

**Young people's mental health needs  
in the school-to-work transition:  
a comparative report  
on youth and professionals' needs  
in Germany, Italy, Spain, Slovenia  
and Poland**



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## Executive Summary

### Objectives of the report

- The present report summarizes the results of the research activities carried out during the “Mind the Gap” project which involved organizations from five countries: Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, and Spain. It aims to enhance a more profound understanding of young people’s mental and emotional wellbeing, to identify early risk factors and imagine preventive interventions targeting young people’s everyday life environments. Moreover, it aims to equip professionals with practical resources to effectively recognize and address the mental and emotional needs of young people.

### Mental and emotional health and well-being in young people transitioning from school to work

- Youth health and well-being have emerged as critical global concerns over the past decade, as the literature widely recognizes that the developmental period between the ages of 12 and 25 represent a critical window during which the majority of mental health issues may first manifest - such as: anxiety, conduct, and mood disorders (such as depression), self-harm and suicidal ideation, and substance use disorders.
- Especially in Western countries, psychological traditions have largely shaped the discourse surrounding youth, fostering a **medicalized understanding** that frames young people either as a societal threat or as inherently defenseless and vulnerable, resisting mature adulthood to prolong their “youth”.
- A **tendency has emerged to interpret "social problems" as individual psychological or developmental deficiencies**, rather than as outcomes of broader social processes, evident in the attribution of failed transitions from school to work to personal shortcomings - such as lack of motivation, ethics, and values.
- Processes of flexibilization and globalization have contributed to the **de-standardization of life courses**: as traditional connections between education, work, and other domains - such as family, partnerships, lifestyle, housing, or citizenship - have progressively eroded, beside becoming increasingly prolonged, unstable, and uncertain, linear and predictable transitions to work have been replaced by ‘yo-yo’ transitions. The subsequent opportunity

of “inventing adulthood” should not be misinterpreted as a reduction in social inequality, as it simultaneously **exposes young people to increased risks of social exclusion**.

- The **biomedical approach** conceptualizes health as a property “possessed” by the individual. By establishing a neat distinction between the mind and the body, it attributes the ultimate cause of illness to the body and overlook the fact that numerous health issues are shaped by social dimensions beyond individual control.
- As mental health has come to be recognized as an integral component of health and well-being, shaping (and being shaped by) the world and relationships in which the individual is involved, the “**social model of health**” emerges, examining the social determinants shaping individual experiences of health through various structural, institutional, and social factors.
- While “**well-being**” is increasingly used to conjure a more comprehensive understanding of physical, mental, social, financial, and civic health, it is frequently conflated with either health or with happiness. This results in diminished attention to the structural conditions that profoundly shape the lives of young people.
- Among the external factors influencing mental health can be enumerated: changes to the education systems and the labour market, unemployment, overeducation, companies' (unrealistic) requirement, gender and sexuality, and other causes of discrimination.
- Formal and informal institutions (e.g., schools, companies, peers, families, and colleagues...) can act either as “stressors” or “protective factors”, amplifying/mitigating young people’s mental and emotional health distress.
- Mental and emotional support can be provided by a variety of actors (e.g., public vs. private sector, formal vs. informal networks). However, seeking help is a complex process unfolding over time, whose major barriers include a widespread negative perception of professional mental health care, difficulty recognizing symptoms, a preference for self-reliance, and concerns about stigma and embarrassment.
- The stigma on mental health is further perpetuated by the cultural perception of it as a taboo, reinforcing negative feelings of worry about not being taken seriously and fostering social isolation. To destigmatize the discourse surrounding mental and emotional health entails addressing the fear of individual failure by situating it within broader structural and relational contexts.

### The project “Mind the Gap”: aims and methods

- Partner organizations in five European countries (Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, and Poland) agreed to rely on research activities using both quantitative and qualitative instruments to work towards three specific objectives:
  1. develop novel knowledge on young people’s mental and emotional well-being during the school-to-work transition by giving them voice;
  2. provide professionals with an original toolkit to recognize and address young people’s mental and emotional well-being during the transition to work;
  3. raise awareness within the scientific community and the general public on the mental and emotional needs of youth, contributing to their de-stigmatization.
- AnciLab designed, administered, and analyzed an original survey aimed at young people aged 16-29 to assess the level of awareness of mental and emotional health and the related needs within the broader population, collecting a total of 1,464 responses.
- The University of Bologna supervised and guided partner organizations in conducting a total of 93 semi-structured interviews with young people aged 16-29, focusing on those navigating the school-to-work transition and facing a diverse range of vulnerabilities.
- Consorzio Comunità Brianza (CCB) supported partners in organizing and implementing a total of 17 focus groups with 112 professionals from the fields of work and education who engage directly with young people during this transitional phase.
- Despite the limitation encountered, the collected data offer a multifaceted reconstruction of young people's experiences of the challenges, opportunities, and emotional and mental struggles faced during this key life stage and highlight similarities transcending the boundaries of the State in which research activities have been carried out.

### The emotional impact of challenges and expectations during the school-to-work transition

- **55% of survey respondents reported experiencing some form of emotional distress** - this however was greatly influenced by gender, sexual orientation, economic status and dropping out of school.
- The most reported issues are **stress and worries, affecting 69.8% and 61.2%** of respondents, respectively; anxiety is also prevalent, being reported by 58.2%.

- While **sexual orientation** proves to be significant, especially in the likelihood of experiencing intense emotional distress or anxiety and stress and in seeking help, **gender** appears to play an important role in a threefold manner, as it significantly influences: 1) the probability of experiencing mental and emotional distress; 2) the likelihood of reporting negative feelings and express fear toward this delicate life stage; 3) the likelihood of seeking help.
- Young people swing between **positive and negative emotions** as they discuss the challenges and opportunities of this life phase.
- Among its positive aspects, young people report the excitement, curiosity, and happiness associated with new opportunities and beginnings, often associated with a positive sense of personal and professional growth and accomplishment, especially due to gaining financial independence. This is particularly true for gender non-conforming youth in need of sustaining the costs of gender-affirming care and for those young people whose families of origin are incapable (or unwilling) to financially support their endeavors.
- On the other side of the spectrum, young people report a feeling of overall “unpreparedness”: a shared feeling emerges about the education system not being capable of adequately equipping students with “marketable” skills for the working world. Moreover, young people highlight the perceived **lack of “adulthood tools”** required to successfully navigate and overcome not only the school-to-work transition but also the transition into adulthood in general (e.g., financial literacy). They are also **critical of student work and internships**, as they are perceived as both occasions for networking and beginning to feel at ease in the workplace, as well as “free labor”.
- Despite their young age, interviewees report directly and indirectly experiencing **discrimination** (e.g., through friends or family recounts) along the following lines of intersectionality: **class, race and/or ethnic background, age, and gender and/or sexual orientation**.

#### **Informal support networks and their pivotal role in young people’s transition from school to work**

- Young people in the survey and interviews report perceiving some overall pressure concerning their success and realization in the world of work: notwithstanding the skills



possessed, many young people, in fact, claim that (informal or personal) connections are still necessary to find a job.

- The perception of external pressure shows minimal variations across the five partner countries but is directly associated with emotional well-being, gender identity, dropping out of school, and a low socio-economic status.
- **Family support** is particularly positive, as parents usually support (emotionally and financially) respondents's education, professional career, and overall life choices. It is within the family that young people find the main source for debate and advice on how to deal with the school-to-work transition, or on how to enter and behave in the workplace. Moreover, families are reported as helpful in providing job opportunities through word of mouth and personal (informal) contacts.
- Families, however, may also represent a **source of pressure and stress** during the school-to-work transition. Parents often try “railroading” participants’ study and work choices, directing them towards universities (to gain more easily “marketable” skills or to “inherit” a profession) and job opportunities thought to be more secure, highly paid.
- **Chosen, close friends** are the people most relied upon, especially when families do not offer or lack emotional support. Especially gender non-conforming participants discussed revolving towards activism and queer people to find a “community”
- However, **peers too can represent a source of external pressure**, as young people tend to compare their achievement of pivotal stages throughout the life course with that of peers, especially over social media and develop a new type of fear - the FOMO, i.e., fear of missing out - capable of altering their expectations on the school-to-work transition and other important life stages (e.g., getting married, starting a family...).
- While young people's relations with coworkers appear more conflictual than cordial, professionals in focus groups frequently mentioned the important role that **employers, coworkers, and mentors** can play in providing support and strategies for young people to handle the complexities associated with the transition from the school to the workplace.

### **Institutional support (or the lack thereof) in the school-to-work transition**

- **56,8% of survey respondents reported asking for help** while 43,2% never did. Seeking help is more common among people who experienced some form of emotional or mental distress than among those who did not report suffering from it.
- As previously mentioned, **gender and sexual orientation are significant when discussing the likelihood of seeking help**. Non-binary people (84%), women (61%) and those who prefer not to disclose their gender identity (57%) are more likely to have asked for help instead of men (44,3%). Among heterosexual respondents only 52,8% asked for help, while the data grows when considering gays (59%), bisexuals (77%), and lesbians (87%).
- When young people did not asked for support, they appear to particularly trust qualified professionals (75%); however, drastically less frequent is the intention to turn to public healthcare services (18%). While most interviewees highlighted the importance of de-stigmatizing the overall discourse on mental and emotional health, a similar **de-stigmatization process should be promoted towards public mental health services** - as a (latent) widespread neoliberal belief of the private sector as “better equipped” or “more qualified” than the public one seem to be shared by the young people encountered.
- Educational systems are described by young people and professionals alike as too focused on the employability of their students rather than on their emotional and mental well-being. Emerges the necessity to **strengthen the collaboration between schools, businesses, and training organizations** to put in place institutional structures with **comprehensive training and support system**, capable of adopting and promoting an **holistic approach** to the school-to-work transition
- Even when public services are available, participants widely appear unaware of their existence. When they do know about the public services and resources available in their proximity, they often opt not to use them. Participants discussed **long waiting lists** and meeting **professionals that are not updated** with the most recent evolution of academic discourse. It is of no surprise that most interviewees appear to be **autonomous in searching and sending job applications**, living their “successes” (and thus “failures”) as their own responsibilities
- **“Mentoring” figures** could have a much more pivotal role in young people’s life than they appear to have at the moment. In this light, guidance and counseling emerged as one of the

strategies that can truly help young people to deal with the emotional challenges of the school-to-work transition: **combining mentors' support with a well-organized workplace** emerge as the two main factors capable of bridging the gap between education and employment.

- Supervisors, employers, and coworkers play a leading part in shaping and promoting an inclusive workplace, where young people can improve their strengths and correct their “weaknesses”. In fact, young people and professionals alike recognize that support from mental well-being in the workplace largely depends on the size of the company, but organizational culture has the opportunity to positively (indirectly) influence young people's well-being, even in the absence of more structured corporate welfare services.

#### **Coping mechanism and learning from challenges**

- A vast array of options emerged from interviewees' experiences when asked about their preferred strategies and practices to cope with the stress and challenges faced during the school-to-work transition.
- Various tactics emerge, in particular: **structured routines and reflexivity, discursive distancing, escapism, masking, camouflaging, and resiliency.**

#### **Conclusions: recommendations and insights**

- By placing young people's experiences at the center of educational and work-related services, the project highlights the critical importance of addressing mental and emotional health during this transitional phase. It further underlines the essential role professionals play in fostering and supporting youth wellbeing.

- *At* *school/university.*

Educational programs should emphasise the importance of **emotional well-being and self-discovery** from an early age and promote a **holistic approach**, not focusing only on employability but also on the emotional and mental challenges associated with the school-to-work transition. Orienteering activities should **identify and nurture individual talents and skills**, while providing young people with "**adulting tools**" to foster informed and empowered transition into the professional world. Effective and updated orienteering should extend beyond

matching job market demand and supply to **improving communication and visibility of existing opportunities.**

- *Workplace* *dynamics.*

As a notable **generational divide** emerges in the workplace, employers to foster a more **inclusive, supportive and respectful work environment** to support the emotional and mental well-being of all employees. Developing a supportive community network within the workplace requires prioritizing **opportunities for intergenerational open discussions on sensitive topics** including emotional and mental health, as well as issues related to racial, gender, age and other types of discrimination. As young people express a strong desire for opportunities to **learn how to give and receive constructive feedback** they show a sensitive interest towards **continuous opportunities for professional development**, depicting the workplace as a space for both **professional and personal growth.**

- *Relations* *with* *professionals* *and* *peers.*

In a world where mental health and emotional well-being remain stigmatized, young people have highlighted the critical need to overcome the fear of **seeking help to improve their mental and emotional health.** Organizations and institutions must prioritize **comprehensive career guidance and robust mental health support systems** that encourage open conversations about the emotional dimensions of the school-to-work transition - and **mentors** can play a pivotal role. Peers and families were occasionally identified as sources of stress and competition, yet nearly all interviewees highlighted **social interactions and relationships with friends and partners as vital coping mechanisms** for managing the emotional and mental burdens of the school-to-work transition. In this light, **promoting informal learning opportunities** allow young people to share their stories, engage in discussions on sensitive topics, and **participate in ludic activities that foster engagement and openness**, shaping a new awareness towards young people as “**co-creators of solutions**”.



## Introduction

Attention to young people's mental and emotional health has gained increasing prominence in recent years, as poor mental and emotional wellbeing is now recognized as one of the most critical health challenges faced by youth in Europe. Recent evidence indicates a significant decline in the mental and emotional wellbeing of European young people following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2020 and 2021, the prevalence of mental health issues among European youth doubled in the majority of European countries (OECD, 2021).

Beyond the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, research has recognized mental health as a significant concern among young people in Europe since the early 2000s, when studies started highlighting an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as in self-harming behaviors. While the causes of mental health and emotional wellbeing are diverse and individualized, it is evident that European youth are confronting shared social challenges, the impact of which has become increasingly apparent in recent years.

Young people are increasingly confronted with new pressures and challenges in their daily lives, stemming from socio-cultural and economic transformations across Europe. Since the early 2000s, sociologists and social-psychologists have linked the deterioration of young Europeans' mental and emotional wellbeing to the growing uncertainties associated with heightened risks of unemployment and the consequences of occupational precarity, which adversely affect young people's economic independence, housing stability, personal relationships, and social inclusion. These challenges have been further aggravated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and by growing concerns related to the climate crisis and the ongoing Ukrainian and Palestinian conflicts. Young people's mental and emotional wellbeing has significant socio-economic and political implications, as it has been associated with rising welfare costs, the underutilization of human potential, and declining levels of political trust and civic engagement.

In this light, addressing the needs of young people extends beyond ensuring their individual wellness and supporting their potential and proves to be fundamental to foster robust, healthy, and resilient societies. To this end, the present report aims to enhance a more profound understanding of young people's mental and emotional wellbeing, to identify early risk factors and imagine preventive interventions targeting young people's everyday life environments.

Understanding mental and emotional health as a "state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to

their community” (WHO), this report explores the relationship between young people’s mental and emotional health and youth social circumstances focusing specifically on the school-to-work transitions - a phase during which mental health challenges and emotional difficulties are especially triggered by multiple risks factors. Adopting a social-psychological, non-pathologizing approach, the report situates this exploration within the context of contemporary challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) on education and work. Finally, it aims to equip professionals with practical resources to effectively recognize and address the mental and emotional needs of young people.

The report is structured as follows.

Chapter 1 draws on existing research on school-to-work transition as well as on mental and emotional wellbeing, two well-established strands of literature within youth studies. Since the intersection of these areas remains underexplored, the chapter underlines the importance of addressing mental and emotional health among young people during the school-to-work transition, as it represents a pivotal stage in their lives where wellbeing is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by broader, global processes of social change.

Chapter 2 introduces the “Mind the Gap” project, detailing its methodology and sample characteristics. Methodologically, the project is distinguished by its interdisciplinary, intersectional, and interprofessional approach to analyzing and supporting young people’s mental and emotional wellbeing. By employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, the project seeks to provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of young people’s experiences of mental and emotional health during the school-to-work transition. The project operates at the intersection of sociology, psychology, and educational science, recognizing young people’s mental and emotional wellbeing during this transition as a multifaceted phenomenon requiring a holistic analytical lens.

Chapter 3 examines the primary challenges encountered by young people during the school-to-work transition, with a particular emphasis on their emotional and mental health implications. By distinguishing between the positive and negative feelings and emotions associated with this transition, the chapter reveals the multiple "axes" along which discrimination and inequalities may arise, shedding light on their impact on young people's overall wellbeing.

Chapter 4 and 5 discuss the role of informal and formal networks, respectively, in shaping young people's experience of the school-to-work transition. While chapter 4 focuses on informal networks, emphasizing the critical roles of families, peers, and partners as primary sources of support and guidance during this pivotal phase, chapter 5 critically examines the role of formal networks, including schools, universities, workplaces, and mental healthcare professionals. The analysis reveals the ambivalent nature of networks, as they appear capable of either supporting or hindering young people's mental and emotional wellbeing during the school-to-work transition.

Chapter 6 highlights the primary practices and strategies employed by participants to navigate stressful and challenging situations. It also provides key insights into their capacity for resilience and their ability to overcome these difficulties, shedding light on the coping mechanisms young people utilize during the school-to-work transition.

Lastly, the report ends with a set of recommendations and insights that synthesize the key suggestions provided by interviewees for enhancing support systems for young people navigating the school-to-work transition. These recommendations emphasize the need for a more holistic approach, one that addresses not only practical challenges but also prioritizes the mental and emotional wellbeing of young individuals, fostering a comprehensive framework of support.



# **1. Mental and emotional health and well-being in young people transitioning from school to work**

Youth health and well-being have emerged as critical global concerns over the past decade. Historically, these concepts were often conflated, reflecting a traditional definition of health as merely the “absence of disease” (Cahill, 2015; France et al., 2020). If it is somewhat true that young people are less exposed to diseases when compared to older age cohorts, research has shown that adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges. As the literature widely recognizes that the developmental period between the ages of 12 and 25 represent a critical window during which the majority of mental health issues may first manifest - such as: anxiety, conduct, and mood disorders (such as depression), self-harm and suicidal ideation, and substance use disorders (de Girolamo et al. 2012; Rickwood et al. 2007) - it appears of outmost importance to address this topic to understand to what extent it has been analysed and discussed, as well as what are the possible solution to promote a stronger support towards the mental and emotional health and well-being of young people.

Starting with a focus on youth as a challenging life stage between childhood and adulthood (§1.1), we will discuss the evolution of the discourse on transitions to the adult status, posing the accent not only on the their individual dimension, but also on the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors shaping them. Then, we will present the evolution of the definitions of mental health and well-being (§1.2), once again bridging the individual with the social dimension of analysis.

## **1.1. The focus on youth**

While childhood and adulthood are typically presented as opposite poles of a continuum and regarded as the most vulnerable and stable stages of life, respectively, youth is often perceived as a transitional phase marked by inherent turbulence and characterized by physical, social, cognitive, and emotional transformations associated with the individual's search for a coherent personal identity (Hunt & Frost 2020; Rickwood 2015).

Especially in Western countries, psychological traditions have largely shaped the discourse surrounding youth, fostering a medicalized understanding that frames young people either as a societal threat or as inherently defenseless and vulnerable (Giroux 2000). For example, over the course of the 20th century, youth began to be increasingly viewed as deviant and problematic,

leading to a heightened focus on their control and socialization. By the 1970s and 1980s, this perspective shifted, with youth increasingly seen as critics of a society that stifled individuality - a shift that encouraged narratives of self-expression and creativity among young people. In subsequent decades, attention turned toward the challenges associated with transitions to adulthood (Hunt & Frost 2020). Young people were increasingly perceived as navigating flawed or incomplete transitions, failing to pursue previously established pathways (Morch 2003) - hedonistically resisting mature adulthood to prolong their “youth” (Hall & Jefferson 2006).

As highlighted by Hunt and Frost (2020), this perspective provides a static categorization of youth, assuming “social identities are stable and coherent rather than contingent, mutable, provisional, or problematically occupied, or that youth is a time for trying on different identities until one seems to fit”. Moreover, such an approach overlooks broader commonalities across the life course: as Morch (2003) highlights, over the years a tendency has emerged to interpret “social problems” as individual psychological or developmental deficiencies, rather than as outcomes of broader social processes. This individualistic framing is evident in the frequent attribution of failed transitions from school to work to personal shortcomings - such as lack of motivation, ethics, and values (Berthet & Simon, 2017; Otto et al. 2017). While this approach justifies measures aimed at enhancing youth employability (Pohl & Walther 2007), it does not adequately take into consideration the influence exerted by sociopolitical structures and the unequal distribution of resources. As a consequence, such measures exacerbate exclusion and stigmatization of young people as well as their families and peers, deemed responsible for insufficient competencies for the labor market or orientation towards it (Wintesteller et al. 2022).

Recent changes to ‘youth transitions’ suggest that phenomena such as early school leaving and youth unemployment are symptomatic of broader social transformations affecting individual life courses. Processes of flexibilization and globalization have contributed to the de-standardization of life courses (Pohl & Walther 2007; Spannring & Reinprecht 2002): as traditional connections between education, work, and other domains - such as family, partnerships, lifestyle, housing, or citizenship - have progressively eroded, beside becoming increasingly prolonged, unstable, and uncertain, linear and predictable transitions to work have been replaced by ‘yo-yo’ transitions (Walther 2006) wherein young people simultaneously navigate aspects of youth and adulthood, often feeling ‘somewhere in between.’ (Wintersteller et al. 2022). On the one hand, the destandardization of life courses appears to grant new opportunities for young people, offering

them the opportunity to make autonomous decisions and effectively "inventing adulthoods" in the absence of reliable collective patterns (Pohl & Walther 2007; Pohl et al. 2006). On the other, it should not be misinterpreted as a reduction in social inequality, as it simultaneously exposes young people to increased risks of social exclusion - especially those who lack resources or opportunities to navigate these individualized transitions successfully (Kovacheva & Pohl 2007; Wintersteller et al. 2022). These resources depend on a variety of factors - such as social background, educational attainment, family support, gender, ethnicity, and region - and shape young people's opportunities in terms of accessibility, manageability and relevance of transitions, often disadvantaging specific groups of young people (Walther et al. 2002; Hammer 2003; Müller and Gangl 2003; Walther and Pohl 2005; Fialho et al. 2022).

## **1.2. Defining mental and emotional health and well-being**

Over the years, various approaches have attempted to define mental health and well-being. The earliest (and more persistent) was the biomedical approach, which conceptualizes health as a property "possessed" by the individual. According to this perspective, disease arises when the human body malfunctions and each disease can be attributed to a specific cause. Although this approach tends to prevail in health intervention and preventive strategies implemented by governments and medical professions, it appears to establish a neat distinction between the mind and the body, attributing the ultimate cause of illness to the body. Furthermore, it appears to overlook the fact that numerous health issues are shaped by social dimensions beyond individual control. Consequently, defining health as "absence of disease" fails to account for the complex (social) factors and environments that shape individual well-being, often leading to individuals being blamed for not doing enough failing to improve their condition, ignoring the critical role of historical, social, and cultural contexts in shaping health outcomes (France et al. 2020). In fact, as highlighted by the World Health Organization (2018):

There is ample evidence that social factors, including education, employment status, income level, gender and ethnicity have a marked influence on how healthy a person is. In all countries – whether low-, middle- or high-income – there are wide disparities in the health status of different social groups. The lower an individual's socio-economic position, the higher their risk of poor health.

In an effort to provide a more holistic definition of health, the WHO aligns with broader themes of social inequality and defines health as a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. As mental health has come to be recognized as an integral component of health and well-being, shaping (and being shaped by) the world and relationships in which the individual is involved, mental health is defined as “a state of wellbeing, in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his Community” (WHO 2011).

This new framework, referred to as the “social model of health”, examines the social determinants shaping individual experiences of health through various structural, institutional, and social factors. It is also referred to as a relational approach (Wexler and Eglinton 2015) to emphasize that well-being is co-created through individual experiences and it reflects social relationships, encompassing both institutional practices and personal interactions (Wyn 2009; Cahill 2015).

Thus far, we primarily discussed the concept of mental health, often relying on an implicit, shared understanding of the meanings associated with the term “well-being”. However, a more in-depth reflection on this term is necessary to explore its evolution and relevance in light of the objectives of the present report. First conceptualized by Maslow (1943), mental well-being was described as an integral component of basic human needs, whose satisfaction was deemed essential for achieving human potential and attaining self-actualization. Later, Jahoda (1958) introduced the term “positive mental health” and identified six pillars of mental health: autonomy, attitude towards self, growth and self-actualization, integration, environmental mastery, and perception of reality. Since then, as highlighted by Vaingankar and colleagues (2022: 1), “mental health and well-being have been characterized as either ‘subjective’ (pertaining to the pursuit of pleasure and happiness) or ‘psychological’ (concerning one’s abilities and perspectives on achieving their full potential)”.

While “well-being” is increasingly used to conjure a more comprehensive understanding of physical, mental, social, financial, and civic health, Bourke and Geldens (2007) point out that it is frequently conflated with either health or with happiness. This results in diminished attention to the structural conditions that profoundly shape the lives of young people. As France et al (2020) emphasize, it is important to use

well-being as a critical concept to interrogate the social and relational dimensions that comprise ‘health’, in order to disrupt the dominant individualizing narratives of biomedical perspectives, which wrongly suggest that we all start from the same level playing field, and can all achieve good health if only we try enough. This obscures the systems of power that privilege some groups and disadvantage others from the outset.

As highlighted in the previous section (§1.1), changes to the education systems and the labour market played a pivotal role, not only in re-shaping the definition and length of youth, but also in re-shaping the factors influencing their emotional and mental health. Heightened competition in the global labor market increased the expectations placed on young people by their parental, social, and professional environments, creating tensions between their perception of what they are expected to achieve and what they can actually achieve (Wintersteller et al. 2022). Unemployment, overeducation, and companies' requirement for (unrealistic) skills and knowledge likely contribute to increasing pressure, stress, and anxiety in young people (France et al. 2020). Mental and emotional health is also shaped by gender and sexuality. While young women tend to report higher levels of poor mental health than young men (Bremberg 2015; Landstedt et al. 2009), young LGBT+ people are more prone to suffer from poor mental and emotional health than heterosexuals due to discrimination and harassment (Grossman 2006). Whether young people suffer or witness it, exposure to discrimination, harassment, bullying, and mobbing represent key contributors to mental and emotional distress (Landstedt et al. 2009; Wintersteller et al. 2022). In this scenario, institutions (e.g., schools, companies...), peers, families, and colleagues can act either as “stressors” or “protective factors” (Woodman 2014). For this reason, Viner and colleagues (2012: 1641) highlight that formal and informal support network play a crucial role in mitigating/amplifying young people’s mental and emotional health distress, especially during a sensitive time such as the transition to adulthood:

The strongest determinants of adolescent health are structural factors such as national wealth, income inequality, and access to education. Furthermore, safe and supportive families, safe and supportive schools, together with positive and supportive peers, are crucial to helping young people develop to their full potential and attain the best health in the transition to adulthood.

Emotional and mental health support can be sought from a variety of sources. While informal support occurs within personal social networks, such as family, friends, and colleagues; formal

support involves institutions and professionals with specialized training and a legitimate role in providing guidance and/or treatment (Rickwood & Thomas 2012). Besides the target expertise of healthcare professionals, young people frequently interact with a variety of other adults in their daily lives (e.g., teachers, coaches, youth workers...) who can serve as crucial “gateway providers” to mental health support (Stiffman et al. 2004). The role of these semi-formal actors, together with general practice, school-based health services, counseling and guidance programs, and community health centers are increasingly acknowledged to play a critical role as primary providers of youth mental health care and as formal gatekeepers to specialist services. Moreover, with the growing influence of information and communication technology (ICT), there has been a growing emphasis on self-help, particularly through the increasing availability of online resources, communities, and professional support (telecare).

However, seeking help is a complex process unfolding over time, whose major barriers include a widespread negative perception of professional mental health care (Jorm et al. 2008), difficulty recognizing symptoms, a preference for self-reliance, and concerns about stigma and embarrassment (Gulliver et al. 2010; Rickwood 2015). In fact, the stigma surrounding mental and emotional health has long been recognized as one of the most significant barriers to accessing care - across all age groups (Corrigan 2004). Often associated with shame and weakness, stigma on mental health is further perpetuated by the cultural perception of it as a taboo, reinforcing negative feelings of worry about not being taken seriously and fostering social isolation. In this light, it is not surprising that young people frequently report a lack of trust in authorities and institutions, stemming from negative experiences in settings such as schools, workplaces, or healthcare services, where they often feel misunderstood and inadequately supported - feelings that are heightened when they experienced discrimination and bullying by colleagues or classmates (Wintersteller et al. 2022)

As mental health promotion tends to include happiness, the right to freedom and productivity, the absence of mental illness, and the fulfilment of an individual’s potential; the promotion of psychological well-being is closely tied to the primary prevention of mental illness. However, the danger of conflating mental health promotion with the primary prevention of mental illness is that preventive interventions may maintain a medical focus on a limited, clinical population while ignoring the population’s needs as a whole.

To destigmatize the discourse surrounding mental and emotional health entails addressing the fear of individual failure by situating it within broader structural and relational contexts. By listening to and documenting young people’s experiences navigating mental and emotional health challenges during a critical phase of their lives—the school-to-work transition—we gain valuable insights into the multifaceted factors that either positively or negatively influence their well-being. This process allows for a deeper, more nuanced understanding, fostering the development of innovative approaches to promote open dialogue on the subject and thereby contributing to its destigmatization. As young people are given the opportunity to speak and state what is best for themselves, it becomes evident that they do not merely conform to the demands of a competitive economic environment. Instead, they advocate for systemic changes to school-to-work transition frameworks (Wintersteller et al. 2022), asserting their right to participate as integral and active contributors to these transformations.

## 2. The project “Mind the Gap”: aims and methods

The project “Mind the Gap” aims to enable transformation and change in the support of organizations and professionals, to strengthen and promote young people’s employability. To do so, attention to their mental health at this delicate stage of life is a fundamental prerequisite for facilitating their entry into the labor market.

In this light, partners from five European countries (Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, and Poland) agreed to work together towards three specific objectives:

- to develop novel knowledge on young people’s mental and emotional well-being during the school-to-work transition, deepening the understanding of young people’s mental health difficulties and needs during this delicate phase. By giving voice to young people’s experiences, the project aims at elaborating concrete strategies to sustain youth mental health and employability, by shedding light on an aspect of their lives that is often neglected (both in research and policies) when discussing youth (un)employment
- to provide professionals with an original toolkit to recognize and address young people’s mental and emotional well-being during the transition to work. In this light, the project aims at smoothening youth’s paths toward employment by training professionals to recognize the importance of socio-psychological and emotional aspects of successful school-to-work transitions.
- to raise awareness within the scientific community and the general public on the mental and emotional needs of youth, contributing to their de-stigmatization. The involvement of partners with different professional backgrounds in the project’s consortium contributes to the reinforcement of the links between policy, research, and practice through the elaboration of concrete strategies to recognize and address young people’s mental health and emotional challenges and needs during school-to-work transitions grounded on research data. These strategies will then be tested in/through practice-driven activities and potentially be of inspiration for future policies.



## 2.1. Research methodology, samples, and approach.

To achieve the project's aims, partner organizations relied on research activities using both quantitative and qualitative instruments. First, AnciLab<sup>1</sup> created an original survey targeting young people aged 16-29 and administered it online in the 5 partner counties, to understand the awareness towards mental and emotional health and needs in the broader population.

In total, the responses gathered were 1464, with diverging response rates across countries (Figure 1): 68% of respondents identified themselves as women, while 27% as men. Besides them, 2.2% of respondents self-identified as non-binary; the remaining 2.7% preferred to describe themselves differently or not to declare their gender identity. In terms of sexual orientation, the vast majority of the sample self-identified as heterosexual (70%); less common were respondents self-identifying as bisexual (12%) and even fewer those self-identifying as homosexuals (4% gay and 2% lesbians), while another 12% of respondents either preferred not to declare or to self-describe their sexual orientation. Moreover, respondents are mostly natives of the countries of inquiry (83%) and show signs of a medium-high socio-economic status.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [ANCILAB s.r.l.](#) is an accredited organization for employment services, training and the certification of competences meeting every year more than 3.000 young people, more and more vulnerable. It has a strong experience in statistical research and surveys based on sample surveys and lead the activity of quantitative research, preparing the instruments and spreading the survey in all the countries involved through the Eurodesk's network, of which it is part.

<sup>2</sup> It is assumed that the respondent lives in a difficult economic context if: they believe they have not succeeded - or are not able - to achieve their goals; they live in a single-income family environment; the person providing such income has a level of education below the diploma and is either unemployed or employed as an unskilled worker. Therefore, only 5,5% of respondents is considered to experience a low socio-economic status.

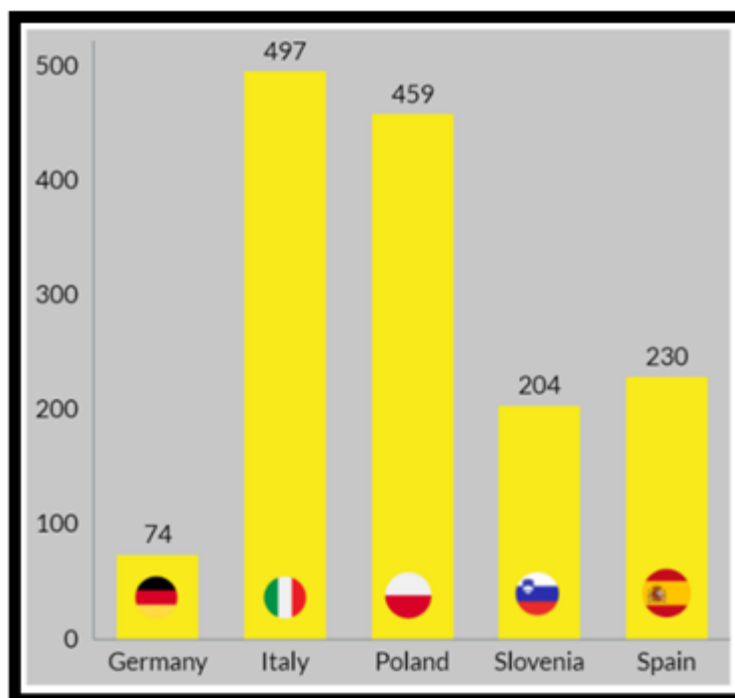


Figure 1, Responses gathered to the survey in the five European countries involved in the Mind the Gap project (absolute values).

In particular, we must acknowledge four main biases in the survey responses received:

- **Country of residence**, as Germany gathered a number of complete and exhaustive responses significantly lower than other countries;
- **Gender**, as women are over-represented among respondents in all countries<sup>3</sup>;
- **Age**, as the high variability of age groups distribution between countries suggests that sampling may have been influenced by local factors, such as accessibility to participants or demographic characteristics of countries' populations. However, the average age of respondents is 21;
- **Student status**, as especially in Germany and Italy this data is halved when compared to other countries, probably due to the involvement of organizations dealing with young people who already concluded their education. Overall, students represent 69% of the sample, while 24% of respondents completed their studies and 7% dropped out of school prematurely.

<sup>3</sup> Among survey respondents, women are over-represented in all 5 countries: 72,7% in Slovenia, 71,2% in Poland, 70,0% in Italy, 57,0% in Spain e 55,3% in Germany.

To counteract the effects and distortions resulting from unbalanced sampling, AnciLab implemented rigorous tests and measurements to account for diverging response rates and respondents' characteristics, to verify the statistical significance of the collected responses.

While survey results are fundamental in setting the overall picture concerning the state of young people's mental and emotional health, qualitative methods were deployed to deepen the understanding of the challenges concretely faced by young people in different countries while transitioning from school to the workplace, the strategies put in place to cope with their emotional and mental health, and the role of (in)formal support throughout the process<sup>4</sup>. Under the supervision and guidance of the University of Bologna<sup>5</sup>, a total of 93 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted between April and July 2024 by partner organizations targeting young people aged 16-29 during the school-to-work transition and experiencing a diverse range of vulnerabilities. According to gender: 45% self-described as women and 44% as men, while the remaining 11% self-described as gender non-conforming (Figure 2). To comply with the required target while also accounting for a wide variety of experiences to draw from, partners agreed to get in touch with young people belonging to various vulnerable categories easily accessible to them according to the scopes of their organizations. Therefore, interviews were conducted targeting gender non-conforming young people (10), young people in juvenile (5) and in the National Civil Service (10), young people with low socio-economic status (39), with migrant background (15), and living in rural areas (14). In this case, too, the average age of respondents is 21.

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<sup>4</sup> The interview guideline explored various macro-areas, such as: the phase of the school-to-work transition experienced; the emotional impact related to the challenges faced and the effect of the workplace on mental and emotional health (for those who experienced it); the reliance on (in)formal networks for emotional and mental support during the school-to-work transition; tactics, practices, and strategies for adapting to and surviving problematic or stressful situations, as well as the lessons learned from these experiences; recommendations and suggestions addressed both to young people in similar life situations and to institutions to ameliorate the school-to-work transition

<sup>5</sup> The University of Bologna coordinated the activity of qualitative research, preparing the questions of the interviews, guiding the analysis of the results and redacting the transnational report. Together with CCB, it defined the methodology of focus groups conduction.

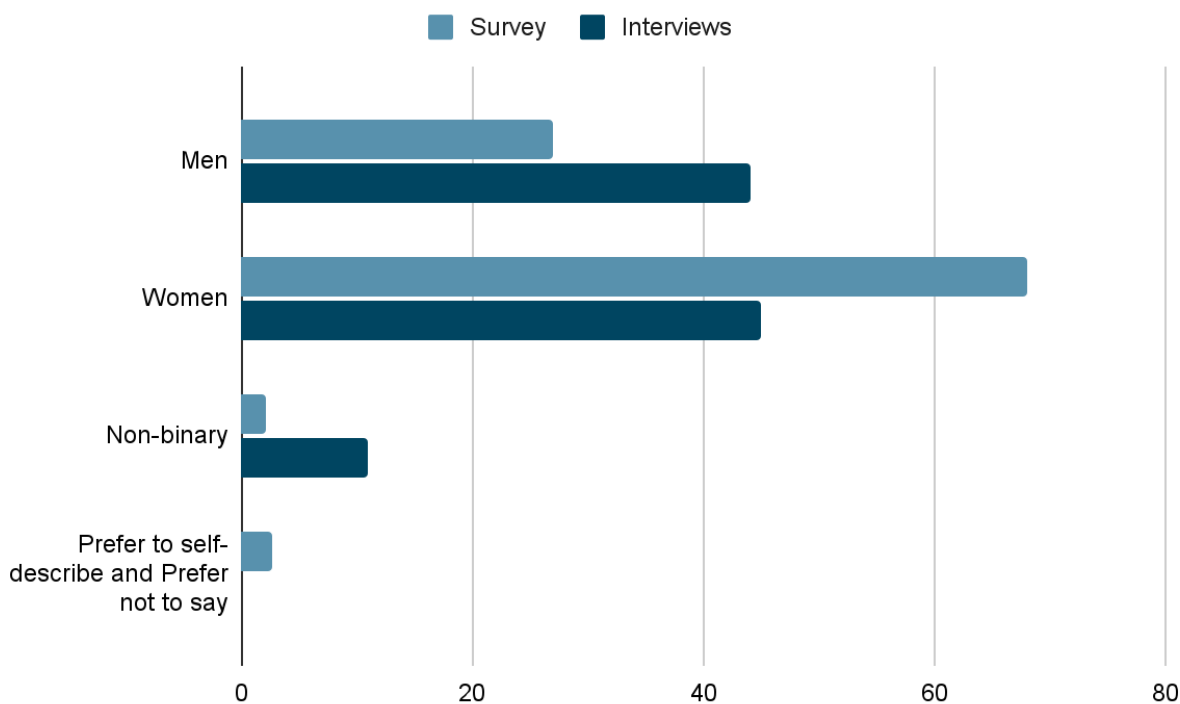


Figure 2, Participants in the survey and interviews, by gender (percentage values)

Balanced is also the amount of natives of the countries involved in the study (51) and people with a migrant or ethnic background (42). Concerning the education level attained, 23 people dropped out of school prematurely. Of the remaining 70 young people interviewed, 27 graduated from high school and/or vocational school, 25 were still enrolled in or obtained a Bachelor of Arts; and 18 were still enrolled or obtained a Master of Arts. All the interviewees had some degree of experience in the world of work, either through volunteering, internships or side jobs carried out while studying. At the time of the interviews, 33 interviewees were unemployed, 13 were engaged in volunteering activities, and 19 were studying. The remaining 28 participants were either employed (15) or self-employed (1), in traineeship (5), or involved in small, flexible jobs while studying (6). The qualitative part of the research also involved the realization of focus groups with professionals working with young people during the school-to-work transition. Consorzio Comunità Brianza (CCB)<sup>6</sup> supported the partners in implementing the focus groups' methodology and conducted the

<sup>6</sup> [CCB](#) is a social enterprise implementing educational services for vulnerable young people, especially migrants, NEET and young people at risk of social withdrawal. The theme of entry into the world of work is addressed by the training and employment area, which intercepts more and more young people with emotional difficulties.

Italian ones. A total of **17 focus groups** were carried out, with a total of 112 professionals involved in the study (Figure 3). Notwithstanding the diverse backgrounds and competencies, all participants deal with young people in the school-to-work transition: 39 self-identify as male and 73 as female. While 48 participants are more closely associated with the business world, 64 are working in education and training. In terms of professions and competences available, most participants are either social workers or youth workers (31), career consultant or job coach (17), dealing with HR responsibilities to various degrees (16), entrepreneurs (11), and teachers and professors (10). The remaining participants are professionals in various sectors of the educational and working world, such as psychologists, sport trainers, project managers, and members of NGOs.

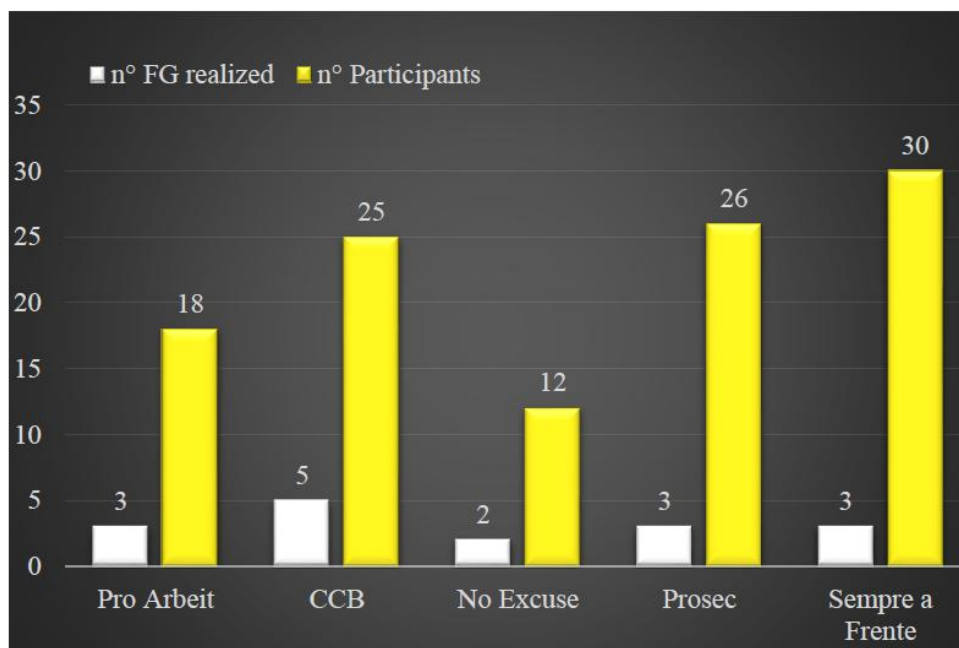


Figure 3, Number of participants and focus groups realized by each partner organization (absolute values).

Interviews did not pose major organizational problems, given the proximity between interviewer and interviewees: organizations mostly relied on consolidated contacts with participants and voluntary workers involved in the activities they propose for young people transitioning from school to work.

In the case of focus groups, instead, we must acknowledge partners' difficulties in their realization. In particular, they registered a low response rate despite the massive invitation efforts: rather than to the format of the focus group in itself (online *versus* in-person), the low participation rate appears

more to be associated with a scarce interest towards (or awareness of) the importance of discussing young people's emotional and mental well-being during the school-to-work transition. Disinterest was especially shown by companies and professionals in the business world of all the involved countries; in some instances, teachers were also a difficult target to engage due to the overlapping between research activities carried out by the consortium and those associated with the ending of the academic year (e.g., school trips, graduation, summer holidays), as focus groups mostly took place between June and August 2024.

Despite the limitation highlighted, the collected data offer a multifaceted reconstruction of young people's experiences of the challenges, opportunities, and emotional and mental struggles faced during this key life stage and highlight similarities transcending the boundaries of the State in which research activities have been carried out. This transnational consonance reveals the structural inequalities in policies and practices superseding youth transition from school to work and stresses the need to elaborate alternative, more sensitive strategies and services of job orientation. To do so, it is fundamental that the analysis of the data gathered through both quantitative and qualitative means assumes an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989, 1994) to consider how identity factors (such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity...) influence youth paths toward employment.

### **3. The emotional impact of challenges and expectations during the school-to-work transition**

As previously mentioned, young people across five European countries reported strikingly similar challenges and experiences in their journey, transitioning from school to work. Here we highlight the diffusion and the multifaceted aspect of the emotional and mental distresses face during their everyday life (§3.1), as well as the ambivalent feelings and experiences associated with this transition as discussed and perceived by our interviewees, hoping to convey the complex and nuanced representation that emerged in their recounts. Their direct recounts will be integrated with professionals' points of view as gathered during the focus groups. In particular, we distinguish between a positive (§3.2) and a negative (§3.3) narrative concerning the school-to-work transition and its impact on mental and emotional health. Given the intersectional approach adopted for the analysis of data gathered, the last paragraph discusses the various axes of discrimination that young people may face (or have already faced) during this sensitive life stage (§3.4).

#### **3.1. The widespread experience of mental and emotional distress**

On average, 55% of survey respondents reported experiencing some form of emotional distress. This, however, sensibly varies according to gender identity: non-binary respondents and those who prefer not to describe their gender identity report the highest rates (71,9% and 76,2% respectively), followed by women (57,3%) and men (46,6%). The most reported issues are stress and worries, affecting 69.8% and 61.2% of respondents, respectively; anxiety is also prevalent, being reported by 58.2%. Other commonly reported distresses are depression (28.4%), panic attacks (26.2%), and eating disorders (20.0%), while it appears to be less common to suffer from self-harm (12.2%) and behavioral disorders (11.1%) (Figure 4).

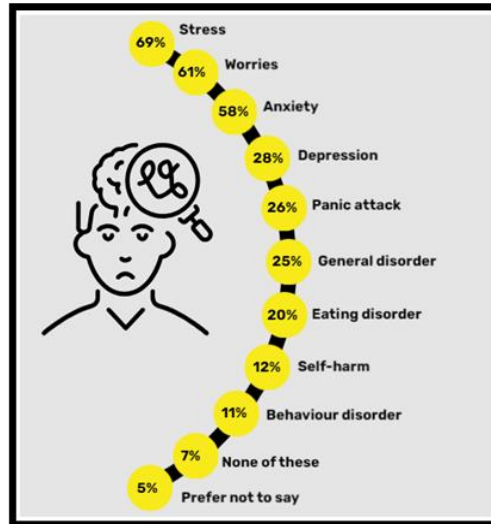


Figure 4, Forms of emotional distress reported by survey respondents (percentage values)

Low socio-economic status and dropping out of school represent two of the main factors worsening young people's mental and emotional health (77,8% and 69,5%, respectively) (Figure 5 and 6).

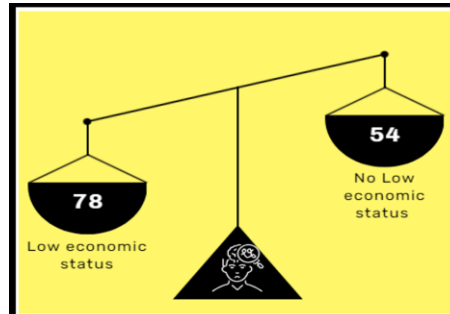


Figure 5, Survey respondents' self-perception of emotional distress, by economic status (percentage values)

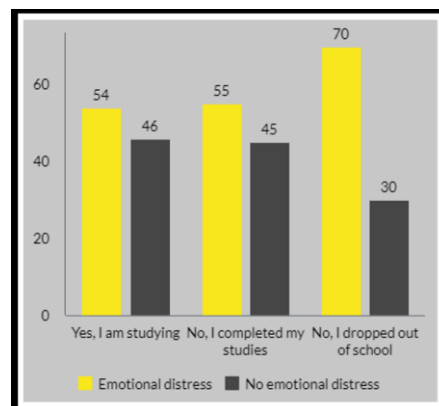




Figure 6, Survey respondents' self-perception of emotional distress, by student status (percentage values)

Also, sexual orientation proves to be significant, especially in the likelihood of experiencing intense emotional distress or anxiety and stress<sup>7</sup> and in seeking help: in the first case, bisexuals and respondents who prefer to self-describe their sexual orientation report higher levels of intense emotional distress than heterosexuals and homosexuals. In the second one, asking for emotional and mental health support is a tendency that lesbians and bisexuals report as almost double when compared to respondents declaring different sexual orientations (87%, 76%, and lower than 47% respectively) (Figure 10).

Moreover, respondents' gender appears to play an important role in a threefold manner: first, in terms of a higher probability of experiencing mental and emotional distress (as we saw at the beginning of this paragraph). Second, gender is pivotal when discussing the feelings and emotions associated with the school-to-work transition: women and gender non-conforming respondents are more likely than men to report negative feelings and express fear toward this delicate life stage. Lastly, gender is relevant when considering the likelihood of seeking help: non-binary people (84,4%), women (61,5%), and those who prefer not to declare their gender (57,1%) show a higher tendency to ask for help to improve their mental well-being when compared to men (44,3%) and respondent who prefer to self-describe their gender identity (26,3%) (Figure 11).

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<sup>7</sup> The Principal Component Analysis (PCA) process revealed three significant components that together explain 52.7% of the total variance in the data. These components represent various groups of emotions related to emotional distress among the study participants.

*Component 1 - Intense Emotional Distress.* This component includes high loadings for variables such as depression, self-harm, behavioral disorders, and panic attacks.

*Component 2 - Anxiety and Stress.* This component is composed of high loadings for variables such as stress, anxiety, and worries.

*Component 3 - Privacy.* This component is characterized by a high loading on the variable "prefer not to say," suggesting a tendency toward privacy or evasiveness in participants' responses. This is, in fact, a less explanatory component, as it reflects a single response option, and has generally not been very impactful for interpreting the dynamics related to the forms of distress that young people may have expressed. For this reason, it is not analysed in the quantitative report.

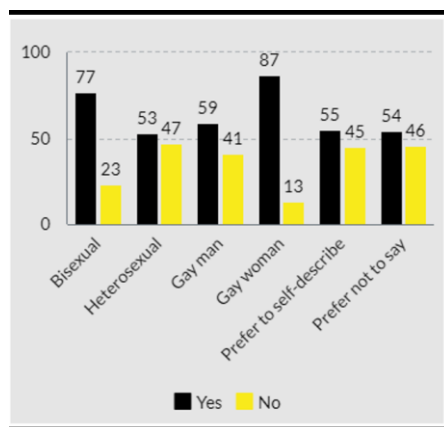


Figure 10, Survey respondents' tendency to ask for support, by sexual orientation (percentage values)

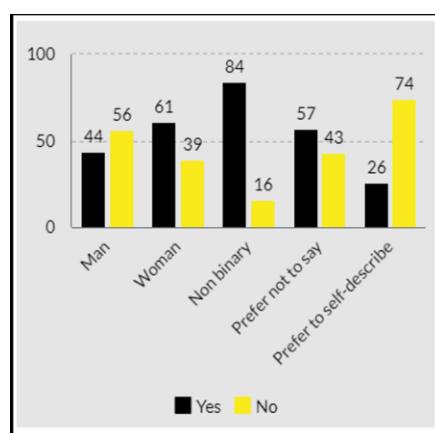


Figure 11, Survey respondents' tendency to ask for support, by gender (percentage values)

Interestingly, when directly asked about the feelings they associate with the school-to-work transition (but also indirectly, as reported by professionals during focus groups), young people swing between positive and negative emotions as they discuss the challenges and opportunities of this life phase. Survey respondents make a clear example of this tendency: when they were asked which words they would associate with the word “future”, “change” was the most common answer provided (68%), followed by “opportunity” (61%) and “hope” (58%), suggesting a vision of the future as a space of transformation and possibility. “Uncertainty”, however, was mentioned by 49% of respondents, together with “concern” (39%) and “anxiety” (37%), reflecting the fears and worries afflicting young people during the transition from school to work (Figure 12).

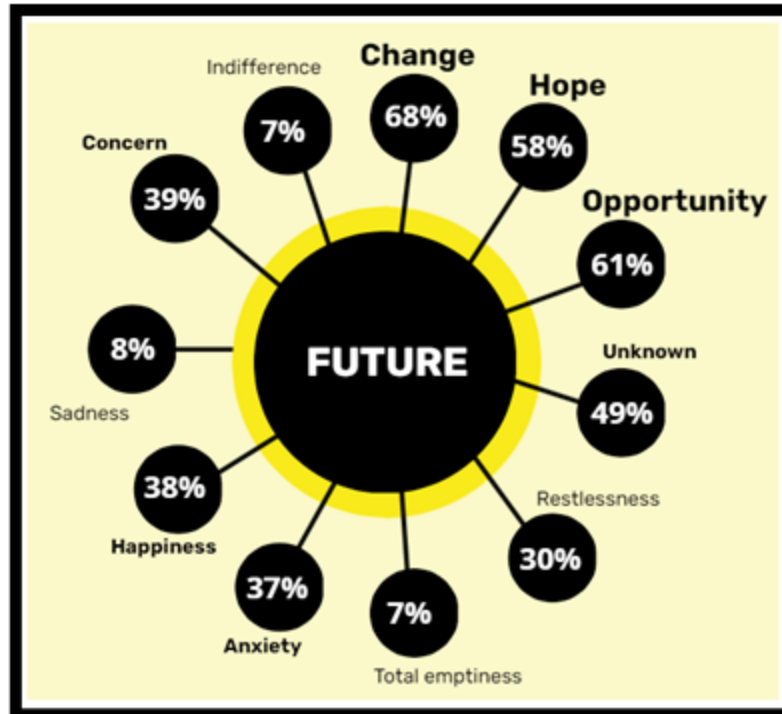


Figure 12, words associated with “future” by survey respondents (percentage values)

Therefore, on the one hand, young people positively perceive their competencies and personal value, which reflects in an overall positive attitude toward the future, its opportunities for professional and personal growth, financial independence, and their ability to overcome almost any challenge - if they put their mind to it. On the other hand, doubt and uncertainty stain their recounts, especially as they report feeling unprepared for the labor market and unsure about the correctness of their life choices. For each “light” of the working world there is a “shadow”, a fear or worry (e.g., among others: precarity, pressure to succeed, or discrimination) ready to subvert their positive attitude. We delve more into these perspectives in the next paragraphs, supported by the empirical data gathered through interviews and focus groups.

### 3.2. The perks of the school-to-work transition

Transitioning from school to work can be «emotionally demanding but valuable for personal growth» (Interview 5, Prosec, Spain). Among its positive aspects, young people report the excitement, curiosity, and happiness associated with new opportunities and beginnings in the labor market, to the point that some of them spoke of the school-to-work transition as *liberating* - a feeling often associated with a positive sense of personal growth and accomplishment, especially

due to gaining financial independence. Even though professionals profusely reported and discussed the transition's downsides, few point out that positive emotions are usually associated with developing a sense of agency in young people's daily decisions. For example, according to a Polish professional, young people experience a continuum of positive and negative feelings during this delicate life stage, recursively moving from fearing what is to come and doubting their abilities to gaining confidence and satisfaction:

I believe that this primarily involves a great deal of stress. This is a very fundamental change in life. On the other hand, I have the feeling that when I talk to young people, once they start, once they enter this environment, they begin to have the satisfaction of such a sense of agency, if they succeed in something (...) it gives them great satisfaction that they feel that they are the ones doing it and they feel responsible. And it's a very cool process. (Focus Group 3, Sempre a Frente, Poland).

Besides personal growth, young people positively approach the development of new skills and abilities, being overall interested in investing in their professional growth. Even professionals confirmed that «companies offering training paths, growth opportunities, and a stimulating work environment are more attractive to young people» (Focus Group Report, p. 10, CCB, Italy).

In this light, however, young people prove to be particularly sensitive towards balancing the need for a fulfilling job with the necessity of earning a steady income - and, thus, are particularly sensitive towards topics such as work-life balance and precarity. According to professionals, as work appears to be no longer perceived as the sole and primary focus of life, salary is considered an important element when entering the labor market, but not the only one to take into consideration:

Young people also seek personal fulfillment, a balance between private and professional life, and a positive and stimulating work environment where they can identify with the values and mission of the organization they work for. The social and economic recognition of the work performed is an important element for the satisfaction and motivation of young workers. Flexibility and the possibility of reconciling work and private life are increasingly demanded by young people. (Focus Group Report, p. 10, CCB, Italy)

Nevertheless, financial stability is almost unanimously mentioned by young interviewees as probably the most important (and positive) aspect related to their entry into the world of work.

Especially gender non-conforming youth underline its pivotal role, as they might need to sustain the costs of gender-affirming care without their families' support:

«I had already decided to start my [gender-affirming] journey before entering the workforce. My concern was more... my dad doesn't accept me like this, so I must be financially independent before it begins.» (Interview 2, Unibo, Italy)

Especially when families of origin are incapable (or unwilling) to financially support their endeavors, financial stability is key for those who need to move to another city (either for work or study). In many cases, young people and professionals report the difficulties deriving from living independently and having taxes, rent, or bills to pay.

The approach to the first working experiences, however, notwithstanding the excitement for the new environment and responsibilities ahead, is often accompanied by a sense of fatigue deriving from engaging in the process of finding and applying for a new job. As underlined by many professionals, going through the application process frequently involves the understanding of complex, bureaucratic procedures, as well as the ability to correctly figure out the job's requirements - which can sometimes be unrealistic.

The challenge is to be able to create a resume, to fill it with information about yourself and your strengths based on your past experience, whether you have already worked or not, and in what area. The problem for young people is to translate real-life experiences into entries in application documents, to look at their student and non-student life as a source of competence and experience, to value them. This difficulty, according to those who participated, is linked to a lack of awareness of themselves and their strengths and areas to work on. In addition to creating a resume or job letter, another challenge is creating and maintaining your page on LinkedIn (Focus Group Report, p.9, Sempre a Frente, Poland).

In this case, it is interesting to note that while survey respondents show an overall positive attitude toward their competencies, skills, and self-esteem, individuals who reported suffering from some form of emotional distress tended to show lower levels of confidence when compared to their peers who did not suffer from emotional and/or mental distress<sup>8</sup>. These uncertainties can be easily

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<sup>8</sup> Two are the other main factors impacting on survey respondents lower levels of confidence and self-esteem, namely: dropping out of school and the low economic status. Those who are currently studying and those who have completed their studies, young people who dropped out of school prematurely show less confidence in their competences, as well as young people with a low economic status when compared to peers that do not experience economic hardships.

reinforced during the application process, as young people report a feeling of discouragement deriving from the lack of feedback received throughout the process, especially after (unsuccessful) job interviews.

### **3.3. The downsides of the school-to-work transition**

On the other side of the spectrum, the shift from school to work is described as *daunting* and *devastating*, as young people report a feeling of overall “unpreparedness” when discussing their transition experience. When entering the labor market, (new) professionalism requirements shape the experience of the (new) work environment and relations - with clients, colleagues, and employers. Transitioning from the more familiar and structured school environment to the greater (at least to some extent) autonomy, responsibilities, and “unspoken rules” of the workplace represents a disruption that is often met with nervousness, stress, and anxiety due to the lack of information concerning the opportunities achievable after completing compulsory education, as well as the uncertainty associated with the management of relations with both colleagues and clients.

At the beginning, I was scared because I had to step into an adult role and accept new responsibilities that I didn't have before. I associate this period with anxiety and social anxiety. I was worried that I wouldn't be good enough and that I wouldn't meet the job's demands. (No Excuse Interviews Report, Slovenia, p. 11)

Young employees often find themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy, which can be intimidating. One participant mentioned the difficulty she found in finding her place in a team where established power dynamics are already in play. She mentioned how understanding “unspoken rules” and expectations within these hierarchies was key to integrating successfully. (Focus Group Report, p.12, Prosec, Spain).

In terms of “unpreparedness”, there is also a general, shared feeling about the education system not being capable of adequately preparing students for the working world. Young people and professionals alike share two main concerns: on the one side, the “traditional” divide blaming schools (other than vocational ones) for being too theoretical and incapable of providing practical or entrepreneurial skills that are actually “marketable” when searching for a job. In this light, for example, professionals recognize that searching and applying for a job requires peculiar skills that seldom young people develop during their course of study. Therefore, those with strongly career-

driven curricula are the ones approaching the school-to-work transition more positively or less stressed. On the other side, especially young people highlight the perceived lack of “adulting tools” required to successfully navigate and overcome the new challenges and responsibilities associated not only with the school-to-work transition but also with the transition into adulthood in general (e.g., financial literacy).

Education that develops the entrepreneurial spirit of young people is not provided systemically. (...) young people are sometimes unaware that they can choose the path of a one-person business, be co-workers, freelancers. [Entrepreneurship] is not taught by the education system, but enforced by the market [or it ] sometimes a matter of patterns passed down in the family (Sempre a Frente Focus Group Report, Poland, p.12)

And these are things that you were never confronted with in school or that you talked about. For example, how do I pay my taxes, or do I need insurance if I am sick or unable to work, and so on. Or signing contracts, what do I have to pay attention to, or the training contract, what do I have to read, what does it say and all that. (ProArbeit and AWO Interviews Report, Germany, p. 16)

Young people recognize the pivotal importance of gaining professional experience before their actual transition to the world of work. However, they are also critical of opportunities such as student work and internships. If, on the one side, they are perceived and described as occasions for networking and beginning to feel at ease in the workplace, on the other, they are perceived as “free labor” and reported as particularly hard to find. Throughout the focus groups, professionals sustained young people's complaints in this regard, especially recognizing that the unpaid condition of most internships might be a significant burden, especially for young people in disadvantaged situations.

Employers often seek candidates with several years of experience, yet most internships are unpaid, forcing young people to choose between gaining valuable experience and facing financial hardship. As a result, many cannot afford to take unpaid internships, leading them to accept underqualified, underpaid jobs that do not match their skills or potential. (Prosec Focus Group Report, Spain, p. 13)

Besides criticizing employers' unrealistic expectations, however, professionals highlight that many young people approach the world of work with unrealistic expectations concerning both employment conditions and salary. As reported by Sempre a Frente: «[s]ometimes they expect

immediate results from their actions and find it hard to accept that change happens gradually, is a process» (Sempre a Frente Focus Group Report, Poland, p. 10). Inflated or unrealistic expectations about the labor market are also the main cause of young people's fear of making the wrong choice when entering it: in many interviews, in fact, young people reported the fear of "being stuck" in an unsatisfying and unfulfilling job that does not grant opportunities to grow professionally and/or personally only because it is necessary to survive or to sustain their family. Therefore, this fear goes together with that of labor exploitation, precarity, and discrimination. We will discuss the latter in the next paragraph, given the complexities entailed with adopting an intersectional approach.

### **3.4 The multifaceted dimensions of discrimination**

People with different backgrounds can experience discrimination on different grounds. The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989,1993) posits that each person lives at the intersection of multiple lines of inequalities, which shape and structure the relations between individuals. The peculiarity of this concept is that it allows to capture simultaneously

the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of discrimination or systems of subordination [...] address[ing] the way that specific acts and policies create burdens that flow along these intersecting axes contributing actively to create a dynamic of disempowerment.(United Nations Gender and racial discrimination: Report of the Expert Group Meeting, 2000, p.10)

According to the (in)visibility of one or more characteristics of a person's identity, they can face a(n) advantage/disadvantage when entering the labor market - which means that they can or cannot experience one or more forms of discrimination. Despite their young age, interviewees report directly and indirectly experiencing discrimination (e.g., through friends or family recounts) along the following lines of intersectionality: class, race and/or ethnic background, age, and gender and/or sexual orientation. Although intersectionality allows for the simultaneous analysis of all forms of discrimination and the ways in which they are mutually constitutive, the following sections examine one potential factor of discrimination at a time to ensure clarity.



### 3.4.1. Class discrimination

Especially in the Italian case, two interviewees discussed some occurrences in which class discrimination was experienced at work and school, with comments assuming their preparation was inferior to that of their colleagues due to their place of origin. This narrative assumed two divides: in the case of Interview 3, they were rejected after a job interview in Bologna assuming the lower validity of their title as dive master because it was obtained in a region in the South of Italy. Interview 4, instead, experienced class discrimination not only because of the lower socio-economic status of his family but also along the divide rural/urban places of origin:

I come from a place known for its economic difficulties, a place with a high dropout rate... even [high school] teachers treated me keeping in mind where I came from and the fact that I wasn't from a good family, unlike most of my classmates... teachers who would ask if where I live there is running water or if there is the internet... Teachers waited for the moment [chuckles] when I got distracted for a second and spoke with my accent to make fun of me... anyway, the burden of the fact that - despite doing well in school, very well, actually - they expected that I wouldn't continue with university or that I would drop out just because where I come from it's normal to leave school... but also teenage pregnancies are quite common... (Unibo Interviews Report, Italy, p. 7)

### 3.4.2. Race and/or ethnic background.

Discrimination along this line usually takes the form of negative comments concerning inadequate knowledge of the national language, or discriminatory actions and behaviors towards people with a recognizable (visible) migratory background.

I was shocked at first, because I only knew this from my father, that he told me back then that he had a lot to do with everyday racism and so on. And I was also sad that it is still the case in my age, even though it was the case with my father more than 40 years ago. But the fact that it's still like that has made me sad. And I thought it was a shame that people couldn't develop further or accept people who have a different skin colour or origin or gender. And I thought that was a shame. (ProArbeit and AWO Interviews Report, Germany, p. 10)

### 3.4.3. Age discrimination

In the realm of age discrimination, we can find two main, intertwined arguments: one concerning young people's lacking experience in the working world; the other concerning relations with coworkers, where we witness a significant generational divide. In terms of work experience, young people report fearing that their young age (and therefore lack of experience) can be seen as a defect

by employers, limiting their search and selection of job offers and resulting in fierce competition with more experienced workers. This fear, however, intertwines and takes shape in the relations with coworkers: colleagues from older generations are, in fact, presented as more disrespectful of others' boundaries and engaging in unpleasant (e.g., sexist, racist...) banter, contributing to negative depiction of their workplace in terms of (un)safety and thus limiting their willingness to build relations within the workplace, opting for a clear-cut separation between their work and private lives.

I might have had less difficulty when a conversation happened - maybe with younger people - in saying what my sexual preferences were. In the sense that maybe it is something more accepted now, and it is unlikely that someone will call you a 'faggot' - at least, I think. (Unibo Interviews Report, Italy, p. 8)

Professionals too report witnessing «hostility and anger towards previous generations, often held responsible for creating a precarious and unsatisfactory world of work. [... together with] a sense of injustice for the more difficult working conditions, compared to those faced by past generations» (CCB Focus Group Report, Italy, p.5). As anticipated in §3.2, intergenerational differences become evident in the attitude toward work and the re-definition of it as one of the aspects of a person's life: while older generations appear to make of their work a defining trait of their personality and identity, young people appear to be more interested in balancing their working with their private and social lives, aiming at setting boundaries between them and creating a positive, inclusive workplace. Put simply, the feeling is that «older generations live to work, while younger generations work to live» (Sempre a Frente Focus Group Report, Poland, p. 6). As a consequence, the lack of a supportive, inclusive work environment, exacerbates emotional and mental distress, fostering feelings of exclusion and isolation «particularly pronounced for those who move away from home for work, leaving behind their established support network» (Prosec Focus Group Report, Spain, p. 6).

#### **3.4.4. Gender and/or sexual orientation discrimination**

Women and gender non-conforming youth report having been treated differentially on a wide variety of occasions. Sexist behaviors and attitudes, in particular, took the form of inappropriate (personal) questions asked during job interviews, on-the-job banter or comments exposing

coworkers' gender or sexual orientation (e.g., misgendering<sup>9</sup>, deadnaming<sup>10</sup>, direct or indirect outing<sup>11</sup>), as well as personal attitudes, character and way of dressing - often judged along the lines of not being masculine/feminine enough.

'What's in your pants'... I've heard it a thousand times! And again: I am a person... having lived in a small town, I've been asked this question so many times that I became completely desensitized... but despite the lack of bad intentions, for me, it is almost harassment. Because it's like going up to a CIS woman and asking what shape her nipples are... You just don't do that! It's an extremely inappropriate question! And yet, it's very common! I've received this question so, so many times... or questions about my old name, very personal questions about my life, many questions about my genitals... (Unibo Interviews Report, Italy, p. 5)

Especially among gender non-conforming young people, being constantly misgendered created feelings of great discomfort and - in the most extreme cases - exacerbated their gender dysphoria. Whenever interviewees stood up to their employer or coworkers demanding the recognition of their true gender identity, they often felt adjustments were made more to comply with labor shortages rather than because of actual, empathetic understanding.

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<sup>9</sup> The act of *misgendering* concerns the use of the wrong pronouns or other gender-specific words when referring to or speaking to a person whose gender expression does not match their gender identity (e.g., talking to/about a trans man using feminine pronouns).

<sup>10</sup> By *deadnaming* we mean the act of referring to or calling a person by their birth name and not their elective name, independently from the fact that the elective name matches the one on their identity document.

<sup>11</sup> By *direct outing*, we mean the act of revealing the gender identity or sexual orientation of a person as directly made by another person (e.g., coworkers, employers, professors...). By *indirect outing* we mean all of those situations in which the person risks (or is almost forced to) reveal their gender identity and/or sexual orientation due to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

## **4. Informal support networks and their pivotal role in young people's transition from school to work**

Young people involved in the survey and interviews report perceiving some overall pressure concerning their success and realization in the world of work. Even though, on average, participants do not feel particularly overwhelmed by the expectations of others concerning their future<sup>12</sup>, they agree that it is difficult for their generation to achieve success. This especially appears to be associated with an overall negative view of the labor market as an environment in which finding a job is hard: notwithstanding the skills possessed, many young people, in fact, claim that (informal or personal) connections are still necessary to find a job.

The perception of external pressure shows minimal variations across the five partner countries but is directly associated with emotional well-being, gender identity, dropping out of school, and a low socio-economic status. In this sense, young people who report experiencing emotional distress show a tendency to perceive higher external pressure. The same can be said for respondents who prefer not to disclose their gender and non-binary respondents, who show higher levels of sensitivity when compared to male and female respondents, who, on the other hand, report average levels. School dropout seems to have a noticeable impact. The support provided by the academic environment could help mitigate external pressure, “shielding” students from the challenges of entering the job market -as they may still be perceived as a problem to deal with “later”. Indeed, higher levels of perceived external pressure in dropout respondents may indicate that, without a formal education, these young people feel more exposed to pressures related to employment and social and family expectations. Lastly, when we consider respondents with low socio-economic status, we witness their heightened sensitivity towards external pressures.

Concerning this theme, it is particularly interesting to see how some of the main actors reported as fundamental in containing such negative feelings are actually the ones capable of fostering them. As young people transnationally reported the role of informal support networks as pivotal in their transition journey to the working world, we must acknowledge that all that glitter is not gold. In this chapter, we highlight the ambivalence of actors such as families, peers, and significant others, as interviewees underline receiving both unconditional support and pressure to succeed. In the next

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<sup>12</sup> Approximately 68% of the respondents experience average pressure. some young people feel a much greater or much lesser impact, likely influenced by factors such as social support, local job opportunities, and economic conditions.

paragraphs, we look at the role of family members, especially parents and sometimes siblings (§4.1). Then we move to the role of peers, friends, and partners (§4.2).

#### **4.1. Family**

For survey respondents, family support is particularly positive, as parents usually support respondents's education, professional career, and overall life choices. Also during interviews, when asking about participants' informal support networks, the first answer in most cases encompasses the pivotal role of the family as a stable and central resource of emotional and financial support. Moreover, it is within the family (especially with their parents, but also other immediate family members) that young people find the main source for debate and advice on how to deal with the school-to-work transition, or on how to enter and behave in the workplace.

In line with the idea that connections are still necessary to find a job, families are reported as helpful in providing job opportunities through word of mouth and personal (informal) contacts. However, this rosy description of the family is seldom true when encountering gender non-conforming youth. As emerges from the Unibo Interviews Report (Italy, p. 8):

reactions to coming out were diverse, as well as the emotional support provided - ranging from a bland acceptance to utter denial. In the worst-case scenario, the emotional impact of school-to-work transition risked being aggravated by the potential lack of financial support from the family of origin, resulting in additional anxiety for participants to deal with.

As positive as they can be, families may also represent a source of pressure and stress during the school-to-work transition. In some cases, participants report families as a main source of pressure to succeed both at school and in the labor market, to the point that parents try "railroading" participants' study and work choices, directing them towards universities and job opportunities thought to be more secure, to gain more easily "marketable" skills. As also emerges from the focus groups with professionals, although with the best intentions, this attitude may hinder the development of autonomy and independence, preventing young people to learn through trial and error.

I started to cry and he [the doctor] asked me what the reason was and I told him that I didn't want to go to university anymore. I didn't have the motivation to go to university and I was afraid to talk to my parents about it. or to say at all, it's not the thing I want to do anymore. (ProArbeit and AWO Interviews Report, Germany, p. 9).

Another motivation for parents choosing young people's career path is associated with the pressure to "inherit" a profession. As emerges in the case of the Sempre a Frente Focus Group Report (p. 7), parents who do so start steering their children's educational paths by influencing their choice of secondary school. Independently from young people's ability of expressing their dissent and making their voices heard or not, this can lead to them experiencing internal conflict, frustration, or even guilt.

#### **4.2. Peers, friends and partners**

Friends (and partners, when present) are the people most relied upon, especially when families do not offer or lack emotional support. Participants reported talking with close friends on a variety of topics, starting from sharing everyday challenges faced when entering the job market (e.g., writing a CV, sending a job application, how to do an interview...) and coming to the more personal and sensitive issues, such as emotional and mental struggles.

I think it was my friends first and foremost, because they went through exactly the same thing. Or are currently on the way to going through it, because in my group of friends we are all in the same year. That means we are experiencing the same thing (ProArbeit and AWO Interviews Report, Germany, p. 12)

Even though speaking with friends is easier than with parents and/or other family members, doing so about emotions is particularly hard. As put simply by the Sempre a Frente Interviews Report (Poland, p. 16),

Overall participants positively value the chance of talking with (accurately) selected individuals because it helps to reduce feelings of loneliness, to confront different perspectives, to provide relief and a sense of being heard, to organise thoughts and to bring us closer to solutions. [It also] helps to reduce tensions and sometimes to find ways to solve problems. (...) However, the picture that emerges from the statements is that talking about emotions is the more difficult conversation to have, requiring a greater sense of trust and confidence in a relationship.

Other than selecting the right friend to talk to, especially gender non-conforming participants discussed revolving towards activism and queer people to find a “community”. Feelings of loneliness and abandonment are common among the people we interviewed, to the point that occasions to meet with peers are frequently welcomed as a coping mechanism (§6) to improve mental and emotional health. In the following quote, we grasp the pivotal role that a community can have in this regard, as well as the importance of a safe space and network on which to rely when in need of support:

Find other people like you: I believe this is what really changed my life. Seeking experiences, seeking examples, seeking help, people, moments of sharing... just go for it, even if you don't have a friend to accompany you to that event - just go. Put yourself in the middle of the room and you'll see that sooner or later someone will talk to you or you'll approach someone and say, "help, help me." [they laugh] Because I believe it's the contact with others, the network, the social interactions... that saves us. When we are isolated individuals, feeling "I don't know, I feel a bit like this, but maybe it's just me being a bit silly," it's difficult. Instead, the strength, I believe, lies in finding other people, sharing problems as well as good things with others. So just go for it. (Unibo Interviews Report, Italy, p. 9)

However, even relations with peers can represent a source of external pressure. The Sempre a Frente Interviews Report (Poland) highlighted that participants tended to question their life choices by comparing their achievement of pivotal stages throughout the life course with that of peers, especially over social media. Doing so, they developed a new type of fear - the FOMO, i.e., fear of missing out - capable of altering their expectations on how to deal with the challenges and possible outcomes of the school-to-work transition and other pivotal moments over their life course (e.g., getting married, starting a family...).

The difficulty in managing choices and changes emerges as a central theme, with many young people experiencing a sense of loneliness in the decision-making process. This situation is exacerbated by social pressure and expectations, often amplified by social media, which can generate a sense of inadequacy and make the journey toward self-discovery arduous. (CCB Focus Group Report, Italy, p. 5).

It is still among the Sempre a Frente results that we find an interesting reflection on this topic: while discussing the subject during the focus groups, professionals pointed out that young people are not taught to recognize their needs, nor to assign priorities among them. While approaching

systemic challenges they are not equipped with a systemic way of reflecting what is their definition of “success” and to what extent it collides/diverges from the average idea associated with it of gaining a higher salary/status.

emotional impact largely depends on the young person's understanding of success, his plan for himself and whether he has one, because young people are not encouraged in any systemic way to reflect in this way, they do not have the opportunity to do so. Awareness of one's needs and priorities allows one to set one's goals differently from the economic calculus. It also allows you to take into account the characteristics of the job and whether it suits a person's personality (Sempre a Frente Focus Group Report, Poland, p.16)

### **4.3. The striking absence of workplace relations**

Only in a few cases, workplace relations with colleagues and employers are reported as a possibility for emotional and mental support for young people. While young people's relations with coworkers appear more conflictual than cordial, professionals in focus groups frequently mentioned the important role that employers, coworkers, and mentors can play in providing support and strategies for young people to handle the complexities associated with the transition from the school to the workplace. However, while stressing the central importance of supportive networks within the workplace, professionals also stress that they are inconsistently available. Professionals, however, do not tackle this issue in depth and seem to assert the situation *by defect*: having witnessed young individuals expressing an increased sense of isolation and "disconnection" stemming from the absence of a supportive work environment, professionals emphasize the significance of fostering a sense of community within the workplace - a goal, they believe, is more readily attainable when operating within small teams than in larger organizations. As stated in the Prosec Focus Group Report (Spain, p.7):

In smaller teams, the internal support among colleagues can significantly reduce stress and create a more comfortable environment for new employees. The consensus among this group was that while supportive networks are invaluable, they are often lacking, especially in larger organizations where young employees may feel isolated and overwhelmed.

In some cases, professionals highlighted the role of employers in creating an inclusive atmosphere at work, underlining how the reduction of the pressure put on (and felt by) young people should be their primary responsibility. To do so, it is fundamental to work towards the promotion of a cultural change within workplaces, a change moving towards the possibility of opening a



discussion on sensitive topics (e.g., emotional and mental health, gender, sexual orientation...) but also on the intergenerational differences that risk jeopardizing young people commitment, by feeling more comfortable and capable of adjusting to a new place, role, and relations.

## 5. Institutional support (or the lack thereof) in the school-to-work transition

Participants offered a multifaceted view of the institutional support received/available when dealing with the emotional and mental challenges of the school-to-work transition. In some cases, interviewees encountered supportive mentors (e.g., in school, university, or other programs/institutions) who supported them and helped them grow during this delicate life stage. In most cases, however, participants elaborated on feelings of abandonment, disillusion, and overall lack of support from the institutions encountered along their way. In paragraph 5.1, we draw from the survey results to draw a picture of the main tendencies concerning help seeking behaviours among young people in the 5 countries participating in the project. In the following section (§5.2) we present the main downsides of institutional support as highlighted by the majority of our participants. In paragraph 5.3, we learn from the positive experiences reported by a minority of young people, especially the ones involved in programs devoted to orienteering, organized by our partner organizations.

### 5.1. Tendencies in seeking emotional and mental support

Of all survey respondents, 56,8% reported asking for help while 43,2% never did. While Figure 13 shows the tendency to request for support by country of residence, it is important to highlight that seeking help is more common among people who experienced some form of emotional or mental distress (Figure 14).

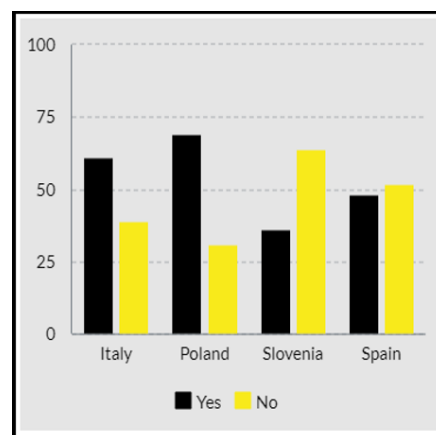


Figure 13, Survey respondents' requests for support, by country of residence (percentage values)

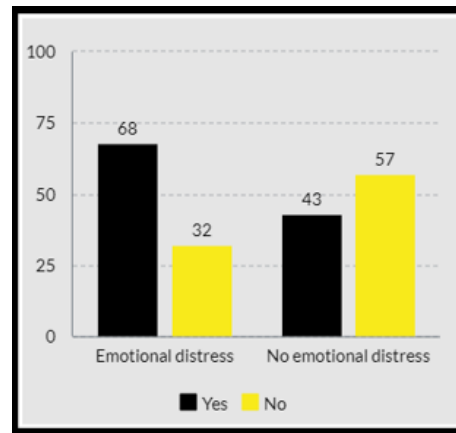
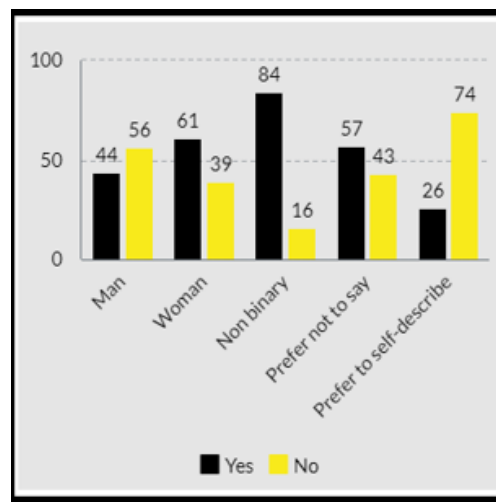


Figure 14, Survey respondents' requests for support, by perception of distress (percentage values)

Overall, non-binary people (84%), women (61%) and those who prefer not to disclose their gender identity (57%) are more likely to have asked for help instead of men (44,3%) (Figure 15). Moreover, respondents' sexual orientation is relevant when dealing with the requests for emotional and mental support: while among heterosexual respondents only 52,8% asked for help, the data grows when considering gays (59%), bisexuals (77%), and lesbians (87%) (Figure 16).



(Figure 15), Survey respondents' requests for support, by gender (percentage values)

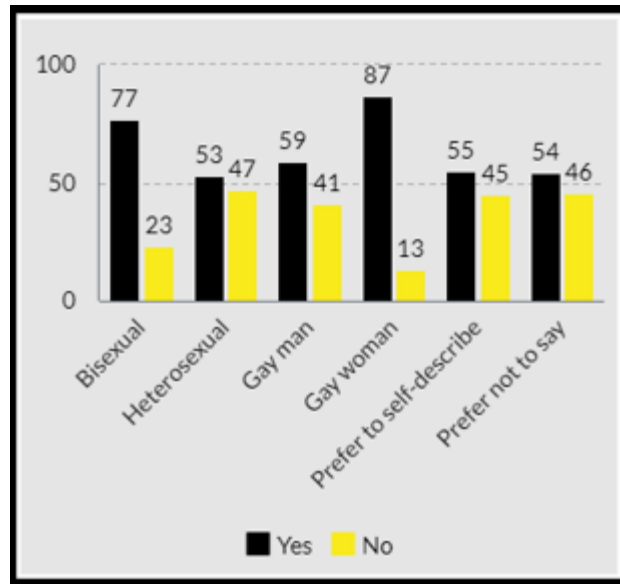


Figure (16) Survey respondents' requests for support, by sexual orientation (percentage values)

Also, age group appears to be a relevant variable to consider, as the likelihood of seeking help increases with growing age: while 51% of participants aged 16-20 reported seeking help to improve their mental well-being, the data increases to 61% for the 21-25 years old and reaches 65% for young people aged 26-29. (Figure 17)

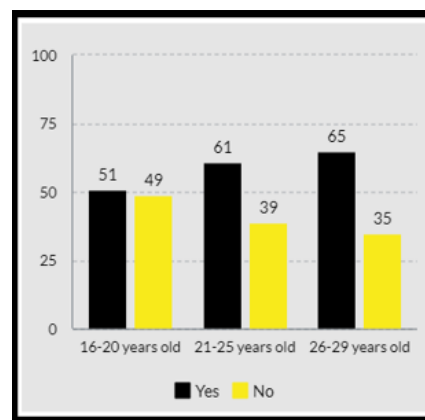


Figure (17) Survey respondents' requests for support, by age group (percentage values)

Interestingly enough, even when young people did not asked for support, they appear to particularly trust qualified professionals (75%); however, drastically less frequent is the intention to turn to public healthcare services (18%) (Figure 18).

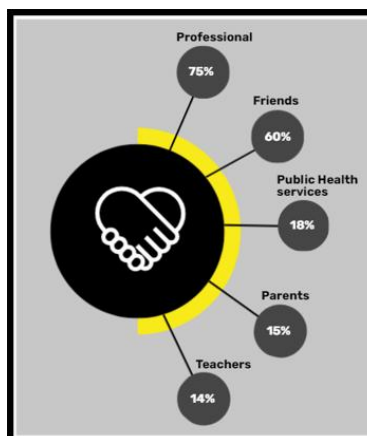


Figure 18, Figures to whom survey respondents who did not seek help would turn to in case of need

Every participant in our cross-country interviews sample experienced the need for formal support during the school-to-work transition - being it either pragmatic in nature (e.g., building a CV, writing a cover letter, sending a job application...), emotional (e.g., psychological support), or both. However, especially in terms of emotional/mental support (i.e., to discuss anxieties and worries associated not only with their personal life but also the school-to-work transition), a tendency clearly emerged among young people to seek support from private professionals.

While most interviewees highlighted the importance of de-stigmatizing the overall discourse on mental and emotional health (still perceived as one of the strongest taboo in contemporary society) it appears that a similar de-stigmatization process should be promoted towards public health services. As we will discuss the concrete dearths of institutional (public) support in the upcoming paragraphs, we feel compelled to underline the possible existence of a (latent) widespread neoliberal belief of the private sector as “better equipped” or “more qualified” than the public one. Young people, in fact, interestingly discuss their propensity to turn to private professionals because of they worry about the un-updated competences available among professionals in the public sector. Besides giving back a (faulty) shared vision of professionals in both private/public sectors as homogeneous, not considering the possibility that also professionals in the private sectors may not be up-to-date with the most recent evolutions of research appears to sustain the hypothesis of a “prejudice” towards public health services and the professionals working within them. Drawing

on the positive and negative recounts of young people and their lived experiences in transitioning from school to work, we will now focus on the forms that this “mistrust” takes when discussing the causes of ineffective formal/institutional support.

### **5.1.1 Lack of a holistic approach**

From school to the university, young participants (but also professionals in focus groups) described educational systems as too focused on the employability of their students rather than on their emotional and mental well-being. If, on the one hand, schools and universities are still perceived as too theoretical and incapable of equipping students with pragmatic or useful (marketable) skills, on the other, when orienteering activities and events are organized, young people feel they target only specific courses of study - this is true especially along the divide between hard sciences and human sciences, with the latter students often feeling “left out”.

These offers from the companies that came to us were really only related to finance, so to speak, i.e. to economics. And I know a lot of people from my year who are interested in economics and that might have helped them. But there are also a lot of people who didn't want to do anything in this area and then it was a bit superfluous. (ProArbeit and AWO Interviews Report, Germany, p. 15)

Throughout the education years, young people feel “misled” and abandoned, as institutions and schools are perceived as incapable of adequately preparing them not only to transition into the working world but also into overall adulthood.

a course that teaches how to be an independent adult, because - let's say I don't have mom and dad to explain how to become an independent adult. How am I supposed to know how to do things? How am I supposed to know that if I work legally and if I earn more than a certain amount I have to file the [tax] form that year? (Unibo Interviews Report, Italy, p. 11)

As also confirmed by professionals in various focus groups, it clearly emerges the necessity to strengthen the collaboration between schools, businesses, and training organizations to put in place institutional structures with comprehensive training and support system, capable of adopting and promoting an holistic approach to the school-to-work transition.

### **5.1.2 Lack of up-to-date professional competences, communication, and resource visibility**

Strikingly, even when public services are available, participants widely appear unaware of their existence. Even more strikingly, when they do know about the public services and resources available in their proximity, they often opt not to use them.

When psychological support was present at school/university, the young people encountered stressed that it was never directly tied with orienteering initiatives, leaving the management of the emotions associated with the school-to-work transition formally uncovered.

School psychologists are not always people who inspire confidence, and in many cases the use of psychological support at school is still stigmatised, including by teachers. (Sempre a Frente Focus Group Report, Poland, p.18)

Participants also discussed long waiting lists and meeting professionals that are not updated with the most recent evolution of academic discourse - as anticipated (§5.1). Beside the general tendency to mistrust public mental health services and professionals, it was especially gender non-conforming young people who would worry about professionals' updated competences and knowledge, a worry due to the significantly higher likelihood of discrimination they are exposed to when compared to other participants.

Young people, however, appear to be also skeptical about the ability of public services to keep up-to-date with the recent labor market evolutions. Therefore, it is of no surprise that most interviewees appear to be autonomous in searching and sending job applications, living their “successes” (and thus “failures”) as their own responsibilities - aggravating their tendency to feel under pressure.

Unfortunately, very little support was provided by my educational institution during this period of crisis. There should be more informative initiatives directing us towards the world of work. (Ancilab Interviews Report, Italy, p.7)

Notwithstanding their skeptical approach to public services, almost every interviewee has asked for mental and emotional professional help at least once in their life. Support from (private) psychologists, in particular, was widely relied upon to discuss anxieties and worries associated not only with their personal life but also the school-to-work transition.

### 5.1.3. Lack of mentors, personalized support, and individual guidance

Among the professionals encountered by young people seeking emotional and mental health support during the school-to-work transition we must also include all of those people assisting them due to their roles as teachers/professors, counselors, social workers... and so forth. These “mentoring” figures could have a much more pivotal role in young people’s life than they appear to have at the moment<sup>13</sup>, as they can facilitate/harden the transition.

Enabling teachers to have a positive impact on students also requires training opportunities that focus on trauma-informed practices, cultural competence and student-centered approaches to education. “Teachers should finally realize the positive influence they can have on pupils. They don't always have to be the bad guys.” (ProArbeit Focus Group Report, Germany, p. 4)

In this light, it is not surprising that guidance and counseling emerged as one of the strategies that can truly help young people to deal with the emotional challenges of the school-to-work transition (ProArbeit Focus Group Report, Germany, p. 5). In more or less detail, all reports stress the importance of combining mentors’ support with a well-organized workplace, emerging as the two main factors capable of bridging the gap between education and employment. When formal, holistic support (in the school and the workplace) is present and functioning, young people highlight its mitigating effect on the emotional and mental distress associated with the school-to-work transition. The quality of support, however, is often left to the initiative of the individual mentor:

My professors were helpful, they would buy me coffee and ask "why are you failing?" and I explained " It is like I don't have family, I'm always around..." and they said "don't worry about it," they always tried to promote me. (CCB Interviews Report, Italy, p. 6)

Support from a social worker was also instrumental, providing direction and assistance during the transition. (Prosec Interviews Report, Spain, p. 9).

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth remembering that only 14% of survey respondents would ask for support to teachers/professors, and that interviewees rarely mentioned them as inspiring figures to turn to when in need of support.



#### **5.1.4. Lack of companies' and employers' transparency and accountability**

Emerges here also the issue concerning the importance of a supportive workplace in fostering confidence and professional growth. As we anticipated the pivotal role attributed by young people to the lack of feedback during the job application process, this extends to mentors, supervisors, and employers, to team members and other colleagues, as they play a leading part in shaping and promoting an inclusive workplace, where young people can improve their strengths and correct their “weaknesses”. Especially after “failed” interviews, challenged by the unrealistic expectations of employers in the labor market, they aim not only to understand what went wrong and to be more prepared for the next occasion but also to make institutions and employers more transparent and accountable towards them.

In theory, there are these compulsory student placements that we have to do, but they are often so impractical that it's mostly just a matter of signing (evidence documentary). Nobody really checks, I have the impression, what has happened there, in these apprenticeships, or where these people have gone, and they are not worth much in the end, because some of my friends have not learnt anything, nor have they done these apprenticeships in the places where this signature will be (...). There is supposedly this system, but it doesn't really work, that's my impression. (Sempre a Frente Interviews Report, Poland, p. 20)

On the other hand, young people and professionals alike recognize that support from mental well-being in the workplace largely depends on the size of the company, but organizational culture has the opportunity to positively (indirectly) influence young people's well-being, even in the absence of more structured corporate welfare services.

Practicing and promoting a culture of inclusion and acceptance for diversity in schools and work places will help and ensure a smooth transition for especially people with migration and diverse backgrounds. (ProArbeit Focus Group Report, Germany, p. 5)

Another important aspect was the drive to build teams based on talent, for example using the Gallup methodology. This ensures that employees are aware of their strengths, that they are valued and that they receive the support they need. (Sempre a Frente Focus Group Report, Poland, p. 21).

## 6. Coping mechanism and learning from challenges

A vast array of options emerged from interviewees' experiences when asked about their preferred strategies and practices to cope with the stress and challenges faced during the school-to-work transition. As mentioned in chapter 4, young people especially report a need for opportunities to discuss and reflect on events happening in their everyday lives together with their friends and partners but also with (supportive) family members (i.e., parents and siblings). Moreover, as discussed in chapter 5, they also stress the importance of discussing peculiar topics and events with the appropriate professionals (e.g., psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, mentors...). All these opportunities allow young people to learn from others' experiences what is necessary to interpret events and put them into perspective, developing new ways to deal with unexpected challenges or difficult/triggering situations. In doing so, various tactics emerge, in particular: structured routines and reflexivity, discursive distancing, escapism, masking, camouflaging, and resiliency.

### 6.1. Structured routines and reflexivity

Most of the young people encountered also find it helpful to develop structured routines and/or approach tasks step by step: as stressed by the Prosec Interviews Report (Spain, p. 11), this *methodical way of handling stress, emphasis[es] gradual progress over immediate perfection*, as it allows young people to learn to destructure big, overwhelming projects into smaller, less challenging tasks. As most interviewees have sought support from mental health professionals, it does not come as a surprise the high level of reflexivity and self-analysis shown: participants, in fact, positively value and seek occasions for reflecting on their own, while implementing personal boundaries (at school, at work, with friends and families) to maintain (and prioritize) their mental well-being.

### 6.2. Discursive distancing

Especially young people who already experienced discrimination show a tendency to distance themselves from those behaviors in their narration of events (i.e., “it happened to others... not to me”). As the Unibo Interviews Report (Italy) highlights, in particular, gender non-conforming youth appear to stress the role of “luck” when they are capable of avoiding discriminatory

situations and often engage in the dialectical effort of “educating” their counterpart - a practice that is extremely draining of their energies other than time-consuming.

### 6.3. Escapism

Pragmatic activities emerge as helpful (and sometimes fundamental) for maintaining mental and emotional health. Practices to counter anxiety and stress appear to be associated both with physical activities and creative outlets, ranging from going to the gym, running, taking walks (in nature, when possible), and doing sports (often with friends), to reading, writing (journaling and affirmations), drawing, painting, dancing, playing or listening to music, watching TV series/movies, and playing videogames. Some interviewees also mentioned engaging in mindfulness practices (e.g. yoga, meditation, breathing techniques) or simply spending quality time with friends and partners.

However, in the recounts of these activities we can perceive a tendency of “focusing through escapism”: young people appear to engage in activities and practices that keep their mind “occupied” on some kind of entertainment to avoid (over)thinking about their worries. If, on the one hand, this helps avoid not only overthinking but also feelings of overwhelming anxiety, on the other, it appears that their “addictive” nature could represent a possible side-effect that should not be overlooked:

*I love video games, I love books, I love theater. So, I am lucky because I have many means of consumption. And yes, now I recognize that there were years when I abused these things, even to the detriment of my school performance. Today, I know it was because of the dysphoria. (...) I unfortunately have seen so many trans people who have then also fallen into somewhat more extreme coping mechanisms - such as the use of alcohol and drugs. I also fell into it for a short time in my life. (Unibo Interviews Report, Italy, p. 12)*

In this sense, also according to professionals in focus groups, it is fundamental to teach young people *healthy* coping mechanism that allow them to overcome avoidance behaviour: to this end, fostering dialogue, promoting an open conversation (at school, in the workplace) about mental and emotional health, and practicing self-care could be extremely supportive (ProArbeit Focus Group Report, Germany, p. 6). Lastly, escapisms may also take the form of frequent job changes or a “nomadic” approach to working life (Sempre a Frente Focus Group Report, Poland, p. 22).

## 6.2. Masking

Masking is a term with which we refer to the tactics used (consciously or not) by gender non-conforming young people to appear as either male or female to blend in and be more easily accepted by society. For this reason, *passing* people are often described as “lucky”: an early gender-affirming journey and updated documents before entering the world of work is often described as a *privileged* position when compared to those who are still struggling with the whole process.

Finding a job isn't much of a problem - as long as people don't realize you're trans. Because I've noticed that many of my friends, who are cisgender and the like, find jobs right away. Even my boyfriend is trans, but he already has his documents rectified, has had surgery, and everything, and he "passes" very well... so he found a job right away. I, who am a bit in-between... I find it very difficult. (ITA08)

Especially in the workplace, but sometimes even with friends and family, interviewees discussed *masking* their true gender identity because they did not feel safe sharing this information, as it is often associated with the risk of losing significant relations. As gender stereotypes are still perceived to be particularly strong and difficult to eradicate, according to the Unibo Interviews Report (Italy) there appears to be a latent discouragement and disbelief among gender non-conforming youth that employers and coworkers could be sensitive on the issue - to the point that the main worry of most interviewees on the workplace is to avoid being deadnamed.

## 6.3. Camouflaging

Also in this case, gender non-conforming youth appear to “(de)activate” and disclose their gender identity only if deemed necessary. Strategically, when interviewees felt revealing this personal information could be counterproductive, they opted to conceal it and use their ability to *pass* as male or female to obtain a successful outcome. However, this tactic especially drains interviewees’ emotional and mental energies. While sometimes recognizing its instrumental nature, young people also state they would rather not hide their identity.

In September, maybe, I will be living in a shared room because a friend of mine is going on Erasmus and will leave me her place for a few months - as a sublet. I have to meet her roommates: in that case, I thought I won't say anything,

because if I say that I am a non-binary person, they might start thinking I am problematic, like now we have to be careful about what we say or do and therefore they won't want me. In that case, I thought, I won't say anything - even my friend, she doesn't know. I said, 'I give up' in general in the search for rentals, which I had already started a while ago. When 'looking for a girl,' I would say yes. Because it's already hard to find a decent place to sleep, so I thought I won't say anything about it [being non-binary]. (Unibo Interviews Report, Italy, p. 13)

#### 6.4. Resiliency

Overall, participants developed a vast array of coping strategies to manage stress and navigate the transition smoothly:

[W]hether through physical activity, social support, self-reflection, or mindfulness practices, these strategies help build resilience, adaptability, and a positive mindset, enabling individuals to tackle challenges more confidently and maintain their mental health. (No Excuse Interviews Report, Slovenia, p. 10)

Such strategies and practices allowed participants to understand that, notwithstanding the difficulties faced, they always represent a learning momentum. As the young people encountered showed a high level of reflexivity, probably heightened by their reliance on psychological support,

a key insight was the realization of their own strength and adaptability. Some learned to accept change and to be resilient, while others learned that they can complete given tasks and carry them through to the end. Moreover, learning to seek help when needed was one of the most recurrent takeaways they would suggest to other young people experiencing similar situations. (CCB Interviews Report, Italy, p. 7)

Especially the professionals involved in the realization of focus groups highlighted the *resilient nature* of young people, whose learning path does not necessarily follows the sole path of formal education, but occurs also through a process of trials and errors that teaches them flexibility and versatility - two extremely valuable skills in the contemporary labor market (CCB Focus Group Report, Italy, p. 9). In this light, the pivotal role of the “mentor” returns, as both a coping mechanism and a means of personal and professional improvement:

One participant mentioned that finding small victories, such as successfully completing tasks or receiving positive feedback, helps boost confidence and morale during tough times. [... Another] participant shared their own experience of their first few months in a new job being overwhelming, but by seeking advice from more experienced colleagues and reflecting on their mistakes, they were able to adjust and improve (Prosec Focus Group Report, Spain, p. 10-11).



## Conclusions: recommendations and insights

Young people's mental and emotional health is increasingly recognized as a critical issue in Europe, shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by broader social factors. In fact, structural uncertainties, such as unemployment risks and occupational precarity, undermine their economic independence, housing stability, personal relationships, and social inclusion. As contemporary challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and ongoing global conflicts (e.g., in Ukraine and Palestine) exacerbate these pressures, the cumulative effects of these “external stressors” reveal that young people's mental and emotional wellbeing is deeply influenced by systemic social changes, and not just individual vulnerabilities.

The present report highlighted the need to address these intertwined challenges adopting a social-psychological perspective and focusing on the school-to-work transitions - a phase where external pressures significantly impact (either positively or negatively) young people's mental health (Chapter 1). To achieve this, it built on the research activities conducted within the “Mind the Gap” project, which involved organizations from five countries: Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, and Spain. (chapter 2). Its interdisciplinary, intersectional, and interprofessional approach is reflected in the adoption of both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of young people's experiences of mental and emotional health during the school-to-work transition.

AnciLab designed, administered, and analyzed an original survey aimed at young people aged 16-29 to assess the level of awareness of mental and emotional health and the related needs within the broader population, collecting a total of 1,464 responses. The University of Bologna supervised and guided partner organizations in conducting a total of 93 semi-structured interviews with young people aged 16-29, focusing on those navigating the school-to-work transition and facing a diverse range of vulnerabilities. Finally, Consorzio Comunità Brianza (CCB) supported partners in organizing and implementing a total of 17 focus groups with 112 professionals from the fields of work and education who engage directly with young people during this transitional phase.

Chapter 3 through 6 we analyzed and discussed the main results of these research activities. By integrating quantitative and qualitative results, Chapter 3 highlighted the primary challenges young people face during the transition from education to employment, with a particular focus on the emotional impact they generated. (Chapter 3). Chapters 4 and 5 examined the critical role of

external actors in this transitional phase, emphasizing the importance of informal and formal support networks, respectively. These networks provide young people with a “safe space” to critically reflect on their experiences and devise innovative and creative solutions to everyday challenges. Notably, in young people’s lived experiences, the discussion of supportive communities in the workplace emerges as a strikingly absent: coworkers and employers, whose roles are equally pivotal, often fail to provide the inclusive environments that all interviewees identified as essential for their mental and emotional wellbeing in the workplace. Lastly, in Chapter 6, we turned to coping mechanisms and practices that can help young people manage the anxiety and stress associated with entering the workforce and navigating new workplace relations and dynamics.

The insights gained from the firsthand accounts of young people and the professionals supporting them during school-to-work transitions are vital for advancing research in this field and shaping the next dissemination phases of the “Mind the Gap” project. By placing young people’s experiences at the center of educational and work-related services, the project highlights the critical importance of addressing mental and emotional health during this transitional phase. It further underlines the essential role professionals play in fostering and supporting youth wellbeing. Consequently, the recommendations and insights derived from the project focus on three key areas, discussing the role of: schools and universities, workplace dynamics, and relationships with professionals and peers.

## **At school/university**

Educational curricula are often viewed as overly theoretical and insufficiently practical, with ongoing concerns about student-work opportunities, internships, and volunteering - primarily due to fears of exploitation. To address this concern, educational programs should emphasise **the importance of emotional well-being and self-discovery** from an early age, while aligning more closely with job market demands. A **holistic approach** that considers individual needs is essential, as focusing solely on employability risks neglecting the emotional and mental challenges associated with the school-to-work transition.

Moreover, schools and universities should implement activities that **identify and nurture individual talents and skills**. This includes supporting young people in recognizing and developing transferable skills to boost their confidence and competencies as they enter the



workforce. Additionally, young people have expressed the **need for "adulting tools"** to help manage the responsibilities of adulthood, such as financial literacy and personal management skills, as well as coping with the emotions tied to major life transitions.

In this light, **effective and updated orienteering** is crucial to offer comprehensive guidance on educational and career paths, including continuing studies, taking a gap year, volunteering, or civil service. This should extend beyond matching job market demand and supply to **improving communication and visibility of existing opportunities**. Guidance should also inform young people about available services and working conditions, such as work-life balance policies and workers' rights, fostering **informed and empowered transition** into the professional world.

## Workplace dynamics

The workplace is one of the primary settings where individuals spend a significant portion of their daily lives, whether physically or symbolically (e.g., remote work). In this light, listening and sharing young people's experiences while entering the labor market is crucial to understanding how workplace dynamics and relations can positively or negatively influence their mental and emotional well-being.

A notable **generational divide** emerges, with young people reporting greater comfort and ease in interactions with peers from younger generations. In contrast, older coworkers are often perceived as rude, intrusive, and less respectful of personal boundaries. This highlights the need for employers to foster a more **inclusive, supportive and respectful work environment** to support the emotional and mental well-being not only of young people, but also that of all their employees. Developing a supportive community network within the workplace requires prioritizing **opportunities for intergenerational dialogue** and exchange. Such initiatives enable different generations to share their experiences, collaboratively reflect on challenges, and discuss strategies for overcoming common obstacles, enhancing mutual understanding and promoting a healthy work-life balance, shifting the focus from mere production and performance to overall well-being and inclusivity. It is equally crucial to foster an **open discussions on sensitive topics**, including emotional and mental health, as well as issues related to racial, gender, age and other types of discrimination.

Moreover, young people express a strong desire for opportunities to **learn how to give and receive constructive feedback** - not only with colleagues but also with employers. This aligns with their

interest in integrating **continuous opportunities for professional development** into workplace practices. These requests underline the importance young people place on both **professional and personal growth**, highlighting their aspiration for workplaces that support the holistic development of each person. Organizations are required to have a higher reflexivity on how they operate and on the value they embrace: by addressing these needs, they can create environments that not only enhance productivity but also promote inclusivity, respect, and individual well-being.

## Relations with professionals and peers

While the importance of accessible psychological services and well-trained, inclusive professionals is often emphasized, it cannot be assumed or taken for granted. In a world where mental health and emotional well-being remain stigmatized, young people have highlighted the critical need to overcome the fear of **seeking help to improve their mental and emotional health**. Organizations and institutions must prioritize **comprehensive career guidance and robust mental health support systems** that encourage open conversations about the emotional dimensions of the school-to-work transition. In this context, teachers, professors, and professionals - as well as coworkers and employers - can (and should) play a pivotal role as reliable and sensitive **mentors**. By fostering an empathetic approach, these actors can create environments that support young people's emotional well-being while easing their transition into the professional world.

Peers and families were occasionally identified as sources of stress and competition, yet nearly all interviewees highlighted **social interactions and relationships with friends and partners as vital coping mechanisms** for managing the emotional and mental burdens of the school-to-work transition. Young people demonstrated an ability to self-reflect, analyze their experiences, and independently challenge their perspectives while redefining their coping strategies. However, a strong need for dialogue and discussion with others emerged, emphasizing the value of comparing experiences, solutions, and strategies to creatively navigate similar challenges.

In this light, **promoting informal learning opportunities** becomes a powerful tool. Such settings allow young people to share their stories, engage in discussions on sensitive topics like mental and emotional well-being, and **participate in ludic activities that foster engagement and openness**. These initiatives challenge the traditional approach of designing policies for young people without considering their input, instead positioning them as **“co-creators of solutions”** - a perspective that recognizes young individuals as competent and resourceful, already equipped with many of the

skills needed to overcome the challenges of the school-to-work transition, but benefiting from guidance to fully uncover and harness their potential.

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