

A Case Study Analysis of the Youth Guarantee Scheme Implementation in Italy (Lombardy Region)

YOUNG

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DOI: 10.1177/1103308818817891

journals.sagepub.com/home/you**Maria Tsekoura¹****Abstract**

Using the implementation of the Youth Guarantee (YG) in the Italian context (Lombardy) as its point of departure, this article exemplifies the introduction of the YG scheme in national realities. Through review of relevant policy documents, the article identifies a contradiction between the policy model implied through the YG that builds upon a concept of active citizenship and an employment context that in reality offers limited structural opportunities for the enactment of these principles during processes of youth transition. This article will argue that initiatives for youth employment that are de-contextualized and lack a clear vision of youth lives can reinforce the existing order and power imbalances as they offer limited support for young people to develop a sense of success, self-determination and agency in terms of employability.

Keywords

Youth Guarantee, transition, employment, agency, activation

Introduction

Youth unemployment and the difficulties regarding successful transition to employment have gained a prominent role within policy discourses in Europe in recent years in the aftermath of the economic crisis. However, this is not a new discourse: youth activation programmes started to become prevalent from the 1990s in the majority of European countries. These schemes involved both the provision of activation offers for first-time jobseekers in countries with more established welfare systems and the centralized activation of benefits in the European South. Furthermore, the European Union (EU) directly affected the employment policies of several countries by providing policy guidelines and subsidizing vocational

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training measures (Dhéret & Roden, 2016; Harsløf, 2005). Overall, during the last three decades, the EU has given increased visibility to the issue of youth and has launched a range of initiatives and programmes in order to deal with the different challenges faced by contemporary youth, such as limited participation in public life, unemployment, training, education and mobility, regional inequalities and multiple aspects of social exclusion.

Regarding the area of inclusion, in 2010 the EU launched the Youth Strategy programme and in 2013 the Youth Guarantee (YG) regarding employment specifically. The YG policy aims to provide a context within which young people under 25 years old receive ‘a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship’ within 4 months of leaving education or becoming unemployed. It is built upon common principles for the implementing countries, including early intervention and activation, building partnership-based approaches, enhancing skills for labour integration and continuous improvement measures. However, there is limited evidence regarding the implementation of the scheme in different national contexts. Gathering this information is of paramount importance, since the implementation of a particular policy depends on the established patterns regarding the relationship between citizens and state within the different national welfare contexts. Policies targeting youth often base their interventions on the notion of normative, linear transitions to adulthood, often constructing transition to adulthood as an individual responsibility, and recast success as participating in employment and taking up the obligations of active citizenship. However, local institutional arrangements, existing policies, infrastructure and the dominant debates about youth affect the way in which these frameworks are interpreted and enacted at the national level.

This article starts with a brief review of transition debates mainly to provide background information in order to facilitate a better understanding of the presented study rather than an extensive analysis of transition theory.

Transitions to Adulthood and the Interplay Between Structural Factors and Individual Elements

Our understanding of young people’s lives has been informed to a significant degree by research that seeks to explore the ways in which young people navigate their transition to adult life. Young people’s lives are seen to evolve in de-standardized, fragmented and non-linear manners, with life events posing risks, delaying transition to adulthood and potentially leading to prolonged periods of ongoing or partially completed transition stages (Jones, 2009). These changes are seen to reflect the breakdown of institutions in late modernity (Giddens, 1991) and individualization processes (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) that give rise to the individualistic paths and patterns that young people devise to achieve the targets set within their personal projects or ‘reflexive biographies’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Nevertheless, there has been an ongoing uneasiness within youth studies regarding the de-contextualized nature of important analytical concepts such as ‘de-standardization’ and ‘individualization’, and even researchers emanating from a transitions perspective are critical of the lack of analytical value of such concepts when applied to empirical research. Nico (2014), for example, argues that there is no strong evidence of de-standardization

(a concept originating from the life course perspective) in young people's lives when seen through quantitative, intergenerational perspective. Goodwin and O'Connor (2005) argue that the transition of young people to adulthood has always been characterized by individual level complexity, coinciding with Furlong and Cartmel's (1997) argument that the idea of late modernity being a separate time in time represents an 'epistemological fallacy'. For Brannen and Nilsen (2005), the individualization thesis is too imprecise to be effectively used in small-scale research that is looking at the ways in which young people organize and conceptualize their lives in particular social contexts. Furthermore, it often detaches the individual from structures where socialization takes place such the family and the workplace (Bynner, 2005) and overshadows the traditional concern within sociology with the interplay between structure and agency. Similarly, the individualization thesis that reflexive biographies involve increased opportunities for the use of individual agency, choice and 'living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative' (Giddens, 1991, p. 28) is highly questioned as it underplays the role that inequalities such as gender, social class and ethnic background continue to play in youth lives (Roberts, 2011, 2012; Shanahan, 2000; Threadgold, 2001).

Locating these ideas within welfare contexts that are characterized by weak systems of protection, increased vulnerability and risk for youth (Alegre, Casado, Sanz, & Todeschini, 2015; Walther, 2006) becomes increasingly challenging. There is a distinction to be made between choice and individual decision-making regarding transitions to adulthood: despite young people's biographies becoming progressively individualized, they are not entirely free to determine their own pathways as choices depend also on a range of external resources (Jones, 2009, p. 100). While individual facets of youth lives are of crucial importance, significant mediators of the process to transition can also be located within the sociocultural and politico-economic domains. In this way, while young people have more choice in contemporary societies, this range of choice is often pre-determined, with youth being unequally positioned to capitalize upon it. Ability to access services, or increased bargaining power, for youth does not only depend on information and knowledge regarding the 'rules of the game' (e.g., employment practices, labour market tendencies) but also on the role of structural conditions and the function of key mechanisms in distributing resources in each country. The vulnerability of youth and lengthening of youth transitions is manifested in significantly different ways in each national context and is strictly related to the ability of the existent welfare regime to make room for presence or 'important positions in the social space' for youth (Alegre et al., 2015). In contrast to universalistic welfare regimes, for example, where risk is minimized through training opportunities and an effective system of social protection (Van de Velde 2008 in Soler-I-Martí & Ferrer-Fons, 2015), in welfare models with reduced government influence, opportunities for transition depend more on the market and the family through 'strong household micro-solidarity' (Moreno & Mari-klose, 2013, p. 494).

Despite the aforementioned realizations and empirical evidence on transitions which acknowledges the non-linearity of experience (e.g., Aassve, Davia, Iacovou, & Mazzuco, 2007; Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2003; European Group for Integrated Social Research [EGRIS], 2001; Evans, 2002; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Iacovou, 2011; MacDonald & Marsh, 2005) and the added complexities within

the European South (Moreno, 2012; Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2013; Parisi, 2008; Santarelli & Cottone, 2009; Serracant, 2012) as they have been amplified by the recent financial crisis (Cairns, Growiec, & Nuno de Almeida, 2014), policies often base their interventions on the notion of normative, linear transitions to adulthood in conjunction with new communitarian perspectives which construct transition as an individual responsibility to become successful and avoid failure (Jones, 2009). Within youth activation policies, for example, an ideal state of individual autonomy and independence is implied that is expected to be achieved through a sequence of age appropriate life events and states and scheduled to occur in a particular order. A major criticism of activation policies is then that they rarely guarantee the achievement of a socially accepted status or stable employment, since they lead to 'misleading trajectories' (EGRIS, 2001; Walther, 2006) and reproduce existing exclusions by allowing limited choice for young people.

Similarly, DeLuca, Godden, Hutchinson, and Versnel (2015) criticize current research and policy for placing little emphasis on the effect of the psychological effects and individual agency produced by experiences of unsuccessful transitions, such as distress and low motivation. They suggest considering other aspects relevant to the individual domain that mediate transitions such as well-being being that is experienced through feelings of competence, knowledge of self/rights, connection to others, self-determination (perception of self as the source of action), and resilience in adversity. The latter form part of a type of agency that is seen as the ability of each individual to actively make choices and shape their own biography within their social networks. To do this, the encouragement of a type of agency is necessary that consists of social engagement informed by the capacity to contextualize past skills and future projects within the contingencies of the moment (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963). For Walther (2006) and Walther, Warth, Ule, and du Bois-Reymond (2015), this includes examining the interplay between the structural and subjective levels of biography in order to identify how or to what extent they allow choice and flexibility in the process of transition. This way, patterns of inequality are constantly reconfigured and exploring the ways in which young people's increasingly individualized lives are unfolding can give an insight on the demands of the reflexive involvement with the world (Furlong, Woodman, & Wyn, 2011).

Methods and Process

The analysis presented in this article was part of a research exchange project and focused on a case study that explored how the YG scheme is understood in the Italian context. At a very early stage, challenges arose in relation to how the research was to be organized and a number of decisions were to be made regarding the documents and perspectives to be included. The difficulties encountered related to YG being relatively new in the Italian context, which meant that there was limited knowledge regarding its outcomes and also the boundaries between the different actors involved were not always clearly demarcated (public/private mix of employment service providers).

The establishment of case boundaries and the identification of the units of analysis in this study evolved on the basis of what Yin (2009) calls 'the purpose of the

study'. As the main aim of this study is to explore the understandings and processes surrounding the implementation of YG within the Italian context, it was not necessary to approach Italian YG as representative through the use of variables, but through its 'critical uniqueness': the important ways in which it connects to other cases, its context and its relation to the topic of study (Stake, 1995). As such, similarly to many other European contexts, Italian YG represents an intervention of paramount importance due to the increasing difficulties for young people to achieve independent adulthood. At the same time, the Italian YG is implemented within a policy context that retains its uniqueness as it is exemplified by its own history and administrative capacity (described in the following section). Therefore, this article is not looking to produce generalizable truths that would apply to each national context but it rather looks at highlighting how the Italian YG speaks about processes of introducing and implementing similar schemes on the national level. Also, the decision to focus on the Lombardy region relates to its comparative advantages and future challenges. The region's prosperity, based on strong industrial concentration and access to domestic and foreign markets, and recent administrative reforms have increased its organizational capacity to implement youth unemployment programmes. Although developing better mechanisms to boost the employability of young people remains a long-term challenge for the region (OECD, 2011), the present study can contribute knowledge regarding the implementation of YG within a context where social policy interventions are more systematic and well institutionalized, compared to interventions in other Italian regions that tend to be more sporadic.

The incorporated documents set the parameters for the implementation of YG in Italy and represent key actors in this process on the national, international and regional (Lombardy) levels. These included: the National Implementation Plan (two documents); Lombardy Regional Plans (three documents); European Commission YG recommendation, YG factsheets, YG Implementation guidelines and Italy country reports (five documents). Also, additional material was accessed through the respective webpages of the three actors. Concurrently, and in a complementary manner, documentary review of relevant research took place and held discussions with informed individuals regarding youth transitions and youth policies in the Italian context. Rather than being treated as formal interviews, these meetings were designed to gather relevant information on the overall institutional and policy background and guided the desk review. The individuals were approached through a snowballing technique and the criteria for the inclusion consisted knowledge and practical research experience in the field of youth studies and in youth employment in Italy (and a willingness to comment on current policy frameworks). These informed individuals offered their unique insights to the issue through different angles, related to their professional expertise: five academics (regional level), two policymakers (national level) and three researchers (regional level). Although the results of these meetings were not treated as texts to be involved in the analysis presented in this article, the contribution of such actors was paramount as within an interpretive interactionist approach, research starts not when the researcher is able to capture the cases to be included in the study and produce the text to be subjected to analysis, but rather a step before when deconstructs how the phenomenon has been defined, theorized and analysed before (Denzin, 2001). This in this case allowed to dynamically adjusting the boundaries of the study, to interpret critically the information within the documents and to locate the issue of youth employment within

its wider context. Also, contrasting different perspectives helped to avoid the bias of representing specific views. This also illustrates the processes unfolding when research data emerge through the collaborative process that is required for the familiarization with new research contexts. This consists a distinct and valuable step in constructing a case study (and discussing/testing preliminary interpretations of the arising themes later on) in the production of valid research outcomes. Nevertheless, we rarely describe in detail this process when we report research that is produced through research exchange projects. Due to the exploratory aspect of the project and the short duration of the research exchange, it was impossible to include the perspective of young recipients of services and local PES professionals.

The documents were analysed using thematic analysis and the process focused on exploring latent meaning; this means that rather than merely looking to quantify—by strictly identifying how many times appears a theme within the data—it went further to explore the appearance of significant elements in each document in relation to the research aim (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). More specifically, the documents were coded, using codes that were mainly theory-informed but allowed space for other elements to derive from the documents themselves. The documents were interrogated in order to identify elements related to: (a) youth and its transition to adulthood: socio-economic changes that impact youth, type of inequalities youth is facing, representations of youth itself; (b) employment opportunities: description of processes and eligibility; definitions of rights and responsibilities, constructions of employment and unemployment, concrete outcomes, efforts to link un/employment to other aspects/domains of young people's lives; (c) future: solutions proposed, change desired, role of the wider community and constructions of youth futures. The material identified around these elements was organized, compared and coded. During a second phase, the codes were synthesized in order to produce across-data wider themes.

The remainder of this article considers three prevalent themes that emerged from the analysis of the revised YG documents. These include: youth and its social world; youth and its agency; and youth and its social presence. These themes offer some insights on the way youth and YG itself is understood as well as the solutions it is expected to offer regarding youth unemployment. Before presenting the themes, a brief review of the policy context will be included in order to provide the context for the understanding of the themes and also to substantiate/demonstrate the critical uniqueness of the Italian case.

The Italian Policy Context: Towards the Modernization of Personal Employment Services

The conditions of young people in Italy are influenced by a number of socio-economic changes in the last decades, including the re-structuring of welfare services, the segmentation of the labour market, territorial differences regarding regional development (South–North divide), slower economic development and economic crisis more recently. At the time of the introduction of the YG in Italy in 2013, there were almost 6 million young people (15–24 years old) in the country,

with 43.3 per cent of them unemployed (ISTAT, 2012), and despite a small recent decline, this still remained at 37.8 per cent in 2016 (EUROSTAT, 2017). In general, youth employment levels in Italy have followed a steadily falling trend reflecting the lengthening of educational trajectories and the lack of employment opportunities (Miglavacca, Rosina, & Sironi, 2015).

Although Italy had already established a number of measures to address youth unemployment, the novelty of the new scheme is its intention to reach groups of the youth population, such as school leavers, that had traditionally been left outside the coverage of other measures. The 2014–20 Italian YG plan aims to reach unemployed youth between 15 and 29 years old and includes seven measures: the offer of employment (often associated with an employment incentive for the employer); the offer of apprenticeship (with the possibility to be realized in a different country); a traineeship that could be associated with a grant; experience within the voluntary civil service sector; participation in a transnational mobility programme; the opportunity to complete studies and acquire professional specialization through a vocational training or formal education programme; and guidance on entrepreneurship and self-employment initiatives (Italian Government, 2013; Lodi Rizzini, 2014). The YG programme is centrally managed by the government, with the regions acting as delegated managers. The national implementation plan defines the main principles, while each region—as an intermediate entity—has the opportunity to devise a local plan and agree its implementation with the Ministry of Labour (Dhéret & Roden, 2016; Lodi Rizzini, 2014; Mandrone & D'Angelo, 2014).

The introduction of the YG in the Italian context can be understood within a wider shift towards the modernization of public services initiated in the 1990s, recently described with the novel term 'second welfare' (Secondo Welfare) (Ferrera & Maino, 2014). In this period, new strategies were introduced in personal employment services (PES) management such as decentralization, service integration, performance targeting and the involvement of private actors (Madrone & D'Angelo, 2014) in order to achieve a more efficient system that would outsource bureaucratic tasks. Second, welfare reform itself can be understood as part of a governance shift towards renewing the relationship between state and citizen, marked by the increasing importance of markets, a focus on partnership in the delivery of services and the increased involvement of non-state-related actors in the development of policies.

The aforementioned developments signalled the end of the public sector monopoly in the delivery of PES, as they introduced new strategies that involved partnership between public and private employment centres, creating a new network of employment providers that also belonged in the private sector, such as companies, trade unions, chambers of commerce and labour consultants (Vesan, 2015b). Regarding the PES which directly affect youth, this is expressed as a move towards modernization of public services that privileges the liberalization of intermediary activities and the use of information technology in order to facilitate a rapid education to work transition (Dhéret & Roden, 2016; Lodi Rizzini, 2014). Such administrative shifts also reflect a general tendency in European politics to emphasize active citizenship as a core principle alongside choice, voice, decentralization and partnership between state and civil society. For Coletto (2014)

and Coletto and Guglielmi (2014), the Italian administrative reforms of the late 1990s have profoundly affected the function, structure and nature of employment services by introducing the principles of activation, employability and human capital, as evidenced in a shift towards incentivizing the provision of benefits and individualizing social protection. During this process, the unemployed young person is seen as the target of activation policies that aim to reduce their passivity and increase individual responsibility (Coletto, 2014) by encouraging active job search and treating employability as a new normative (Lodigiani & Santagati, 2016). Furthermore, lack of clarity regarding the legislative responsibilities of each partner and disparities regarding the efficiency and organizational capacity of local institutions to deliver services generates heterogeneity of practices applied across the different regions, thus reflecting, and often exacerbating, already existing regional inequalities.

Constructions of Youth: Beneficiaries in the Search for an Ideal State of Adult Independence

Youth and Its Social World

As it was stated earlier, this study focused on exploring the constructions of youth, its agency and its future within YG. However, and in a rather striking way, young people's conditions of life seemed to be invisible within the relevant policy documents. There is a vague reference in the European Commission recommendation to the markers of vulnerability related to transition periods and it acknowledges some of the structural elements that put the young at risk, such as gender, disability, economic crisis, inadequate protection systems and precarious work conditions (European Commission, 2013). In the European Commission documentation, the necessity of the programme is substantiated on the basis of the magnitude of the phenomenon of youth unemployment in numerical terms, especially in comparison with that of the adults. The YG is seen as an 'investment' to future considering the: 'long-term costs of unemployment to the economy, to society and to the individuals concerned, such as increased risk of future unemployment and poverty' (European Commission, 2014, p. 3).

The majority of revised YG documentation in Italy (national and regional) tends to mainly describe processes, requirements and obligations relevant to participation in the described processes. The language used in these documents depicts young people as 'beneficiaries' while at the same time there is an implicit view of them as active citizens through the emphasis that is posed on the obligation to demonstrate that they are ready to and *have a strong commitment to work*. The balance between these discourses is subject to the predominant administrative model and organizational capacity of each region and can vary according to each regional implementation plan. For example, the National Italian YG plan (Italian Government, 2013 – National Implementation Plan; Governo Italiano, 2013) represents an effort to contextualize youth lives within a discourse of intergenerational injustice, or a 'guilty plea' in the words of Madrone and D'Angelo (2014)—recognition by older generations regarding the mismanagement of public resources and institutions in a way that failed to consider the needs of the

generations to come. On the other hand, in the region of Lombardy, characterized by a predominant shift towards managerialism, the regional implementation plan uses technical–rational language such as outputs, admission conditions, attendance registers to describe the implementation of the scheme (Regione Lombardia-Alegato, n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c). In all instances (national and regional), young people are described under two categories ‘stock’ and ‘flows’:

Firstly, the implementation of the Guarantee requires identifying the target audience of the programme. It is necessary in this regard to distinguish between the stock and the annual flow of young potential beneficiaries ... It is clear, in fact, that capturing flows is a key aspect of the policies brought about by the Guarantee, in particular with reference to the activities of guidance, training and qualification, as it allows to preventively tackle the stock and to develop the intervention realistically with available resources ... the stock of young people aged 15–24 amounts to 6,041 units. (Italian Government, 2013 – National Implementation Plan, pp. 5–6)

Such technical language reveals a homogenized, impersonal and abstract construction of young people as a target group. Furthermore, it renders irrelevant to the application of the scheme the uniqueness of young people as individual human subjects, with their unique identity and characteristics. It could be argued that it constitutes an example of how policy can set the boundaries of what is to be achieved (what type of agency is to be mobilized) by depriving its audience from the contextual and relational aspects of their lives. Overall, there is a complete absence of recognition of the particular structural aspects that render young people vulnerable in Italy and the young person is depicted in all of the plans as devoid of socio-economic background, gender or ethnicity. For example, research evidences that the trajectories of young people in Italy are highly structured depending on gender, social capital and location of residence, since in terms of employability it ‘is better to be a male, with a higher education degree, residing in the Centre-North’ (Madrone & D’Angelo, 2014, p. 18). In contrast, within the YG revised documents is observed an assumption that any young person should and could act as a free agent with the full capacity to exercise choice within the available opportunities in the scheme in order to achieve independence.

Enabling Youth Agency

The limits of agency promoted with YG are very clearly demarcated in the documents through the description of existing opportunities and a ‘service pact’ that has some space for personalization but is clearly focused on the improvement of the beneficiaries:

Wherever needed, specialized and qualified second-level guidance and/or skills assessment will also be offered, aimed at exploring more in depth the beneficiary’s life experience and to stimulate his improvement, proactive approach and independence. (Italian Government, 2013 – National Implementation Plan, p. 14)

There is also an obvious conditionality that is reflected through the need for young person to demonstrate commitment in order to receive more personalized services:

Beneficiaries who can be successful and show real business creation skills, if confirmed during preliminary guidance activities, will benefit from suitable counselling and mentoring services delivered directly or through accredited bodies. (Italian Government, 2013 – National Implementation Plan, p. 19)

Therefore, independence is constructed as the result of a young person's own initiative and drive to improve his/her life and dependence is seen as inability to adequately use existing opportunities. Wider power imbalances that may affect the ability of youth to do so remain largely unaddressed within the revised documents. On a regional level, there is an implicit view of young people as active agents with the responsibility to take up opportunities, when it comes to the roles of each partner there is an emphasis on the responsibilities of '*the operator who takes charge of the young person*' (Regione Lombardia-Alegato, n. d.a, p. 30) excluding a mention to the role of the young person as equal partner. The responsibilities of the service provider refer to the duty to comply with the legal requirements and decide the level of support offered in each stage. Similarly, the national plan despite a more partnership-orientated language focuses on incentivizing youth and reducing its passivity: 'The implementation of the Guarantee constitutes both a challenge and a great opportunity to test a more effective system for taking charge, analysing needs and activating its beneficiaries on the basis of a *mutual obligation*' (emphasis in original) (Italian Government, 2013 – National Implementation Plan, p. 3). Throughout the documents revised are observed a prevailing power imbalance between young people and YG providers/administrators.

The policy demonstrates a commitment to universal access for all youth, facilitated through online 'competent services' for 'the case of youngsters who enrol themselves' and 'contact points' within education establishments 'to "capture" early leavers from education and training pathways' (Italian Government, 2013 – National Implementation Plan, p. 13), little thought has been invested on issues of access to the scheme in the first place for those young people who are already excluded. A choice to recognize a primary role to online platforms or 'competent services system' reveals a conviction that all young people are digitally savvy. Although opting for digital implementation can be seen as a policy intention to facilitate provision of information to larger audiences, it could also be argued that a number of young people in more vulnerable communities may need more directed support (outreach activities) to demonstrate a proactive approach in search of employment/training. Lodigiani and Santagati (2016) highlight the limitation of the YG in accessing the most vulnerable young people, since only 15 per cent of those registered in the scheme present high social disadvantage. This failure to reach more vulnerable young people indicates that the scheme can be more successful in mobilizing already active young people or those capable of making use of existing resources (Vesan, 2015a). Research evidences that young people use other routes towards employment as 'in 2012 only 1.4 per cent of the young Italians found a job through public employment services... the two main channels for hiring were: advice and referrals from family and acquaintances, 43.9 per cent and spontaneous applications 25.9 per cent' (ISTAT, 2013 in Lodi Rizzini, 2014, pp. 18–19). This highlights the limited space that exists for the exercise of agency and self-determination in terms of employment within the existing system. It also corresponds to Walther's (2006) observation (drawing from Esping-Andersen's

three worlds of welfare capitalism) that a ‘dualistic’ welfare system is produced within a sub-protective youth transition regime that is characterized by a low percentage of work opportunities and labour market segmentation, with family and informal work being rendered as the main provider of choice, support and security.

Youth and Its Social Presence

Regarding constructions of youth futures and envisioned positions for youth in the social space, success was constructed as the ability to embark on and timely complete an opportunity offered by the respective YG (Italian Government, 2013 – National Implementation Plan), boosting policy reform and reducing the percentage of youth unemployment (European Commission, 2016a) as well as having received employment offer upon completing the scheme (European Commission, 2016b). In general, the intentionality of YG itself was constructed through a clear, short-term time frame: *‘The guidance and counselling services should therefore offer young people, within four months, the integration or reintegration into education and training pathways or work experiences’* (Italian Government, 2013 – National Implementation Plan, 2013, p. 8) and involved *‘a tailor-made pathway will be designed on the basis of a “service pact”, in order to provide job inclusion and/or return into education/training system’* (Italian Government, 2013 – National Implementation Plan, p. 14). *There is a vague reference on the dual purpose of guarantee of ‘of impacting on the unemployment emergency and to lay the foundations for the creation of a permanent guarantee system’* (Italian Government, 2013 – National Implementation Plan, p. 4) with the long-term outcomes of this remaining largely unclear. Occasionally, in some peripheral documents (Regione Lombardia—online information aiming at youth), participation was depicted as an opportunity to increase future competitiveness in a highly demanding labour market. This is in stark contrast with research that reveals that the vulnerability of youth in Italy is often exacerbated by lack of knowledge regarding the long-term impact of their choices. Choosing, for example, traditional fields of academic qualification that mismatch with the requirements of the employment market reflects the limited presence of structures that would offer young people the necessary support to develop their knowledge of how the employment context functions (Miglavacca et al., 2015; Murgia, Poggio, & Torchio, 2012). Such disarticulation between labour market and education regarding the suitability of degrees obtained, results to precarious working conditions (remuneration, stability, progression), limited or low access to welfare services (Dhéret & Roden, 2016; Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2016; Micheli & Rosina, 2010; Miglavacca et al., 2015; Rapporto Giovani, 2017; Samek Lodovici & Semenza, 2012) and a growing tendency to consider migrating upon completion of studies in search of better working opportunities (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2014).

Tiraboschi Rosolen, Casano, Di Stani, and Petruzzo (2014) conclusion that the Italian YG is better understood as a measure to favour youth employability, but not their long-term employment becomes very relevant here, in that it can be successful in administering already existing jobs but it has limited scope in providing alternatives for young people. Therefore, with its limited projection to the future YG functions as a space that provides restricted alternatives for youth to exercise a

form of agency that would be sustained through ‘manoeuvring among repertoires’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 980) and the ability to ‘construct changing images of where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there from where they are at present’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 984).

Conclusion

A contradiction can be observed in the implementation of the YG in the Italian context, although it is by no means exclusive to this context. This contradiction consists of a policy paradigm shift that recasts citizenship as participation in the labour market within a welfare context that in reality offers very limited opportunities for young people to exercise this type of citizenship, thus exacerbating their vulnerability and risk of social exclusion. This apparent gap between the local reality and the effort to introduce structural reforms seems to be reconciled with the production of a discourse which uses parts of the international discourse, especially that of active citizenship, but, at the same, reveals an effort to evade disrupting existing power relations as expressed by local perceptions of youth as beneficiaries and victimized by previous generations. Therefore, trying to compile the observations that arise from the review of documentation, one could argue that the story of implementing the YG in Italy is not a coherent one, but it rather constitutes a range of discursive segments which aim to re-tell the local discourses of youth unemployment, infused and re-interpreted with international discourses of structural reform and activation.

As a conclusion, it could be argued that initiatives for youth employment that are de-contextualized and lack a clear vision of youth lives can reinforce the existing order. This occurs by maintaining a sole focus (a pre-determined agenda) on young people as beneficiaries rather than active partners in the design and implementation of such policies. Additionally, discourses that construct independence as the result of youth’s attitude to constant self-improvement and failure as the inability to take advantage of existing opportunities lead to lowering young people’s aspirations and sense of self-determination. This involves young people feeling responsible for their successes and failures even in situations where they have limited control over external conditions or ability to make decisions regarding their life project. It can also result in feelings of being left out of social progress and a form of citizenship that sees full participation in the life of society as an unachievable principle, as it allows limited space for the projective element of agency. Projectivity involves identifying future possibilities of action, constructing narratives around these possibilities, proposing solutions to issues arising in current everyday life and exploring and experimenting with these solutions in the here and now (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Limited options, lack of involvement in the design of activation policies and pre-determined agendas limit the ways in which young people ‘imagine, talk about, negotiate, and make commitments to their futures’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 990). Such power imbalance can be addressed through more creative processes that would allow young people to develop the necessary knowledge about how the employment market works and how policies, resources and funds are directed by governments to support employability in order to develop self-determination.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared the following potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This article reflects only the author's view and the Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

Funding

This article was elaborated in the context of INCASI Network, a European project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie GA No. 691004 and coordinated by Dr Pedro López-Roldán.

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