

INTERGENERATIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION: OLDER ENTREPRENEURS REDUCING YOUNGSTERS' SOCIAL AND WORK DISENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

The current generation of young Italians leaving education have never entered the labour market with more years of schooling and higher levels of academic certifications as now. Nevertheless, they are losing out in the struggle for employment. It is a paradox experienced not only across Europe and poses questions about whether young people are being trained efficiently for twenty-first century employment. Nowadays employers require that young people possess skills-oriented learning that emphasises adaptability and preparedness for change.

Italian Education systems, however, have not been responsive in this way.

The intergenerational education approach may be an effective method for covering the mismatch between provided education and competences required on the labour market. Experienced older entrepreneurs may give young people Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEETs) the confidence and intellectual resources to deal with the problems they will encounter through professional life, creating new spaces of autonomy and responsibility.

Two focus-groups and questionnaires with 15 NEETs and 15 qualitative interviews and questionnaires to 50+ entrepreneurs were carried out in five European countries, Italy included, to understand how an entrepreneur could help youth to start their own business. Results from Italy demonstrate that to spread a culture of entrepreneurship, senior entrepreneurs are required to strengthen NEETs' confidence, initiative and courage, the ability to take risks and to invest in the future.

Considering Lev Vygotsky's cognitive and social development theory as applied to intergenerational learning seniors need to act as a trigger to promote NEETs' entrepreneurial attitudes, capabilities and aspirations for life.

Keywords: *active participation, intergenerational entrepreneurship education, NEETs, senior entrepreneurs, social inclusion.*

Introduction

A rising phenomenon in industrialised countries having to do with the transition to adulthood is that of NEETs, an acronym for *Not in Employment, Education, or Training*: in brief, unemployed and inactive young people, aged between 15 and 24 years (Eurofound, 2016) not enrolled in any formal or non-formal education and training.

Although the definition of NEETs can vary in relation to many factors such as: the meaning that different cultures ascribe to "youth", the diverse obligation to attend school, as

well as the possibility of easily accessing educational opportunities, all definitions of NEETs concur in identifying a heterogenic category particularly at risk for social exclusion from mainstream adult life.

The results obtained by the *EU Youth Report* (European Commission, 2012) and by the *Survey of Adult Skills* (OECD, 2013) showed that NEETs are the social group most exposed at depletions of key skills that are important in enabling adults to fully participate in the labour market and in social and civic life (Alfieri, Sironi, Marta, Rosina, Marzana, 2015; Di Francesco, 2013).

Problem of Research

According to the *NEET population clusters across Europe, for people aged 15–24* (Eurofound, 2016), Italy has a large share of long-term unemployed people without work experience (Eurofound, 2012, p. 41).

In Italy the NEETs aged 15-29 are 24.3% of the youth, the highest value among the European Union (EU) member states (EU average: 15.9%) (ISTAT, 2017).

The Country is characterized by one of the most difficult school-to-work transitions, with dramatic absolute and relative disadvantages in the labour market.

The evolution of labour market reforms from late 90s onwards, suggests that this may be only partially due to the economic crisis the Country is facing. The recent crisis has intensified the problem of young people's labour market participation; but, it is important to understand that this is not a new issue.

Unlike in the past, nowadays the largest group of Italian NEETs is composed of young people with an upper secondary or a tertiary level of education.

Studies show how young people with lower education are three times more likely to become a NEET compared to others (Eurofound, 2015), so the Italian NEETs seems to have an obvious advantage since they are higher educated. In general, this should be a capable group with a lot of potential, probably prepared and willing to start working, and society would have a lot to acquire in both social and economic terms from integrating this youth into the labour market. However, the transition between a University degree and a relevant job seems to be hard.

In Italy, choosing a higher education career can be seen as an individual strategy in order to avoid the lack of opportunities in the labour market. For different reasons, many young people have fallen victim to credential inflation, lack of progression opportunities, and competition for scarce jobs (Cefalo, Sergi, Giannelli, 2015).

Also, if Italian NEETs with a higher education in general have developed knowledge, understanding and skills during their education, it seems like they still face important challenges (such as attitudes and values in relation to society, work life and oneself) when it comes to having a successful work life. The impression is that they don't have the ability to be inspired and develop creativity, and to deal with so-called change management (Elamson, Sonne & Rendahl Stenersen, 2016).

The problem seems to be principally due to the fact that the national education system is unable to close the youth experience gap (Pastore, 2012). Although the schools and the Universities present throughout Italy offer a wide variety of programs of study, the education system fails to deal with and overcome what appears to be the principal "lack" of the young, the one that sets them apart from adults, namely, their lack of both work experience (Pastore, 2011) and of interpersonal skills needed to function well in the working environment: these include attitude and willingness to work, a desire for responsibility, teamwork and problem-solving. It is in these areas that the employability gap is becoming a real problem.

The new character of the twenty-first century labour market, fundamentally different to that which existed a generation ago, drives a pressing need to close this mismatch between the current needs of employers and the reality of today's education system. To succeed in today's

labour market, Italian NEETs need qualifications that match with their emerging aspirations. They need to better develop their ability to be personally effective in applying knowledge in unfamiliar contexts as is required by contemporary jobs with greatest chances of success.

Research Focus

How should youth respond to the demands of the twenty first century labour market?

How can they learn to be adaptable to the changes being experienced and be prepared to succeed in today's labour market?

How to combine the employability with the promotion of young people competences and skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, openness to innovation, effective communication, team building?

In the era of portfolio careers, zero hour contracts, part-time and self-employment, employment growth in small, rather than large employers, these are all trends which require adaptability and confidence.

Who can teach young people the art of being enterprising – solution-focused dispositions, spotting opportunities and managing with uncertainties? The great goal of such teaching is not in ensuring deep conceptual understanding as an end in itself, but in fostering the ability of NEETs to apply the knowledge they have accumulated in new situations. In this way, they can develop confidence and intellectual resource to embrace and deal with the innumerable unfamiliar problems they will run into their lives.

The “Be the Change”¹ is a two years project (November 2017-October 2018) funded by the Erasmus Plus Programme of the European Commission (Key Action 2: Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices) and carried out in five European countries (Germany, Hungary, Italy, Malta and Slovenia).

It aims at answering all these questions by equipping NEETs with the skills and competences needed in going from education to find employment through the development of a methodology based on an intergenerational learning paradigm, capable of promoting entrepreneurship.

Methodology of Research

General Background of Research

The “Be the Change” project foresaw the analysis of the context (or analysis of the framework) in five European countries in order to know the already existing initiatives of intergenerational education to entrepreneurship at national level, getting inspired and defining older entrepreneurs (hereafter also “seniors”) and NEETs (hereafter also “youngsters”) profiles, useful for setting up an educational offer meeting learners' needs and expectations.

In Italy the Ca' Foscari University of Venice (i.e. the Italian organizations involved in the “Be the Change” project) carried out 15 interviews and questionnaires to older entrepreneurs and the National Institute of Health & Science on Ageing (INRCA) dealt with 2 focus-groups and questionnaires with 15 NEETs.

Sample of Research

Seniors and youngsters were selected through a non-probability technique, because the research follows a qualitative methodology mainly. Informants were therefore intentionally selected having some characteristics that could represent in part the condition of Italian seniors and youngsters, i.e. entrepreneurs more than 50 years old, working or active in any business

1 For further information: <https://bethechange-project.eu/>.

sector (social sector included) and young people aged between 18 and 29, and being out of any working and educational pathway.

Entrepreneurs were recruited in the Veneto (Northern Italy) and Umbria (Central Italy) regions through researchers' personal contacts established during previous studies involving entrepreneurs, word-of-mouth and the Artisan Confederation of the Veneto region. Youngsters were recruited in the urban area of Ancona, the Marche region (Central Italy) capital, through social network (i.e. Facebook), snowballing and word-of-mouth techniques mainly.

Instrument and Procedures

The topic-guide developed for gathering qualitative data from youngsters was introduced by a brief questionnaire for collecting information on socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, age, level of qualification, etc.), perceived entrepreneurial competences, their interest in running a business and in receiving support and knowledge from an experienced older entrepreneur/business person. Youngsters were also asked to identify the entrepreneurial skills they thought to have, among the 25 skills listed by Tessaro and Baschiera (2016).

The 7 qualitative open questions of the topic-guide for the focus groups were aimed at gathering youngsters' opinions about their willingness and motivations for starting a business, what being a business person mean, and about how might an experienced entrepreneur/mentor help them to start a business. The two focus-groups took place in the headquarters of INRCA: 8 persons attended the first discussion and 7 the second. Each focus-group was about 2 hours long and was moderated by a researcher, while a second researcher played the role of observer.

As done for the focus-groups with the youngsters, even the topic-guide of the semi-structured interview to seniors was introduced by a brief questionnaire. It was mainly focused on professional experiences of entrepreneurs/business people 50+ and on their availability to pass on their experiences and entrepreneurial skills to young people. The last quantitative question was based on the list of 25 entrepreneurial skills developed by Tessaro and Baschiera (2016): seniors were asked to list, in order of importance, key entrepreneurial skills and to choose the abilities they felt confident with teaching others. The interview topic-guide was articulated in 12 qualitative open questions focusing on professional experience of seniors, their opinions about motivations, entrepreneurial competences and characteristics (e.g. personal, relational, technical) important for being a good entrepreneur; their availability to support the youngsters and potential ways for motivating young people to start a business and acquire entrepreneurial skills.

Interviews with seniors were administered face to face by researchers of the Ca' Foscari University. Each interview lasted 1 hour and half and took place at the interviewees' home or in the offices of the company they own, or by phone.

All individuals involved in the research were informed about the aim of the project and the modality of interviews and they signed a consent letter where all rights for the safeguard of the privacy were guaranteed according with the National Law (Legislative Decree n. 196 of 30th June 2003 - Personal data protection code). Furthermore, the procedure for data collection, storing and protection adopted in the research were compliant with what required by the Ethic Committee of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, that was asked for advice and approval even on behalf of INRCA.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data from both interviews to seniors and focus-groups with youngsters were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Textual data were analyzed through the Thematic Analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013), because it is recommended for studies approaching under explored phenomena for which there are still no many established theories, as in this case.

Through this method, patterns in the data were identified, analyzed and interpreted and common threads along the textual material were found (De Santis & Ugarriza, 2000). Researchers familiarized with interviews texts, identified repeated themes through the dataset and gave them a code. In a second phase codes were combined, and different codes were sorted into potential themes and sub-themes. Finally, researchers identified the “essence” of each theme for the final interpretation and themes and sub-themes were systematized in a matrix.

Data from 15 interviews to seniors were analyzed with the support of a software for the management of textual data, i.e. Max Qda11. Data from focus-group did not need the use of the software due to the small amount of data, thus data were systematized in tables treated using paste and copy system of chunks of text.

Given the prevalent qualitative nature of the research and the consequent limited number of participants to the survey, quantitative data were analyzed mainly for the description of demographic characteristics of the targets, without any ambition of statistical power.

Results of Research

As mentioned, the research adopted a qualitative methodology. Nevertheless, first several quantitative data were reported emerged from the answers to the questionnaire filled in by the Italian youngsters before the focus-group discussion and by the older entrepreneurs before the face to face interview, in order to provide a general picture of participants' socio-demographic profile.

Afterwards, qualitative data are reported even through quotations extracted by the textual data recorded during the focus-group discussions and the interviews, in order to show the thoughts of the two target groups about education, entrepreneurship and mentoring.

Italian Young People: When the Real “Enterprise” is Finding a Job in an Unfriendly Labor Market

Even though a total of 15 Italian young people (eight women and six men) have attended the 2 focus groups, only 14 have filled in the questionnaire, so quantitative data reported below are related to the latter.

The youngsters had a medium-high level of qualification: 7 respondents were graduated (6 of them obtained the first degree and 1 a master degree); 2 respondents completed the secondary school, and 5 had a post-secondary school education.

Eight people reported to be unemployed from less than 1 year, 6 from at least 1 year, and 3 of them from 2 years or more, so the latter can be considered as long-term unemployed.

Eleven young people declared to be interested in starting a business, considered as a way to change the unemployment condition and to (re-)enter the labour market.

Among those young people open to the possibility of starting a business, the job aspects more appreciated and viewed as positive by them are the following: “to do what interests me”, “to utilize my abilities and talent in my work” and the “possibility to create new things” (6 preferences each).

Twelve young people declared in the questionnaires to be willing to attend a course about starting a business and 13 of them would welcome an experienced entrepreneur to help them in starting their own business. Furthermore, 11 youngsters also declared that would be able to maintain regular contact with a mentor in order to learn from him/her about starting a business.

The youngsters were also asked to answer “yes” or “no” or “I don't know” to a list of 25 sentences related to entrepreneurial skills for capturing the level of awareness and the self-perception of those owned. Among the interviewees, 10 thought to have the capability of overcoming challenges, to recognize their strengths and weakness, to set challenging goals and to take decisions. However, several young people felt unconfident and uncertain in getting the best out of people, in leading others to their projects and in recognizing potential projects.

The Thematic Analysis of the contents arisen during the focus-group discussions, identified drivers and barriers for starting a business among young people and underlined some weaknesses of the Italian formal educational system in providing competences useful and expendable in the labour market.

Concerning drivers, the youngsters were shaped to start a business by the desire of being successful and autonomous in the workplace, as reported in the following quotations extracted by the textual data of one focus-group:

"In my opinion, starting a business may be an opportunity for realizing myself. If you have a good idea and you can identify a market niche, thus you can have a chance of success". (Male, Graduated in Economics).

"I would like to start a business for being autonomous and independent". (Female, High School degree).

For many young people participating in the focus groups, becoming an entrepreneur is perceived as a chance for doing a job they like and for following their dreams:

"I would like to start a business in the field of social counseling, because it might be a way for doing what I like and for doing it at my better." (Female, Graduated in Social work).

"In my opinion the idea is a key aspect, the motivation that pushes you in realizing your dream. Thus the courage, a mix of passion and action!" (Female, High School degree).

"You need someone who trust you and available to fund your idea." (Female, Graduated in Social work).

Youngsters thought that technical and personal/relational capabilities are needed for starting a business. Part of the technical requirements, achieved through training, are economic competences, such as the ability to organize the work, to carry out a market analysis and a business plan:

"The first step is the organization of funds, of production, of how you want to be on the market". (Male, Graduated in Economics).

"Once you identify your business, you must train, because training is important for the realization of your dream". (Female, High School degree).

In the opinion of the interviewees, the greater barriers preventing Italian young people from starting a business were the lack of funding and the fear of the economic risk:

"I have no idea of where I could find money for starting a business. Who can help me start a business? I am 28 and I have nothing in my hands, I have not savings" (Female, Graduated in Nutrition and Food Science Technologies).

"The problem is that under 30... who would ever want to borrow for life with a bank, after asking for a mortgage? If the business is unsuccessful, what happens? I am concerned about it!". (Male, Graduated in Philosophy).

Another difficulty for starting a business identified by the interviewees is finding collaborators and persons sharing the same business idea and having motivation for carrying out it. The lack of grit could be the consequence of a spread discouragement characterizing Italian young persons, even due to the consequences of the international economic crisis:

“Italian young people are blocked to start a business perhaps because they do not fully believe in it” (Female, High School degree).

“We hear and see that so many activities close, so now, I wonder... why should I do it in a moment like this?” (Male, High School degree).

Such a discouragement, even concerning the idea of starting a business, may depend also on the interviewees' fear of personal failure. The Italian youngsters indeed, were finishing their formal education (secondary school or University) or were trying to enter the labour market when the national consequences of the international economic crisis, started in 2008, were particularly negative. The following quotation summarizes the feeling of the interviewees and proves how much the bad economic condition hit both the national labor market and the social context:

“(I do not want to start a business because) I am concerned that things can go to end badly: for example, in Italy, during the economic crisis, there were people who hanged themselves at 60-70 years for the debts they have with the bank and because they are shamed to the family.” (Male, High school degree).

During the discussion with the youngsters some weaknesses of the Italian formal educational system emerged spontaneously, even if there was not a specific question about it.

Indeed, in the youngsters' opinion, the Italian formal education system is too much focused on theoretical aspects and does not provide the chance for translating “theory in practice”:

“There is discrepancy between what is being studied and what is required in the work. I did an internship, but just for not examining. It was a little useful experience. University does not provide knowledge useful for the workplace.” (Female, Graduated in Foreign Languages).

They also thought that such a gap between theory and practice would be the first reason for their unemployment, because companies prefer hiring people with experience:

“Many companies require experience, especially in the field of research or in science, but where can we begin to do an experience if no one takes/hires us?” (Female, Graduated in Nutrition and Food Science Technologies).

Thus, young people would like to receive practical advice by older entrepreneurs who may transfer their experience and knowledge by hosting them in the company for a stage and by working side by side, for acquiring business' attitude by helping them identify their value and “light their stars”:

“In my opinion, entrepreneurs should tell us step by step how they move during the day, what they do, how they move in business... what are their actions... know what they are doing... and then, based on what they do, help us understand if we are able to do the same things... they have to tell us...” (Male, High School degree).

Young people also thought that older entrepreneurs may help them by giving courage to start a business:

“An entrepreneur with experience could encourage young persons like us by trusting and making us feel important. This could be useful because we are unconfident, because there is resignation among young people in Italy.” (Female, High School degree).

*Older Entrepreneurs: When Grit and Self-Esteem were
Key Elements for Starting a Business*

The seniors of the sample were men only and 2/3 of them aged between 50 and 64 years. About half of the interviewees had a post-secondary degree and 4 had a master degree. Ten out of 15 were still active in their micro and small enterprises.

When the seniors were asked to list in order of importance the entrepreneurial skills they own(ed), they mainly answered to have the capacity of having a positive vision of the future. It seems extremely important, indeed, to have an inspiring entrepreneurial vision before beginning launching a business. To be effective, this vision must provide a greater sense of purpose.

The second entrepreneurial skill identified by the seniors in order of importance was the ability of transforming an idea into a project by analyzing its feasibility and obstacles. This means being able to project into the future and build a plan to accomplish some objectives.

The third ability of an entrepreneur is generating alternatives and opportunities, that means bringing problem-solving and decision-making strategies to generate new solutions to overcome difficulties.

The interviews to seniors focused on their characteristics and on their opinion about entrepreneurial skills and competences required to an entrepreneur, in order to contribute to draw up a profile of Italian entrepreneurs and capture common aspects characterizing an entrepreneur.

Seniors were first asked to identify the key steps for starting a business on the basis of their experience. In the interviewees' opinion, the main prerequisites for starting a business are having a good idea, being creative and having money for funding your idea, as the following quotation highlights:

"A lot of people think that starting a business is hard. Too many would-be-entrepreneurs get stuck early in the process because they think only a certain type of person has what it takes to make it as a successful business owner. The reality is that most people have what it takes: a good idea, the right amount of capital and the creativity." (Male, age bracket 50-54, small Limited liability company, publishing industry).

Moreover, seniors thought that, before starting a business, it is necessary to make a business plan and a market analysis:

"The most important thing is to have a business plan that ensures the sustainability, because you cannot be successful in your business only because you have a good idea!" (Male, age bracket 70-74, small Limited liability company, IT sector).

Also, technical competencies were considered important for running a business:

"It is important you know your work and you can do it, you need to have technical competencies, the knowledge and the will to do." (Male, 65-69, small Limited liability company, industry sector).

One of the motivations that drove the interviewed seniors to open their business is the passion for their job:

"My job is the dream I wanted to accomplish"; "I was passionate about this work, passion is the first thing on the path to entrepreneurship." (Male, age bracket 65-69, small Limited liability company, handicraft sector).

Others were pushed to become entrepreneurs because of the need of a job:

“I was unemployed, I come back from Turkmenistan, everyone told me that I was too skilled ... the only alternative I had was to create my own business.” (Male, 50-54, small Limited liability company, publishing industry).

“At the beginning I was working in a big company, but at some point it was dismembered and we decided to open ours.” (Male, age bracket 70-74, micro Limited liability company, industry sector).

In Italy the enterprise is often a family tradition and some of the interviewees decided to continue this tradition because family and business in some cases are the indivisible two faces of the same coin:

I've always seen my dad having this business and coming home tired but satisfied. I continued his tradition”. (Male, age bracket 65-69, micro Limited liability company, handicraft sector).

Some other entrepreneurs started their business for the need of autonomy:

“I had had enough of being managed by incompetent people, so I said, ‘I am better than them and I can create my own company’.” (Male, age bracket 70-74, micro Limited liability company, handicraft sector).

In the seniors' opinion, entrepreneurs are self-confident people and able to recognize their own capabilities; they have passion for their job and are keen to sacrifice:

“I call it passion, but it really is endless energy. You have to get up early, work late. It takes a lot of passion, a lot of energy; it takes a lot of yourself.” (Male, age bracket 65-69, micro Limited liability company, handicraft sector).

In order to be successful, an entrepreneur has to be correct and respectful of human values:

“An entrepreneur has got interpersonal and relational competences. Certain skills, such as communication, delegating and respecting others can only be acquired through practice and by developing habits of character.” (Male, age bracket 60-64, small social enterprise, transport sector).

In the seniors' opinion, an entrepreneur has to play multiple roles in the company, have social skills e.g. communication, engagement, charisma, economic and technical competences:

“Have a clear understanding of industry evolution, knowledge of the effects of globalization, techniques for developing markets, etc.” (Male, age bracket 50-54, micro Limited liability company, industry sector).

The interviewees thought that an entrepreneur or an ex-entrepreneur could help a young man/woman to start a business through coaching about both hard (i.e. economic and technical knowledge) and soft skills (i.e. self-confidence, perseverance, relational capabilities), as showed by the following quotations:

“I would teach him/her (a young person) to make goals specific and realistic with target dates; monitor progress and adapt plans when necessary. (Male, age bracket 70-74, micro Limited liability company, industry sector).

“I would teach him/her to be persevering in dealing with situations: if there are obstacles it is necessary to overcome them.” (Male, age bracket 65-69, micro Limited liability company, handicraft sector).

The majority answered to be available to help young people start their own business, for a sense of reciprocity, for continuing learning through the intergenerational exchange, for a sort of social responsibility:

“Yes, I would like to help a young person start a business to grow together with others [...] I was helped when I was young; Now it is my turn to help.” (Male, age bracket 70-74, micro Limited liability company, industry sector).

“A company is a social good and running a company brings wealth to everyone”. (Male, age bracket 50-54, micro Limited liability company, social sector).

When the seniors were asked how they would have gone about helping young people, they told that formal education should be brought to life through practical experiential learning models and the experience of real-world entrepreneurs.

Discussion

The research results are compliant with those of the previous research (Alfieri, Sironi, Marta, Rosina, Marzana, 2015; Cefalo, Sergi, Giannelli, 2015; Pastore, 2011) but they provide further insights about the reason of the difficulties encountered by Italian young people when they seek for a job, albeit the university degree. The results indeed, show that Italian young people are discouraged because they have not practical knowledge that can be spent on a work place.

The research also demonstrates that senior entrepreneurs are available to help young people for a sort of social conscientiousness, to give back what they received during their lives. As entrepreneurs they criticize that young people lack practical experiential learning models.

Indeed, a consistently repeated concern through the contents of focus-groups and interviews relates to the mismatch between the supply of the skills young people bring with them as they come out of formal education and what the labour market actually demands.

Senior entrepreneurs consider the role of entrepreneurship as an instrument to improve employability levels as it has been stressed by the European Union: *“young people who benefit from entrepreneurial learning, develop business knowledge and essential skills and attitudes including creativity, initiative, tenacity, teamwork, understanding of risk and a sense of responsibility. This is the entrepreneurial mind-set that helps entrepreneurs transform ideas into action and also significantly increases employability”* (European Commission, 2013).

The research, however, demonstrates that entrepreneurship education is not considered part of the traditional Italian learning experience.

Promoting NEETs' entrepreneurship is seen by the senior entrepreneurs as an essential instrument to empower the youth active participation in social and civic life, as it allows the individuals to leverage on their own professional retraining project, a project of their own initiative, on their ability to re-read the events of their own life, on their autonomy and responsibility and innovation, mainly in the workplace, but also in private and social life.

According to the socio-constructivist approach, social interactions play a key role in the cognitive development process. To support the learners to explore and to achieve a further transformative capacity, senior entrepreneurs are ready to act as scaffolders of the intergenerational learning. Building common zones of proximal development, defined as *“the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance”*, (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) seniors indeed can encounter the other generations and provide assistance and support tailored to suit the NEETs' needs.

The intergenerational entrepreneurship education should become a means to ensure real access on the individual's part to learning opportunities, making possible to connect his/her personal projects with entrepreneurship and innovation, in a dialogue with the socio-economic system.

In light of the findings, it is absolutely apparent that if we want to do anything to make transitions into an increasingly complex working world easier for NEETs, it is essential that intergenerational entrepreneurship education become a more structured learning pattern aimed at promoting autonomy, personal growth and that high-quality careers information advice and guidance are available.

In this way it could be possible to overcome the human capital definition (i.e. the idea that people learn to become more productive, or learning to “fit for purpose” in a socio-economic system) to embrace the perspective of an economy based on the opportunity to intervene and to transform the reality on the basis of the own agency, i.e. the power of express the own identity along a project of life (Margiotta, 2013; Sen, 1999).

At the heart of an effective preparation for today's working world is the concept of personal resiliency. How can it be developed among young people? Seniors who have already passed through difficult experiences need to teach NEETs, that failure happens and how to respond it. They need to be honest about just how hard the labour market now is and start preparing young people to compete successfully in a job environment which will present many setbacks and disappointments as well as enormous opportunities. Senior entrepreneurs or ex-entrepreneurs have precious know-how and experience that can make it easier for unexperienced entrepreneurs contemplating a start-up to go through the process of starting up and running the business than they might otherwise do without such help. This knowledge represents valuable European intellectual capital.

Intergenerational entrepreneurship education, in conclusion, constitutes the key for redirecting learning paths through the design of new training architectures capable of integrating the different generations and of defining new pedagogical models based on multidisciplinary, competent and generative actions (Costa, 2013). This educational approach should be sustained by specific policies addressing both the educational sector and the labour market, through a systematic interaction between the two systems, in order to help the transition from the first to the second and vice versa, favouring also the long-life learning and according to a perspective of intergenerational solidarity, especially in Italy, where social and economic inequalities between older and young people are increasing in the last years (OECD, 2017).

The research has some limitations. First, it focused on young people and older entrepreneurs living in the Central and Northern Italy, where the Small and Medium Enterprise model (often family-run business) is predominant, especially in the handicraft sector. This may be a limit of the research, because, as known, there are relevant differences between Northern and Southern Italy in educational level and early school leaving rate; in employment and unemployment rates and about economic and business development.

Second, the research did not consider gender differences in entrepreneurial attitudes of NEETs because of the restricted number of participants, nor among entrepreneurs, because any woman was in the group of the interviewed entrepreneurs. Future studies involving young and older people living in the Southern Italy and taking into consideration the gender perspective may contribute to draw up a more exhaustive and complete image of Italian NEETs and older entrepreneurs. They could also give additional insights for understanding the improvements needed by the formal education system in Italy for being more effective in helping young people discover their own value and find more job opportunities in an unfriendly labour market. Future studies could address the above issues, even adding further knowledge through developing cross-national comparisons, integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Conclusions

In a youth labour market characterised by increasing complexity, growing fractured transitions and employers requiring new skills, there is a call on schools and Universities to react, embracing approaches which improve personal adaptability and the ability to apply knowledge efficiently in unfamiliar situations. In all of this, there is a very simple proposition:

that for young people to go into the labour market with better prospects, the distance between the classroom and the workplace needs to be reduced.

If schools are not able to respond to changes in the labour market by extending and adapting what, and how, they teach, limiting the distance between the classroom and the workplace, there is a real need to think about how more coherent pathways can be put in place for young people entering the labour market after attending formal education trainings (i.e. high school and University).

This research gives the evidence that senior entrepreneurs may give the youngster what they are missing and needing: awareness of their value, risk-taking and grit.

In order to encourage a pro-active attitude in young people, it seems important to strengthen the link between education/training through intergenerational entrepreneurship education, which becomes more effective the more we are able to provide youth with skills that are directly useful in the job market and consistent with its evolution.

As European Union is not fully developing its entrepreneurial potential and it is failing to encourage enough people to become an entrepreneur, the idea of fostering intergenerational entrepreneurship should be seriously considered.

The older entrepreneurs' contribution to the local economy should start from the educational sector and should be supported and promoted by the policy agenda through the addition of a specific subject on entrepreneurship into the curricula of students.

Seniors who complain that young people lack work readiness have it in their hands to help address the problem, through providing work experience and careers provision, in helping them to get to grips with modern recruitment practices, demonstrating the relevance of learning and providing real-world learning examples and ultimately in closing the growing gap between classroom and workplace.

Intergenerational entrepreneurship education, then, represents a privileged learning paradigm to support dialogue between the world of education and the world of work, enhancing networking and cooperation.

More than any other form of entrepreneurship, an intergenerational approach will create not only jobs and economic growth, but (above all) social cohesion, generational comprehension and wellbeing for individuals.

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Notes

The authors carried out the research and drafted the article in a coordinated way. Barbara Baschiera is responsible for the Abstract, the Introduction, the Discussion and the Conclusions. Sara Santini and Marco Socci are responsible for the Methodology and the Results of Research.

This study targeted NEETs aged between 18 and 29 years in order to focalize on the unemployed young population with a at least Secondary School degree, since the unemployment of young people with high human capital is a specific challenge of the Italian labor market.

The analysis of the framework foresaw even the collection of 3 Good Practices whose findings are reported into the “Be the Change” Italian National Report (2017), available at this link: <https://bethechange-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Italian-National-Report.pdf>.

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