

Article

Identity and Multiplicity of Belonging in a Europe in Search of Democracy

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Abstract: The research we present concerns the narratives of political and social identity of young adolescents sampled in Northern, Central and Southern Italy. Our qualitative analysis is based on constructivism and aims to enhance narratives by privileging the communication of meanings elaborated by the young people. Consistent with this perspective is our choice of the paradigm of pedagogical personalism, which places the human being as a ‘person’ at the center of reflection. The diverse universe of youth manifests multifaceted aspects that it is possible to bring out using interaction with deliberative, open, and non-pre-conceptual discussion. The link between semantic cores such as democracy, freedom, rights, interculturalism, and citizenship runs through the analyses of the entire research (based on the study by Ross’s work in 2019, *Finding Political Identities: Young People in a Changing Europe*), examined here specifically in the Italian context. The article presents some contrasting aspects of the way young people living in Europe. They harbor uncertainties and discontinuities from the universe of values inherited from previous generations. However, from the tunnel of doubt young people show that they know how to emerge by outlining the forms of a promise of social commitment containing a hope for change, defined as the design of a future in which alternatives to the current situation can be found. In the background, the theme of democracy shows as an aspiration for something still struggling to be born.



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1. Introduction

This contribution presents the study on the political identity of young Italians and highlights how it is related to citizenship education and the teaching of civic education in secondary school. The investigation is part of the extensive research conducted by A. Ross [1,2] across Europe on over two thousand narratives collected during discussions in 324 locally organised focus groups. The Italian section of the research shows some departure from Bauman’s [3] fluid identity model and opens new interpretations related to national culture and young people’s experience of politics.

What are the educational spaces in which the sense of belonging to the European Union takes shape and consolidates? Is there a specific role for the school? What forms does the sense of belonging to Europe of young Italian students take? In this paper, we will look for answers to these questions, following three paths of research. The starting point of the reflection concerns the important role of the school in construction of social and political identity of young people [4]. There are several questions that can be posed about the role of schools in building the social identity of young people. First, we can reflect about the social imaginary [5] that school contribute to create, through which paths and curricula.

Closely related to this issue is the focus on the context of Italian formal learning [6–8] with an analysis of the paths of education for European citizenship, through the general image of Europe [9]. Who does not know the Italian pedagogical debate cannot understand what influence the school curricula have on the growth of young people and teacher training. *Civic education* in Italy has had a very difficult institutional process. This discipline has not always had a central place in the curriculum but has always paid attention to constitutional values and European identity [10], in a different way compared to what happens in the European Schools [11], which are not the subject of this paper.

The second part (Sections 5–7) of this paper, written by anonymization, illustrates the various forms that the sense of belonging to the European community takes through the words of young students aged 14–20. The opinions of young people were collected by deliberative discussion as main strategy of the enquiry conducted by Alistair Ross who planned and led the focus groups in Italy and other European countries. Interesting and problematic elements emerged from focus groups, often linked to family cultural background of who was born in Italy or not. There are significant challenges in the teacher training curriculum, which lacks social and civic competences.

The last part (Sections 8 and 9) of this essay, written by anonymization, deepens the verbalizations expressed by young people during the focus groups, underlining some obstacles to the sense of belonging, such as distrust in the political class or prejudices against the customs and traditions of other countries. Among the elements that promote a sense of belonging to the European community, those of a pragmatic–economic nature prevails. The attention to human rights, which is considered central to the mission of the Union’s bodies, is also appreciated.

The scenario is articulated and complex, and the empirical data collected in this enquiry date back to a period preceding “Brexit”, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian aggression against Ukraine. It can be assumed that focus groups, if created today, could contain new elements, or provide a different overall representation. However, it is important to take stock of some pedagogically significant elements that have been focused on in this enquiry, to identify new scenarios and research hypotheses.

2. The Troubled Path of Civic Education in Italy: What Spaces for European Identity?

The troubled path of civic education in the Italian Republic begins during the work of the Constituent Assembly, when the problem was placed on the agenda and presented by Aldo Moro, Francesco Franceschini, Antonio Ferrarese and Domenico Giacomo Sartor. The text said: “May the new Constitution find without delay an appropriate place in the educational framework of the school of every order and degree, in order to make the young generation aware of the moral and social achievements that now constitute a sacred heritage of the Italian people” [12] (p. 24). This statement lays the foundations for the pedagogical identity of civic education in Italy: it is a teaching based on the values of the Italian Constitution. It is only with the progress of European integration that this course includes more and more references to European citizenship. On 13 June 1958, Aldo Moro, now Minister of Education, signed Decree of the President of the Republic No. 585, which established, for the first time, a teaching of civic education with a strong cultural soul and a weak institutional position. The ‘broad cultural education’, specifically called “paideia” of this teaching was based on the Constitution [13], while its educational organization provided for two hours a month and was entrusted to the history teacher without a specific evaluation.

Through a series of intermediate steps, which are not dealt with in this paper [14,15], we arrived at Law No. 169 of 30 October 2008, whose first article is explicitly dedicated to the teaching of “Citizenship and Constitution”. The text of the law opened various possibilities, which should have been clarified in the phase of implementing decrees after the planned trial. The possible topics to be addressed were clearly indicated in a Document of Direction (designed for experimentation) signed by the Minister of Education on 4 March 2009 [16]. It was transmitted to schools by Circolare Ministeriale of 4 March 2009.

The cultural identity of the teaching of *citizenship and constitution*, which emerges in this document, is based on the Constitution of the Italian Republic, understood not so much as a sequence of notions to memorize but as a value map able to find the social and civic competences of young citizens. The disciplinary structure is divided into four categories of descriptors designed to certify the personal skills of students: *human dignity, identity and belonging, otherness and relationship, and participation*. Learning objectives include many references to the history and identity of the European Union but also to the founding values of a Europe of peoples. The disciplinary structure of this teaching has pedagogical reasons in which the four categories of descriptors we have indicated above represent the educational levers to structure a civic identity. The sense of belonging to one's own country (but also to Europe and to other international families) should be based on respect for the dignity of the human person and should be translated into good relations with all. It should also be grounded in various forms of active participation towards the realization of the common good.

However, the teaching of *citizenship and constitution* had neither a defined timetable, a specifically trained teacher nor an autonomous evaluation. We can therefore ask ourselves whether, with such a "weak" institutional position, the pedagogical levers indicated in the document of address could regenerate awareness deep in the minds and hearts of the students. The students' words collected during the focus groups (When the focus groups that are part of the research mentioned here were organised, the measure in force—in Italy—was that relating to "Citizenship and Constitution". Only later was Law 92/2019 approved, which is discussed in the next paragraph.) open many questions in this sense.

The teaching of citizenship and constitution has been replaced by that of a civic education, by Law 92/2019, which states: "The cross-cutting teaching of civic education is established, which develops knowledge and understanding of the social, economic, legal, civic and environmental structures and profiles of society" (art. 2). There is a minimum of at least 33 h per year for this teaching, but the law states that these hours must not be added to the school timetable but obtained within it in a transversal way.

The most problematic aspect, from the pedagogical point of view, is the "reading" of this transversality that is given in the *Guidelines for the Teaching of Civic Education*, issued by the Ministry of Education by Decree No. 35 of 22 June 2020 (Annexe A), which states: "The core themes of the teaching, that is those contents considered essential to realize the purposes indicated in the law, are already implicit in the topics of the disciplines" [17] (p. 1). The language used, where we speak of "core themes" and "essential contents", recovers a semantics that—in the Italian pedagogical debate—is placed within a "materialistic" approach to disciplines.

The risk is that of a very dispersive teaching that could "dissolve" in the multitude of contributions made by different teachers of different disciplines, which would be juxtaposed with each other, without generating deep awareness in the vital worlds of the students [6,7,18].

The formal structure of teaching [15] is divided into three areas of content: the Constitution of the Italian Republic, sustainable development (with reference to Agenda 2030) and digital citizenship. It would be interesting to verify through empirical surveys how the 33-h teaching constraint introduced by the Ministry of Education has been interpreted and whether this has been sufficient to improve the educational impact of civic education.

3. What Is the Level of Awareness European Identity in School Education in Italy? An Analysis of Address Documents and Research Demand

The Italian legislative texts, with reference to the 2009 Guidance Document and the 2020 Guidelines [16,17], would seem clear and reassuring in indicating the need to know the European Constitution and the identity of the main European political bodies, which are indicated among the learning objectives. However, if we analyse the documents in more depth, we can see that in the 2020 Guidelines especially, these knowledges about Europe are cultural contents simply enumerated among many others, without having a

“structuring” power on the curricular indications. On the other hand, the reference to Agenda 2030 or Digital Citizenship, which seems to interest the legislator much more than European citizenship, is more explicit and central. It is not enough to indicate some learning objectives regarding Europe to make a decisive contribution to building a real sense of belonging.

The most serious problem concerns not only how references to European identity are present in curricular guidelines but also the kind of educational dynamics that the Guidelines can activate. This teaching has a marginal place and this fact risks making it scarcely relevant in the eyes of teachers and students. This low sense of relevance is reflected in all the issues that are addressed in civic education, including those that relate to European identity.

The changes that took place in the institutional framework with the transition from citizenship and constitution to cross-party civic education are not decisive. For this reason, the research request formulated at the time can remain valid today. In other words, we can ask ourselves whether students in schools in the Italian Republic perceive their sense of belonging to the European community, what are the strengths of this perception and what are the weaknesses.

4. Methodology

The maturation of a multiple belonging to the changing Europe, the kaleidoscope of identities, contingent and consistent, according to Ross’s expression [19] (p. 4), emerges as an even more relevant empirical datum if read in the guiding context of Ross’s chosen methodology of social constructivism and in the narrative intensity the experiences collected [20–26]. Narrative methodology is the paradigm of interactive human communication in which people talk about their lives in defined times, places, and contexts. Björninen, Hatavara, Mäkelä [27] argue that narrative is a form of social action in which discourse is the text that communicates events, how they are organized, how they are explained and predicted, what motivations and expectations are represented. According to Ntinda [28] it has a collaborative and narrator-centred basis, meaning is constructed through negotiation and collaboration between the participant and the researcher, narrative research allows easy access to the construction of personal experience narrated in autobiographical form. Narrative research is a fundamental tool to detect what is important for the social construction of reality from the narrators’ perspective. Allowing young people to speak in deliberative discussion and record their meaning of identity and citizenship moves away from the static romantic idea of the nation-state and the nationalist idealism of a past that sometimes hints at reappearing in forms disavowed by the social and cultural maturation of the young people listened. The experiences are manifold. Although it is impossible to generalise, one can shed light on personal experience as a source of new knowledge. One of the merits of social constructivism lies in considering identity a matter of political choice rather than a natural gift [19] (p. 18). The group of research used social constructivism approach having in mind the background of pedagogical personalism with the clear intention of placing the student in an experiential context of the investigation that considered the necessary space for expression of what the person processed in the conversation, without altering its meaning. In this sense a focus group discussion rather than a focus group interview better matches the authors’ personalist scientific perspective in the Italian context [1] (pp. 30–35).

The enquiry in Italy took place in February 2015 in upper secondary schools. The expected sample was 120 students, distributed in 8 schools in the North, 4 schools in the Centre, 8 schools in the South. In each school two groups of 6 students of a predefined age were expected to interact: one group with students within 14 years of age and one group with students over 14 years of age for a total of 24 students per city. The actual sample was 138 students: 53 in the North; 31 in the Centre; 55 in the South. The schools were chosen based on contacts with teachers and school directors, including schools in the center and schools on the outskirts of cities. The students were chosen because of age, gender, and knowledge of English at medium and high level. The conversations were in

English and were conducted by Ross [1] who ensured the uniformity of the procedure in relation to other surveys conducted in other European countries. The names of the young people are pseudonyms respectful of individual's gender and current names of the country. From the point of view of the ethical approach, the rules of informed parental consent and the authorisations of the school authorities were respected. Ross's opening question was to ask each student to describe themselves, to talk a little about their identity and then about parentage, ancestry and descent, birthplace, residence, language, culture, and more enabling student dialogue. A limitation of the approach was essentially the small number of focus groups. This limitation was overcome by the participation of other focus groups involved in Ross's research. The data were examined using content analysis without the use of any computer software. Findings have been provided separately by the Italian group and considered by Ross in the commentary of all European focus groups.

5. The Construction of Young People's Social and Political Identity

In examining identity in political communities, Bruter's [29] model distinguishes the cultural perspective and the civic perspective as two essential components. The first, the cultural perspective, relates to political identities in the sense of belonging that a citizen feels towards a political group, perceived as adhering to a culture, values, religion, ethics and even ethnicity. The second, the civic perspective, refers to the identification of citizens with the civic structure, such as the state, which can be defined as a set of institutions, rights, and roles that preside over the political life of the community. Europe can be seen as a superstate or as a cultural entity sharing civilisations and traditions. Identifying with one's own country and Europe takes on many meanings in terms of constructing one's personal identity. The distinction between the two perspectives, cultural and civic, risks polarising meanings excessively, yet it allows one to understand the formation of otherness as part of one's identity. What emerges is the sense of exclusion and inclusion of others, characterised by the maturation of that feeling of belonging to one's own state that could radicalise to the point of excluding all identification with Europe and its values. Conversely, an inclusive identity presents non-rigid boundaries, opens to tolerance, and fosters a strong European identity. From the perspective of qualitative analysis, Gergen and Gergen [30] focus on the narratives through which young people elaborate their meanings and share them with their peers. We thus have two examples of research, Bruter's typological research and Gergen's ethnographic research. Following the latter, one can arrive at the former. Indeed, clusters of semantic belonging emerge from the narratives of young people, describing identities in formation. The narratives highlight new notions of democracy, freedom, rights, interculturalism and citizenship that it is essential to embrace to understand the depth of the emerging social and political identity.

6. Values and Cultures in the Construction of Sampling

Conversation opens the youth scenario by revealing existential links that revive the most accredited theoretical acquisitions by providing evidence, confirmation, and non-confirmation, with respect to a reality that cannot be taken for granted. The identity of the person now is in movement, and particularly so in the identity of adolescents, who question their being part of a state, and even of more than one state, as a moment of transition from unconsciousness to political awareness and social leadership and activism.

The narratives collected with focus groups of 14–20-year-olds speak of identity as the ownership of the rights that the state and individuals must respect, up to and including a respect for the whole world, and the diversity of one's own being as a person. Identity means always being oneself, in the simple as well as the complex context, and it means having pride in oneself, perceiving the honor of being seen in a certain way by others, standing out. The relationship between identity, right, recognition and freedom describe the upward parabola of the polity. The terms are related and explain the close dependence of being who one is by virtue of exercising a right that functions as such if it is recognised, and for recognition to occur a state of freedom is necessary. The concepts are expressed

in this conversation of the youngest boys. Martial, aged 18, condemns the right as the condition of respect: 'It is important to have my rights, and to be respected by the state, and by other people', one is respected more by right than by reason of the person as an ontological absolute. This finding is also noted by Ross at the level of the overall analysis of the entire sample heard, young people talk more about rights than about identity [1] (p. 280).

It should not be overlooked how in one part of the conversation the terms of discourse are reversed. Ladislaus, aged 15, more forcefully returns the priority of the discourse to the person recognisable by their own and necessary identity, the fundamental premise of the two values, right and freedom: 'Identity is one of the most important things of a person, and everybody should be proud of their identity and their rights, and the freedom that their identity gives them'. For Palmiro, identity is a reason for distinction and specificity: 'I think that identity is very important for a person—it could be a right to be distinguished from others'. This observation shows how fundamental it is for the adolescent to construct the characters that define the whole person. Mastering oneself means knowing oneself and being able to relate to others with a determined and visible personality. These considerations lead to the concept of the unique and unrepeatable person, identical to himself, distinct from others, elaborated by the pedagogical Personalism of Mounier [31] and Maritain [32] renewed in more recent studies in which the concept of the Person is examined both as an affirmation of the human being rich in potentialities and charisms, and as an existence at risk of drifting into 21st century materialism [33–35]. The focus group discussions highlight the growth in awareness of the notion of right that has matured among adolescents and young people in whom the lesson of the present is heavily conditioned by political and social expectations. In fact, the answers are immediate and sufficient to explain how identity has political origins, i.e., it refers to rights, philosophical conceptions, and traits of meaning with reference to freedom; social, visible in the value assigned to the recognition of others; cultural, in the attention to distinguishing oneself from others and making a name for oneself, a sign of respect and honour in the eyes of the community.

In the older boys, aged 17 and 18, the description of identity extends to their cultural characteristics. Alboino, aged 19, clearly expresses the concept of a territorial identity, indebted to the country of his birth and to the countries in which he is stationed: 'First of all, I'm not Italian, I'm Romanian—and I'm here in Italy from when I was six years old, but I changed country when I went to London and stayed there two years, and found something for my identity—because now I can speak English very well, and can travel the world and have many opportunities. I love to play football—I think I'm going to work in football in the future—but I'd also like a job with technology, and English, and maybe to work in other countries' [36] (p. 72). In this speech we can already see a feeling that opens to a European identity.

Two young girls emphasise their sense of belonging by talking about contributing to the betterment of the country, pride in the history and culture of Italy.

'I think I'm proud to be Italian, because this is a country with a lot of problems, that's true, especially at this moment, but it is also a very precious country, because we have a lot of history here. I know that's the same as other places, but we really have a lot of monuments and we have also some important traditions. This is important and I hope to travel a lot and learn new things. I appreciate living here, it's important to me'. (Karine, 16)

'For me, being Italian means to—the thing that I personally that I love about my country is the culture, because it's a very big part of the Italian state. Being Italian for me means naturally that we are born in this country, and we have all the rights we need, and that we should have the possibility to work and live a happy life in our country. At this moment, that's not really possible, but I like my country mostly for its culture'. (Vivienne, 14)

Identities related to family history emerge, with definitions of oneself in relation to family members, and with foreign identities of young people not born in Italy who continue to think of themselves with a personality built on dual belonging. The belonging of origin and the cultural belonging of the life experience lived in Italy. The prevalence of the majority culture is strong and does not erase the roots of origin. This aspect makes one reflect on the current political and legislative debate on *ius soli* and *ius culturae* for young people living in Italy and born to non-Italian parents. Young people with a family from a migrant background show a high level of civic awareness and, from the debate on identity, the degree of socialisation to Italian culture that makes young people an integral part of the school community is evident. It does not seem to be a simple integration or even a forced assimilation; rather, one understands the progressive growth in belonging to Italian society with the simultaneous desire not to forget one's origins.

In terms of feeling towards Europe, understood as the European Union, young people show a polarized attitude poised between a strong and a weak sense of belonging. Political events such as the terrorism that exploded in some of Europe's capitals prompt them to think in a European sense.

'For example, the tragedy of Charlie Hebdo—this makes me feel European in a way—because it's a tragedy, which was meant as an attack on Europe, not only France—but to the culture of Europe in general. Even Rome can be a target from these terrorists, even London—every principal city of the European Union—this makes me feel a little bit more European than before'. (Adorno, 19)

On the other hand, the general reflection on feeling part of Europe leads one to say that belonging has not matured, lacking that historical fabric and cultural heritage that is instead highlighted for the description of Italian identity.

'I think the European Union is very important, but I don't feel European, because for me it's not the time to make a European identity. I think it's early, because the European Union is not yet old enough to create a common identity for the people—so now there aren't occasions to realise that there is a very real European identity—so I don't feel European'. (Eusebius, 19)

The common factor is the fear of losing the lack of the death penalty, considered a value of respect for human life, which is not present in other countries. This is why the possible entry of Russia and Turkey is a real concern shared by all the students.

Two languages and two cultures, two references and two traditions remain in the existence of these young people. The persistence of feeling here and elsewhere does not generate doubts about the fact that the identity of the heart is that of cultural roots, while the political identity is that of the country of arrival. There is no competition, instead there is attention to the two levels of formation of the person. The issue of the right to citizenship because one was educated in Italy does not erase the strong and persuasive value of one's identity culture if it has been cultivated and nurtured in the family and community of reference. The *ius culturae* seems more like an *ius educationis* right to education, i.e., to receive the education needed to become active citizens. Recognition of the educational path attests that one has participated in the social, cultural, and political life of the country; that one has shared the constitutional principles of the country in which one lives; and that one ultimately wishes to be part of it as a citizen exercising one's rights and duties in full moral and civil authority. Matilde Callari Galli [37] (pp. 208–209) speaks of identities that, like cultural content, are linked to "historical contingencies" and these form and re-form the patterns of discourse that compact the individual and unite them around the differences constructed over time and in different places. Identity is neither discovered nor absorbed once and for all, instead it is elaborated on differences, it is dynamic and unstable.

7. Teacher Education

Given these narrative premises, the question arises as to how the school participates in the political education of young people by including opportunities for cultural growth in its curriculum.

The situation is lacking due to a certain resistance that students perceive in teachers who are not inclined to talk about current topics. This has also been noted in previous national and local research. The 2016 Young People's Report edited by the Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo [38], highlights among young people aged 18–29 the peripheral nature of trust in political institutions and in political parties ranked last, while the European Union ranks third after the police, school, and university [39] (pp. 49–50). The Report's conclusions underline how young people give positive evaluations of schools and teachers, appreciating the preparation of life skills, while pointing out the lack of preparation in terms of the skills needed to better enter the world of work. In general, the loss of trust in educational and political institutions depends on the difficult entry into the labour market, which is increasingly drifting away, hence the return to the family as a good counsellor [39] (p. 52).

In a considerable number of the cases examined, the judgement persists of the absence of the school from the political debate and from the neuralgic themes for the formation of the young person's moral and social personality. The family definitely socialises to life as a whole, i.e., it invests the whole person with respect to himself, to others, to society near and far, the social dimension and the political dimension, and young people receive at home what they need to be oriented in their working life, expecting from school that integral and instrumental preparation that can make them protagonists of their future.

With respect to the areas of the enquiry, some general considerations can be noted. A substantially positive position emerges towards the prospects of teaching citizenship education also understood as intercultural awareness and as civic education. It is felt that both school and university curricula should be strengthened, introducing more opportunities for active training linked to the daily life experience of children, parents, families, and the local community for a better preparation to understand the near and far, knowing how to interact positively with the challenges of globalisation.

In all cases, there is a lack of connection between theory and practice. Teachers both at school and university should work more on human rights, social justice, political and social issues, tolerance, cultural diversity. There are high levels of responsibility in schools for the importance of citizenship education. Teachers are basically judged to be attentive to working with children going beyond purely and simply institutional tasks; in other words, they invest far more in hours and commitment than is stipulated in their employment contract. Teachers' remuneration is still rather low compared to the amount of work required and the burden of attention, care, and responsibility.

Confidence in change is very much felt especially because of the possibilities that today's children educated to become good citizens of tomorrow will have. Knowledge of norms is seen as important, but not exclusive, since notions are not enough to build the common good, experience is needed, cultural exchanges are needed, active and responsible participation in building the common good is needed, the mindset of openness and acceptance is needed from everyone, at school, in families and in the community.

Theoretical training must be accompanied by the practice of citizenship, and generic openness must be combined with organisation in terms of the efficiency of structures and good use of human and material resources. Teachers have fundamental tasks in terms of educating the good citizen and encouraging them to do something for others. The gift of oneself and one's time is a dimension to be regained.

Expectations towards citizenship education are high with regard to the possibilities of improving society and criticism concerns the structural inefficiencies of both Italy and Europe. The migration issue opens a chapter that is only partly known. Mobility towards the world seems an incontrovertible fact and affects all adolescents, even those with a migrant family experience [40].

With respect to our initial reflection, clear signs of intuition of change emerge from the research, conveyed by the students who show that they have well understood the process underway. The intuition of a boundless citizenship, as big as the world, creates the expectation of an adequate preparation for the present time, so as to be able to best express those values that constitute the common fabric of our humanity and whose driving force young people understand.

8. Main Findings at a Glance

From an overview of the answers provided by the Italian students during the focus groups, very significant indications emerge for reconstructing a picture of the attitudes of the new generations concerning the civil commitment in the middle of the second decade of this century. The data also suggests interpretations about the psycho-social roots of these attitudes and their genesis, related to the changes that have taken place in society in recent decades [40].

At a first glance, the answers, in fact, would seem to highlight a generic and generalized tendency of the adolescents towards political-civil disengagement. On a more careful and close reading of the answers the picture of attitudes appears more complex and anything but disappointing.

The distance between trust in institutions and political figures and the positive willingness towards voluntary social participation highlights the parallel paths without encounter between politics and society. Politics does not meet social needs, and social needs explode to the point of requiring citizen intervention. We are in the presence of a concept of citizenship rooted not in the political state but in the welfare state [41], [36] (pp. 87–98).

As regards the solicitations aimed at detecting which elements occupy a pivotal position in their national identity, most of the pupils participating in the enquiry indicate the historical, artistic, and monumental-architectural heritage, as well as the richness and variety of regional and local traditions. Some of them highlight as an element of pride of being Italian having as a mother tongue one of the most important cultural languages, embodied by a literary tradition of maximum value and prestige. A significant number of them declare to feel proud of the primacy that Italian culture holds on the European and world scene, as our peninsula has been right from the start an epicenter of civilization, which has radiated from the Mediterranean basin to the whole world. Still others, finally, highlight the quality of the climate, the environmental and landscape resources, and the gastronomic tradition, incomparable, according to some, to those linked to other cultural contexts. All the latter elements are indicated by participants as decisive factors for the quality of life, which would be significantly higher in our country than elsewhere.

Regarding the factors unfavorable to the feeling of belonging to the national community, most pupils, of all age levels, indicate the public administration, clearly denouncing their distrust in the work of rulers and political decision-makers. The most critical ones, who are the oldest of the groups, express the belief that politicians, regardless of ideological orientation and party affiliation, operate exclusively in the interest of small oligarchies and economic powers and almost never in the interest of the entire community. Those who take even more radical positions, mainly young people from high level of civic awareness and middle- and upper-class family background, less from young people from migrant background, declare that politicians are generally corrupt and carry out this activity solely for personal ends or for narrow associations or lobbies to which they are linked. Some students also highlight the poor efficiency of the services, pointing out the inaction of the institutions in carrying out their specific tasks and always attributing the responsibility to those who manage public affairs.

This distrust in the institutions seems to take on a generalized character: when asked if a change is possible through voting, i.e., the choice of men/women and political organizations that guarantee to operate in the interest of all, the majority replies that this would not be possible. They explain that it is the political system as such that has its roots in malpractice and corruption, so that anyone, even if animated by the best intentions, would

find himself involved and overwhelmed by perverse dynamics and therefore lacking the tools to make healthy and proper management of public affairs. When asked if any of them would be interested in pursuing a political career, thus personally assuming the task and responsibility of stimulating change processes, almost all the pupils involved in focus groups declared that they were not interested in the profession of politics. They preferred other professions, among which those that register the greatest preferences are that of entrepreneur-merchant and freelance activities. Finally, a not negligible share of participants stated that they did not feel completely at ease in living in Italy, because the economy of our country is extremely weak in relation to that of other European or non-European countries. Consequently, the high rate of unemployment and the scarce public incentives aimed at promoting solid training and valid opportunities for entry into the workplace or entrepreneurial initiative limits the development of working careers in the new generations and forces young people to move towards more promising paths beyond national borders.

When asked which foreign countries they would choose to emigrate to, most preferences are directed towards Germany and France, both on account of the greater employment opportunities and the better quality of life, in terms of material well-being but also of the social atmosphere. England and the Anglo-Saxon countries, on the other hand, attract less interest, above all since the British temperament and customs are perceived as notably heterogeneous to the constitutive spirit of the Italian people, in terms of disposition for sociability and solidarity. Several pupils perceive Anglo-Saxons as tendentially individualistic and are critical of the choices made by the British government in foreign policy in the years immediately preceding the enquiry. They stigmatize the low participation of this nation in the life of the European Union, interpreted as the result of conservative drives and exaggerated attachment to traditions, which translates into competitive rather than cooperative economic policies and into not effective economic relationships with other European countries.

As regards the sense of belonging to the European polity and whether or not it is advantageous to be part of it, coherently with the trends shown in relation to the topics discussed up to now, most of the students find unquestionably positive elements in the integration process. The main elements are made up of the common currency and the free circulation of people and goods throughout the community, conditions which, according to the opinion highly shared by the participants, cannot fail to favor, especially in perspective, the living conditions of young people, offering their decisive opportunities to broaden their cognitive horizons and expand the perimeter of their experience [36] (pp. 123–142).

9. Conclusions

Comparing the acquired theoretical models with the results of our enquiry on the construction of the identity of young Europeans, we essentially note three new aspects: 1. a generically positive consideration of Europe that cannot be interpreted as a real sense of belonging; 2. the intergenerational estrangement in the sense that adults are not good examples for young people; 3. weakness of the school in terms of the political education of young people.

The issue relating to the emergence of a condition of disenchantment with political life appears more complex. Scholars who have investigated this phenomenon have attributed its causes to a progressive dissatisfaction, and sometimes resentment derived from the widespread political culture.

In the adult groups students seem to express themselves in terms of resignation and frustration, which sometimes lead to forms of spontaneous and ephemeral protests, sometimes in the refuge of individualism and indifference. However, in the youth groups the disillusionment with projects for the transformation of society of a political-ideological nature translates into initiatives aimed at the more concrete need to solve problems at the neighborhood level, of the city, of the territory and of the environment. New networks and forms of organisation are developed in the local context.

Analyzing more closely the protocols collected through our investigation it becomes evident how the detachment from the life of strictly political institutions and the clear disinterest in active militancy in party formations is balanced by an equally general sensitivity for the phenomena of social marginalization. There is an explicit desire to contribute with an active commitment, through participation in various organized forms of volunteering, to favor the inclusion of weaker subjects and social groups.

Our enquiry represents a contribution that confirms and enriches the knowledge on the degree of maturation of the sense of national and European identity of some Italian adolescents. The intergenerational distance between young people and their parents is confirmed. Young people's criticism of the events linked to the wars and the country's political and economic conditions is higher. The narrowing of ideality and the reference to a future without much hope of change is evident in young people. The enquiry enriches knowledge on the perception of a common national and European sentiment that is still weak and too often linked to everyday contingency events rather than to a deep conviction formed on a foundation built through civic education offered in school, at home, and in society. It follows that the construction of European citizenship suffers more of a halt than a positive advance.

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