Outside the "gender cages": men in training courses dedicated to educational and caring professions

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Abstract. This article deals with the lack of male enrolments in training courses dedicated to educational and caring professions. A study carried out by the author with male university students who have known how to move outside the "gender cages" by enrolling in broadly feminised courses of study, allows us to pinpoint a plurality of social and cultural factors that discourage young men from approaching knowledge and practices historically unrelated to their gender. This contribution also intends to highlight the lack of attention paid to the promotion of gender equality in the Italian school and training context, particularly in terms of educational orientation

Keywords. gender segregation in education – educational choices – men's studies – school orientation – gender stereotypes

1. School orientation and educational policies based on gender equality: an unresolved issue

Orientation (professional, school and university) is a crucial component of the European Union's economic, educational and cultural policies. A demonstration of this is the economic reform plan launched with the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, later relaunched in 2005, and continued with "Europe 2020", which aimed to make the European Union «the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy by 2010». As the ultimate goals are the development of innovation, entrepreneurship and human capital, social inclusion, job redevelopment, female employment and sustainable development, we can ascertain that educational and career orientation is considered a strategic and instrumental objective for achieving all these macro-purposes.

By shifting the focus onto education and training, the centrality of the orientation becomes even more evident. The report Education and Training in Europe 2020: responses from the EU Member States of the Eurydice network[1] examines the national policies and strategies that Member States have been implementing since 2011 in response to

[1] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, *Education and Training in Europe 2020: Responses from the EU Member States. Eurydice Report*, Brussels, Eurydice, 2013. Available at: http://eurydice.indire.it/pubblicazioni/education-and-training-in-europe-2020-responses-from-the-eu-member-states/ (last consulted on 9 September 2019).

the challenges posed by the strategic priorities of "Europe 2020". There are four priority objectives: to counter early school leaving; to increase the number of graduates, and the quality and importance of higher education; to improve the skills and vocational education and training for youth employment; to encourage adult participation in lifelong learning. In the report, orientation is included among the most effective investments that European countries can make to achieve these ambitious goals.

The principle according to which orientation throughout the course of life must be recognised as a permanent right of every person and a strategic lever for training policies (as well as economic policies), is by now also accepted and supported in Italy. The *Linee guida nazionali per l'orientamento* issued by the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research) in 2014 state that: «Orientation is no longer just the tool to manage the transition between school, training and work, but it also takes on a permanent value in the life of every person, guaranteeing development and support in their choice and decision-making processes with the aim of promoting active employment, economic growth and social inclusion»[2].

Upon consulting the document, it is interesting to note that there is not one reference to gender issues: the relationship between school orientation policies and educational policies aimed at promoting equality between male and female students is not even contemplated. This fact is surprising given that the gender variable, together with the social class one belongs to[3], is what still today has the most profound effect on the scholastic and academic choices of girls and boys[4]. Intervening through targeted orientation actions on the deconstruction of cultural and social conditions that act pervasively on male and female training paths should therefore be a priority objective[5]. The lack of specific focus on the link between orientation and gender equality unfortunately has negative results: Italy is among the European countries in which there is the greatest problem of "gender segregation in education", i.e. the gap between the technical-scientific paths (with a marked male presence) and the educational and caring fields (the prerogative of the female gender).

When we talk about "educational segregation" we are referring to «a sexist subdivision, inherent in our school system, which leads the students of the male gender to be guided towards the disciplines considered 'masculine' (technical-scientific subjects) and the females towards the more "feminine" ones (humanities subjects)»[6]. This phenomenon is already present in the choice of upper secondary schools and it becomes even more pronounced at a university level. According to the latest MIUR statistics on enrolment in the

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[2] Ministry of Education, University and Research, *Linee guida nazionali per l'orientamento permanente centrato sulla persona*, 2014. Available at: http://www.istruzione.it/orientamento/linee_guida_orientamento. pdf (last consulted on 9 September 2019).

[3] G. Ballarino, D. Checchi (ed.), *Sistema scolastico e disuguaglianza sociale, scelte individuali e vincoli strutturali*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2006; M. Romito, *Una scuola di classe. Orientamento e disuguaglianza nelle transizioni scolastiche*, Milano, Guerini, 2016; A. Schizzerotto, *Vite ineguali. Disuguaglianze e corsi di vita nell'Italia contemporanea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2002.

[4] I. Biemmi, S. Leonelli, *Gabbie di genere. Retaggi sessisti e scelte formative*, Turin, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2017; F. Sartori, *Differenze e diseguaglianze di genere*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009.

[5] B. Mapelli, G. Bozzi Tarizzo, D. De Marchi, *Orientamento e identità di genere. Crescere donne e uomini*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 2001.

[6] I. Biemmi, *Educare alla parità. Proposte didattiche per educare in ottica di genere*, Rome, Edizioni Conoscenza, 2012, p. 74.

first year of the upper secondary schools[7], while the percentage of male and female students out of the total students is more or less balanced (51.5% of male students compared to 48.5% of female students), it is distributed in a highly uneven manner depending on the type of secondary school chosen. The high school is the one preferred by girls (60.6%), and in particular, the discipline of Human Sciences counts 89% of female enrolments. In the case of male students, the choice falls on the technical institute (70% of enrolments) with a prevalence for the technological sector that has 83.8% of male enrolments. Furthermore, males prevail in the sports-based scientific (70%) and applied sciences lyceum (68.6%), while the females prefer linguistic (79.4%) and artistic subjects (89.6%)[8].

The school system appears to be split in two: there are "feminine" study chains and "masculine" study chains[9]. As mentioned above, this divergence does not diminish, but on the contrary tends to be accentuated in the transition to the university. The most recent data of Almalaurea on the "Profiles of graduates" in 2017[10] confirm a strong gender segregation also in academic education. Women, who for a long time have constituted more than half the graduates in Italy (in the academic year 1991/92, for the first time in Italy, the female enrolments exceeded the male enrolments), represented 59.2% of the total graduates in 2017. However, there is a strong differentiation in the gender composition of the various disciplinary areas. In first level courses, women constitute the strong majority in the "teaching" (93.6%), "linguistic" (83.6%), "psychological" (80.0%) and "healthcare profession" (69.8%) groups. Conversely, they are the minority in the "engineering" (26.1%), "scientific" (28.2%) and "physical education" (31.6%) groups. This distribution is also confirmed in the two-year master courses. In the single-cycle master's courses, women clearly prevail in all disciplinary groups: from 54.4% in the "medicine and dentistry" group to 96.3% in the "teaching" group[11].

When we analyse the phenomenon of educational segregation, we tend to give it a one-way interpretation, as though the gender conditionings have an impact exclusively on the educational choices of the girls. Evidently, such influences instead act in a specular manner on the choices of the boys who, in the common imaginary, are automatically excluded from educational and caring knowledge, and, therefore, from the careers that are connected to such knowledge.

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[7] Ministry of Education, University and Research –Statistics and Studies Office, *Le iscrizioni al primo anno delle scuole primarie, secondarie di primo e secondo grado del sistema educativo di istruzione e formazione*, 2017. Available at: http://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/0/Le+iscrizioni+al+primo+anno+delle+scuole+primarie%2C+secondarie+di+primo+e+secondo+grado+del+sistema+educativo+di+istruzione+e+formazione/ (last consulted on 9 September 2019).

[8] Ivi, p. 5.

[9] The gender division in the scholastic choices has already been highlighted by Simonetta Ulivieri who analysed the upper secondary school and university enrolment data in the nineteen-eighties. See S. Ulivieri, *Educare al femminile*, Pisa, ETS, 1995, 154-155.

[10] Almalaurea, *XX Indagine. Profilo dei Laureati 2017*, 2018. Available at:

http://www.almalaurea.it/universita/profilo/profilo2017 (last consulted on 9 September 2019).

[11] Ivi, p. 2.

2. Standing out from the crowd: results of a survey on university students enrolled in training courses dedicated to education and caring

2.1 Purpose of the study, investigation tool and sample

A critical examination of the literature present in Italy on the main themes of the Gender Pedagogy[12] highlights how the issue of educational segregation has rarely been the object of specific analyses or systematic studies. Educational segregation is monitored mainly from the statistical and quantitative point of view, extrapolating information from larger surveys concerning our school and academic system[13]. The analyses are also marked by another peculiarity: they focus on female educational segregation, completely ignoring the study of the phenomenon from the male perspective. From this it can be deduced that the fact that girls still keep themselves far removed from technical-scientific courses is socially considered problematic[14], while the fact that the boys are a small minority in study paths leading to educational and caring careers does not instead appear to be an interesting topic.

Given the above premises, I conducted an empirical survey which involved a cohort of female students and university students from three Tuscan universities (Florence, Pisa, Siena) enrolled in degree courses characterised by a strong segregation on a sexual basis, i.e. having an overwhelming male or female presence among the enrolled students[15]. Within these courses a sample of male and female students belonging to the minority group was selected, and they were interviewed on several central points of their school and academic path: starting with their first major choice, namely, that made after the third year, up to the decision to enrol in university courses considered atypical for the kind of group they belong to[16]. The survey was characterised by two elements of originality that concern both the subject under investigation and the research methodology used. As regards the subject of study, starting from the assumption that the "gender cages" condition not only the life pathways of females but also those of males, it was decided to study the unconventional training paths of both girls and boys. This choice allowed us to investigate a field of research that is still largely unexplored in Italy: the cultural

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[12] S. Leonelli, *Costruzioni di identità e pedagogia di* genere, in M. Contini (ed.), *Molte infanzie molte famiglie. Interpretare i contesti in pedagogia*, Rome, Carocci, 2010, pp. 57-76.

[13] See the periodical reports of the MUIR «La scuola in cifre» and «L'università in cifre», which for some years have included data broken down by gender.

[14] Also worth noting among the most recent contributions, the following book: A. G. Lopez, *Le donne ai margini della scienza: una lettura pedagogica*, Milan, Unicopli, 2009.

[15] The survey was conducted by the author and its results are reported in the second part of the book by I. Biemmi, S. Leonelli, *Gabbie di genere*, cit., entitled *Fuori dalle gabbie di genere: una ricerca su percorsi accademici atipici* (pp. 111-197). In this contribution the results of the research have been analysed and re-elaborated in an unprecedented form.

[16] Forty biographical interviews were conducted during the survey, eighteen of which were with male students and twenty-two with female students. Female students were interviewed who were enrolled in engineering, computer science, geological sciences and technologies, earth sciences, oenology, nursery sciences, and physiotherapy, and male students were interviewed who were enrolled in children's sciences, primary education sciences, nursing, social service sciences as well as neuro therapy and psychomotricity at the developmental age and psychiatric rehabilitation techniques. The interviews were conducted during the academic years 2012-2013, 2013-2014 e 2014-2015.

legacies that mark the relationship between males and caring professions[17]. As far as the methodology of the research is concerned, we decided on the narrative interview tool[18] in view of its effectiveness in activating processes of interpretation and giving a sense to life experiences and choices[19].

Narrative research, now widely used within the sphere of social research, is found in the domain of idiographic-qualitative research, that is, in an area of analysis of the social reality aimed at the hermeneutical understanding of the phenomena and connections of meaning as well as the contexts in which they are generated, rather than their quantification and the generalisation of the results[20]. In this type of perspective, the criterion of scientificity derives from the ability of the research to generate knowledge, making the processes emerge and producing reflexivity. Thanks to the narrations, individuals carry out a sense-making process [21], in other words, the construction of meaning, placing events inside frames of reference in order to give them coherence and meaning. Stories therefore offer direct and privileged access to the cognitive world of the individuals and to their way of representing and giving meaning to the situations and events they experience:[22] they therefore constitute a valuable heritage for social and educational research.

Among the various tools used to collect stories, the biographical interview [23] seems particularly effective in bringing the world of the interviewee to the surface as it guarantees ample freedom to the interviewed subject both in the choice of contents and in the sequence of topics to be discussed. The interviewer simply has an outline available which contains a series of topics that he/she wishes to touch on during the interview. Despite the fact that the contents to be analysed are therefore proposed by the researcher, they are not presented in the form of a set of fixed or standardised questions: both the form and the order of presentation of the questions-stimulus may vary depending on the specific interview situation. The interview outline is therefore limited to a promemoria function and is

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[17] The following contributions represent refreshing exceptions: S. Bellassai, *Dalla trasmissione alla relazione. La pedagogia della mascolinità come riposizionamento condiviso nella parzialità di genere*, in C. Gamberi, M. A. Maio, G. Selmi (eds.), *Educare al genere. Riflessioni e strumenti per articolare la complessità*, Rome, Carocci, 2010, pp. 45-54; S. Ciccone, *Essere maschi. Tra potere e libertà*, Turin, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2009; S. Deiana, M. M. Greco (ed.), *Trasformare il maschile nella cura, nell'educazione, nelle relazioni*, Assisi, Cittadella Editore, 2012; B. Mapelli, S. Ulivieri Stiozzi (eds), *Uomini in educazione*, Rho, Stripes, 2012.

[18] R. Atkinson (1998), It. translation. *The life story interview. Raccontare la storia di sé nella ricerca formativa, organizzativa e sociale*, Cortina, Milan, 2002; Bichi R., *L'intervista biografica. Una proposta metodologica*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 2002.

[19] F. Cambi, *L'autobiografia come metodo formativo,* Rome-Bari, Edizioni Laterza, 2007.

[20] M. Baldacci, *Metodologia della ricerca pedagogica*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2001.

[21] For an in-depth analysis of the concept of *sense-making* see K. E. Weick, *Senso e significato nell'organizzazione*, Milan, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 1995.

[22] J. S. Bruner, *La mente a più dimensioni* (1986), Italian translation. Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1988.

[23] In literature this type of interview can be found under a variety of labels: narrative, in-depth, motivational, focused, discursive, hermeneutic, non-standard, qualitative, free, life story, and life history. This is clearly a type of interview that still suffers from severe systematisation deficiencies even though there is now extensive literature on this research instrument in Italy. For further information see: R. Atkinson, *L'intervista narrativa*, cit.; R. Bichi, *L'intervista biografica. Una proposta metodologica*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero 2002; D. Demaziére, C. Dubar, *Dentro le storie. Analizzare le interviste biografiche* (1997), Italian translation. Milan, Cortina, 2000; M. Olagnero, *Vite nel tempo. La ricerca biografica in sociologia*, Rome, Carocci, 2004; B. Poggio, *Mi racconti una storia? Il metodo narrativo nelle scienze sociali*, Rome, Carocci, 2004; S. Mantovani, *L'intervista biografica*, in Ead. (by), *La ricerca sul campo in educazione. I metodi qualitativi*, Milan, Bruno Mondatori, 1998.

an extremely flexible and non-directive tool, designed so as not to hinder the spontaneous flow of the interviewees' thoughts. The biographical interview technique allows for gaining access not only to the personal world of the interviewee, but also to their social world. To quote Jedlowski: "If the social world is a world of meanings, how can you have access to it without confronting yourself with the ways in which people express these meanings, without confronting yourself with their voice? The voice of a person is a singular voice: but it always expresses something that reaches beyond itself"[24].

In this research the biographical approach is used for cognitive purposes, therefore it complies with rigorous scientific procedures throughout the various phases of the investigation: from the planning of the interview (research design, interview outline, sample selection, access to the field), to its management (biographical agreement between interviewer and interviewee, listening and intervention strategies during the interview), and transcription of the interviews (transfer from orality to writing as an interpretative act), up to the analysis of the texts produced.

In order to analyse the material collected I was inspired by the theoretical and methodological principles of the Grounded Theory[25]. The theoretical node at the centre of this approach is that there is theory at the basis of sociological knowledge and that it constitutes the most systematic way to construct, synthesise and integrate scientific knowledge. The Grounded Theory consists of a systematic process of conceptualising and categorising the data collected during the research in order to produce theory. This method fits perfectly with the generative nature typical of the narrative analysis process, in which hypotheses and theories are produced and processed during the analysis. More specifically, the narrative analysis, which must be differentiated from the paradigmatic one – aimed at producing taxonomies and categories – is fundamentally oriented towards producing new stories. The product of research based on narration is in fact a new narrative in which the researcher – through understanding and interpretation – produces a new order and new meanings[26].

The interviews were conducted by drawing up a specific outline consisting of a set of topics that we wanted to address during the interview. The outline of the biographical interview takes on a special connotation: "It is a living instrument, which changes as the work progresses, following the entire process of knowledge"[27]. Its two fundamental functions are to provide the framework for the interpretative model and to guide the researcher during the interviews.

Therefore, in order to conduct the interviews, I used an outline containing several central thematic nodes that I formulated during the interview in the form of questions and which were remodelled from time to time depending on the responses of the inter-

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[24] P. Jedlowski, *Storie comuni. La narrazione nella vita quotidiana*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2000, p. 204.

[25] This expression is understood as the "discovery of the theory from the data"; it is a form of qualitative analysis that tends to directly produce the theory starting from the collection of empirical data. Its formulation dates back to the 1960s when Barney G. Glaser and Anselm Strass published the volume *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago, Aldine, 1967), the Italian translation of which is now available: B. G. Glaser, A. L. Strauss, *La scoperta della grounded theory. Strategie per la ricerca qualitativa*, Rome, Armando Editore, 2009.

[26] For more in-depth information on the *grounded theory* in Italian, see: M. Tarozzi, *Che cos'è la grounded theory*, Roma, Carocci, 2008.

[27] R. Bichi, *L'intervista biografica*, cit., p. 66.

viewed subjects. I built an interview outline that was functional to two basic objectives. On the one hand it had to act as a guide for conducting the interviews by offering the constellation of topics that I was interested in touching on for reconstructing a coherent picture around the main topics from which the research idea itself stemmed, thus avoiding an excessive dispersion of the topics covered. On the other hand, the outline had to be sufficiently ductile to allow for opening to the 'new', to themes that emerged spontaneously during the interviews.

The outline was divided into three areas: a first area for the reconstruction of the training path from the secondary schools to high school, a second area that includes the time of choosing the academic study course and the experience gained at the university, and the third area dedicated to both professional and family projection in the future. The initial outline was as follows:

Previous educational experience
What memories do you have of secondary school?
How did you choose which high school to go to?
How would you describe your studies in high school, both in terms of academic performance and in relation to the atmosphere in class (relationship with classmates and professors)?
Can you remember any teachers who had a specific influence on your study path?
Are you satisfied with your choice of high school?
The university path
What made you decide to enrol in this course?
Why do you think so few boys/girls enrol in this study course?
How do you cope as a minority group in an almost entirely male/female environment?
Have you ever felt discriminated against as a male/female?
Are you happy with the choice you made? Would you repeat it?
The future
What work would you like to do "when you grow up"?
Do you think that as a male/female you will find it more difficult to find a place for yourself in a very feminised/masculinised work environment?
How do you imagine your life in the future?

The sample involved the three Tuscan universities in Florence, Pisa and Siena, in which the degree courses with a strong sexually based segregation were selected, in other terms, those having an overwhelming male or female presence among the enrolments. A sample of male and female students belonging to the minority group was selected from within these courses. Forty biographical interviews were carried out during the survey, of which eighteen were males and twenty-two females. The interviews were conducted with female students enrolled in engineering, computer science, geological sciences and technologies, earth sciences, oenology, nursery sciences, and physiotherapy, and with male students enrolled in children's sciences, primary education sciences, nursing and caring, social service sciences, neuro and psychomotor therapy in the developmental age, and psychiatric rehabilitation. The interviews were carried out during the academic years 2012-2013, 2013-2014 and 2014-2015.

2.2 Why are there so few males in the education and caring professions?

In order to start exploring the professional imagination of young people in relation to gender discrimination, the following question was asked during the interviews: "Why do you think so few males enrol in this study course?". Thanks to this point of reflection, the future teachers, educators, social workers, nurses and developmental-age therapists took the opportunity to pause and think about an issue which up until then they had either tackled too hastily or not considered at all.

An initial group of interviewees believed that the main cause of male educational and occupational segregation is determined by historically rooted cultural and family prejudices. In relation to the profession of teacher for example, the traditional concept of teaching as a vocation – or as an educational mission – is closely connected to the concept of mothering: teaching is configured as a sort of sublimated place of the maternal destiny in which women can exploit their "innate" gifts of gentleness, emotivity, solidarity, selflessness for caring, protecting, and understanding growing subjects[28]. In this perspective, the profession of teacher ends up appearing "unacceptable" for a male because, following a dichotomous logic, these characteristics do not by definition belong to the masculine gender and even risk being detrimental to their personal identity. In this interpretative line we find the testimony of Francesco, a future teacher: «The problem in my opinion lies in Giovanni Gentile's philosophy, it all stems from there. The teacher as a mother, the female sex as the weaker sex, the mother as the angel of the domestic hearth... These are all things related to the cultural context, especially in southern Italy where there is still this male-dominated culture with the man as the head of the family – the 'strong sex' – and the wife who in small towns is still frowned upon if she goes to work, or if she is not at home with her children. I find this shameful»[29]. Marco, future nurse, adds another important element to the thesis of the learned nature of gender roles, focusing on the family. Here is an excerpt from his interview: «I don't believe so much in the 'nature' of the gender, rather, I believe that one builds one's own idea of male and female roles through experience, as well as through family life. For example, in my family there is a distinction of the gender roles in the family which, due to living it, becomes absorbed. The mother has always taken care of the children up to a certain age, then perhaps the father takes over more. The same applies to the elderly. For example, my grandparents fell ill on both sides of the family. My mother took care of her mother, while my father asked others to take care of the physical aspects of his mother, such as nursing, and referred her to a caregiver. Consequently, it's a perpetuation. Then later maybe there will gradually be people who make different choices and who will act as a model»[30].

Within the motivations of cultural origin there is also a set of testimonies from a second group of interviewees who focussed on the lack of social recognition of professions such as teachers, nurses, and social workers. A widespread prejudice leads to the

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[28] The concept of teaching as a 'natural' extension of the maternal role has been the focus of numerous debates on the professionalism of women teachers. Worth noting in particular are the following critical contributions: E. Lodini, *L'insegnamento: vocazione o professione?*, in «Scuola e Città», 3, 1990; S. Ulivieri, *Mater et magistra. La donna insegnante tra 'maternage' e professione*, in «La scuola se», 6-7, 1990; S. Ulivieri (ed.), *Essere donne insegnanti. Storia, professionalità e cultura di genere*, Turin, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1996.
[29] I. Biemmi, S. Leonelli, *Gabbie di genere*, cit., pp. 169-170.
[30] Ivi, p. 170.

belief that certain activities related to the care and assistance of the person (washing, cleaning, nourishing) are "degrading" for a man, while – on the other hand – they are acceptable for a woman. Andrea, a future male nurse, puts it in a nutshell: «For some people it is difficult to accept cleaning a person, or assisting them or performing more… basic tasks. I know about some of my friends who wanted to do nursing and they didn't do it because they knew it was hard at the beginning, you have to do even slightly degrading jobs, a bit repulsive, and they didn't do it for that reason. Like the idea of cleaning the person or placing the catheter doesn't attract them much… (smiles). And consequently, this profession disgusts them»[31]. Along the same lines we find testimonies that focus on the fact that women are more "naturally inclined" to look after children, especially if they are very small, and therefore it is "normal" for them to approach these areas professionally. It is an innate interpretation of gender differences according to which the different male or female characteristics are the result of natural predispositions rather than the consequence of cultural processes.

The debate between the cultural and the innate position is still open and is substantiated in some basic questions: Do women and men learn to be different, or should the responsibility for the differences be attributed exclusively to their inherited biological heritage? Are the differences in behaviour and personality determined by biological, genetic or hormonal data, or are they instead the product of cultural conditioning and environmental influences? In essence, are the differences between males and females innate or learned? With respect to this diatribe, the sample of students interviewed was rather compact on the cultural front, despite expressing doubts at times about possible different "predispositions" and "attitudes" of males and females.

A third group of interviewees fully supported the cultural hypothesis, stating that the reluctance of young men to choose certain study and work courses is simply due to the lack of adult male models to inspire them. The case of the teaching profession is exemplary: if during his schooling in kindergarten and primary school a child never comes across a male figure, he concludes that it is a profession suitable only for women. He automatically limits what Silvia Leonelli defines as the "field of thinkability", that is, the range of hypothetical opportunities from inside which the subject chooses his own individual path: «The horizon of choices can really be open 360 degrees, or it can only seem that way, because what the subject sees are many well-trodden paths, which however risk being identified as the only ones. Some of the possibilities, which would also be available, are not even taken into consideration»[32].

2.3 The "atypical" training choices are the consequence of life experiences (rather than the effect of a gender-sensitive orientation)

How is it possible to widen the horizon of thinkability of young men to include professions that are conceived as exclusively feminine in the common imagination? An answer emerges from the stories of the interviewees who represent the living proof of the fact that the widening of one's gaze beyond the "gender cages" is possible, even if very

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[31] Ivi, p. 171.
[32] Ivi, p.71.

laborious. Faced with the question regarding the reasons for an atypical training choice ("How did you decide to enrol in this degree course in which you belong to a minority group?"), the sample students reconstructed much more tortuous and tormented paths of study and life. In most cases, the idea of wanting to become a teacher, nurse, social worker or developmental-age therapist matured slowly, thanks to life experiences that led to a clear break with the past. Many respondents "discovered" that they wanted to become professionals in the education and caring sectors after having had extra-scholastic experiences (civil service, summer camps, after-school care, babysitting) that brought them closer to jobs that they had never previously considered possible. There is a "first" – in which we move forward through inertia, following paths already traced – and there is an "after", in which we discover a new passion, in some cases a real vocation.

This is the case of Francesco, whose life changed course after an experience in the multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Belleville, Paris. From that moment he decided he wanted to be a teacher when he grew up: «When I finished high school I enrolled in the Arts Faculty in Sicily then I left because we moved from region to region, I dropped out of school, I went to England to work, then I returned to France, Paris, and travelled to various places. (…) Ten years have passed between leaving high school and enrolling in Childhood Education. At eighteen I had still not made certain decisions, I still had to have other experiences first. Then, by getting to know people, doing things and learning to know oneself, one also learns to know what one really likes. My experience in France, in the multi-ethnic Belleville district, was very significant. There were schools near where I lived and every morning, I used to watch the teachers who took the children of various ethnic groups outside. Male teachers! I saw some French children and then the rest were Algerians, Tunisians... It was wonderful. I enjoyed this multicultural atmosphere and so I was also fascinated by the profession of teacher. In fact, I even went to ask in these centres if I could work there. I have half a mind to go back there, to be a teacher!»[33].

Another exemplary case is that of Tommaso, who after obtaining his first degree and experimenting with various jobs, decided to accept a new challenge at a mature age by enrolling in the degree course in Primary Education because he understood that his path was that of teaching. Here is his story: «A person gave me a contact for a summer camp. And that gave me the chance to get to do what I should have done right from the start... There were also clues here and there that were to lead me down this path. It's just that – and I absolutely don't want to brag – but... I think younger children find me particularly appealing. I always find them on top of me! (smiles) Children, cousins, neighbours... I'm feel good when I'm with small children. And this thing came to light at this summer camp. What I felt in July 2011 is difficult to explain: I used to get up at half past six in the morning, returning in the afternoon at five, but I was happy (smiles). I said to myself: 'If I don't take this step here and now, I won't ever take it and if I don't take it, I know that I'll regret it for the rest of my life'. And then I went back to the university again, to study Educational Sciences. Five more years of study! But even now when I do the training, it's never a burden»[34].

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[33] Ivi, pp. 134-135.
[34] Ivi, pp. 135-136.

Precisely because the choice matures progressively and sometimes in a painful way, when one finally makes the decision to enrol in a degree course that is atypical for the gender they belong to, this decision is firm, decisive, and passionate, and the academic performance also turns out to be very positive. Given that the motivation behind any learning process is a decisive element for successful training, we can affirm that gender cages are penalising and detrimental in both male and female school and academic pathways.

Activating orientation pathways aimed at undermining the cultural roots of gender stereotypes would therefore be an operation which is not only ethically correct, but also functional to the proper functioning of the entire educational and training system.

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