**Young people in the post-pandemic reality: perceptions of actualities and challenges in life choices**

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**Introduction**

The post-pandemic period has not ended the crises in people's lives. The period of adolescence and early youth is very susceptible to both external influences and the personal search for answers to existential questions (who am I? what do I choose for myself? who do I follow? etc.). It is not easy for young people to find their place in adult society, especially if the changes taking place, in the different spheres of life in society, are unexpected, multidirectional and often ambiguous in terms of ethics, values or interpersonal relationships.

Young people represent the most vital, acculturated, innovative, and dynamic part of European society: On the one hand, they have so much potential and creativity; on the other hand, several of them have reinforced their state of uncertainty about the future, loading themselves with anxiety and dissatisfaction. Sometimes young people appear invisible and dull, prisoners of a collective narrative that does not see them as protagonists and leaves them limited space to design a better future (National Agency, 2022).

It is important to constantly search for forms and strategies to understand the world of youth and promote the ability to accompany them in their choices. We are convinced that the proposal of the Teacher/Pupil relationship remains valid, which, although it might seem uninteresting in the digital age, represents an irreplaceable experience that is always useful in accompanying the younger generations.

This talk will address the proposed topic from 4 perspectives: the definition of "youth," the situation of youth in the post-pandemic era, the relationship between youth and society, and the perception of the youth world and the possibilities of collaboration with adults.

**1. The problematic issues involved in defining the period of youth**

The term "young" is commonly used. Firstly, because it has a generally positive connotation and opens up prospects for the future, secondly, because it increases one's own level of emotional satisfaction, and thirdly, because it has become very popular in media parlance.

We can talk about "youth" from the perspective of physical (physiological) and/or biological development; we can talk about emotional, cognitive, social, religious, and probably some other developments. Each approach used will be guided by its own criteria and needs; for example, we may ask whether a biologically mature 18-year-old is also mature socially, emotionally, or religiously. The answers to these questions will depend on the criteria that guide us.

The term *youth* is often considered on two levels: "on the basis of psychology and pedagogy, it is most often defined as an age category of individuals who are in the transitional stage (youth phase) from childhood to adulthood, with the goal of reaching full maturity in the course of socialization and development [....]; in the social sciences, it is more often defined as a social group or socio-demographic category that, due to its youthfulness and dynamism, can become an agent of social change and exert influence on the transformation of society as a whole" (Galas, 2004, 327).

In classifying (describing) the category of youth, the following criteria (and accompanying phenomena) can be distinguished (*Ibid*., 327-330):

(a) **biological criteria** - related mainly to biological maturation. On the one hand, the age for reaching sexual maturity is lowering (from about 10-12 years of age), and on the other hand, the process of education and vocational training of young people is lengthening (to about 25 years of age). This results in fluid age boundaries in the transition to adulthood. "Today's young people grow up biologically earlier than their peers of the previous generation. At the same time, the child's dependence on parents is becoming longer due to the lengthening educational cycle, which causes some social tensions" (*Ibid*., 327).

(b) **psychological criteria** - relating to intellectual and emotional maturity. Youth is the time of attainment of cognitive and emotional maturity, that is, the development of awareness of one's "*self*," and the acquisition of the ability to objectively perceive oneself, others and the processes occurring around oneself. The rapid development of formal operational capacity is associated with great educational opportunities. The process of intellectual development is accompanied by the process of acquiring norms, views, attitudes and beliefs, as well as the formation of a hierarchy of values and life aspirations. Cognitive-moral development proceeds from anomie to autonomy as the highest level of development of moral behavior, characterized by the individual's conscious application of moral norms and principles in social life. Youth is also a time when one gains independence and learns responsibility for one's actions. Among the characteristics of youth, psychologists most often mention: dynamism, vitality, spontaneity, openness, enthusiasm, ease of contact with peers, as well as a principled and critical attitude toward existing reality. There is a tendency to challenge and question the norms and prohibitions imposed by adults. During adolescence it becomes  important to build one's identity, but crises can occur in this maturation process, which is crucial for the whole development of the person (Erikson, 1997; Formella, 2009). It is only after overcoming these usually developmental and temporary crises that the young person truly enters the stage of maturity.

(c) **pedagogical criteria** - related to the process of learning and education (in the family, at school and in a peer group). We can distinguish here between formal criteria (e.g. school) and informal criteria (e.g. peer group). In general, in recent decades we have witnessed an extension of the educational cycle (as a permanent trend toward civilization), the emergence of the idea of lifelong education, and the development of so-called institutions of continuing education (e.g., vocational courses, master's degrees, graduate schools, specialized diplomas, etc.). This is partly related to the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial and IT society. All these trends cause the postponement of the start of life of the new generation of young people and, consequently, the prolongation of the youth period. In the area of education, there is a decline in the fertility rate (nuclear family model), a decrease in the number of marriages and a widespread form of consensual relationships. Changes in the traditional value system, and consequently a decrease in the importance of the influence of the traditional bearers of these values: the family, the school, the church. The growing importance of peer groups and mass media is also noted in the area of value carriers.

(d) **social criteria** - related to taking on specific social roles (e.g., pupil, student, worker, citizen, spouse, parent). The role of pupil/student, i.e., completing education, is often associated with assuming the role of employee and moving into the category of so-called young adults. The type and level of education largely determine the possibilities of young people in relation to the labor market (e.g., the problem of vocational education or youth in villages and small towns). The age of sexual initiation is lowered, while the decision to marry is postponed, and the practice of cohabitation is spreading among young people, leading to changes in customs and transformations in social consciousness. Another relevant aspect is the decrease in fertility and the aging of the population. As for the civic attitude of young people, they generally withdraw from social activity and distance themselves from the world of politics. Instead, they value freedom and democracy as well as technological development.

(e) **economic criteria** - related to the independence of young people and the satisfaction of material needs, as well as the conditions for starting adult life. Among these criteria, in several European countries, we note the problem of adult children living with their parents (for various reasons), the problem of emigration and economic migration.

(f) **legal criteria** - related to obtaining legal capacity and responsibility in the field of criminal law. There is no uniform age criterion for youth and adulthood in the legal system (see, for example, labor law and criminal law).

In contemporary advanced societies, the boundaries between the various ages of traditional life cycles appear increasingly blurred. There are no longer true rites of passage for entry into adulthood, although the following 5 thresholds are considered as such:

* The conclusion of studies and/or training,
* entry into the world of work,
* The exit from the paternal home,
* marriage,
* The responsibilities of motherhood and fatherhood.

In recent years a radical change is being observed in the ways in which these 5 thresholds are crossed: there is a tendency to defer each of these steps, not to follow the order with which they are marked, and to dilate the distances between the time of the first and the last. The dilation and psycho-social moratorium grow as the social class to which one belongs rises (Mion, 2008).

As for Europe, four models of psycho-social moratorium of youth can be identified (*Ibid.*):

* **The Mediterranean** model-characterized by increased years of study, job insecurity, and prolonged cohabitation with parents, even when economic independence has been achieved.
* **The Nordic model -** inwhich young people leave home early, live either alone or in cohabitations that do not prelude marriage, get married and decide to have children later.
* **The French model** - which shares with the Mediterranean **model** a tendency to prolong study, and with the Nordic model a longer moratorium between leaving home and marriage.
* **The British model** - in which early youth finish school, enter the labor market and get married, but delay having children.

Generally, in literature,

we find the youth age division proposed in this mode:

* Teens (13/14 - 18/19);
* Youth (18/19 - 24/25);
* Young-adults (25-35) (Galas, 2004; Le Breton, 2016).

The boundaries thus proposed are certainly related to the cultural and economic conditions of individual geographical areas.

The generalization of education and the lengthening of training paths are processes that have led to the diffusivity of student status. There are several reasons for this change: the demand for increasingly skilled labor requires longer training periods; young people are urged to continue their studies while waiting because this guarantees them greater opportunities for social mobility; and education and culture have become values no longer limited to a few particular elites. The conclusion of training cycles does not coincide with entry into stable employment, both because today it is difficult to determine the end of the training phase and because increasingly large periods of unemployment and precarious work are being inserted. This phenomenon results in prolonged relationships of economic, and especially psychological, dependence on the family of origin. In addition, the prolonged transition from school to work determines the expansion of the time required to leave the family of origin and form a new family. It should also be acknowledged that in Western Europe alone, the phenomenon of cohabitation varies greatly from country to country, and according to the models already indicated: the "Mediterranean" one (more dependent even in moral norms) and the "Northern European" one (more independent and permissive) (Mion, 2008).

As cohabitation with parents continues, intergenerational relationships also change. Because of adolescent ambivalence, which moves between dependence and independence, these relationships in the "long" family tend to become less asymmetrical. This may be determined precisely by the styles of exercising parental authority, which under these conditions grants the strands to enjoy increasing degrees of freedom and autonomy, without excessive differences between males and females (*Ibid.*).

**2. The post-pandemic situation and young people**

Initially, Covid-19 mainly affected the most fragile part of our society, the elderly, because they are more exposed to the risk of infection and the consequences of the disease. Over time, however, the effects of the pandemic on all segments of the population and in different dimensions of daily life became evident. During the pandemic many young people revised their life plans, some stopped studying or lost their jobs, a great many found themselves (and several still find themselves) in a situation of physical and/or mental suffering. These are young people who feel lonely, who are afraid to go out and frequent crowded places, who express the appearance of health problems and in the transformation of their bodies, a generational and personal discomfort (National Agency, 2022).

In the Italian situation, which certainly also partly corresponds to the situation in other European countries, three main themes can be pointed out regarding the youth situation in recent years:

* there are more and more young people suffering situations of economic, relational, and mental distress,
* young people increasingly choose to go abroad, often transforming their life project from temporary to permanent,
* even seemingly integrated young people deny themselves the chance to build a family and have a child or postpone it as much as possible (*Ibid.*).

*2.1. Mental health of the younger generation*

Health care, wellness and a healthy lifestyle are vital for all people. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the need to work together to build stronger health care systems and protect the physical and mental health of all. The health emergency has not only brought contagions, hospitalizations and deaths, but has severely affected all dimensions of daily life. While the virus has affected the elderly the most, its effects on everyday life have been heaviest for children and young people whose lives have been drained and reduced to the screens of PCs, laptops and smartphones between distance learning, smartworking, video calling, e-aperitifs and digital dating (National Agency, 2022).

First the pandemic, then the news about the war in Ukraine, now the conflict in Gaza and Israel, strongly impact the mental health of the younger generation. There is a risk that an awareness of their limitedness in the face of the possibility of being at the mercy of unforeseen, unpredictable, global events will arise in them.

Below are some data from the researches showing the situation of youth concerning, in general, mental health.

In a study on online databases (PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science) published between January 2020 and December 2022 we aimed to investigate the symptoms of: anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder in children and adolescents (age ≤18 years). The results found an increase in at least one psychological disorder (by 23.8%). The aggregate prevalence of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder was 26 % (the highest prevalence of anxiety was observed in Europe more than in the rest of the world) (Alizadeh et al., 2023).

UNICEF Italy and the UNICEF Office for Europe and Central Asia (ECA), with technical support from the UNICEF Innocenti Research Institute (IRC) in Florence, Italy, promoted an online survey in 2020. The survey had as its focus satisfaction with one's life, interpersonal relationships, economic well-being, school and work sphere, environment, and health. More than 2,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 19 responded to the survey. The main findings say that young people are generally satisfied with their lives, concerned about economic well-being and health, positive about the environment and social relationships (UNICEF, 2020).

In research in Ireland, using a survey approach, the effects of lockdown on the mental health of 16-year-olds were explored. It was hypothesized that young people were particularly vulnerable, in relation to the negative mental health effects of COVID-19, as revealed by several authors. The results of the analysis showed that being female, being homosexual, and the perception that mental health had worsened during the lockdown were the best predictors of poor mental health. In open-ended responses, young people reported significant concerns about their mental health and academic achievement. They also felt that their needs did not have the same priority as those of adults during the lockdown. The results of this research suggest that lockdowns for COVID-19 negatively affected the mental health of many young people in Northern Ireland, with more acute effects for women and those who identified as nonheterosexual. Future research should explore the long-term impact of the pandemic on the mental health of these vulnerable youth and identify what support mechanisms need to be put in place to mitigate the negative effects of any future crisis (Lloyd et al., 2023).

The results of an Italian research reports some signs of the pandemic on the health of young people: 26.7% of young people say their health deteriorated during the pandemic, and 97.5% experienced at least one minor ailment. The most recurrent is headache, which affected 69.1% of those under 37; 57.1% suffered from back or joint pain; 41.9% had intestinal problems; and 39.1% had stomach pain or esophageal disorders. Compared with five years ago, more young people suffered from back pain (+33.2 the percentage difference), headaches (+38.0 percentage points), stomach pain, gastritis, digestive problems (+21.6 percentage points), and intestinal problems (+22.7 percentage points) (National Agency, 2022).

Regarding the Scandinavian countries, which to some extent the data in other European countries are confirmed, and it is emphasized that, to some extent, the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced existing challenges related to mental health and well-being of adolescents and young people. Prior to COVID-19, the existing literature found high levels of mental health problems such as self-reported loneliness, stress, negative emotions, poor sleep, headaches, stomachaches, and an increase in psychiatric diagnoses (Jeppesen et al., 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2019). The reasons for this accumulation of challenges are complex, but some explanations include the rise of performance culture, a demanding educational system, the use of social media (Krogh, 2023), digitization (Ottosen, Andreasen, 2020), and individualization (Niclasen, Lund, Obel, 2016). Despite having direct experience with mental health problems, young people are often excluded from actively contributing to research aimed at finding solutions to the problems. However, there is an urgent need to engage young people in research projects through direct engagement and co-creation of knowledge, particularly focused on mental health challenges and potential solutions to improve mental health (Herbers Poulsen, 2024).

*2.2. The social and relational health of young people*

An interesting study on the Italian territory presents a snapshot of adolescents' behaviors in the post-pandemic period of 2022 is represented by the VI survey of the HBSC Italia (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children) Surveillance System, coordinated by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità together with the Universities of Turin, Padua and Siena, with the support of the Ministry of Health, the collaboration of the Ministry of Education and Merit and all Regions and Local Health Authorities. This research was carried out on the representative sample in all regions of young people aged 11, 13, 15 and, for the first time 17. In total, more than 89 thousand boys and girls, more than 6 thousand classes and more than 1,800 educational institutions participated (https://www.quotidianosanita.it, 08/02/2023).

The questionnaire used investigated the impact that distancing measures such as lockdowns, school closures, distance learning (DAD), and closure of gyms/pools/sports centers due to the pandemic had on young people's lives. Data show a positive effect on boys' and girls' relationships with their families and school performance, while negative on life as a whole and their mental health (emotion management, stress) (*Ibid.*).

The following are some significant data from this research.

It emerged how daily breakfast consumption decreases as age increases, especially among girls, and fewer than one in 10 young people engage in physical activity every day. Almost all of them relate to each other through social media, a growing phenomenon but not without critical issues: 17 percent of girls (rising to 20 percent among 15-year-olds, so one in five) and 10 percent of boys make problematic use of it with negative consequences on their physical and psychological well-being. Risk behaviors remain, such as alcohol intake, which is on the rise among girls (one in five among 15-year-old girls has gotten drunk at least twice in her life), cigarette smoking, which is still prevalent among girls (29% vs. 20% of 15-year-old boys), and gambling, which, on the other hand, is a purely male phenomenon (47.2% of boys and 21.5% of 15-year-old girls have gambled or played money at least once in their lives) (*Ibid.*).

The majority of teenagers dislike school. Only 13% of boys, with slightly higher proportions for girls and younger children, say they like school. This percentage drops dramatically to 6 percent among 15-year-olds. Roughly 75% of boys feel accepted by their teachers but only half trust them a great deal (55%) and perceive from teachers a real interest in them (49%), with the trend decreasing as age increases. In contrast, about half of 11-year-olds feel very stressed by school commitments to rise to 60 percent and 78 percent in 15-year-old boys and girls, respectively. Regarding relationships with peers, 60 percent of young people say they have helpful friends and about 70 percent feel accepted as they are (*Ibid.*).

In more critical relational behaviors, however, bullying seems to maintain its peculiarities without major variations. Its occurrence is around 15 percent overall and decreases with increasing age, with proportions of 19 percent among 11-year-olds, 16 percent in 13-year-olds and just over 9 percent among 15-year-olds. Similar proportions are observed for cyberbullying, which is more frequent among girls (17 percent versus 13 percent) and younger ages: 19 percent at age 11, 16 percent at 13 and 10 percent at 15.

Regarding communication within the family, HBSC data confirm that as age increases, the ease with which boys open up to both parents decreases. Girls aged 13 and 15, compared to boys of the same age, have greater difficulty in talking to the father figure. In general, the mother represents the reference figure with whom boys and girls communicate the most (*Ibid.*).

Another Italian survey, which looked at adolescents and young people up to age 37, shows decreasing social expectations generating disinvestment and dissatisfaction: 77.1 percent of Italians believe that today it is difficult for a young person to see the investment of time and energy spent in work and study recognized in life, and 71.8 percent think the time when children were better off than their parents is over. All this leads to disinvestment from the traditional levers of socio-economic growth: education, training and work. 63.9 percent of young people think that work is not central to people's lives and is only a way to secure an income, and 86.5 percent believe they deserve more in work. But dissatisfaction does not stop at work, and it also runs through the other dimensions of daily life, including that of relationships and affection. 70.9 percent of those under 37 think they would deserve more in friendships and personal relationships, and 81.9 percent think they would deserve more from life in general (National Agency, 2022).

The same research notes that anxiety and uncertainty, two boulders on the future of the younger generation. 62.1% of young people have changed their view of the future as a result of the pandemic: for 22.1% the future will be better, 40% believe it will be worse, and 37.9% think the future will be the same. There is a lack of promise of improvement and well-being for the younger generation, and in the face of an unknown future, uncertainty (49 percent) and anxiety (30.5 percent) prevail, which in some cases turn into fear (14.6 percent) and pessimism (13.5 percent) in the face of events whose scale and consequences are beyond the ability of individuals to predict and act (National Agency, 2022).

It is also interesting to note the resentment on the part of young Italians toward a politics that does not represent the future. 69.0% of young people believe that politics does not represent them right now, with shares reaching 74.7% among those residing in the Northeast and 77.3% among the unemployed. 22.8% (rising to 24.0% among young adults) think they will not go to the polls to vote next time. These data are confirmed by the low trust in political parties (which have an average rating of 3.9 percent) and the decreasing percentage of voters, reflecting the low social weight and value attributed to the younger generation (*Ibid.*).

One thing that is positively emphasized is the importance of being part of a community in the face of a disease whose most effective cure was isolation and distancing; the belief that one must be united and that no one is saved alone won out. One in 4 young people, 24.1 percent of the total (and 27.7 percent among the very young between the ages of 18 and 24), personally engaged in volunteer activities during the pandemic, and the same proportion (25.6 percent among the youngest) joined fundraising campaigns to help people/structures in need. 31.3% of young people say they rediscovered neighborhood life during the pandemic (*Ibid*).

**3. The relational crisis among young people and their community belonging.**

There are fewer and fewer young people in Italy, and they count for little.

Individuals who reside in Italy and are between the ages of 18 and 36 are 11,661,346 and represent 19.8% of the approximately 59 million residents: as if to say that 1 in 5 residents in Italy is young. In 2000 there were 15,615,298 18-36 year olds and they accounted for 27.4% of the total, so 1 in 4 residents was young. In the last 20 years, while the Italian population has increased by more than two million residents, we have lost about four million young people (National Agency, 2022).

A kind of "crisis," seen from the socio-evolutionary and inter-generational perspective between an adolescent/young person and his or her social affiliation (family, institutions, society), is part of the growth path. It is read as a tension between the static nature of the past and the dynamic nature of the future that characterizes adolescents in the process of becoming. In the relationship between the person and society, two extreme and dangerous positions for both the person and society can be taken: aggression and passivity/retreat. We deal with this second event, which is becoming a very serious problem among adolescents and young people, especially in the post-covid time.

Below, we will present three manifestations of youth passivity toward today's reality of adolescents and young people.

*3.1. Self-isolation vs. social withdrawal*

In recent years, and especially since the pandemic, there has been a gradual increase in the number of cases of self-isolation among young people from developed countries. This phenomenon, already known by the Japanese term "hikikomori," was first observed in Japan in the late 1980s (Saitō, Angels, 2013), and over time it has spread worldwide, especially in industrialized countries (Cerutti, Spensieri, Siracusa, Gazzillo, Amendola, 2021; Crepaldi, 2019; De Michele, Caredda, Delle Chiaie, Salviati, Biondi, 2013; Ranieri et al., 2015). It is estimated, based on a study conducted by the Japanese government in 2016, that the number of Hikikomori was about 541,000 cases, 35 percent of them for at least 7 years (Tajan, Yuyiko, Pionné-Dax, 2017). A number of studies have highlighted the phenomenon of social withdrawal, initially considered a prerogative of Japan, as a global phenomenon that has spread over time to South Korea, India, China, Australia, the United States, Canada, and European countries, mainly Italy, France, and the United Kingdom (Lo, Chan, 2014; De Michele et al., 2013; Hamasaki, Pionnié-Dax, Dorard, Tajan, Hikida, 2022; Lee, Lee, Choi, Choi, 2013). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that the phenomenon of social withdrawal is configured as universal, concerning contemporary social life (Kato, Shinfuku, Tateno, 2020).

At this point we point out in a concise way, just some of the elements of the topic of adolescent social withdrawal and the function that the virtual world, particularly frequented by young people, plays in the development and management of this new form of adolescent and youth unhappiness.

In general, social withdrawal can be seen as demonstrating the multidimensional nature of adolescent malaise, resulting from the interaction of many individual and contextual variables (Bagnato, 2017; Li, Wong, 2015; Yong, Kaneko, 2016). The literature on the topic often represents society, family, and school as the basic environments in which various types of interactions take place that affect the well-being of young people (Bagnato, 2017; Lancini, 2020; Saitõ, Angels 2013; Stip, Thibault, Beauchamp-Chatel, Kisely, 2016). A much smaller part of the literature, focuses on the role of the virtual world as an environment of relationships that influence youth. Studies on this topic highlight that the Internet is not the main reason for social withdrawal, although it is a factor that can influence methods of isolation (Crepaldi, 2019; Lancini, 2020; Lancini, Cirillo, 2022). It seems that the amount of research on the digital world and adolescents needs to be greatly increased, because according to V.H. Murthy (2023), this is a dimension that is believed to have an impact on the phenomenon of social isolation, increasingly penetrate the lives of adolescents, and promote an unrealistic perception of reality, characteristic of the phenomenon of social isolation.

Several studies address the issue of the virtual world as a "kind of surrogate for reality" in the context of adolescent development in the digital age and the impact of digitization on their developmental process (Lancini, 2020; Naslund, Bondre, Torous, Aschbrenner, 2020; Riva, 2014; Villani, Triberti, 2018). The functions of the virtual network in both supporting adolescents to cope with their developmental tasks and fostering the emergence of developmental blocks are explored (Davis, 2013; Gudlavallety, Radham, Gurnule, 2023; James et al., 2017; Kuss, Louws, Wiers, 2012; Verduyn, Ybarra, Résibois, Jonides, Kross, 2017).

In the research conducted, we see an attempt to explore two aspects of an introverted adolescent's virtual world. On the one hand, an online presence can be a way to bridge a sense of isolation and a bridge to contact and communication with the outside world (Lo, Chan, 2014; Kato et al., 2020; Lancini, 2020; Spiniello, Piotti, Comazzi, 2015; Stip et al, 2016), on the other hand, it can act as a virtual compensator for those most at risk, providing them with a protected world in which to hide from the difficulties of growing up and relationships encountered in real life (Gros, Debue, Lete, van de Leemput, 2020; Vicari, Pontillo, 2022; Villani, Triberti, 2018).

An interesting field of research is testing the hypothesis that the world of new technologies, by proposing the implementation of unattainable ideal models, can drive narcissistic tendencies and sense of inadequacy in contemporary youth, which are important factors of social withdrawal (Charoensukmongkol, 2018; Lancini, 2020; Verduyn, Gugushvili, Kross, 2021; Vandenbosch, Fardouly, Tiggermann, 2022).

Of course, the research conducted can be useful in understanding the phenomenon and, consequently, in proposing appropriate interventions to support the withdrawn adolescent. We already have some studies and psychoeducational proposals aimed at supporting parents in their ability to accompany and support in difficulties in both the adolescent's developmental process and developmental blocks. It is also important to promote awareness of the resources and potential of the parental role and the ability to accompany the adolescent on his journey discovering his own identity and the inevitable process of separation from his family (Bagnato, 2017; Brena, 2015; Gambini, 2011; Lancini, 2017; Lancini, 2020; Tagliaferro, Formella, 2022).

As for intervention proposals for adolescents and youth, these should aim to promote the youth's resources by improving their social skills and providing opportunities for meaningful social experiences (Vicari, Pontillo, 2022; Bignardi, Marta, Alfieri, 2018; Formella, 2015). Intervention programs should also include opportunities to support youth in managing their presence in the virtual network (Borgen, Domoff, 2023; Lancini, 2020).

*3.2. FoMO*

This phenomenon has been called *Fear of Missing Out* (FoMO) and has been described as "a common fear that others may have fulfilling experiences in which we are absent and a desire to stay in constant touch with what others are in touch with" (Przybylski, Murayama, De Haan, Gladwell, 2013, 1841). In other words, it is a form of constant anxiety in which there is a fear of being "left behind," of not being updated, included, or made sufficiently available to others; a personal feeling of "not fitting in"; a fear of not being seen by others and of being able to be considered a nonexistent person (Meradaputhi, Aulia Nadhirah, Saripah, 2022).

Adolescents see these eventualities as a very significant risk to their self-concept in the process of growing up, so they try to avoid the "state of not being" by engaging in a constant search for information and interactions with the experiences of others, especially friends and peers (Tandon, Dhir, Almugren, Al Nemer, Mäntymäki, 2021; Zhang, Li, Yu, 2021). During this period of life, there is an increased sensitivity to so-called social monitoring, which affects not only the traditional world of family, school or peer relationships, but also the virtual world. There is a phenomenon of perception of signals from the surrounding world, which is expressed in the so-called "imaginary audience" (Elkind, 1967). Social media share similar characteristics, offering social networks aimed at the individual and a "virtual audience," which is always present and potentially reachable (Donat, 2007).

Traditional family contexts tend to focus on protecting adolescent sons' and daughters' emotional ties as their main source of self-esteem and individual satisfaction, so that interpersonal conflict and the possibility of losing good relationships are the least noticeable effect, because this is what adolescent sons fear most and consequently avoid (Gambini, 2011).

Importantly, the implementation of the display function in online instant messaging services (i.e., hints indicating whether a delivered message has also been read) has contributed, for example, to the promotion of interpersonal expectations for immediate response and the expectation of a kind of norm of lasting bonding (Peter, Valkenburg, 2012). In this regard, adolescents experience intense states of anxiety if they do not receive timely feedback from parents or, even more so, peers. It has been shown that about one in four adolescents regularly experience significant levels of stress from having to respond to a large number of messages (*Ibid.*).

FoMo has been defined in the scientific literature as a phenomenon involving two main elements:

(a) the fear that others are experiencing satisfying things that I am not experiencing;

(b) the persistent desire to stay in touch with people on the social network in which I am present (Przybylski et al., 2013).

The first element corresponds to the cognitive aspect of anxiety (e.g., distress, worrying too much, etc.), and the second element includes a behavioral strategy aimed at relieving this anxiety, similar to compulsions, which, although non-adaptively, allow the person with obsessive disorder to relieve the accompanying internal tension in the form of intrusive thoughts (Elhai, Yang, Montag, 2020).

*3.3. NEET*

The acronym NEET, coming from the English language ("not in employment, education or training") can be translated as: neither - nor (not studying, not working). NEET was first used in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s to define an alternative way of categorizing young people following changes in unemployment benefit policies. Since then, interest in the NEET group has grown at the policy level in the EU, and definitions equivalent to "NEET" have been created in almost all member states (European Foundation, 2011).

This group generally includes people between the ages of 15 and 24 who, regardless of their level of education, are outside of employment and education and therefore have a higher risk of social and labor market exclusion.

In Italy, the extent of the phenomenon has reached the top among European states with a percentage of 19 percent in 2022, with the number of NEETs amounting to 5,725,000 as of May 2023, according to ISTAT data. As many as 1.7 million just those between 15 and 24 years old. Italy has thus reached a sad record-it is the country where there are more NEETs than any other European Union state. Most NEETs live in the South (62 percent) compared to 39.5 percent who live in the North. In 2022, according to Eurostat, 11.7 percent of 15-29 year olds in the EU were neither employed nor engaged in education and training. Italy is the European country with a 19 percent share of NEETs among its youth. It is second only to Romania (19.8 percent) [(](https://www.ticonsiglio.com/neet/)https://www.ticonsiglio.com/neet/; Eurostat, 2023).

Below we present some risk factors affecting young people. There is a general consensus in the relevant literature regarding the range of social, economic, and personal factors that increase a person's likelihood of joining the NEET group. The results show that the following factors have an impact on the likelihood of joining the NEET group:

* those who report some type of disability are 40 percent more likely to become NEET than others,
* youth with an immigration background are 70 percent more likely to become NEET than native peers,
* young people with low levels of education are three times more likely to become NEET than those with tertiary education,
* Living in remote areas increases the likelihood of becoming NEET by up to 1.5 times,
* young people with low family incomes are more likely to become NEETs than those with average family incomes,
* having parents who have been unemployed increases the likelihood of becoming NEET by 17 percent,
* having low-educated parents doubles the likelihood of becoming NEET,
* young people, whose parents have divorced, are 30 percent more likely to become NEET (Irene Brunetti, Valentina Ferri, 2018).

**4. The perception of reality and the future and the possibility of change**

In general, we can identify 4 possible directions of change in a person:

* change behavioural - focuses on developing and implementing habits and behaviors that enhance the possibility of desired change;
* *change of cognitive structures* - is aimed at creating conditions for the acquisition of information, knowledge, both about oneself and about the world and issues of interest to the person, as well as the development of perceptual (intellectual) skills, which are necessary to know and personally process the acquired information and accumulated knowledge;
* *change in relationships with people* (things, phenomena) - refers to the relationship between specific people and/or a person and the environment. The strength of this activity is that it provides an opportunity to collaborate with others and takes into account a specific person, social group, or local environment;
* *personality* change - focuses on creating conditions in which the person has the opportunity both to self-actualize in achieving conscious psychological development and to experience the possibility of taking responsibility for oneself and one's actions (Formella, 2020).

In the process of education and in the process of self-education, desired changes in an adolescent/youth occur consciously or unconsciously. Some of the factors influencing these changes are known and consciously applied; others, however, occur somewhat "spontaneously" or are the result of the impact of unforeseen circumstances or events, such as the Covid pandemic.

In the analysis presented below, which characterizes adolescents/youth born after 2000, an interesting check originates in relation to the current situation in individual regions or countries, and in relation to the general post-pandemic situation (Galas, 2004; National Agency 2022). Some factors noted are given below:

* feeling of being lost in the chaos of a rapidly changing reality,
* anxiety and uncertainty about the near future,
* Fear of unemployment after graduation,
* a sense of anomie and a crisis of norms and values, such as: truth, honesty, justice,
* Lack of sense of security, difficult material conditions, sense of deprivation,
* feel threatened by increased crime and aggression,
* reasonable, pragmatic and realistic adaptation to existing conditions,
* withdrawal from broader social activity, orientation more individual than community,
* orientation to consumption and comfortable living, as well as the pleasures of entertainment,
* Focus on education and equal educational opportunities,
* Demand universal access to free higher education,
* focus on change and information technology,
* media awareness,
* acceptance of democratic changes and expansion of civil liberties, with an ambivalent attitude toward economic changes,
* family orientation, with concomitant deferral of marriage and parenting decisions (tendency to enter cohabitation relationships),
* identity crisis, sense of breaking the continuity of cultural tradition in a situation of rapid change,
* search for "new projects of spiritual life."

There are certainly also the positive signs in the changes that are taking place among young people today, which are noticeable in our society. We report here a significant example from the French ecclesiastical field. To get to know and better understand the priests of tomorrow, *La Croix*, with the agreement of the French Bishops' Conference, sent an unprecedented online questionnaire (see below for details on how the survey was conducted) to candidates for the priesthood in 25 French seminaries. The study sought to better understand the profile of seminarians in France. Most of them come from practicing Catholic families and show a very strong attachment to the Church and doctrine. Confident in the future, they are very eager to evangelize in a secularized society. The future priests were deeply concerned about fidelity to the Church and its doctrine, fearing caricatures and intra-Catholic quarrels, bringing with them a classical view of the priesthood. This is how one could broadly summarize the exclusive survey conducted among the 673 seminarians destined for the dioceses of France. "In a context of secularization and the recomposition of Catholicism, the survey shows future priests who are comfortable in their Catholicity, in an assumed and affirmed ecclesial fidelity," analyzes the sociologist of Catholicism from the University of Bordeaux, Yann Raison du Cleuziou, who helped develop the fifty or so questions posed to these young men. They don't seem to need change. They are in a spirit of service to the Church, of full confident adherence, fully in the "line" with it (La Croix, 2023, 1).

Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of the seminarians, with an average age of 27, agreed to answer the questionnaire. The first major lesson is that their vocation is rooted in solid Catholic ground. Seventy-two percent of them come from a practicing Catholic family that went to Mass every Sunday, and 62 percent believe their parents are the primary determining figures in their spiritual journey. "The importance of the family matrix is remarkable," insists Yann Raison du Cleuziou. This underscores the role of the family as a small Church where priestly vocations are born. In fact, 36 percent of respondents said they first considered the priesthood before the age of 10. The emphasis on the family is reflected in their understanding of evangelization, with 61 percent citing family transmission as the best way to share the faith. As for spiritual walk, while the paths show great variety, strong markers emerge: nearly two in three have been altar servers for many years (59 percent) and scouts (56 percent), including 34 percent among the Scouts of Europe. Three-quarters have attended World Youth Day (WYD) and more than a third have regularly attended a new community (*Ibid.*).

**Conclusion**

In the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's document entitled: *Rethinking Education: towards a global common good?* it is emphasized that "education is the intentional process of acquiring knowledge and developing skills to apply that knowledge in appropriate situations. The acquisition and engagement of knowledge are the ultimate goals of education, guided by principles related to the kind of society to which we aspire" (UN, 2019, 4).

In other words, we can say that education is a process of individual and social change and should also be seen as a factor that can change the bonds between society and the individual. For those involved in education and the promotion of human development, research never ends in the area of issues related to personal growth and/or social influence. Knowing how to balance the two indispensable components of human development, personal progression and socialization, becomes one of the fundamental challenges for all those acting in the educational field, and for the educator in particular (Formella, 2020). Personally, I am convinced that these statements can be fully applied to the reality of the Church in Europe.