

Narratives of Becoming: Social Personae and School Choice in the Italian Education System

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Over a ten-month period of linguistic ethnographic research in three secondary schools in central Italy, I conducted interviews with third-year students about how they came to choose the school they currently attend. Students told of chance encounters, moments of madness, institutional pressures, and social expectations, often hinting at tumultuous narratives. Since the three secondary school types in this research—lyceums, technical schools, and vocational schools—are popularly believed to attract specific types of students, interviews and everyday metacommentary (Rymes, 2014) about the schools and the people inside them hold great social importance. In this paper, I consider how the school choice decisions of these students—as told to me in the form of short narratives occurring in interview contexts—intersect with local ideologies and figures of personhood (Agha, 2011) associated with each school.

N*arratives of becoming*—stories people tell about the way they or others came to be in a certain social role or position—frequently emerged as an important part of my broader research project early on in my fieldwork at three types of Italian secondary schools. Via unstructured interviews and narratives told to me throughout my observations at a lyceum, a technical school, and a vocational school (see below for description of school types), I gathered dozens of narratives of various lengths from students. They are all narratives of becoming in that they tell of how individuals came to hold a specific position, in a specific place, at a specific point in their lives, and they tell of the circumstances surrounding their decision-making (including last-minute surprises and/or lack of choice) throughout this process. While many are not what typically come to mind when one thinks of narratives (cf. Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967), they could be classified as what Bamberg (2004) calls *small stories*—those fleeting bits of discourse that are often overlooked by analysts—or more generally as conversational narratives, which are co-authored “interactional achievements” rather than extended monologues (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 3). Like Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), I am working with small stories occurring in semi-structured and/or unstructured interview situations, which are therefore far from full-fledged narratives. The interview excerpts presented herein are part of a broader project focusing on how students in these three types of Italian secondary schools come to be labeled as good, successful, or difficult students, and how these labels intersect with students’ socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, language uses, and fields of study.

In this paper, I draw on the history of Italian education and language policies as a means of understanding how the Italian education system has come to be constructed and maintained as part of a nation-building project, and I draw on narrative analytic methods to consider the ways that national laws, policies, and reforms intersect with the lived experiences of individuals in their educational and professional pursuits. In this analysis, I also seek to make evident the role that social identity, gender, and socioeconomic background play in students' academic trajectories. Considering Italy's 38% youth unemployment rate (as of January 2017),¹ as well as the relative instability of the country's federal government (which has seen six prime ministers in the past 10 years), such an analysis is not only relevant for better understanding current employment and education issues in Italy, but it also raises questions about equality and access in education more universally.

Background: The Italian Education System

The Research Context

In Italy, like in many countries in the world, adolescents must decide at the age of 13 how they should begin to whittle down their options for the future. Despite the fact that all diplomas—whether from a lyceum, a technical institute, or a vocational school—now grant access to university, the type of school that one attends can still determine the career path that one will eventually pursue, which in turn impacts one's opportunities as an adult. As it stands today, the three types of secondary schools in Italy's centralized, open-enrollment school system—lyceums, technical institutes, and vocational schools—are each intended to equip students with different specialized knowledge and skills for differing academic and/or career trajectories. That is, *licei* ("lyceums") are designed to prepare students for tertiary education (e.g., sciences, classical studies, philosophy); *istituti tecnici* ("technical institutes") are designed to equip students with career skills (e.g., hospitality, mechanical engineering, biotechnology); and *scuole professionali* ("vocational schools") teach trade skills (e.g., electrical maintenance, sartorial skills). While graduates of all three of these secondary schools are eligible, on paper, to access tertiary education, only 11% of vocational school graduates go on to university, while 80% of lyceum graduates do so (Corlazzoli, 2015). While this is arguably by design, that is, vocational school graduates need not seek tertiary education to practice their craft, it also hints at school-level practices and national-level policies being out of sync with one another.

Over the course of the 2016–2017 school year, I conducted 10 months of fieldwork in Cittadina,² a small city in a *comune* ("county"), of approximately 30,000 inhabitants in Umbria, a central region of Italy. I first visited the secondary schools in Cittadina in early 2013 as part of a pilot project focused on the use of local *dialetti* ("dialects")³ in schools. At this time, I established contact with two

¹ the third highest in Europe after Greece (45%) and Spain (42%; Italy Youth Unemployment Rate: 1983–2017, 2017)

² All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

³ I use the Italian term *dialetto* and its somewhat inadequate English gloss *dialect* throughout this paper to refer to the various codes spoken throughout the Italian peninsula that developed—alongside what is today considered Standard Italian—from the superposition of Latin on local languages throughout the Middle Ages (De Mauro, 2001, p. 150). The term *dialetto* is a social shifter in that the meaning of the

English teachers who acted as my gatekeepers at the classical lyceum, the technical school, and the vocational school when I returned in 2016. After circulating around all of the third-year classes at these three schools, I narrowed down my focus to three focal classes: 3BLC (the classical lyceum track at the classical lyceum), 3 Meccanica (the mechanical track at the technical school), and 3 Moda (the sartorial track at the vocational school). I chose to observe third-year classes on the recommendation of my gatekeepers. Secondary school is divided into the *biennio*, years one and two, and the *triennio*, years three, four, and five, with year three representing an important transition from more general education to more discipline-specific subject matter. I then chose the three focal classes because they represented a range of school experiences, the students and teachers were willing to let me record their class sessions, they did not involve any conflicts of interest with my gatekeepers, and because I was able to build rapport with them from the beginning. The size and make-up of these three classes were also varied: 3BLC had 19 students (84% female, 16% male); 3 Meccanica had 22 students (100% male); and 3 Moda had 9 students (89% female, 11% male). The schools do not keep statistics on students' nationalities or ethnicities, but the classical lyceum track had no foreign-born or foreign-heritage students, while one third of the mechanical track had students with North African or Eastern European heritage, and just over one third of the sartorial track students had North African or Middle Eastern heritage. This reflects the distribution of so-called foreign⁴ students across Italian secondary schools in general: In school year 2015–2016, the percentage of foreign students in vocational schools was 12.4%, in technical institutes 8.2%, and in lyceums only 3.9% (Borrini & De Sanctis, 2017).

Italian Education Reforms

The contemporary tripartite school system in Italy, as well as the ways that students talk about each of the schools, has grown out of the policies and laws that contributed to these schools' formation, as well as the role these played in nation building. After World War II and the founding of the Republic of Italy, a new Constitution of Italy was written in 1948, specifying, among other guarantees, that education would be free, as well as compulsory for at least eight years. It was also specified that more advanced education would be accessible for all deserving students regardless of financial status, although there would be one caveat: The longstanding *Legge Casati* ("Casati Law;" established just before unification in 1859) had reformed the entire school system, proposing a highly centralized model of schooling that dedicated more attention to advanced education than to primary education, and which separated technical and classical schooling for the working and upper classes, respectively (Minio Paluella, 1946). This act created the *liceo classico* ("classical lyceum") as a means of selecting the

term can only be understood in the context of the message being communicated; the term has connotations that encompass everything from pride to shame, from wittiness to ignorance, and even from an appreciation for local wine to racist or secessionist political propaganda (see Perrino, 2013, 2018). For a contemporary overview of *dialetti* in Italy, see Coluzzi (2008) and Dal Negro & Vietti (2011).

⁴ The designation "foreign" is problematic in this case, since Italian citizenship laws follow *ius sanguinis*, not *ius solis*. Therefore, children born in Italy to non-citizen parents are considered foreign until they are allowed to apply for citizenship on their 18th birthday. Many of the students considered "foreign" in Borrini and De Sanctis (2017) may have only ever lived in Italy.

future upper classes for university education, and therefore the caveat was that under the Casati Law, no other secondary school aside from the classical lyceum offered access to tertiary education.

The Casati Law was modified in 1923, the year after Benito Mussolini took office as Prime Minister, by *Riforma Gentile* (“Gentile Reform;” Cives, 1990). This reform raised the mandatory age of schooling and expanded the offerings of applied, technical, and vocational secondary school options while holding the classical lyceum up as the only school through which one could access tertiary education. This would remain the case until 1969. In 1928, further reforms instituted the development of the *scuola di avviamento professionale* (“school of professional training”) which directed students who held an elementary school credential toward targeted preparation for either the workforce or further vocational training. After World War II, there was still an elementary school drop-out rate of nearly 50% (De Mauro, 1963), which was potentially, in part, motivated by linguistic and social class factors. The push for literacy—part of a nation-building project—may have been linked to the Fascist Party’s attempted eradication of all *dialetti* and minority languages, which were spoken more widely among those who had never attended formal schooling. The only way to learn to read, write, and speak in Standard Italian was to attend school.

Throughout the 1960s, an increasing focus on education and human rights came to the fore and in 1968, state-sponsored kindergarten was established. Shortly afterward, student protests also paved the way for a liberalization of university access; the pedagogue Don Lorenzo Milani had a major influence on these student movements by problematizing the selective nature of the Italian school system and the classist society that it produced (Milani, 1967/1996). The 1990s and early 2000s saw additional reform, motivated in part by the problematic separation of lyceums and technical–professional instruction, as well as continued difficulty in accessing university. *Riforma Berlinguer* (“Berlinguer Reform”) extended the obligatory age of schooling to 16, reformed the graduation exam, and reformed the structure of the education system to resemble, in large part, the way it is today: five years of elementary school, three years of middle school, and five years of secondary school (thirteen years total, roughly from age 6 to 19; La Repubblica, 1999).

The most recent reforms at the time of writing have had less to do with major restructuring of schooling itself and more to do with the administration of schools. While, on paper, neither the 2010 *Riforma Gelmini* (“Gelmini Reform”) nor the 2015 *La Buona Scuola* (“Good School Reform”) claimed to have a direct impact on primary and secondary students’ school experiences, the latter led to great unrest and anxiety amongst teacher participants in my research. During the time of my fieldwork, this appeared to have a trickle-down effect on what occurred in those teachers’ classrooms and disproportionately affected the vocational school, which had teachers coming and going from September until January with little to no advance notice.

While this is far from an exhaustive list of reforms and only scratches the surface of how the Italian education system has been shaped by policies since the country’s unification, it is nevertheless clear that schooling and nation-building have gone hand in hand throughout the history of modern Italy and that the different secondary school types have remained distinct. Despite the fact that schools do not have entrance exams or official criteria for selection, a decision

made in 1859 to split the working class and the upper class into two separate educational streams still has an impact today.

Methods and Analytic Framework

Research Methods

Over the course of my fieldwork, I conducted several short, impromptu interviews with students about miscellaneous topics related to recent events at the school or in their class, about school policies and procedures, about their own school experiences, and on other similar or related topics. While I also conducted planned group interviews with all students, these tended to yield fewer personal narratives due to the fact that they were more structured, they were scheduled rather than spontaneous, and students were grouped arbitrarily and not according to friendships. The narratives presented in this paper are drawn from both scheduled and spontaneous interviews that I conducted between October 2016 and March 2017 with students from the vocational school, technical institute, and the classical lyceum. The students whose narratives are presented below were from the three focal classes that I observed, and they were all third-year students at the time (mostly age 16–17, with one or two older students). Taking a critical perspective in this study, I have treated the experiences of these students and their peers as central to my research, aiming to open up space for ongoing future reflection on the goals of secondary education in Italy. By analyzing these narratives, I aim to understand how different (gendered, classed) subjectivities frame the experience of school and how the collection and analysis of such narratives might push back against the reproduction of the status quo by calling on the voices of those who have traditionally been overlooked in the field of education.

Analytic Framework

I approach the student interviews analyzed in this paper through a narrative analytic lens, drawing on Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) and Ochs and Capps (2001). Narratives are critical for constructing a web of meaning around one's educational experiences, and I draw on them to develop a multifaceted picture of how students move through the Italian school system. By taking narratives of becoming into consideration as both the personal and pre-professional journeys of these participants *and* as a means of identifying commonalities across student experiences, I illustrate the ways that these implicit societal expectations interact with macro (i.e., national-, regional-, and school-level) policies regarding academic and career options. That is, I find that official policies (e.g., of open enrollment schools and of equal opportunity after graduation) are filtered through gendered, sociolinguistic, and socioeconomic aspects of personal experience and societal expectations. Further, as Mehan (1996), Varenne and McDermott (1995), and Wortham (2005) have demonstrated, the way that individuals are categorized or labeled within their school communities often involves complex, multiparty social interaction in which the individual being labeled plays only a small role. Often there are power dynamics at play which have an important impact on the ways that students come to be defined (e.g., as learning disabled, as gifted, or as difficult).

Students, like all people, have trajectories of socialization through which their identities “solidify” (Wortham, 2005, p. 104; cf. Bartlett, 2007), and a narrative analytic approach offers a means of understanding the observed and recounted events that may have been most influential in the solidifying of an individual’s identity (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Ochs & Capps, 2001). Citizen sociolinguistic metacommentary (Rymes & Leone, 2014) on schools and the people who attend them provides another means of understanding the social context in which student identities are formed and the circumstances under which inequalities are produced and reproduced.

In any given school, there are expectations and standards set by students, teachers, administrators, the community, the region, and the State for how students should behave and what they should be able to do. An explicit version of these often appears in official written material, policy documents, professional development seminars, and in student-directed discourse, but a tacit set of expectations and standards also circulates. That is, middle school students seeking information about secondary schools *may* go to the school website and to orientation events, but they likely also talk with their older siblings and peers about how hard the work is at a given school, hear rumors about teachers and students, and try to find out which school their friends are going to attend. In doing this research, prospective students must do identity work: They must come to understand what type of person they are, what type of person they would like to be, and find a school (i.e., a community) that seems likely to help them realize these aspirations. Insofar as particular types of schools and fields of study are associated not only with particular career possibilities, but also with different lifestyles, different ways of being a student, and different values, they are also associated with different figures of personhood, or “contingent, performable behaviors effectively linked to social personae for some determinate population” (Agha, 2011, p. 172). Throughout my fieldwork, I came to understand across numerous conversations and encounters that studious, well-spoken females from bourgeoisie families were expected to be associated with lyceums (rather than with vocational schools) and that rowdy, mischievous, dialect-speaking, and academically unmotivated males from working class families tended to be associated with vocational schools (rather than with lyceums).

Figures 1 and 2 are examples of metacommentary (Rymes, 2014) that make clear the associations between particular figures of personhood and school types. I obtained these images during a brief period in which I was part of a WhatsApp⁵ group with the students I observed at the technical school. Both of these images come from an Instagram account called *Nasce, Cresce, Ignora* (a username that could be translated as “be born, grow, ignore”) and got many laughs and crying-laughing emojis when they were shared in the WhatsApp group.

These two composite images poke fun at what school trips look like in four different types of schools (Figure 1) and at what gym class looks like in four different types of schools (Figure 2). In both Figures 1 and 2, the scientific lyceum (*liceo scientifico*, or simply *scientifico*), the industrial technical institute (ITIS), and the vocational school for industry and artisanship (IPSIA) remain constant. The scientific lyceum is depicted as the archetype of a class trip in Figure 1, showing a large group of students accompanied by adult chaperones posed in front of

⁵ a mobile phone messaging application



Figure 1. What field-trips look like at different types of schools, according to the popular Instagram account Nasce, Cresce, Ignora. GITE SCOLASTICHE (School Trips; title). Clockwise from top-left: LICEO SCIENTIFICO (Scientific Lyceum); ITIS (Industrial Technical Institute); IPSIA (Vocational School for Industry and Artisanhip); ALBERGHIERO (Vocational School for Hospitality).⁶



Figure 2. What gym class looks like at different types of schools, according to the popular Instagram account Nasce, Cresce, Ignora. EDUCAZIONE FISICA (Physical Education; title). Clockwise from top-left: SCIENTIFICO (Scientific Lyceum); ITIS (Industrial Technical School); IPSIA (Vocational School for Industry and Artisanhip); ARTISTICO (Artistic Lyceum; formerly Institute).⁷

⁶ Nasce, Cresce, Ignora [nascecreceignora]. (2017b). Gite scolastiche [School trips; Image]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQFslM6AzAg/>

⁷ Nasce, Cresce, Ignora [nascecreceignora]. (2017a). Educazione fisica [Physical education; Image]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQNayYg7z/>

an important-looking building, and of gym class in Figure 2, showing a group of students in athletic wear, jogging in formation around a school gym. Physical education is depicted for ITIS as a fight between two boys in the hallway of the school with two adults walking over to potentially intervene, and class trips are depicted as a riot with a group of masked young people (seemingly all male) swinging blunt objects and running through a smoke-filled, urban-looking scene. IPSIA is given the prison theme in both of these Figures, with class trips depicted as men behind bars and gym class depicted as shirtless men working out in a prison yard. Tellingly, there are no females in the images for ITIS or IPSIA, except the female teacher who is on her way to intervene in the fight between the two male students in Figure 1. Females are only shown in the pictures designated for the scientific lyceum.

This circulating metacommentary (Rymes, 2014) about which types of students attend which types of schools—or which types of schools develop which types of students—contributes to the ideologies around particular social personae or figures of personhood associated with each of these schools (Agha, 2011) and reinforces their indexical links to particular ways of being. In these memes, particular scenes—some from school and others from non-school settings—depict behaviors that are linked to particular social personae, for example, burnouts and troublemakers, which are recontextualized by the creators of the memes as pertaining to Italian secondary schools. In so doing, the memes' creators have drawn a connection between non-school contexts (like the prison yard), the social types who frequent these non-school contexts (like so-called troublemakers), and school contexts (like the vocational school). The uptake of these figures of personhood by secondary school students and by middle school students who are in the process of choosing schools may reinforce existing stereotypes and inform discourses about schools and the people inside them.

Student Narratives of School Choice

The Technical School

The first interview excerpt I present here is from a longer improvised interview with four male students from the technical school, in 3 Meccanica (Excerpt 1). This particular third-year class was all male, with students ranging from ages 16 to 19. The participants in this interview are myself, Ivan, Luca, and Akram and Otmane (identical twins whose voices are also identical). Ivan was one of the oldest students in the class at age 19, and had joined the class the previous year after moving to Italy from Moldova to join his mother and sister, who had been living in Italy for some time. Energetic and funny, but also motivated and with high standards for himself, Ivan walked the line between being highly participatory and highly disruptive depending on the moment. He often sat in the front row of the classroom in the middle seat, directly in front of the teacher. As far as I could tell, he enjoyed sitting in this spot, although it was never clear to me if he selected it himself or if he was put there so that the teacher could keep an eye on him. His spoken Italian was outstanding and included abundant dialectal words and phrases, despite having been in Italy for only a little over a year, and he took great

pride in correcting me when I made errors of gender or number in my spoken or written Italian. We often sat next to each other in class because, unlike most of his other classmates, he was the only one who routinely sat alone at his double desk. Out of all of the students in this interview, I had the best rapport with Ivan. Luca was quite the opposite: very quiet and introverted. He also sat in the front row, but near the door, and shared a desk with a much more talkative good friend of his who often got in trouble for being off-task and joking around with Ivan (who sat across the aisle). Luca was very friendly and enjoyed being around talkative people, although his own contributions to talk were usually minimal and limited to smiling, laughing, and the occasional one-liner. Akram and Otmane shared a desk in the opposite corner of the classroom from Luca, in the far back near the window. They were very friendly, and their participation varied wildly from class to class, with a clear preference shown for the technical subjects over the more humanistic subjects. They were born in a nearby town to Moroccan parents and were proud to tell me that they spoke *dialetto*, Arabic, and Italian.

This interview occurred on a day when the majority of the students in the school were on strike, so there were only these four students in class, along with a substitute teacher. I took advantage of this *ora buca* (literally “hole hour” or free period) to ask them about why they decided to pick the Mechanics specialization instead of others. As this was conducted in late October 2016, less than a month after I had begun regularly frequenting their class, we didn’t know each other very well yet, and I was very curious about how they had come to be in this school.

*Excerpt 1. Choosing the Mechanics specialization (3Mec 2016.10.28)*⁸

1 Andrea [ALP]: Perché avete scelto questo indirizzo?

2 **ALP: Why did you choose this specialization?**

3 Akram [A]/Otmane [O]: Allora, io ho scelto questo indirizzo meccanico perché su
4 gli indirizzi che offriva questa scuola è quello che mi prendeva di più. Poi l’ho
5 frequentato dal indirizzi si inizia dal biennio. In questa scuola ti mischiano con gli
6 altri indirizzi, con gli altri studenti, quindi non è dagli indirizzi. Poi dal biennio si
7 comincia, si inizia a fare questi indirizzi e le materie.

8 **A/O: Well, I picked this mechanics specialization because out of the**

9 **specializations that this school offers, it’s the one that interested me the most.**

10 **And then I’ve been in it since the second year because the specializations start in**

11 **the second year. In this school they mix you with the other specializations, with**

12 **the other students, so it’s not divided by specialization. Then from the second**

13 **year you start to do the specializations and the [specialization-specific] subjects.**

14 *I ask Luca, joking a little, if he chose this school because he lives close by. He says yes, but
15 then I ask him again seriously.*

16 Luca [L]: Sì anche, già venivo qua ma prima facevo l’informatica. Poi
17 dall’informatica ho cambiato a meccanica.

18 **L: Yes also that. I was already coming here but I was doing Informatics (IT)**

⁸ For transcription conventions, see Appendix. All translations are my own.

- 19 **before. Then from Informatics I changed to Mechanics.**
- 20 ALP: E' diverso da informatica?
- 21 ALP: **Is it different from IT?**
- 22 L: Sì... per il meglio. Ci sono i sistemi e questa roba che mi piace di più
- 23 dell'informatica.
- 24 **L: Yeah... for the better. There is [the subject of] Systems and the stuff that I like**
- 25 **more than IT.**
- 26 ...
- 27 ALP: E tu Ivan? Perché hai scelto di venire qua?
- 28 ALP: **And you, Ivan? Why did you choose to come here?**
- 29 Ivan [I]: Io da sempre mi piacciono le macchine, cose di quel tipo, e quando mi
- 30 sono trasferito qua—vabbè sono un po' universale io. Universale. Mi piace tutto a
- 31 me. Informatica, meccanica, mi piace tutto, però ho scelto meccanica perche non
- 32 posso sceglierle tutte e ho pensato che meccanica sarebbe meglio, cioè un po' [xxx]
- 33 mi piace, si può anche dire così. Insomma, mi trovo bene.
- 34 **I: I've always liked machines, stuff like that, and when I moved here—I don't**
- 35 **know, I guess I'm kind of universal. Universal. I like everything. IT, Mechanics,**
- 36 **I like everything, but I picked Mechanics because I can't pick all of them and I**
- 37 **thought that Mechanics would be best, so I mean [xxx] I kind of like it, you**
- 38 **could say that. Basically, I feel good here.**

In these small stories, Akram, Otmane, Luca, and Ivan express their affinity for the Mechanics specialization, even though they frame it not so much an affinity in itself as it is relative to what is available at the school (lines 9, 24–25, 36–37). Importantly, while they mention considering other specializations within the technical school, in this telling they do not mention their consideration of any other type of school (e.g., vocational or lyceum). Ivan justifies his decision to study the Mechanics specialization by orienting us to a point earlier in his life, suggesting that his decision to study Mechanics is from an ongoing affinity for it and not because he picked it out of a limited line-up. He claims to have “always liked machines” (line 34), albeit along with many other technical subjects (lines 35–36), and frames his narrative so that his interest in Mechanics precedes his arrival in Cittadina and, therefore, his knowledge of what the school offerings were. Akram, Otmane, and Luca, on the other hand, orient their decision to follow the Mechanics specialization at the point when they understood what the specialization options were (lines 8–9, 24–25), and after having been in the school for a year in either a different specialization or in general studies.

On another occasion, later in the school year (at the end of March 2017), I held a group interview with Ivan and seven other students from the Mechanics specialization (Excerpt 2). The participants in this interview were Rocco, Ruggero, Zied, Wassim, Lukas, Ilir, Giacomo, and Ivan, and I held the interview around a large table in a spare mechanics lab. During this interview, Wassim and Lukas were

having a separate side conversation at the far end of the table, much like they did in class when they were disengaged from the lesson at hand. Ruggero was a quiet and respectful young man and was by far the most serious student in the class, almost always paying attention, taking notes, and asking appropriate questions during lessons. Rocco was quite the opposite: sarcastic, boisterous, and almost always off-task in class. He always sat in the back corner of the classroom and often had his phone out, scrolling through social media apps. Giacomo was considered among the most disruptive students in the class, often becoming belligerent with teachers and classmates, swearing at and talking back to teachers, leaving the classroom whenever he felt like it, and even sometimes being ostracized by his peers as a result of his behavior. Ilir seemed much younger than his classmates, partially due to his small size and his tendency to mumble in an exaggeratedly deep voice. He was often distracted and seemed to enjoy being on the periphery of mischief in the classroom, especially when Rocco or Zied were leading the way. Zied, like Ivan, was older than his classmates (he was almost 20 at the time of this interview) and was often the ring leader of the class. He excelled at math, often proudly helping his classmates and letting them pass around his work to copy from, but he began his secondary school career at the linguistic lyceum in the next town over. Born in Tunisia to Tunisian parents and brought to Italy as a baby, Zied told me that he spoke Arabic, Tunisian Arabic, and French in addition to Italian, some English, and some German, so the linguistic lyceum had seemed an obvious choice for him. Finally, there was Ivan, who had seated himself somewhat apart from the others during the interview and had turned 20 a few months prior.

After reminding the students about the memes shown in Figures 1 and 2—which they had introduced me to—and asking if they had prejudices, or knew about prejudices, toward particular types of schools and students (which they confirmed they did), I moved on to asking them if the prejudices had a role in their decision to come to the technical school.

Excerpt 2. I came for the friends (3Mec 2017.03.27)

39 Andrea [ALP]: Però cioè voi quando avete deciso di venire a questa scuola, ad

40 esempio, avete pensato a questi pregiudizi anche o--?

41 **ALP: But like when you (pl.) decided to come to this school, for example, did you**

42 **think about these prejudices too, or--?**

43 Rocco [Ro]: No io-- io sono venuto per gli amici

44 **Ro: No I-- I came for the friends**

45 Ilir [Il]: Io prima [xxx] all'IPSIA

46 **Il: I first [xxx] to IPSIA**

47 Ro: Io ci sono venuto per gli amici

48 **Ro: I came here for the friends**

49 ALP: ((to Il)) Hai cominciato all'IPSIA?

50 **ALP: ((to Il)) You started at IPSIA?**

51 Il: No [xxx] per fa' Meccanica, ma siccome Meccanica non c'era, ho cambiato e

52 son venuto all'ITIS. Quando mi hanno chiamato all'IPSIA mi hanno detto, "eh

- 53 comunque Meccanica c'è," ma [xxx]
- 54 **Il: No [xxx] to do Mechanics, but since they didn't have Mechanics, I changed**
- 55 **and I came to ITIS. When they called me to IPSIA they told me "eh, anyway, we**
- 56 **have Mechanics here," but [xxx]**
- 57 Giacomo [G]: Io invece avevo scelto il commerciale, poi mi hanno bocciato e sono
- 58 venuto qua all'ITIS
- 59 **G: I, instead, chose the commercial school, then they failed me and I came here**
- 60 **to ITIS.**
- 61 Ro: Io per gli amici sono venuto.
- 62 **Ro: It's for the friends that I came.**
- 63 **Ruggero [Ru]: ((sarcastically, to G)) HAHAHA**
- 64 **Il: ((giggles))**
- 65 Ro: Io per gli amici
- 66 **Ro: Me, for the friends.**
- 67 Lukas [L]: Per gli amici di calibro suo
- 68 **L: For friends of his caliber**
- 69 **Students: [xxx]**
- 70 ALP: Che cosa?
- 71 **ALP: What?**
- 72 Ru: Io voglio andare a fare ingegneria meccanica all'università.
- 73 **Ru: I want to go do mechanical engineering at university.**
- 74 ALP: E quindi hai fatto-- non volevi andare al liceo scientifico?
- 75 **ALP: And so you did-- you didn't want to go to the scientific lyceum?**
- 76 Ru: ((shaking his head)) no no
- 77 **Ru: ((shaking his head)) no no**
- 78 Zied [Z]: Io invece ho fatto il linguistico
- 79 **Z: I, instead, did the linguistic lyceum**

This brief stretch of talk includes several small stories, as well as untold narratives. The format of the interview was such that students could elaborate if they so desired, or could choose to keep their contributions short. However, the multiparty format also meant that I, as an interlocutor, could not always respond in the ways that the students might have liked so that they could continue or develop their narratives, and I counted on the students to resort to their usual side-talk to tell any stories that they wanted to elaborate on. Rocco's response to my question about whether circulating stereotypes had influenced their decisions to attend the technical school (lines 41–42) sets the tone for the rest of the student contributions by recontextualizing my question as "Why did you decide to come to this school?" But then his narrative gets overshadowed by Ilir launching into a narrative about considering pursuing his secondary school career at IPSIA, the vocational school (line 46). I pick up on Ilir's narrative and ask for clarification, which he provides,

and then attend to Giacomo's narrative (lines 59–60), along with Ruggero and Ilir, while Rocco's third attempt at launching his story is thwarted yet again. Giacomo tells of having started off in the commercial school (the sister school of the technical school) but of having failed a year and therefore deciding to change schools and specializations. Ruggero teases him with an exaggerated laugh (line 63). It is Lukas who finally picks up on Rocco's attempts at a story, elaborating on what Rocco has been repeating almost word-for-word throughout this stretch of the interview ("I came here for the friends"), which appears to satisfy Rocco and get at the point he was making: He had made his school decision based on there being particular types of people he wanted to be around. Ruggero then shares that he came to the technical school, and the Mechanics specialization in particular, because he wants to study mechanical engineering at university (line 73). He shakes his head hard and says "no no" (line 77) when I asked if he had considered the scientific lyceum. Zied then volunteers (line 79) that he actually started off at a lyceum—the linguistic specialization—which then sparks another phase of the conversation (not shown here) in which tensions around academic performance, school type, and associated social personae begin to arise. A few moments later, Ivan offered that Zied had failed the linguistic lyceum, and a brief but increasingly tense exchange of words between Zied and Ivan ensued in which they invoked one another's ages (both were considered old for their grade) and what that suggested about their academic ability.

In the short stories in Excerpt 2, it is clear that there are a number of reasons why students selected the Mechanics specialization, but none of them aside from Ruggero adheres to the desire to study Mechanics which was expressed in Excerpt 1 from five months earlier in the school year. These narratives are consistent with the school principal's characterization of the student body as a "catch-all" when I asked him about the differences and similarities between the three school models: That is, whoever doesn't go to the lyceum and whoever doesn't go to the vocational school ends up in a technical school (Interview 2016.12.19). However, all of the students in Excerpts 1 and 2 frame this as a choice that they made.

The Vocational School

The students I interviewed from the majority-female sartorial specialization at the vocational school had a different take on their school choice narratives. They primarily cited their academic performance in middle school as an important factor in their choice to attend the vocational school, which meant the Fashion specialization in particular. Unlike some of the students at the technical school, who mentioned a variety of entry points into the technical school and into the Mechanics specialization in particular, the students I interviewed from the Fashion specialization seem to have been funneled into it by default. These excerpts are taken from a longer impromptu interview I conducted with some of the students from the Fashion specialization at the vocational school (a class of eight girls and one boy; Excerpts 3–4). The participants I focus on here are Sonia and Roberta, both age 16. At this point in the semester, relations were fairly tense among the students, and Sonia and Roberta appeared to me to be among the highest ranking (socially) in the class hierarchy. Sonia was very formal with the teachers, using the respectful *Lei*⁹ form with them and with me, and she tended to be fairly secretive.

⁹ *Tu/Lei* is the Italian equivalent of the French *tu/vous*.

She was born in Morocco, but her family came to Italy when she was very young. She spoke dialect fluently but was also very selective about when to use it (often reserving it for moments when she wanted to appear tough). She routinely skipped class to smoke cigarettes and she took offense when teachers pointed out that she wasn't putting her best foot forward in class. Roberta, like Sonia, had a strong personality. An avid and artful speaker of *dialetto*, she could be heard using it in almost all situations; as she told me, she preferred its genuineness over what seemed phony to her in Standard Italian. She often used nicknames and the informal *tu* with teachers and with me (unless she was reminded to use *Lei*), but it was never perceived as insubordination. She would often be the one who could get control of her peers on behalf of the teacher, and she often took on the role of speaking on behalf of the class when they, as a whole, had something to tell the teacher. Academically speaking, Roberta was the star of the class.

This interview took place during the end of one of five two-hour-long special laboratory sessions in which a well-known costume designer from the area collaborated with the third- and fourth-year students in designing and realizing replicas of 15th century clothing, based on the portrait of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino (Excerpt 3).¹⁰ Due to some power struggles between the fourth- and third-year students, with the fourth-year students being given or claiming the more interesting work and leaving work such as cutting and tracing to the third-year students, the third-year girls slowly started to sneak out of the session. I came across them in the hallway outside the classroom and asked if I could interview them.

Excerpt 3. The easiest school (3Moda 2017.01.25)

80 Andrea [ALP]: Noi ancora non abbiamo parlato di come voi avete scelto questa
81 scuola quindi forse possiamo cominciare da lì.

82 **ALP: We still haven't talked about how you (pl.) chose this school, so maybe we
83 can start from there.**

84 **Roberta [R]: ☺ Hmm... mm mm mm... ((suck teeth)) ☺ [Sonia (S) & R laugh]**

85 **ALP: ((laughing))**

86 R: Allora... io-- parlo personalmente-- sono arrivata alla fine di settembre tra terza
87 media e il primo che ancora non-- all'inizio di settembre scusa-- che ancora non
88 avevo deciso dove andare. [ALP: Ah si?] E quindi il babbo e la mamma hanno
89 praticamente-- si sono buttati sulla scuola più facile perché io alle medie non
90 andavo tanto bene. Alla scuola più facile-- sono venuta qui, e invece ho capito che
91 mi piace quindi...

92 **R: Well... I-- I'm speaking for myself-- I arrived at the end of September
93 between the third year of middle school and the first [year of high school] and
94 I still didn't-- at the beginning of September, sorry-- that I still hadn't decided
95 where to go. [ALP: Oh yeah?] And so my dad and mom practically, they threw
96 themselves on the easiest school because in middle school I wasn't doing too**

¹⁰ The Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza by Piero della Francesca

- 97 **great. To the easiest school-- I came here and actually I understood that I like**
 98 **it, so...**
 99 ALP: Ho capito. E quindi quando dici che non andavi bene... nel senso di studiare?
 100 **ALP: Got it. And so when you say you weren't doing well... like meaning**
 101 **studying?**
 102 R: Alle medie, sì.
 103 **R: In middle school, yes.**

Roberta's narrative here is prefaced with some suspense (line 84), acknowledged by Sonia who joins in on Roberta's laughter, and an emphatic "Well" (line 92), indicating that she indeed has a story to tell me about this moment in her life. She tells of how her decision about which school to attend was made just before she was supposed to begin her first year of secondary school (lines 92–95). While this decision is initially framed as having been up to her ("I still hadn't decided where to go," line 95), she then says that her mother and father "threw themselves" on "the easiest school" (lines 95–96), suggesting that they were the ones who made the decision in the end. The official sign-up period for secondary schools is in February of the last semester of middle school, but Roberta claims to have let the decision go until the very last minute, at the beginning of September. In her framing of this decision as being up to her, she hints at the lack of assistance from her parents or other adults in keeping her on-schedule with her decision, and suggests that her parents signed her up for the vocational school as a last resort. Further, this decision appears to have been based on Roberta "not doing too great" (line 97) in middle school, which hints at her difficulty in school and perhaps again to a lack of academic support resources outside of school or at home. She does not include in her narrative anything about the Fashion specialization being a draw for her, nor does she mention having considered or tried other options. Indeed, with the only other option at the vocational school in Cittadina being the Electrical Maintenance specialization (which was all male), Roberta had virtually no other feasible option: As a low-performing female student, her only choice was the Fashion specialization at the vocational school. Sonia's story is very similar (Excerpt 4). Both Sonia and Roberta state that they think this way of making decisions about which school to attend is very common.

Excerpt 4. Here you don't do anything (3Moda 2017.01.25)

- 104 Andrea [ALP]: Ok. [to Sonia (S)] E la tua storia cos'è?
 105 **ALP: Ok. [to S] And your story, what is it?**
 106 S: Allora io sinceramente ascoltavo le voci che giravano sulla scuola. Inizialmente
 107 dicevano "eh alla scuola non si fa niente"... e dato che manco io andavo bene,
 108 cioè mi hanno--
 109 **S: Well I honestly listened to the voices around me about school. At first they**
 110 **said "eh at the [vocational] school you don't do anything"... and given that I**
 111 **wasn't doing well either, they--**
 112 ALP: Hai sentito queste voci quando tu eri alle medie?

113 **ALP: You were hearing these voices when you were in middle school?**

114 S: Sì... dicevano che "ah qui non si fa niente," allora "vabbè" dico, "provamo."

115 Sono venuta il primo anno, ho sme-- cioè mi sono smentita di tutto quello che

116 avevano detto, non è vero che non si fa niente, e poi mi è iniziato a piacere la

117 moda e... anche perché mi piaceva anche da prima, però quando sono venuta qua

118 mi è piaciuta ancora di più.

119 **S: Yes... they were saying that "oh here you don't do anything." "Well," I say,**

120 **"let's try." I came the first year, I sto-- like I took back everything they told**

121 **me. It's not true that you don't do anything. And then I started to like Fashion**

122 **and... even though I liked it before, when I came here I liked it even more.**

123 ALP: Ok. Quindi in generale credete che le vostre... cioè i vostri modi di scegliere

124 questa scuola sono comuni tra le persone?

125 **ALP: Ok. So in general do you (pl.) think that your... like your ways of**

126 **choosing this school were common among people?**

127 Roberta [R] & S: Sì sì

128 **R & S: Yes yes**

129 R: Comunque sia, diversi dicevano "che scuola fai, che--?" io dicevo "l'IPSIA,"

130 no? E allora mi dicevano "come si chiama? il professionale?" e si mettono a

131 ridere. Ho detto "guarda che è una scuola come come le altre, è uguale."

132 **R: Anyway, different people would say "what school do you go to, what--?" and**

133 **I would say "IPSIA", right? And then they would tell me "what's it called? The**

134 **vocational school?" and they would start laughing. I said "look, it's a school**

135 **like the others, it's the same."**

Sonia's narrative puts an emphasis on the "voices" she heard around her when she was at middle school (line 109), not specifying if they belonged to classmates, teachers, administrators, parents, or figures outside the school itself. She tells of basing her decision to come to the Fashion specialization at the vocational school on these voices and on the fact that she, like Roberta, was not doing well in middle school (lines 110–111). Here, the idea that students "don't do anything" (lines 110, 119) is a selling point for Sonia and an element of the school that she appears to have thought would make it a good fit for her. Unlike Roberta, Sonia frames the decision as ultimately being hers to make, and she attributes her decision, in part, to the voices that she heard around her. She does not mention her parents as playing a role, which is interesting considering the fact that her father proved to be quite vocal about his daughter's decisions over the course of the school year and often came to the school in person when he had a bone to pick with the teachers or the principal about them hiding his daughter's bad behavior from him. Sonia takes a somewhat rebellious stance in saying that she decided to come to the school because she heard that students "don't do anything" (lines 110, 119), but then starts to align herself with Roberta's narrative when she says that she soon learned that it was not true that the students in the Fashion specialization "don't

do anything” (lines 120–121). She also adds, almost as an afterthought, that “she liked [Fashion] before,” but that she “started” to like Fashion “even more” once she was enrolled in the school (lines 121–122).

When I ask if they think their ways of choosing a school are common, they reply that they do think so (line 128), and Roberta offers a follow-up narrative. This narrative leads me to believe that Roberta thought that I wanted to know if many people go to the vocational school because they don’t think the students “do anything” (lines 110, 119), when what I had intended to ask was whether they felt that many students make the decision based on what their peers say and what their middle school academics are like. Roberta’s narrative tells of “people” who would ask what school she attended (line 132), and when she would respond “IPSIA” (line 133), which is the official acronym for this particular type of vocational school, they would respond with “the vocational school?” (lines 133–134) and that they “would start laughing” (line 134). Based on her follow-up comment, it appears that she is framing these individuals as making fun of both her decision to attend the vocational school and her attempt to legitimize it by using its official name, IPSIA. The individuals she voices in her narrative retort by referring to IPSIA generically as *il professionale* (“the vocational school;” lines 133–134). By responding “Look, it’s a school like the others. It’s the same” (lines 134–135), she is framing her past self as believing in the vocational school, maybe even in the way she does now. This contradicts to some extent her initial idea that one does nothing at the vocational school, and situated her current outlook on the school as one that she has held since the beginning (consistent with her identity as the star pupil).

With school-level discourse in mind, as well as the role that institutional policies about school choice play in the individual students’ decision-making processes, I ask Sonia and Roberta about the period in which they needed to make a decision about which school to attend (the last year of middle school) and about how they informed themselves. I ask them if they had school-sponsored orientations of some kind, where they were, and what they were like. Sonia and Roberta explained that in their final year of middle school, the school only took them to the lyceum. They were told to go with their parents to the technical and vocational schools. Thinking back to Figures 1 and 2, as well as Excerpts 3 and 4, this action taken by the middle school does little to undo or work against the stereotype of technical and vocational schools as being generally worse than lyceums. In Sonia’s narrative, the middle school takes a similar stance to the memes in *nascresceignora*’s Instagram account.

The Classical Lyceum

Finally, in the third-year class at the classical lyceum, I conducted an interview during two back-to-back free periods in which the substitute teacher had left me in charge of keeping the students under control. With only 10 days to go before winter break and having spent the previous three months trying not to be seen as an authority figure among the students, this made for a very noisy interview environment with students coming and going from the conversation. The participants in this section of the interview were Chiara, Sofia, Federica, Noemi, Daniela, and Melissa, all young women in the third year of the classical lyceum (Excerpts 5–6). These students are all ethnically Italian and Italian-born and all of

them were 16 or 17 at the time of the interview (the typical age of students in the third year). Chiara was one of the *rappresentanti di classe* (“class representatives”)—a role held by students who are willing to mediate between their peers and their teachers, who act as the voice box of their classmates, and who generally take on a leadership role in their class. She was studious, typically appeared attentive in class, and was often visibly stressed or nervous about oral and written exams, suggesting that grades were important to her. Sofia was similarly engaged and studious, often appearing genuinely engrossed in her teachers’ lectures. She seemed much older and more mature than her peers; a budding fashion photographer, she seemed more comfortable in an observer role and had a calm and peaceful demeanor. She also often struck up conversations with me about my work out of what appeared to be genuine attempts to make me feel welcome. Daniela, another very studious student who typically got high marks, was one of the quieter students as well, although very self-confident and always with a sarcastic comment ready. She was typically engaged in lessons, but even when she was off-task, her deadpan facial expression never gave her away. Noemi was a lovable and unpretentious girl who didn’t shine academically or socially, but she had a good time with her classmates, was always good natured, and took her struggles in stride, never disengaging from lessons that she didn’t understand, unlike a couple of her peers. Federica was not a particularly confident student either, but she was more vocal about her frustrations during break time. She often seemed worried about her schoolwork. Finally, Melissa changed noticeably over the course of the year from appearing somewhat ditzy and distracted (when she shared a desk with her two good friends) to appearing much more engaged and serious (when she was moved to a different seat). She often volunteered answers in class and seemed increasingly more confident in her academic ability as the year went on.

At the beginning of this interview, these students and I talked for about fifteen minutes about their siblings who had attended this same school before them, about the teachers that they had had, and about what their siblings had told them about the teachers. This led into a multiparty conversation about the scariest teachers, the hardest subjects, and other similar information. I asked them, taking all of this into consideration, why they had then chosen the classical lyceum (Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 5. I ask myself that every day (3BLC 2016.12.13)

- 136 Andrea [ALP]: E quindi perchè avete scelto il liceo classico?
 137 ALP: **And so why did you (pl.) choose the classical lyceum?**
 138 **Students: ((laughing)) ehhhh**
 139 Melissa [M]: ☺ Ogni giorno me lo chiedo ☺
 140 M: ☺ **I ask myself that every day** ☺
 141 Sofia [S]: ☺ “Ma che c’avevo in testa quel giorno!?” ☺
 142 S: ☺ **“But what did I have in my head that day!?”** ☺

My question in line 137 gets a big laugh out of the group, along with a prolonged “ehhhh” (indicating that there is much to say and that they are thinking about or considering the answer very carefully; line 138). The students make

fun of themselves and their decision to go to the classical lyceum, with Melissa jokingly telling me that she “asks herself every day” why she decided to do so and with Sofia jumping in on the joke to voice Melissa (or perhaps herself) with “But what did I have in my head that day?!” This slow disclosure (Ochs & Capps, 2001) of their co-told narrative indicates that they, for the most part, have had a shared experience of their journey to the third year of the classical lyceum and that they share similar feelings about it: Namely, that they have suffered through it together. Rather than elaborating further on this, however, they seem to rely on my knowledge of their school experience, based on the many observations I had conducted up to this point, to fill in the blanks. This topic, however, prompts Melissa to share (in Excerpt 6) the other option she considered before choosing the classical lyceum, as well as why she ultimately chose the classical lyceum. Sofia follows by offering up her initial preference, and Federica does the same. They also share some information about why they ultimately decided not to pursue those options.

Excerpt 6. Other schools and specializations (3BLC 2016.12.13)

143 Melissa [M]: Io volevo sempre andare all’ITIS.

144 **M: I always wanted to go to ITIS [the technical school].**

145 Andrea [ALP]: Quale indirizzo?

146 **ALP: Which specialization?**

147 M: Biologico. Però tutti mi dicevano, visto che alle medie andavo abbastanza

148 bene no? Anche [xxx] all’orientamento delle scuole superiori. [xxx] biologico e mi

149 piaceva, sì, [xxx] ma come faccio a [xxx]?

150 **M: Biological. But everyone told me, considering that I was doing pretty well in**

151 **middle school, right? Even [xxx] at orientation for the high schools. [xxx] I liked**

152 **biological, yes, [xxx] but how can I [xxx]?**

153 [xxx]

154 M: Ma quando è arrivato questo insegnante, come parlava, io non lo so, mi è

155 talmente appassionata che ho scelto questa scuola.

156 **M: But when this teacher [from the classical lyceum] arrived, how he spoke, I**

157 **don’t know, I felt so passionate about it that I chose this school.**

158 ...

159 Sofia [S]: A me piaceva tanto l’artistico.

160 **S: I really used to like the artistic [specialization].**

161 Federica [F]: A me piaceva il pedagogico ma--

162 **F: I used to like the pedagogical [specialization] but--**

163 S: Il problema è che qui l’artistico non è più istituto, ma liceo, quindi anche questo

164 mi ha fatto [xxx] generale perché nasce come istituto, non come liceo, però poi--

165 me l’hanno sconsigliato.

- 166 **S: The problem is that here the artistic [specialization] isn't an institute**
 167 **anymore, but a lyceum, so this also made me [xxx] general because it was born**
 168 **as an institute, not as a lyceum, but then-- they advised me against it.**
 169 Chiara [C]: [xxx] conosco delle ragazze che ci vanno e non fanno niente.
 170 **C: [xxx] I know some girls who go there and they don't do anything.**
 171 Noemi [N]: Io vedo il mio fratello che fa l'artistico, il gemello è, e non fa niente.
 172 Nieceente. Niente.
 173 **N: I see my brother who does the artistic [lyceum], he's my twin, and he doesn't**
 174 **do anything. Aanything. Anything.**

Melissa tells of “always” having wanted to “go to ITIS” (line 144), and particularly the biotechnology specialization, which she and most other people call *biologico* (“biological”). Throughout the school year, teachers and students at the technical institute and the lyceum often suggested that the only real alternative for the students who do the classical and scientific lyceums would have been the biotechnology strand of the technical school, seen as the most rigorous of the technical specializations. In fact, it was referred to multiple times throughout my fieldwork as “the lyceum of the technical school” (e.g., Fieldnotes 2016.09.22). Here, however, it is not clear whether Melissa is trying to position herself as radically different from her classmates by indicating, at first, an interest in “ITIS” in general (line 144), as opposed to “biotechnology” specifically (line 150). When I follow up and ask her “which specialization?” (line 146), she says “biological” (line 150), which was the nickname given to the biotechnology strand both by students at the technical school and elsewhere. She chooses not to elaborate on why she was interested in that specialization, or why she (herself) eventually decided to come to the classical lyceum. Instead, she points to having done “pretty well” in middle school as a reason for “everyone” to persuade her either against signing up for the technical school or to sign up for the classical lyceum (lines 150–151). She leaves this part hanging and implied (“but everyone told me, considering I was doing pretty well at middle school, right?;” lines 150–151). An inaudible section follows, in which she continues narrating the story of her decision-making, and she concludes with a brief story from her orientation at the classical lyceum in which she was impassioned by a teacher and “how he spoke” (line 186), which led to her eventually signing up for the classical lyceum. Neither in her move away from the technical school nor in her move toward the classical lyceum does Melissa tell of having control over or agency in having signed up for the lyceum. She tells of being dissuaded from the technical school, even though she liked it, and of signing up for the lyceum only after being impassioned by the presentation by one classical lyceum teacher. In line with Sofia and Chiara, Melissa presents her decision as a moment of madness.

Sofia and Federica chime in afterward with the schools that they used to like: the artistic and the pedagogical specializations, respectively (lines 160 & 162). Federica’s “but” in line 162 gets interrupted by Sofia, who goes on to explain to me that her original favorite, the artistic specialization in Cittadina, is no longer a technical institute but a lyceum (lines 166–167), indicating that this had some

significance in her decision not to attend it. She adds the fact that it was “born” as a technical institute (lines 167–168) and since became a lyceum, which perhaps hints that the artistic specialization at its core is not a *real* lyceum. Because of the background noise on the recording, it is not possible to make out whether this was a positive or negative attribute for her. In the end, she was “advised against” the artistic specialization (line 168) by a third party. On this note, Chiara jumps in and adds that she heard from “some girls who went there” that “you don’t do anything” (line 170), perhaps aiming to build on Sofia’s point about the artistic specialization being “born” as a technical institute and, therefore, having been “advised against it” (lines 167–168). Noemi builds on this by sharing her observation that her twin brother, who attends the artistic specialization, “doesn’t do anything” (lines 173–174). This co-constructed narrative, unlike Roberta’s and Sonia’s in Excerpts 3 and 4 frames “doing nothing” as an undesirable characteristic of the artistic specialization that makes it a bad fit for Sofia and possibly also for Noemi and Chiara. This also aligns with the representation of the artistic specialization in Figure 2.

Fifteen minutes later in the conversation, the topic shifts a bit toward the reputations of the various specializations and schools. They rank the classical lyceum as “the most qualified” and compare it with the less prestigious (in their opinion) human sciences lyceum, which they qualify as the “vocational school for women” (Interview 2016.12.13). They explain that sometimes students choose schools precisely because students in those schools are believed not to “do anything.” Looking back to Excerpt 5 and the students’ good-natured self-criticism about having chosen the classical lyceum, this narrative about *other* students who want to “do nothing” is interesting: The classical lyceum students in this interview appear to be positioning themselves as academically superior to their peers in other schools but as being somehow also burdened by this framing of themselves.

Discussion

The narratives and small stories presented above illustrate that the school choice decision is differently “tellable” by different narrators and their co-authors (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 34): For some their school and specialization is represented as an obvious choice, and for others it is framed as quite an unsure and suspenseful one. The narratives of the students in 3 Moda at the vocational school represent their choice of school as fairly straightforward: If you’re a low-performing female middle school student, you go to the Fashion specialization at the vocational school, and if you’re a low-performing male middle school student, you go to the Electrical Maintenance specialization at the vocational school. The girls in 3 Moda tell about their decision as having been informed by the reputation of the vocational school as easy, which they frame as being a match for their lower academic performance in middle school. Both also mention the influence of a third party in their decision-making, with Roberta citing her parents as having been highly influential in the decision (even making the decision on her behalf) and Sonia mentioning the voices at middle school which swayed her in the direction of the vocational school. In their tellings, Sonia and Roberta do not hint at any other possible option for their secondary school careers, but neither do

they mention their dissatisfaction with the single option they see as having been available to them.

The boys in the Mechanics specialization have variable frames for their narratives about entry into the technical school, with some focusing on the appeal of the Mechanics specialization itself, others arriving at it after testing out a different specialization beforehand, and still others having ended up at Mechanics as a fallback after failing a year in a different specialization or school. None mention their family's wishes as being a factor in their decision-making, unlike Roberta at the vocational school and some of the students in the classical lyceum. Instead, they frame the decision as being theirs alone to make. The boys offered up several narratives around their choice of the Mechanics specialization, from wanting to go where their friends went, to wanting to learn how to work with machines, to wanting to attend university afterward, but it appears there is also a tension between Mechanics being a place for budding mechanical engineers and it being a place for those who failed at other specializations. The overall image of this specialization as portrayed by the narratives is quite heterogeneous, which is consistent with what the principal of the technical and vocational schools told me in an interview: The very high achieving students go to the lyceums, the students who have the most difficulty to go the vocational schools, and everyone else goes to the technical institutes (Interview 2016.12.19).

At the classical lyceum, however, the topic of school choice evokes intense participation and co-authorship from the students. Nearly all of the students frame the classical lyceum as superior to the others in terms of academic rigor, but not originally as their top choice (perhaps as an attempt to disalign from the figure of personhood typically associated with the classical lyceum). They mention several other specializations that would have interested them—mostly lyceums, but also the biotechnology specialization, that is, “the lyceum of the technical school”—but none seem to have actually pursued any of these alternatives because of advice from family members and peers (Fieldnotes 2016.09.22). Thus, the depiction of their choice to attend the classical lyceum as a moment of madness may serve to preserve any cool factor they have achieved by carefully avoiding being seen as a *secchione* (“nerd”), while still attending a school that is known as being for high achieving students.

Numerous feminist and critical theory scholars have pointed out the connections between critical pedagogy and the importance of taking storytelling seriously. Indeed, as Razack (1998) has said, “for many of us who would describe ourselves as teaching for social change, storytelling has been at the heart of our pedagogy” (p. 36). This is so because critical pedagogy seeks to push back against the reproduction of the status quo by calling on the voices of those who have traditionally not been listened to in the field of education. Taking a critical perspective in this study, I have treated the experiences of students as central to my research, aiming to open up space for reflection on what may have previously been overlooked about the task of choosing a secondary school. In particular, I have sought to make evident the ways that everyday metacommentary about schools and students (e.g., “at that school, they don’t do anything”) makes its way into official school marketing presentations (e.g., “it’s not true that you’ll just study and that’s it!”) and decisions (e.g., students’ choice of which school and specialization to attend; Interview 2016.12.13).

Conclusion

Popular discourse about schools and specializations circulates widely, from Instagram posts to official, school-supported, student-facing marketing. Members of a school community are aware of the prejudices and stereotypes about their school, and in the age of the neoliberal subject (e.g., Urciuoli, 2016) and related discourses about education and school choice in Italy, they must find a way to address these pre- (or mis-)conceptions without giving them too much weight. However, students' narratives of how they came to be in the school/specialization where they found themselves at the time of the interview would lead me to believe that word-of-mouth and preconceptions about what one *does* (or *does not do*) in each type of program are the primary means by which they made their decisions. In fact, over the course of these multiparty and co-constructed narratives about school choice, there is some alignment of student views within each interview context. The nature of the group interview may have led to this alignment of views and narratives, whether they were actively co-constructed by classmates or simply told in the presence of peers. Regardless, these three interviews highlight the pressures and constraints—from family, school officials, peers, and policies—that students encounter at the early stages of the school selection process.

The analysis of student narratives in this paper has aimed to address broader questions about education policy and practice in Italian secondary school, a context which has not been explored ethnographically. Many studies of Italian education focus on elementary education, and most use surveys or quantitative methods. In this analysis, rather than exploring only test scores, survey answers, and policy documents, I have reached toward an understanding of student realities as they directly explain them. Instead of exploring only how policy documents and curriculum frame a student's progression through their school career, I have treated students' insider perspectives—their narratives of becoming—as a means of giving a voice to what lies beneath the famously bureaucratic Italian education system. Students are governed by infinite layers of social expectations, political influence, and family obligations. Their narratives are thus a means of showcasing how individuals act agentively (or not) in the faceless presence of national education policies.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

plain text	original language
bold text	English translation
<i>italics</i>	summary of section of interaction
<i>bold italics</i>	emphatic
[xxx]	inaudible
[ALP: word]	backchanneling
((text))	paralinguistic description
☺ text ☺	smile voice
CAPS	loud voice
“text”	quoting self or others
... (between lines)	lines omitted
... (in-line)	pause
--	cut off