

"This is a pre-copyedited version of an article accepted for publication in *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* Volume 44, Issue 4, 2023, following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version is available from Wayne State University Press."

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Turning to character: teachers' narratives of youth futurity and educational responsibility

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In this article I connect two topics that are relevant to debates in educational studies today: an understanding of how educational discourses and practices convey and produce a definite kind of future, and the debate on what has been defined the 'turn to character'. I do so by means of interviews with secondary school teachers in Sardinia (Italy), discussing how participants conveyed a discourse characterized by an individualized view of their students' futures (residing mainly within their character) and a narrowly 'institutionalized' view of the responsibility of school in helping them to shape it. Both discourses allowed teachers to avoid taking on more of a direct, personal and caring sense of responsibility regarding their students' futures. I argue that, in order to reinforce the role of education in empowering students' capacity to aspire, a stronger anticipatory responsibility must be activated.

Keywords: character; future narratives; teachers; educational discourses; educational responsibility; capacity to aspire

Introduction

In this article, I connect two topics that are relevant to debates in educational studies today: the thinking on how educational discourses and practices convey and produce a definite kind of future and the debate on what has been defined the 'turn to character'. There is growing interest today in sociology and educational studies on the future as it is involved in educational discourses and practices. Education is inherently oriented toward the future (McLeod, 2017); however, a growing body of literature emphasizes how the *anticipatory regimes* (Amsler & Facer, 2017) that dominate education are centred on an essentially

instrumental relationship with the future. Curricula are devised to shape and legitimize a desired future, with an emphasis on students' future economic success (Facer et al., 2013; Sandford, 2013). 'In this perspective, futures are imagined to be exchangeable – that is to say, with accounts of the desired future that can be replaced with other, more cost-effective ones' (Sandford, 2013, p. 117). These economic driven educational futures are thus conceived as 'open, empty and short term futures' (Amsler & Facer, 2017; Clegg, 2010; Sandford, 2013). These are 'present futures', in that they approach the future 'from the standpoint of the present through which we seek to predict, transform and control the future

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for the benefit of the present' (Adam & Groves, 2007, p. 200). These kinds of futures are decontextualized – an empty and open terrain subject to colonization. That is to say, they are 'disconnected from the contexts in which they arose, freed of content that ties them to the configurations of social processes and actions that give rise to future circumstances' (p. xx). In this sense, educational *anticipatory regimes* exemplify an idea of the future which has been largely criticized and has revealed itself as inadequate for representing the future in societies that are increasingly complex (Urry, 2016) and characterized by uncertainty (Nowotny, 2016).

By contrast, the 'progressive education' (Sandford, 2013) approach overturns the perspective that portrays the most desirable future as the one that makes individuals progress and thrive, and emphasizes the idea of an 'ethics of possibility' over and above the 'ethics of probability' approach to shaping educational futures. Thus, critical thinking on educational futures (Amsler, 2015; Amsler & Facer, 2017) look for methodologies which 'open up new ways of "seeing" the possibilities of the present' (Facer, 2013, p. 141).

This critical perspective resonates with Appadurai's (2013) idea of the capacity to aspire as the fundamental ability to navigate the future. According to Appadurai, the *ethics of possibility* amounts to:

... those ways of thinking, feeling and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination, that produce greater equity in what I have called the capacity to aspire, and that widen the field of informed, creative and critical citizenship. (p. 295)

The capacity to aspire, according to the Appadurai (2013), is not only a matter of individual wants and wishes, but is related to the ability to produce justifications, narratives and metaphors. These are tied to wider social scenes and contexts, and to yet more abstract norms and beliefs. Therefore, the 'capacity to aspire' is, in effect, the ability to participate in the production of discourses on the future. Educational discourses, providing the cultural elements in which the individual story of the future lies, can draw scenarios that are not accessible to all, whilst obscuring horizons and excluding subjects from certain kinds of imaginary futures. From this perspective, the analysis of educational discourses and practices is of utmost importance because of the implications regarding their role in shaping students' scenarios of the future and thus enabling or restricting their ability to navigate the future.

Recent research has shown how narratives regarding the future are, more generally, recognized as relevant in terms of influencing people's actions *in the present*. Many concepts have been applied to take account of this dimension of the future and are significant in the field of 'educational futures'. Together with Appadurai's concept of the 'capacity to aspire', the idea of the future as a *self-realizing narrative* (Weigert, 2014 Not in references), the concept of *future literacy* (Miller, 2011 Not in refs), or the idea of *anticipation as a capacity* (Poli, 2015; 2017 Not in refs) all point to the fact that imagining the future is deeply related to agency. Looking more specifically at educational practices, research has shown how educators' future visions shape their conversations with students and their personal commitment to teaching (Bateman, 2012). At the same time, ideas of the future are profoundly embedded in assumptions about children's development and growth (Facer, 2013).

The aim of this article is to contribute to the exploration of this topic through an analysis of the most relevant traits within a set of teachers' narratives about their students' future. Narratives were collected through interviews with secondary school teachers in Sardinia (Italy). Despite the fact that the teachers involved in the research worked in different schools (meaning that the students came from different backgrounds),¹ the ways in which they depicted their students' futures shows a strong common core, tightly intertwining three

elements. The first of these is the observation that a generalized optimism pervades teachers' views of their student's futures, despite their frequently negative perceptions of young people's present circumstances. The second element relates to how this optimism is accompanied by a rather individualized view of students' futures; that is to say, the idea that the future is their responsibility. Third, the teachers also conveyed a narrowly 'institutionalized' view of the responsibility the school has in helping them to shape it. I explain elsewhere (Author, forthcoming) how optimism emerges from the educational rhetoric of an open future and is reinforced by the professional awareness that teachers should feel responsible for their students' futures. Thus, recognizing young people's failure means recognizing their own.

In this article, I emphasize how the intertwined narratives of the individualization and institutionalization of students' futures resonate with the 'turn to character' in education and political discourses (Sayer, 2019). Teachers' narratives suggest that character is indeed a dominant trait in describing young people's possibilities of success in the future. However, the idea of character emerging from the narratives goes further in the individualization of youth futures as it refers to a set of 'naturalized' dispositions. This negates the role of education (and thus the work of guidance programs themselves) in empowering the students' ability to navigate the future. That is to say, character is not conceived as a set of soft skills that can be acquired through education and activated through a social mobility path (as in the *entrepreneurial-self* model), nor as moral virtues that allow students to flourish (as in the *education to character* perspective). Character turns out to be a set of personal qualities (the most important of which are strength and resilience) that the school merely has to acknowledge. From these narratives, the deceptive nature of character clearly emerges as a fixed individual trait hiding students' differing cultural resources and opportunities, which relate to class. The future of young people living in Sardinia (a peripheral region of Italy) does not look very bright in terms of current opportunities. For this reason, the responsibility of educational institutions in helping them to navigate both the possibilities and uncertainties should be particularly heightened. My closing argument is that an alternative approach to responsibility for the future should inform educational practices.

Researching narratives of the future

The collection of teachers' interviews analysed in this paper is part of a broader, longstanding project on young people's *capacity to aspire* (iFuture). Through the project, 341 students' essays were collected, and four focus groups undertaken, narrating an imaginary future. The aim was to understand not just young people's visions of the future but, more importantly, following Appadurai's conception, the complete set of cultural resources they could (and could not) draw upon to imagine their futures (Cuzzocrea & Author, 2016; Author, 2018). At a later stage of the project, we also aimed to explore narratives of the future circulating within society, which we saw as a step towards an understanding of how 'narrative sense-making shapes prospective social action' (Andersen et al., 2020). With this aim in mind, in-depth interviews were conducted with practitioners working with young people (such as teachers, social workers, sport coaches, and priests), exploring participants' understandings of young people's futures. The aim was to explore how adults interacting with young people on a daily basis frame their futures. As part of this, ten interviews were conducted with secondary school teachers in different schools across Sardinia, and these are the empirical basis of my argument, herein. Although the number of interviews is small, I believe saturation has been achieved in relation to the

conceptual categories of optimism, individualization, and institutionalization with regards to attitudes expressed towards students' futures (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Therefore, though I do not consider our data to be in any way 'complete', I believe we achieved 'sufficient depth of understanding [to] allow the researcher to theorise' (Nelson, 2017). Whilst the empirical basis of the paper may seem narrow, it clearly offers the opportunity to proceed with a grounded exploration of how the future is approached in educational discourses. This view is also based on the consistency of these findings with the existing sociological literature. Moreover, the coherence of teachers' discourses concerning their students' futures strongly resonates with theoretical reflections on educational futures (regarding the intertwining of optimism, individualization and institutionalization) and the turn to character, which will be expanded upon in the next section of this paper.

The interview extracts presented here are those that best illustrate the *narratives of the future* across all ten of the interviews that informed this article. To ensure anonymity, confidentiality and the protection of participants, pseudonyms have been used in place of participants' names. The interviews were thematically coded using NVivo 10. In an early stage of the analysis, we used the programme to organize the text around high frequency nodes from which further qualitative analysis departed. The coding scheme was refined iteratively throughout the interview process, allowing for the emergence of the semantic areas in teachers' narratives.

To contextualize these narratives, a few contextual considerations are important. First, the way in which teachers are selected in the Italian educational system is an ongoing matter of debate in Italian studies on education (Argentin, 2018). It is important to acknowledge that, 'In Italy, the ordinary exercise of teaching does not include specialized training in guidance and counselling skills; rather, these are considered implicit in teachers' 'vocationality' (Colombo, 2011). The representation of the teaching profession includes not only technical competences but also a specific moral capacity (being loving, sensible, self-sacrificing) (Argentin & Cavalli, 2010). Second, as far as the territorial context is concerned, the research is based in Sardinia, a peripheral region of Italy where there is both a high percentage of young people leaving school (21%) and a low proportion of young people aged 15–29 achieving tertiary education (12.4%). Looking at the job opportunities, the prospects for young people aged 25–29 are limited (both compared to Europe and the rest of Italy), with unemployment at a rate of almost 40% and many NEETs (Spell out). Moreover, the number of young people leaving the region is important, to the extent that mobility is often seen as the only way to imagine a future (Cuzzocrea & Author, 2016).

If they are strong enough: character as the key to the future

Many critical accounts of contemporary educational discourses draw attention to the way that these are dominated by a model of the *entrepreneurial self*, particularly in higher education (Brökling, 2016; Kelly, 2013; Oinonen, 2018; Taylor, 2018). The qualities young people are expected to develop, according to this model, include autonomy, determination and resourcefulness. Young people are thus a 'work in progress' (Kelly, 2006 Not in refs, p. 18). Expectations of what one will do and achieve in the future are more important than any existing skills or things they have already done (Nikunen, 2017, p. 665). Young people must 'cultivate themselves as subjects of value' (Farrugia, 2019) and are expected to grow into 'working citizens' (Nikunen, 2017, p. 670). The idea that 'all young people can be winners' is inherent in the project of governmentality that these discourses contain (Holdsworth, 2018). In fact, teachers' narratives are generally optimistic about their students' futures (Author *forthcoming*). However, the responsibility for being winners or losers and the

possibility of developing all the attributes that make a ‘subject of value’ is highly individualized. This individualization has been underlined as a generalized trait of late modern societies (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Still, since the beginning of the century, this model has turned into a much more compelling project of *formation of character*. As Sayer (2019) has recently highlighted, we can talk of a specific ‘turn to character’ in education and political discourse.

Character, generally defined, is about the personal qualities that are valued (or discouraged) within a society. As such, it has gained a central role in contemporary discourses. ‘Both the acquisition and the exercise of the virtues and vices that make up an individual’s character are encouraged or discouraged by social structures, institutions, discourses and norms’ (Sayer, 2019). Sayer emphasizes how meanings of the term vary, both within its use in public discourses and in everyday accounts. Simplifying the picture, however, it is possible to point to two interpretations regarding the importance of personal dispositions today. First, character refers to the individual traits that are needed in the development of the *entrepreneurial self* (as in Kelly, 2013, or Farrugia, 2019). From this perspective, character is linked to social mobility and employability and is conceived as a set of ‘non-cognitive skills’, including characteristics and behaviours such as motivation, self-control and personality (Camfield, 2015). This portrayal of character as an individual resource is criticized because it conceals social inequalities. Resilience, for instance, ‘features strongly in neoliberal economic policies that emphasize individual, rather than state, activity and responsibility’ (Burman, 2018). Second, the qualities identified refer to *virtues*, which can be defined as moral strengths (or failings), such as honesty, courage, kindness or selfishness and callousness (see Kristjánsson, 2013; Pattaro, 2016). From this perspective, individual dispositions may be conceived as resources for society, as in the case of citizenship education, which aims to improve young people’s social and political participation (Maccarini, 2016). According to both perspectives, character can and must be cultivated, and educational institutions have an important role to play in doing so.

In the narratives that form the empirical basis of this paper, teachers embraced a particular version of the idea of the entrepreneurial self. According to their accounts, young people must take the initiative and are held responsible for their own future (success or failure). However, when describing the qualities of the students that would likely ‘get ahead’, they emphasized character, portrayed in terms of dispositional, naturalized attitudes, rather than a more complex set of individual skills, capacities and competencies. This suggests a view that the self cannot ‘be cultivated’ (Farrugia, 2019); you either have it or you do not. Moreover, the character traits that were deemed relevant in students’ outcomes were overly simplified. Sayer (2019) points out:

it is striking how ‘character’ has often been taken to be synonymous with strong character – with having a commanding, forceful and perhaps charismatic personality – an attribute possessed by a Hitler as much as a Mandela. (p. 3)

In teachers’ narratives, in fact, the most important trait of character referred to whether they were strong enough. Speaking about her students, Maria (female, liceum) recognized that ‘today they do not give up on having a dream, a project of life’. However, she went on to say, ‘not everyone has the strength and perseverance to go straight to the goal’. The mantra of the strong character is pervasive. As Mariagrazia (female, vocational school) put it:

I think most of them can be brilliant. Having a strong character, they can succeed. I can tell you, many of them have a really strong character indeed, and they are determined to live in a context where their ideas can also be realized. I see them resolute not to suffer passively in any kind of

situation. From the character point of view, they will certainly know how to behave... you come across this 'capacity for being strong', as if they grew up on their own. As if they became adults earlier than usual.

Referring to the possibility for young people to pursue their aspirations, Teresa (female, technical school), stated: 'Some certainly do. Some do. Especially those who have an already determined character. That is, those who are concrete guys, guys who bring themselves into play, who do things and are determined'. And similarly, Marta:

They are confident in the capabilities they have and therefore in the possibilities of achieving the goals ... there may be some sort of pessimism sometimes, but basically, I see them, in most cases, even pugnacious, in the sense that, from what they say, from what they propose, they will strive, at least they will try, at least most of them, try to commit themselves so that they can achieve these results, even at the family level, on a personal level. (Marta, female, vocational school)

Being strong was often accompanied by the idea that young people must be somehow exceptional, or out of the norm.

I am also convinced that many of them will be exceptional people not only professionally but also as human beings. They will have to learn to deal with failures and challenges, but I think they have all the tools to overcome them. (Matteo, male, liceum)

I repeat, I have a good idea of these guys I work with. Sometimes I think they're almost out of the norm in some respects. Even as compared to the dominant image of today's young people. (Luisa, female, technical school)

Our findings resonate with the idea that the formation of 'labouring subjectivities' are located beyond the possession of skills, more precisely at the level of the affective and relational life of the subject (Farrugia, 2019). In some cases, the individualization of young people's futures was endorsed to explicitly blame students for not been selfish enough. It is clear that the character required in this sense is not necessarily a *good character* in the sense that it has no moral content; rather, it appears to be just a performative one. As such, there is no trace of *character education*, meaning 'efforts to help young people develop good character, which includes knowing about, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values such as fairness, honesty, compassion, responsibility, and respect for self and others'.² Young people must not only stand out from their peers in order to succeed, but they are also required to compete.

Teresa (female, technical school) expressed this idea clearly:

I have a fourth-year class, so these are boys between 17 and 18 years, and in this class some guys surely have aspirations, have skills, are 'good'. But I would not want the school to deceive them too much because they are guys with skills that get results. We must understand if they will not succeed in achieving these objectives. Even for any demerits not their own, but the economic and social context where they live. Also, for psychological fragility typical of the boys ...

For example, some time ago, there was an internship to be organized and the coveted places were in the accounting firm's offices. There were only two places in an accountancy office. A third boy chose not to accept the placement ... he is a very good boy, who comes from a working-class family, with strong values ... Well, this boy gave up, making room for the two classmates who had never had an internship. And this attitude from a certain point of view is noble because he did not want to question the friendship with his companions for the place of the internship. But I wonder: will this boy manage to get by in this jungle that awaits him out of school? I do not know ...

The above interviewee referred to a defective aspect of character: *fragility*. If a strong character is key to success, inversely, *fragility* can be offered as another individual personality trait with which to explain failure. This notion of ‘being vulnerable’ echoes with the ethos of vulnerability present in social (Brown, 2014) and educational (Brunila et al. 2016; McLeod, 2012) policies, as well as in popular discourses (McLeod, 2015).

... Over the last five years, more and more fragility emerges in young people’s lives, both at school, in the family and at [a] personal level. That is, both the class councils and we as teachers have to take into account many variables, also certified by ASL (Health Institute), therefore, fragility is increasingly manifest, even certified at this point. So we always have to re-align, revise, rediscover personalized educational plans ... So, it is difficult. (Mariagrazia female, vocational school)

Year after year [the students] arrive in our school increasingly smaller, more and more fragile, more and more young even in mind ... And with more and more difficulties. (Laura, female, technical school)

Today I see greater fragility and greater difficulty in finding a reference model. Perhaps also because the times are different, are different the starting conditions, I do not know how to say ... (Luisa, female, technical school)

These guys are fragile, have weaknesses, difficulties in relating to each other, often they have problems in the family, even serious ones. They do not know their emotions, they do not how ... They are not conscious, that’s it. (Maria, female, liceum)

As McLeod (2015) has emphasized, the idea of vulnerability is closely tied to individual responsibility. As well as success, the individual remains responsible for any failure and its negative effects (Brunila & Siivonen, 2014). According to McLeod (2015),

... critical engagements with the affective and social circumstances of precarity bring new challenges into view for how schools and other educational institutions might respond to a pervasive sense of vulnerability. (page ?)

On the contrary, teachers’ discourses throw all responsibility for success or failure at the students. If they are strong, they will succeed and, conversely, fragility seems to be the main obstacle that will prevent them from getting ahead.

‘Institutionalizing’ students’ futures

While young people are held accountable for their own future (they have to be exceptional, strong, resilient), the teachers’ personal responsibility towards their students’ future was almost never addressed directly. I use the term of ‘institutionalizing’ here to emphasize the standardized, impersonal and somehow unyielding character that teachers envisage when they address the issue of their students’ futures. The sense of social responsibility teachers carry into teaching is certainly an important part of their professional culture and experience. The meaning of responsibility, however, is often intended as ‘responsibility for education in the abstract, as a public good, as part of a social mission’, rather than as a more concrete ‘sense of responsibility for the lives of individuals and classes of students’ (McLeod, 2015). In the Italian educational system, the representation of the teaching profession includes, not only technical competences, but also a specific moral capacity (being loving, sensible, self-sacrificing). These traits came out in the emotional undertone of teachers’ discourses. Asserting that their students would be okay, even that they would be *exceptional people*, and describing their future in an emphatic and somewhat overdone tone:

‘[Students] have a new world that is at their feet and in their hands’, as Luca, a teacher in a vocational school declared. She emotionally colors the idea of an open future that is part of the educational project, showing teachers’ lovingness and sensibility.

However, when asked to talk about the ways in which schools help young people in dealing with the future, participants rarely referred to their own, personal involvement. Moreover, the role of education was interpreted in an ‘institutionalized’, short-sighted manner, mainly in terms of routinized guidance programs to university (rarely to work), thus reflecting the very same inability to look further into students’ precarious futures that, in other excerpts from the interviews, teachers blamed on their students. There was almost no hint of a broader responsibility on the part of the educational institution to help these young people find their way.

In teachers’ narratives, the ‘task’ of helping students build their future was completely handed over to the guidance programs, whose effectiveness was taken for granted.

Teachers talked at length about the institutionalized procedures that the school put in place: ‘This school does a lot to help the students to think about their future’ (Laura, female, technical school). This was a typical, recurring statement made by teachers. For instance, this was expressed as follows:

So, the school makes proposals. For example, we have an itinerary, now part of educational routines, many projects, many activities, so to speak. Upstream there are some projects that come from the Ministry, some others we choose directly from the school itself. Let’s say that we give children the opportunity to grow, to relate with the outside world, I think of internships, work placements, language courses, certifications, even ... open monuments, for example, are small activities that put children in relation to the outside world to understand what you want to do, how you can do, so not only ‘know’, but also ‘know how to do’.... (Mariagrazia, female, vocational school)

Within contemporary policy discourse, guidance is conceived as a key strategic empowerment tool aiming to increase individual well-being and self-realization. Within the Italian context, guidance activities at the secondary school level mainly involve the supply of standardized information about the local university. ‘Government narratives stress that interest in guidance activities is motivated by the belief that these will help students in making “better” choices and reduce educational dropout’ (Romito, 2019). Luca (male, vocational school) defines the school he teaches in as ‘experimental’ and ‘aimed at orienting students towards the future’. In this case, traineeship and school-to-work programs³ are described as the best way to ‘guide to the future’. He stated:

For several years now, since the 1980s, we had already introduced work-school internships. Students in fourth year were sent to public laboratories for a month to do a month’s internship. We then, like all the other schools, participate in the outgoing orientation towards university, with the dedicated days that take place at the university campus. Then we do various initiatives. By the way, now the internship is done in all the three years. The school does a lot to orient the children towards the future. For a period of time, we were also an IFTS centre, with advanced training activities, followed by some of our students. Initiatives in this sense have never been lacking and are still available. We were also pioneers. We also had a simulated enterprise workshop and things like that. Luca (male, vocational school)

While the programs were consistently described as being highly effective, in instances where they have not worked well, the students were blamed. As Luca went on to emphasize later in the interview:

I think that, at an institutional level, the school already does enough as far as orientation is concerned. The problem is another one. The problem is that these efforts are often frustrated by the attitude of students who are not too interested in getting oriented. So you could do even more, a lot more,

however, these efforts will not necessarily be successful for the children who are the first recipients of these interventions.

There was no suggestion that the program could be modified or improved if it was not working or the students were uninterested. On the contrary, teachers continuously stressed the number of programs the schools had established, as if the mere repetition of these initiatives somehow translated in more possibilities for students.

Then there's a whole series of projects and programs that help kids to orient themselves and understand their inclinations. Then there are the orientation days with the universities that are important. In short, there are, there are many initiatives. (Teresa, female, technical school)

This school does a lot. We have an ongoing guidance program, because the boy is followed even after the end of the course. We do an initial orientation, then one in itinerary (?) ... So we try to orient them in the best possible way and to get the best out of them as well. Above all, we try to understand their objectives, even if only in the short term, as I was saying. (Laura, female, technical school)

In discussions regarding the efficacy of the guidance programs, the celebration of character shows its darker side in the unavoidability of personal destiny. In a Bourdieusian sense, some teachers recognized that these programmes were embraced least of all by the very students who needed them most. Students who struggled to meet 'regular' scholarly achievement goals (usually those from less educated families that have also less information on university tracks) also tended not to have time to engage in guidance programs.

But the participation of students is not so numerous. The answer is a bit ... because they are busy anyway, huh. The students apply for those activities where there is, for that moment, the exemption from the class activity. Eh, but in the long run this can't hold up. Because the absence from class makes it difficult for them. Instead, the more demanding extracurricular activities, the ones that should actually help – the last ones – are only welcomed by the best ones ... who continue to improve more and more. But the school in itself offers ... these opportunities. (Mariagrazia, female, vocational school)

Teachers conveyed a commitment to such guidance programs, meaning that any failure was to be attributed to individual responsibility: no interest, no time. However, what if aspirations discovered thanks to guidance programs did not succeed?

The problem is that, today, access, for example, to the university world is very selective and not always ... So we often see that, let's say, the orientation has not led them to reach the set objectives. For example, our students in the technology path usually aspire to the health professions, but the number is so small that few succeed and then, well, those more experienced and with a certain autonomy then find other channels, many others do not find anything. (Mariagrazia, female, vocational school)

So the selectivity of the university produces a further divide (aside from the one between those that succeed in getting into the university and those who do not) between those who are *experienced* and *autonomous* enough to adjust and those that just fail.

The school does a lot because there are topics that are addressed in our school. We do guidance programs to make the children understand what their attitudes are, what their skills are, to orient them, to make sure that they do not have unnecessary defeats. It is useless to direct a boy towards a type of study that he will not be able to sustain, that is. So let's try to pay attention, especially to the more fragile kids. Let's avoid that they face useless defeats, for example, at the University which is a completely different world from school, less attentive to the individual, and much more selective. The University does not have this human and particular attention to its students. The school follows its students in a different way. (Teresa, female, technical school)

Here, fragility emerges again. Instead of aiming at empowering young people, teachers take care to make their students aware of *who they are* so that they do not have to face *unnecessary defeat*. The role of teachers in Italy in the reproduction of inequalities has been often underlined. As some research has shown, it is not the result of a discriminatory intentionality, quite the contrary, as it comes from a ‘protective’ attitude towards the students (Argentin, 2018). Recent research on guidance practices addressing 13-14 year-old students moving from a comprehensive to a tracked educational level in Italy show how these practices ‘constitute an important tool for making educational (and life) desires and aspirations coincide with the political ambition to regulate the distribution of individual free choice’ (Reference?). The way guidance programs are organized for older students conveys the same result differently(?). By feeding (sometimes reluctant) students with information on what’s next, guidance programs operate (in teachers’ narratives) as a kind of sorting machine, capable of matching students’ abilities and future opportunities. So, the idea is that the best thing the school can do is to ‘discover’ young peoples’ skills (as in a talent show) and direct them to the appropriate end. The students’ future is already determined, and schools just have to help them to see it.

Conclusions: toward anticipatory responsibilities?

In this article I have discussed how the secondary school teachers in Sardinia that were interviewed conveyed a discourse that entails both a highly individualized view of their students’ future and a narrowly ‘institutionalized’ view of the responsibility school has in helping them to shape it. On the one hand, there was a view that whether students succeed or fail resides in their character (i.e., if they are sufficiently strong, determined, and resilient). On the other hand, school provision in ‘guiding students into the future’ tends to be administered through standardized guidance programs, which largely entails simply explaining the different options that are available to them. The ‘naturalization of character’ emerging from these narratives negates the role of education (and thus the guidance programs themselves) in empowering the students to navigate the future. Moreover, both discourses allow teachers to avoid taking a more direct and personal responsibility in their students’ futures.

Turning to character allows teachers to blame the students for their success or failure. If what really counts are personal, fixed dispositions that the students either do or do not possess, teachers’ role in the shaping of their future does not feature in the equation. In this way, rather than ‘open[ing] up new ways of “seeing” the possibilities of the present’ (Facer, 2013, p. 141) for some students, education appears to be oriented towards closing them down (in order to avoid failure). The possibility of escaping direct and personal responsibility also resides in the strong *institutionalization of the future* emerging from the centrality in teachers’ narratives of the guidance programs organized by the school. It has been argued that forms of ‘institutionalization’ of pedagogical practices (as in the case of guidance activities) discharge pedagogical responsibility and narrow the vision and purpose of education (Yates, 2012).

Expanding upon this vision, there needs to be, among other things, a clear awareness that education is indeed about shaping (individual and societal) futures. The *recontextualization* of educational futures, or in other words, their reconnection to the concrete lives and experiences of the students, should be an important step in this direction. A strong pedagogical responsibility cannot thus be limited to the educational relationship in the present; an anticipatory responsibility must be activated. That is to say, the awareness

that educating also means helping young people to navigate both uncertainty and possibilities. Recognizing both the difficulties that young people will have to face in the future and the fact that access to future-making practices is unevenly distributed and not easy to achieve, is certainly an important step. As Appadurai (2013?) emphasizes, the ‘capacity to aspire’ demands and promotes recognition in the first place. Moreover, the capacity to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture and refutation, and school can be the place where this can take place. Resourcing students to imagine alternative futures in open-ended ways (Sellar & Gale, 2011), instead of ‘sorting them’ according to their abilities, must be a focus of educational practices.

Some underline the importance of teaching the future in school (Bishop, 2019). Futures literacy would certainly be welcomed in order to help teachers to ‘talk about the future’ with their students. This would increase their sensibility and expand their vocabulary. However, to make sure that these kinds of instruments do not simply shift into mere technicalities (i.e., into a new institutionalized procedure), future literacy must meet an ethics of care. McLeod (2015) proposes ‘re-position[ing] responsibility as a productive and affirming orientation to self and other in educational work, particularly in teaching’ (p. ??). This repositioning involves, in my opinion, a different attitude towards what educating for the future means.

Intergenerational responsibility and the need for an ethics of care has been largely developed in relation to the future. According to Adam and Groves (2007), the future is a matter of ethics. Proceeding from Jonas (1990), the authors emphasize a different kind of responsibility. Responding to the decontextualization of the future in contemporary society –

is to provide a new context, using the concepts of lived and living futures to reinterpret the meaning of responsibility and obligation, and to mobilize ways of thinking about responsible action that draw on our social memory of futures. (p. 141)

Care ‘brings with it specific future-oriented responsibilities that must be fulfilled in passing on a “word” to future generations’ (Groves, 2014, p. ???) This perspective can be usefully applied to the field of education as a stronger awareness of the consequences that educational institutions and practices have on the students’ lives. Education thus should not only be about showing the students the options that most probably fit their skills. Instead of guiding them towards the opportunities that they are already aware of, education should help the students to navigate their futures, enhancing modes of anticipating the future within a regime of *possibility* and a logic of *discovery* and *exploration* (Author, 2020 Perhaps you shouldn't refer to your own work here; make the point fresh here.)

Notes

¹ Secondary schools in Italy are organized into three main tracks: Licei, which are commonly seen as the more demanding and mainly university-oriented; vocational schools, which generally lead to more of an immediate entrance into the labour market; and technical schools, which are somewhere in between. There is a strong correlation between the class origins of the students and secondary school choice, Licei being the preferred path for those of middle-high class origin (Panichella & Triventi, 2014; Romito, 2014). Together with social class inequalities, territorial ones are also important in shaping educational opportunities. The teachers interviewed were from all tracks: four from Licei, three from vocational school, and three from technical school.

² This sentence explains the editorial aim of the Journal of Character Education – <https://www.infoagepub.com/jrce-issue.html?i=p5e65061367c85>

³ In Italy, taking inspiration from the German and Swiss dual education system, educational reforms have been introduced in recent years offering school to work transition measures (in Italian, ‘Alternanza Scuola-Lavoro’). This policy established that a variable number of hours during the school year must be dedicated to work experience, both in public agencies and private companies.

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