in the perspective of learning-by-doing and situated learning.

This is the chance students have to relate to a context that is different from their current one. So this can surely strengthen some skills, even other aspects of their personality. You realise how important it is to move in a work environment. So, beside skills, theoretical concepts, either theoretical or practical...like the ability to be punctual, to be respectful, to be attentive, to listen... and all these things that must be part of a work context that maybe they see for the very first time (ist2.b).

For the students it is certainly an educational opportunity [...] you use a printer, you use procedures, respect for time.... In other words, they are all things that actually help to build up a perception, to understand, for example, who can be called 'you' and who can't, to avoid getting into uncomfortable situations (ist1).

Students who experience this type of projects, envisioning training in a work context, might be considered at an 'early' age, if we think that they will not necessarily enter the labour market in the immediate future. However, they are still offered useful opportunities to acquire skills that they can certainly spend later in their professional life. From this point of view, transversal skills also facilitate the capacity for self-orientation.

3.2. Digital competences

Although the interview grid did not encompass a specific attention to the digital competences – considered, for example, by Unioncamere (2019) as part of transversal competences – within interviews this aspect was often reported by privileged witnesses as relevant within the issue of training in a work context.

So, here it says 'for example technological and digital skills', but [...] digital skills, in 2020, are transversal skills. [...] The school should pay

more attention to this. Because, for example, within the project I manage [...] students make an unconscious use of the internet, especially of social media, unconscious of potential risks they might be exposed to, physically and personally. [...] There is no awareness towards this topic. [...] They don't see the internet as a work tool [...] And this is the first among digital skills: to be aware about the internet as a tool to give solutions (ist1).

3.3. The orientation dimension of the projects

The interviewees report that within the orientation process being able to see a job role up close in the working environment takes on a particular value, allowing students to acquire a specific idea of the various roles, in relation to their own abilities, aspirations, and work-related values, with a view to increasing their capacity for self-orientation. The following interview excerpt emphasizes how the paths taken at a given organization – a large company – show possibilities in the world of work that students do not always imagine for themselves.

Also understanding what the job fields are. Many young people [...] have [...] only a part of what their schooling could give them as a job opportunity. In our specific case [...] we do a fairly niche job and many of them don't even know it exists. So, I think it can give them [...] the opportunity to know other job opportunities that they had not considered. [...] The effect it should have is that of helping these young people to understand, [...] of helping them to orient themselves and understand what paths there are in the company in addition to those they already imagine. Or even to understand if the ones they have imagined are the ones they like (org5).

Moreover, the self-orientation objective is associated with the possibility to gain a perspective that is external from the school, as shows the following passage.

The PTSOs precisely for me serve to give [...] a new perspective to the student who finally finds themselves interfacing with a world outside the school, so being able to give a perspective of what happens outside and what are therefore the situations in which they can come to find themselves, or the contexts with which they can come to interface in the future (org4).

The following description looks at the orientation objective in terms of orienting students to make conscious choices about their formative paths.

The main purpose of these projects is to orientate students to a conscious choice of the training path, that is also a life path. So basically to approach them giving some tools to make thoughtful choices and also giving them tools to build a path beyond training,

considering also the following years, independently from the education path in university, so as a life perspective (ist6).

The person here interviewed is part of the university reality: for this reason, she emphasizes the formative path. Nevertheless, the concept can be transposed to the work path as well, as the interviewee adds that it is a 'life path' too.

3.4. The gap between the school and the labour market

There are many voices among those interviewed that refer the existence of a gap between the education provided within the school environment and the actual necessities emerging on the labour market.

The school interest comes from the idea the schools realised that what they were teaching, even in technical institute, wasn't replying to the organisation's needs, so while entering the job market there was a large gap. Organisations are not satisfied, because they know that if they introduce a person they have to invest in training for two or three years, because skills are not overlapping (ist4).

Often PTSOs allow students to understand that school curricula and workshops, especially for technical institutes, are not updated with the effective needs of the jobs market. So, from a point of view of technical competencies, the outcome is not always positive (ist2.a)

These excerpts from interviews to members of category associations look at the issue of the gap between what students learn in a traditional education environment and what are the needs of a work environment, especially focusing on technical institutes.

3.5. Organisations propensity

From the interviews with the privileged witnesses, several aspects emerged that are linked to the motivations of businesses to activate training paths with schools and to welcome students into their organizations through the PTSO modality. The excerpt from the interview that follows is a clear example of how the needs of a specific company can be reconciled with the type of project implemented with PTSOs.

The world is changing quickly, especially in the last year, and not having a product by myself, I need to change my company and my production as a chameleon. How can I do that? With skills I create during the development phases of my order. I mean, I arrive at my client, I take a production order to build these machines. It is sized in the company, it is developed, it is made possible to build and I need young people that have the intuition to be quick and dynamic for production. How to do this? Thanks to training within the company, so I try to shape workers that my company need. How to do this? With young fresh workers who want to learn with the basis from the school.

This is what I found from SWA. I preferred to invest this time I have together with the school, to teach, train, also for my needs (org6).

Therefore, this example shows, on the one hand, the need for organizations to recruit a young workforce that is still in training, and on the other hand, the desire to train students themselves, as businesses, in order to have workers with skills that are as appropriate as possible to the needs of the business itself. Moreover, the same function of PTSOs (or a very similar recruiting function) can also be carried out for universities or, in general, tertiary training organizations.

3.6. The geographical area

A specific element asked in the interview dialogues through the stimulus of the track concerned the role of the relationship with the territory within the design of the PTSOs. According to what was reported in the interviews by several privileged witnesses, this aspect is linked to the theme of collaboration among actors. The following passage highlights this aspect, noting how, through collaborative work with schools in the area, we can also strengthen what is called the 'school-territory-enterprise relationship'.

The SWA paths, PTSOs, as they are now defined, are absolutely important and interesting paths for young students. We have been able to verify this as Bicocca, we have been able to verify it concretely, making available to high schools in the area, and then in this sense strengthening the relationship between school-territory-enterprise, considering the University of Milan-Bicocca as an enterprise that at that time gives the availability to welcome, we wanted to offer opportunities to experiment with practical activity, concrete action, the action of doing, for the students of high schools in the area, including high schools, classical, scientific and so on.... rather than technical institutes, within the structures of Milan-Bicocca, choosing as hosting structures all those colleagues who, within their offices, laboratories, departments, more service structures such as libraries, were able to offer positions for high school students (org1).

The following interview excerpt, on the other hand, shows how the specific characteristics of the territory influence the availability and types of projects for hosting students. In addition, the role of the territory is underlined in the relationship between the needs of businesses, in terms of types of professions, and the world of training, which can respond to these needs by looking at which businesses require personnel in the territory.

There are different approaches for example among Milan, Monza-Brianza and Lodi [...] The difference is related to the geographical context vocation. The vocation of the Brianza context, for example, is surely a context with a main manufactory vocation, so that there are

many opportunities to send students for a practical activity there. [...] Even more troublesome is the Lodi area, with a mismatch between orientation in general and with high rates of school dropout, while the context vocation, with some factories, but mostly agricultural. Professional education works very well there, and in relation to company's needs (ist1).

4. A General Reflection to Conclude

A relevant element emerged from all the interviews conducted is the importance of the collaborative dimension during the process of project design and implementation, showing the centrality of a cooperative approach. This means making an effort to actively involve within the planning activities and in the whole PTSO experience organisations, schools, students, their families, but also all the institutions possibly related to PTSO programs. Also within the Guidelines for PTSO published by the Ministry of Education the principle of co-design is defined as central in collaborations with host organizations and tertiary institutions in the area. In the following interview excerpt, the collaboration between school and company is mentioned as a specific factor for the success of PTSOs, with particular attention to the fundamental role played by school teachers.

The success factors are always related, in my opinion, to the ability and skill, the commitment of the teachers in contacting, choosing, the companies to send the teens to. When the teachers are active and the coordinators of these activities are active and are participating, even participating precisely with the company, the internship, in short, the alternation, this period becomes really interesting for the boy. The collaboration between school and company, I would say (org5).

The next passage, extracted from the interview texts, goes more into organizational details related to the collaboration between the tutor within the host organization and the school tutor.

Normally, when you prepare the training project, and here I am going on my personal experience, you discuss with the school what are the goals of the students at that moment and what can be in some way the inputs that come from our experience. So you really drop the project on the goals that the teens have. And this is done together, this is a collaborative work that actually takes some time, perhaps in the private sector it is seen as extremely time consuming, [...] and we try to adapt the path to the objectives, not necessarily selecting schools on the basis of the supply chain. I'll give you an example, I'm a language teacher, I don't only take students from linguistic schools when I do these experiences, I also take students from technical and nautical schools... however, together with the teacher, I find a training project that is coherent with what they are doing and that, at the same

time, presents them with possibilities that maybe they haven't thought about or are thinking about (ist6).

We opened this paper with an outline on the time evolution that allowed to shift from SWA to PSTOs, considering in particular developments in the law and a transit of focus from an approach based on incrementing employability to a perspective driven by self-orientation and awareness of students' skills and possibilities. Then, we presented the preliminary research conducted by the Milan-Bicocca unit, with the use of in-depth interviews to privileged witnesses in host organisations as well as to institutional representatives. While going through results, we particularly focus on relevant themes emerged from the interviews, such as transversal skills, digital competences, orientation, the gap between schools and the labour market and, finally, organisations propensity to participate in the programs.

Our results show that the host organisations and institutional representatives interviewed have mainly a clear understanding of how, in what ways and what skills are necessary to guide students in their respective orientation path. With respect to specific competences required, some of the host organisations emphasize how certain acquired competences can be implemented or are more easily implemented only within the labour market (Jackson *et al.*, 2005) because these are not passed down in the education system. Often the host institutions have clear perspectives about those shortcomings that schools have in the implementation of some skills, especially digital skills.

The underlying paradigm in the words of representatives from host organisations is that of the search for a match between the needs of the production world and theoretical knowledge. The host organisations and institutional representatives seem to understand that the main objective of PCTO is implementing competences, not the simple provision of jobs (Giergji, Cillo, 2021), but the interviews let emerge that host organisations point out often also the secondary purpose of employability. By law, the mission of the PTSOs has become increasingly focused on orientation: the host organisations do not seem to evade this objective but, rather, they make it their own and integrate it within broader purposes that also reflect different possibilities of connection between the labour market and schools (Capecchi, Caputo, 2016). Good collaboration with schools, according to what we have defined as a cooperative approach, the chances –sometimes – of employment for students in the future and those of testing the flexibility of the organisations are all possibilities that could be implemented by PTSOs. Beside this, the problems that emerges in the realization of PTSTO in their full potentiality cannot be ignored: we are aware that this configuration of PTSOs model is only one within many possible models (Giovannella, 2016), but the cut of resources available, and the difficulties in the COVID-19 emergency made the path of

implementation of PTSOs even more problematic and uncertain in terms of development possibilities.

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