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# education and/for social justice

3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

# PROCEEDINGS

01

Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance



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Vol. 1  
**Inequality,  
Inclusion,  
and Governance**

Organizers and partners

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EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE	22
Young People's Transition from Education to the Labour Market and Territorial Inequities: Outcomes from INAPP Plus Survey	23
Laura Evangelista	23
Concetta Fonzo	23
Education, Evolution of Welfare Measures and New Inequalities	31
Raffaele Sibilio	31
Paola Buonanno	31
Angelo Falzarano	31
New Welfare and Social Inequalities. The Italian Case of Vocational Education and Training	35
Paola Buonanno	35
Raffaele Sibilio	35
Angelo Falzarano	35
Towards climate justice in education: a transformative change	41
Angelo Falzarano	41
Raffaele Sibilio	41
Paola Buonanno	41
Mapping NEETs in Europe and Italy: poverty, inequality and critical policy roles	48
Mirella Ferrari	48
Social Integration and Inclusion of Students with Special Needs in the Italian Higher Education System: a Case Study	76
Valentina Ghibellini	76
How can educational research assume an intersectional approach? A case study on homelessness in Brescia	85
Monica Amadini	85
Annalisa Pasini	85
New educational paradigms after the pandemic? The challenge of the educational community	93
Francesca Bianchi	93
The participation among young member as an opportunity for social transformation: Social justice within the Italian Cooperative Credit Banks	103
Alba Francesca Canta	103
Juvenile Offenders and Education: Which Tools to Pursue Social Justice?	111
Arianna Monniello	111
Intersections between disability and migratory background in educational contexts: a critical perspective	119
Maria Giulia Pascariello	119
Anna Fausta Scardigno	119
Human Capital and R&D: Unlocking Innovative Entrepreneurship through HEIs in Italy	127
Piero Esposito,	127
Francesco Ferrante	127
Sergio Scicchitano	127
Migrants' Children, Natives and Underemployment: Differences In Involuntary Part-Time Work Across Europe	138
Giorgio Piccitto	138
Educational and economic status differentials: a composition approach to social origin dimensions	146
Federica Rizzi	146
Orazio Giancola	146
Being NEET in Italy in the Post-COVID-19 Era	158
Marialuisa Villani	158
Riccardo Prandini	158

Indigenous Heritage, War Refugees or Language for Academic Purposes: Exploring language centres' social justice and vulnerable communities empowerment potential	170
Libor Stepanek	170
School Segregation and School Dropout in Public Primary Schools: The Case Study of Bologna	175
Irene Giunchi	175
Territorial Pacts: possible tools to limit social exclusion	184
Bonci Martina	184
Shaping Desires. A Workshop to Give Voice to Children from Popular Schools	192
Giulia Franchi	192
Popular Education: a Bridge to Prevent and Combat Early School Leaving and Juvenile Criminality	199
Angelica Padalino	199
Preventing early school leaving: risk factors, effective interventions and policies	205
Valeria Di Martino	205
Marta Pellegrini	205
Rosa Vegliante	205
Dropout <sup>2</sup> : the dropout on school data dropout	211
Arianna Beri	211
Laura Sara Agrati	211
Marco Lazzari	211
Review of Factors Underlying the School Dropout Phenomenon in Instruments Used with Students, Parents, and Teachers	220
Bonaiuti Giovanni	220
De Angelis Marta	220
Marras Arianna	220
Morsanuto Stefania	220
Gamification as a tool for preventing early school leaving: a possible perspective?	228
Filippo Bruni	228
Livia Petti	228
Marta De Angelis	228
Preventing Early School Leaving: Objectives and Milestones of a National Project	236
Valeria Di Martino	236
Marta Pellegrini	236
Rosa Vegliante	236
Supporting Students' Motivation: A Key Factor to Reduce Intentions to Drop Out of High School	244
Sara Germani	244
An Investigation About The Risk Factors Of School Dropout In Campania	253
Graganiello Deborah	253
Tammaro Rosanna	253
Tiso Maria	253
Peer Feedback as a Lever for Enhancing Reading Comprehension in Primary Schools: An Evidence-Based Experience	262
Antonio Marzano	262
Rossella Luongo	262
Rossella Vaccaro	262
The Role of Teachers in the Framework of Self Determination Theory: A Research Training Project	269
Sergio Miranda	269
Ludovico Vespasiani	269
Early school leaving in Camorra Territories: An Exploratory Research on the Motivation to Study	277
Carmen Lucia Moccia	277
Fausta Sabatano	277
Paola Aiello	277

The interprofessional collaboration between teachers and school social workers for the prevention of school failure and early school leaving. The <i>Provaci Ancora Sam!</i> project	284
Paolo Bianchini	284
Francesco Pongiluppi	284
Stepping out of Failure Stories by Stepping in the <i>Kepler Lab</i> : a Quasi-Experiment on Affective-Motivational and Instructional Mechanisms of Progressing	292
Marco Spampinato	292
Andrea Conficoni	292
Educational policies and the Neet phenomenon in Campania Region	303
Rosa Vegliante	303
Coppola Margherita	303
The vertical structure of educational inequalities in Italy	311
Adamo Lo Cicero	311
Orazio Giancola	311
Non-Predicted trajectories: educational choices over the reproduction of predicted paths	322
Matteo Bonanni	322
Orazio Giancola	322
Do decentralized campuses promote equality of educational opportunity? The case of the University of Turin	332
Federica Cornali	332
Valentina Goglio	332
I'll Be a Doctor: Medical Specialization Choices from a Gender Perspective	342
Domenico Carbone	342
Joselle Dagnes	342
Emerging Youth, Ideal Ages of Transition to Adulthood and Students' Post-diploma School Choices	351
Giuliana Parente	351
The choice of field of study at the tertiary level: the analytic approach of mapping 2.0 and main results	359
Federica Rizzi	359
Adamo Lo Cicero	359
Orazio Giancola	359
School choice and job expectations of Italian pupils after the covid19 pandemic	373
Marialuisa Villani	373
<b>EPISTEMOLOGIES AND DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES</b>	<b>383</b>
Unschooling in Italy: Navigating Idealisations, Constraints, and Decolonising Promises	384
Anna Chinazzi	384
Emilio Ruffolo	384
Angela Biscaldi	384
Critical unschooling: practicing unschooling and a closer look	393
Morena Franzin	393
Free Play And Its Benefits For A Democratic Society	404
Marco Leali	404
Critical Unschooling: an Educational Choice for Self-Determination and a Challenge to the Dominant Concept of Success and Well being	412
Valeria Melloni	412
Critical Unschooling: A Conscious Psychosocial Strategy Against the Influences of Individualism and Neoliberalism And For a More Compassionate Society	420
Elena Piffero	420
Benefits of an Unschooling Experience and the Lack of Unschooling Characters in the Entertainment Media	428
Jacopo Silvestre	428

Critical unschooling for a democratic idea of childhood and adolescence	433
Nunzia Vezzola	433
Carlo Leali	433
Against School Stigmatization: Successes, Conflicts and Main Challenges of the Educational Community of the Pisacane School	441
Adriano Cancellieri	441
Fabrizia Cannella	441
The disciplinary notes and the shaping of student subjectivities	448
Caterina Donattini	448
Beyond Deficit Thinking: From Epistemic Subjugation to the Decolonisation of Thought and Knowledge in the Classroom	456
Paola Dusi	456
Becoming a “Space Defector” or when Inequalities Meet Social Justice in Architectural Education. The Case of the Nantes School of Architecture	464
Bettina Horsch	464
Pauline Ouvrard	464
The overqualification of Eastern EU migrants: A gendered and sectoral approach	479
Montanari Maria Giulia	479
Neuromyth and Gender Stereotypes	488
Valeria Minaldi	488
School dropout and Active Citizenship. A social and sustainable experience in Lombardy.	494
Lisa Sacerdote	494
Annaletizia La Fortuna	494
Nicola Morea	494
Luisa Zecca	494
Inclusion Beyond the Conflict: Perspectives on Inclusive Education in the East-Jerusalem Context	503
Arianna Taddei	503
Tommaso Santilli	503
Samah Halwany	503
<b>NEOLIBERALISM IN/AND EDUCATION</b>	<b>511</b>
Health Promotion and Co-planning of an Affectivity and Sexuality Education Laboratory with Adults with Intellectual Disabilities, Parents and Social	512
Gabriele Buono	512
Carmen Ferraro	512
Democratic Education? Learner Voice and Adult Education in Ireland	520
Thomas Murray	520
Aisting Meyler	520
Abilitating Digital Learning to Innovate VET and Adult Education: Field Practices Supporting Policy Implementation	528
Elena Pacetti	528
Serena Foracchia	528
Alessandro Soriani	528
Laura Zambrini	528
Skills development for social justice?: A critical reading of adult education policies in the European and the Greek context	536
Eleni Prokou	536
Georgios Koulaouzides	536
Radicalization and Post-Critical Perspective	545
Claudio Melacarne	545
Exploring the Normative Assumptions of the “Inclusion Paradigm” through the Lens of Three Social Justice Theories	553
Marie Verhoeven	553
Amandine Bernal Gonzalez	553

An inclusive glance on local heritage: fostering engagement among High School students	561
Marianna Di Rosa	561
Sara Ovidi	561
Nicoletta Zucca	561
Pedagogies of social enquiry for democracies of the commons	566
Jean-François Dupeyron	566
Inclusion and Exclusion through Time? A Commons Perspective on Time	574
Sylvia Jäde	574
Judith von der Heyde	574
Conditions and Potentials for Educational Commons to Promote More Equal and Inclusive Education: A Swedish Case Study	582
Liselott Mariett Olsson	582
Robert Lecusay	582
Children as cultural actors: participation and active citizenship through Heritage Education	589
Ludovica Sebastiano	589
Francesca Berti	589
Simone Seitz	589
Social Investment Strategies in Education. An Investigation of Italian Case Studies	597
Arianna Montemurro	597
Between Spatial and Social Justice – The Case of Lifelong Learning Policymaking	613
Jozef Zelinka	613
Marcelo Parreira do Amaral	613
Generations, Education and Common Values: a study on five Italian cohort-generations, from the Reconstruction to Gen Z	621
Matteo Bonanni	621
Education and Social Cohesion in Europe: Testing the Post-Modernization Thesis	630
Loris Vergolini	630
University studies and changes in <i>habitus</i>	640
Emanuela Susca	640
Elena Gremigni	640
University studies and changes in <i>habitus</i> . Exploratory research on first-generation students	644
Elena Gremigni	644
To Leave or Not to Leave: Experiences of University-Student Dropouts in Croatia	652
Iva Odak	652
Nikola Baketa	652
Saša Puzić	652
<b>POLICY AND GOVERNANCE IN EDUCATION</b>	<b>660</b>
Continuing Vocational Training in Italy, Between Unresolved Issues and New Scenarios	661
Roberto Angotti	661
Continuing Vocational Training in Italy: Unresolved Issues and New Scenarios	665
Roberto Angotti	665
Giovanna Campanella	665
Alberto Vergani	665
Key Issues for Continuing Vocational Training Policies in Italy, based on the Results of the Inapp Survey INDACO-Companies	673
Roberto Angotti	673
Luca Dordit	673
The Impact of Smart Working on Reskilling and Upskilling Processes in the Private and Public Sectors in Italy: a First Analysis	681
Giuditta Occhiocupo	681
Alessandra Pedone	681

The Curriculum as a key lever for achieving Equitable, Inclusive, and Accessible Early Childhood Care and Education	689
Eloise Drure	689
New Quality Assurance Approaches: Outcomes Of An Integrated Peer Review Experimentation In Italian VET Schools And Training Centres	697
Laura Evangelista	697
Concetta Fonzo	697
Beyond Expectations: How Much does the Structure of European education Systems Affects Students' Performance?	705
Iacopo Moreschini	705
Matteo Bonanni	705
Pathways for Transversal Competencies and Orientation (PCTO) as a Device for Developing Personal Resources and Contrasting Scholastic Dispersion	714
Valentina Pagani	714
Elisa Truffelli	714
Barbara Balconi	714
Roberta Biolcati	714
Guido Benvenuto	714
Giulia Gabriella Pastori	714
Elisabetta Nigris	714
Mara Marini	714
Sara Germani	714
Giuliana Viscuso	714
Martina Rossi	714
Giacomo Mancini	714
Irene Stanzione	714
Evidence, Myths and Teaching Practices: The Case of Teaching Reading in Italian Schools	719
Sergio Miranda	719
Antonio Calvani	719
Paola Damiani	719
Lorena Montesano	719
Luciana Ventriglia	719
Proving Impact in Complex Programs. Challenges, Opportunities and Consequences for Practice Using the Example of the Federal Program "Live Democracy!"	729
Alexander Stärck	729
Systematic Review: Quality Assurance Mechanisms And Evidence-Based Approaches in Guidance	736
Concetta Fonzo	736
Enric Serradell López	736
School Communities And Educational Evaluation: Reflections, Experiences, Perspectives	744
Carla Gueli	744
Cristiano Corsini	744
Formative Assessment Practices to "Leave No Student Behind": An Experiment to Enhance Text Comprehension Abilities in the Lower Secondary School	751
Elisa Guasconi	751
Formative Assessment in Preschool for Inclusive Education	761
Iolanda Sara Iannotta	761
Roberta Scarano	761
Alessia Notti	761
The Effectiveness of PCTO on School-To-Work Transition in Italy: the Point of View of External Tutors	769
Alessandra Decataldo	769
Sara Recchi	769
Valentina Pacetti	769

The (re)production of social inequalities through the lens of PCTOs: Micro-macro Mechanisms for Project Adhesion and Evaluation of Experience	778
Antonio Fasanella	778
Veronica Lo Presti	778
Maria Paola Faggiano	778
Orazio Giancola	778
Fiorenzo Parziale	778
Michela Cavagnuolo	778
Maria Dentale	778
Andrea Carlini	788
Francesca Penner	788
Christian Poggi	788
Scuola Diffusa (Widespread School) in Reggio Emilia and its Effect on Teaching Methodologies and Classrooms Relations	797
Michele Campanini	797
Chiara Bertolini	797
Laura Landi	797
Interprofessional experiences to overcome some potential inequalities in learning context	806
Giuseppina Cannella	806
RETI Project: Innovative processes toward educational communities	813
Irene Culcasi	813
Maura Benedetti	813
Marcella Tellini	813
Italo Fiorin	813
For a Sustainable Idea of Scuola Diffusa (Widespread School): Meanings, Practices and Characteristics	821
Paola Damiani	821
Moises Esteban Guitart	821
Edgar Iglesias Vida	821
Laura Landi	821
Bridging the gap: implementing Inner Areas governance in education. A case study of the Territorial Educational Pact of Casentino	830
Luca Grisolini	830
Giovanna Del Gobbo	830
Giulia Biagi	830
Francesco De Maria	830
The Social Contract for Education and Educational Territorial Pacts: Pedagogical Innovation and Territorial Governance. A Multilevel Analysis of the Verona Case	839
Giuseppina Rita Jose Mangione	839
Stefania Chipa	839
Rudi Bartolini	839
Chiara Zanoccoli	839
Examining the Role of Global Citizenship Education in the Context of Unesco's Recent Report and Recommendation	851
Massimiliano Tarozzi	851
Reframing University. Impact and Relational Value in the Higher Education System	859
Valentina Martino	859
Lucia D'Ambrosi	859
Paolo Brescia	859
Vytautas Beniušis	859
Growing Public Engagement Initiatives Signaling Changing Functions in Italian Universities	868
Barbara Grüning	868
The social mission of a Southern university. Stories worth telling	876
Emanuela Pascuzzi	876
Stefania Chimenti	876



The transformative mission of universities: Personal trajectories and institutional drivers of community engaged scholarship	884
Andrea Vargiu	884
Emanuela Reale	884
Andrea Orazio Spinello	884
Valentina Ghibellini	884
<b>DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE EDUCATIONAL FIELD</b>	<b>892</b>
The Experience of School Victimization Among Adolescent Adoptees	893
Laura Ferrari	893
Sonia Ranieri	893
Rosa Rosnati	893
Simona Caravita	893
Open adoption: educational reflections and pedagogical proposals on the recent jurisprudential interpretation of the Constitutional Court (judgment 183/2023) offering new perspectives on the protection of the child	898
Angela Muschitiello	898
Michele Corriero	898
For a culture of foster care	909
Paola Ricchiardi	909
Residential Foster Care Homes as Tools for Social Equity and Empowerment. A Study about Foster Care in a Region of Northern Italy C. Scivoletto	916
Stefania Fucci	916
Matteo Davide Allodi	916
Irene Valotti	916
Adoption and Foster Care: Analysis, Reflections and Best practice on Equality and Social Justice at School and in the Educational System	925
Alessia Tabacchi	925
Anna Guerrieri	925
Caterina Balenzano	925
Monya Ferritti	925
Being Well at School: Equity between Well-Being and Student-Centred Pedagogy	931
Anna Granata	931
Valerio Ferrero	931
Using <i>Pereživanje</i> in Autobiographical Memory Activities Within the Class Group	935
Stefano Costantini	935
Bringing Education Back to School: An Action Research Project to Strengthen Teacher Professionalism and Avoid the Medicalisation of Schooling	943
Valerio Ferrero	943
Anna Granata	943
Listening to Silent Voices: An Investigation into the Student Voice Approach to Promote Inclusiveness and Student Well-being	953
Federica Festa	953
Alice Di Leva	953
The <i>Writing Workshop</i> as a student-centred approach: strengths and weaknesses	962
Charlotte Kohlloffel	962
The Children of Mixed Couples in the Postdigital Age: When Digital and Intercultural Competences Come Together	979
Stefano Pasta	979
Michele Marangi	979
The Contribution of Complexity Epistemology to a Critical Analysis of the “Child at the Center” Pedagogical Imperative	989
Letizia Rota	989
Equity, Justice, Inclusion at Schools	997
Giorgia Ruzzante	997
Wellbeing at school: Between different languages and family cultures	1001
Silvia Sordella	1001

Adolescents, well-being and media practices: analysis of students' experiences in the Metropolitan City of Bologna.	1011
Paolo Bonafede	1011
Alessandro Soriani	1011
Elena Pacetti	1011
Philosophy for Children, Character Skills and Well-being in the Classroom	1022
Nicolò Valenzano	1022
Federico Zamengo	1022
Design of school contexts and an inclusive curriculum according to the Universal Design for Learning approach: results of the exploratory phase	1029
Maria Antonietta Augenti	1029
Cognitive Disabilities And Personalised Learning: The Case Study Of The Agenzia Formativa Of The Province Of Varese	1037
Francesca Brognoli	1037
Alessandro Curti	1037
Daniela Martarelli	1037
The Individualized Strategy for an Inclusive School	1046
Silvia Fioretti	1046
Participation of students with disabilities in education, training and labour systems: an issue of equal opportunities	1053
Ivana Guzzo	1053
Rethinking Education: A Three-Dimensional Approach in the Context of Contemporary Challenges	1063
Patrizia Lotti	1063
Bridging Theory and Practice: The Role of Training of Trainers in Promoting Inclusive Education	1073
Alessandro Monchietto	1073
Cecilia Marchisio	1073
Decision-Making and Justice: Unraveling the Threads of Social Equity	1081
Teresa Rinaldi	1081
Annalisa Valle	1081
Individual variables influencing successful choices in international work mobility	1087
Diego Boerchi	1087
Teresa Rinaldi	1087
Can The school context foster altruism? Preliminary evidence from children playing the Dictator Game in "Scuola Senza Zaino" method	1097
Ilaria Castelli	1097
Nicole Zanga	1097
Empowering Future Generations: The Crucial Role of Parents in Shaping Financial Decision-Making Skills	1105
Teresa Rinaldi	1105
Annalisa Valle	1105
Antonella Marchetti	1105
Decoding Childhood Prosocial Decision-Making: the Role of Mentalization and Personality Traits in School-Age Children	1111
Annalisa Valle	1111
Elisabetta Lombardi	1111
Cinzia Di Dio	1111
Ilaria Castelli	1111
Davide Massaro	1111
Antonella Marchetti	1111
Comparing Teaching Methodologies for the Development of Financial Literacy in a Primary School: An Explorative and Evidence-Based Study	1119
Giovanna Andreatti	1119
Daniele Morselli	1119
Monica Parricchi	1119
Doris Kofler	1119

Financial Knowledge and Household Vulnerability. Evidence from Italy	1128
Riccardo Grazioli	1128
Financial Education in Italy: Training The Future Teachers	1136
Claudia Maurini	1136
Luca Refrigeri	1136
Carlotta Rossi	1136
Maria Irde Vangelisti	1136
Providing access to 'powerful' financial knowledge: A financial literacy programme for school students	1144
Emanuel Mizzi	1144
The Relation between Experience, Education and AI	1153
Alessio Fabiano	1153
Giuseppe Spadafora	1153
Artificial Intelligence and Language Learning: What Opportunities for Allophone Learners	1159
Marika Calenda	1159
Storytelling with AI. A New Paradigm for the School of the Next Years	1167
Andrea Cirolia	1167
Experience, Theater and Politics for an Inclusive and Democratic School	1173
Vincenza Costantino	1173
Educating Artificial Intelligence to enhance uniqueness	1181
Concetta Ferrantino	1181
Roberta Scarano	1181
Marika Calenda	1181
Education of the Future: an Integrated Approach between John Dewey and Artificial Intelligence. What Perspective for Children with Special Educational Needs?	1189
Carolina Leva	1189
How to Face Artificial Tyranny. How good Thinking saves Democracy in the in the AI Era	1196
Aldo Pisano	1196
Reflexivity: Lights and Shadows of the relationship between technology and education	1203
Maria Sammarro	1203
Silvestro Malara	1203
Added value and school effectiveness for a democratic school	1211
Vincenzo Nunzio Scalcione	1211
Caring Professions in Superdiverse Societies: A Study on Social Work Students with Migration Background	1220
Maria Grazia Galantino	1220
Francesca Messineo	1220
Inclusive societies and equity in education: experiences and opportunities through Service Learning for cultural change	1228
Silvia Guetta	1228
Patrizia Lotti	1228
Lorenza Orlandini	1228
Emotions on stage: an International Service-Learning experience in Brazil with children and adolescents, based on a GloCal approach	1233
Nicola Andrian	1233
Giulia Sailis	1233
Enhancing Global Engagement: Insights from the FLY Program in European Interuniversity Service-Learning	1243
Irene Culcasi	1243
Alzbeta Brozmanová Gregorová	1243
Maria Cinque	1243
Milagros Avila Olías	1243
Aitor Arbaiza Valero	1243

Intersections among Higher Education, Peace Education, Sustainability and Service Learning: civic engagement for the present and the future	1250
Silvia Guetta	1250
The Pensare In Grande/Thinking Big Project: A Paradigm for Democratic Education	1263
Vanessa Macchia	1263
Stefania Torri	1263
Gianluca Amatori	1263
Silvia Maggiolini	1263
Moira Sannipoli	1263
Integrating Opera Into Service Learning: a multidisciplinary approach in training future teachers	1271
Benedetta Miro	1271
Alessandra La Marca	1271
Educational Innovation for Social Transformation. Building Inclusive Cultures and Professionalism through University Service Learning	1279
Maria Moscato	1279
Francesca Pedone	1279
Cinzia Novara	1279
Gaetano Di Napoli	1279
It is Interprofessional Teamworks in the school context: Service-Learning projects in the Empoli area between formal and nonformal education	1289
Massimiliano Naldini	1289
Patrizia Lotti	1289
The contribution of Service Learning to counter educational poverty. The experiences of the “Avanguardie educative” Movement	1298
Lorenza Orlandini	1298
Massimiliano Naldini	1298
Best practices from the Enhance project	1308
Giorgia Pasquali	1308
Anita Montagna	1308
Andrea Marconi	1308
Sabina Falconi	1308
Empowering Education: Integrating Design for Change and Service-Learning for Socially Committed Learning Experiences	1317
Juan Peña-Martínez	1317
Stefania Falchi	1317
Antioco Luigi Zurru	1317
Service-Learning In Italy and Spain. A Comparative Analysis Of The Two Educational experiences	1324
Jady Safira Silveira	1324
Fostering Active Citizenship and Ethical Professionalism: A Service-Learning Paradigm for Translator Education	1332
Stempniewicz Patrycja Lidia	1332
Bernardini Silvia	1332
Measuring Flexible Furniture Impact on Students’ and Teachers’ Learning Experience	1340
Giuseppina Cannella	1340
Wesley Imms	1340
Silvia Panzavolta	1340
The impact of school furniture on students’ engagement. An international single subject research study	1348
Stefania Chipa	1348
Elena Mosa	1348
Julia Morris	1348
Can innovation and inclusion coexist?	1356
Matteo Di Pietrantonio	1356

The “Student Voice” from “Dante-Carducci” School in Piacenza (Italy). Well-Being, Inclusion and Learning Environments: What the Students Think, Like and Dislike?	1364
Mariagrazia Francesca Marcarini	1364
Francesca Lunardini	1364
Filippo Rebecchi	1364
Lucia Tagliaferri	1364
Wall-Less Schooling as a Device for Social Justice	1376
Emilio Ruffolo	1376
Doing research with schools, bridging space and education	1384
Beate Christine Weyland	1384
Andrea Zini	1384
Free University of Bozen-Bolzano; University of Modena and Reggio Emilia	1384
Nonviolence in education for social justice	1392
Francesca Ursula Bitetto	1392
Nonviolent Relationships to Change the Culture of Victory and Domination: Experiences and Practices at School	1397
Annabella Coiro	1397
Nonviolent Theory and Practice in Aldo Capitini: The International Seminar on Nonviolent Techniques (Perugia, 1963)	1405
Emanuele Follenti	1405
Civic Education To Support Nonviolence And Democracy	1412
Sabina Langer	1412
School dropout in the perspectives of parents: Insights from a qualitative study in a peripheral neighbourhood in Milan	1421
Anna Chinazzi	1421
Alessandra Mussi	1421
Project Evaluation of “Oltre i confini. Un modello di scuola aperta al territorio” – Against school dropout: an integrated approach	1430
Rebecca Coacci	1430
Walter Moro	1430
Peer tutoring to prevent school dropout. The case of a high school in San Siro	1439
Valeria Cotza	1439
For those who fall behind: Examining Language and Cultural Enhancement Practices in Milan’s extra-school services	1447
Lefterov Petar Vasilev	1447
Strengthen the School-family-services partnership through the implementation of the P.I.P.P.I LEPS	1456
Claudia Marcellan	1456
Paola Milani	1456
Preventing and combating early school leaving since early childhood. Towards a dynamic, situated and eco-systemic approach to promote equality, social cohesion and justice	1464
Luisa Zecca	1464
Chiara Bove	1464
Social Inclusion Through Sport and Physical Education	1469
Luciana Taddei	1469
Luca Bianchi	1469
Social justice and ageing: older learners as active citizens in a complex system	1474
Vanna Boffo	1474
Laura Formenti	1474
Activating the Potential of Older Adults: Education and Active Aging in Italy	1479
Michele Bertani	1479
Donatella Bramanti	1479
Sara Nanetti	1479

Elder Active Citizens and Community Engagement	1488
Giulia Biagi	1488
Giovanna Del Gobbo	1488
Francesco De Maria	1488
Cristina Banchi	1488
Sofia Marconi	1488
Education, Learning and Skills for Active Ageing: an Italian Research on Good Practices	1495
Vanna Boffo	1495
Debora Daddi	1495
Christel Schachter	1495
Empowering Active Aging with Limited Autonomy: a Training Proposal to Enhance the Skills of Home Caregivers for Frail Older People	1504
Elisa Bruni	1504
Elena Luppi	1504
Aurora Ricci	1504
Active Ageing for Cultural Services: focus on Elderly Population in Inland Areas	1512
Giovanna Del Gobbo	1512
Sofia Marconi	1512
Cristina Banchi	1512
Giulia Biagi	1512
Francesco De Maria	1512
Learning in longevity: a critical ecosystemic approach to research and intervention	1520
Laura Formenti	1520
Davide Cino	1520
Francesca Romana Loberto	1520
Active Ageing and the Challenges of Digitalisation. Experiences from the Social Research Active.It	1528
Giulia Melis	1528
Dario Pizzul	1528
Enhancing Well-being and Autonomy in Active Aging: A Montessori Perspective. The case study 'G. Palena'	1536
Patrizia Palmieri	1536
Università di Foggia	1536
Social Participation, Education and Healthy Ageing in Italy	1544
Paolo Pasetti	1544
Loris Vergolini	1544
Developing Age-Friendly Cities for promoting Active Ageing: State of the Art in Europe	1554
Maria Grazia Proli	1554
"Università dell'Età Libera" for Active Ageing. Fostering well-being and social inclusion through language learning in later life	1563
Inmaculada Solís García	1563
Valentina Antonina Pipicella	1563
Davide Bonaiuti	1563
Autobiography and Quality Longevity	1572
Fabio Togni	1572
Vanna Boffo	1572
Social Media Representations of Disability. A Study on Italian Influencers	1579
Antonia Cava	1579
Fabrizia Pasciuto	1579
Maria Angela Galizia	1579
Unleashing potential: exploring the role of non formal education in digital transformation for social inclusion	1588
Nadia Crescenzo	1588

The Triangle P+: A Transmedia Catalyst for Family Inclusion in Parenting Education	1596
Arnau Erta-Majó	1596
Eduard Vaquero	1596
Aida Urrea-Monclús	1596
Maria Àngels Balsells	1596
The diversity challenge for higher education. Barriers and opportunities in updating educational settings to deal with international students and guarantee equal and inclusive multicultural environments	1606
Isabella Pescarmona	1606
Roberta Ricucci	1606
Anna Miglietta	1606
Transforming Initial Teacher Education for Plurilingual Competence: Insights from an Erasmus+ Project in a Heterogeneous School	1611
Luca Angelone	1611
International mobility, resources and inclusion of incoming students: preliminary data from the VAMOS project with Spanish students	1619
Aurelia De Lorenzo	1619
Elga Zedda	1619
Antonio Lucas-Alba	1619
Emanuela Rabaglietti	1619
Addressing Linguistic (In)equality in Higher Education: A Case Study of Social Justice and Multilingualism at the University of Luxembourg	1628
Argyro-Maria Skourmalla	1628
Faculty Development, inclusion and attention for diversity: participants' reflections at the IRIDI START course at the University of Turin	1636
Emanuela Maria Teresa Torre	1636
Federica Emanuel	1636
The educational poverty of minors with a migratory background: experiences, analysis, challenges	1645
Giovanna Filosa	1645
Patrizia Rinaldi	1645
Disability Models in Education: What Fits the B.E.S. Category?	1650
Denis De Almeida Barros	1650
Leisure Time Use and the Third Sector's Role in Combating Educational Poverty of Minors with a Migratory Background	1658
Francesca Gabrielli	1658
Migrant Minors between Discrimination and Educational opportunities. A Research Perspective on Italian contemporaneity	1667
Giulia Gozzelino	1667
Federica Matera	1667
From Integration to Inclusion. The Educational Challenge in Msna Interventions Between Trauma, Learning Disabilities And Inclusive Teaching	1675
Francesca Oggiano	1675
Teaching language through literary texts: a possible didactic strategy for the Italian as a second language classroom	1682
Ilaria Usalla	1682
The Current Value of <i>Lettera a Una Professoressa</i> for the Sociology of Education: A Book for Parents	1690
Gian Luca Battilocchi	1690
Don Milani Generative Center. Looking for the present "Barbiana Schools" to promote the idea of Actualization	1698
Viola Davini	1698
Eugenio Pandolfini	1698
'The Word' sets You free: Don Milani's Revolutionary Anti-idealistic and Maieutic Approach	1707
Vanessa Lamattina	1707

The Cronobook of Don Milani's Life: An Intersection of Philology and Criticism in Revitalizing his Legacy	1714
Marco Sbardella	1714
The Topicality of the School of Barbiana on the Centenary of the Birth of don Lorenzo Milani	1723
Marco Sbardella	1723
<b>GENDER AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION</b>	<b>1727</b>
Female Bullying at School. The Multidimensionality of Violence Among Adolescent Girls	1728
Antonia De Vita	1728
Giuseppe Burgio	1728
Francesco Vittori	1728
Lights and Shadows of Adolescence Between Social Stigma and the Need for Recognition: A Phenomenology of Female Bullying	1733
Maria Gabriella Landuzzi	1733
Paola Dusi	1733
Girl-to-Girl Bullying in Irish Schools: a call to intra-action & response-ability	1741
Vanessa Rutherford	1741
A Gender Perspective on Bullying. Findings from a National Survey	1757
Irene D. M. Scierri	1757
Federico Batini	1757
Bridging Gender Gaps in STEM Employment: Insights from La Sapienza University Graduates	1767
Giulio Lucentini	1767
Astrid Favela	1767
Valeria Bruno	1767
A Coding Workshop Against Gender Bias	1776
Scicchitano Emanuela	1776
Del Vecchio Anna	1776
Ensuring gender equity in promoting Computational Thinking in Primary School. A systematic review	1785
Francesco Claudio Ugolini	1785
Panagiotis Kakavas	1785
Gender, Interculture, Educational Perspectives. Analysis and Contrast of Gender and Ethnic-based Violence Dynamics	1794
Carla Roverselli	1794
Scouts and Guides' Experience of Coeducation to Prevent Violence and Build Positive Gender	1799
Paola Dal Toso	1799
Intersectional and Gender Perspectives: a Research on Trafficked Refugee Women	1806
Gaetana Tiziana Iannone	1806
Alias career and non-binary students in the Italian Educational Institution	1814
Richard Bourelly	1814
Learning about the queer. Deconditioning imaginaries and education	1821
Silvia Nanni	1821
Homosexual sons and daughters: why we should understand, support and love them	1831
Massimiliano Stramaglia	1831
Stereotyped Social Representations of Gender Violence and Mafia	1839
Sabrina Garofalo	1839
The Role of Italian LGBTQ+ Centres Against Discrimination (CAD) in the Public Sphere. A Case Study	1846
Fabio Mostaccio	1846



Discrimination as a Form of Gender-Based Violence: Consequences of Sexist Stereotypes on the Transgender Community	1854
Social Conflicts and the Public Sphere. The use of gender stereotypes by political parties and movements in Italy	1863
Milena Meo	1863
Antonio Tramontana	1863
Organizing Committee	1872
Volunteer Staff	1873
Scientific Committee	1874
Promoters and Partners	1876

Stream A

**EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES  
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

# YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRANSITION FROM EDUCATION TO THE LABOUR MARKET AND TERRITORIAL INEQUITIES: OUTCOMES FROM INAPP PLUS SURVEY

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Since 2005, the INAPP-Plus Survey has monitored Italy's labour market dynamics, particularly focusing on job supply. Conducted by INAPP (formerly ISFOL), this national longitudinal survey includes 45,000 interviews and addresses key labour issues such as youth employment, gender participation, and regional disparities. Its latest edition specifically examines the challenges faced by young Italians (aged 18–29) in transitioning from education to employment. The study reveals persistent difficulties, including precarious job offers, underpayment, and roles with limited responsibilities or risk of under-classification. These issues are unevenly distributed across geographic areas and educational qualifications. Additionally, compared to their European peers, Italian youth face greater obstacles in accessing stable and rewarding employment, highlighting structural inefficiencies in the national labour market. The paper provides an in-depth analysis of these barriers, integrating qualitative and quantitative data, and explores the role of gender, urbanization, and access to guidance services in shaping labour outcomes. It situates these findings within broader socioeconomic and territorial inequalities, emphasizing the low valorisation of youth in Italy's production system.

education, training, labour market, transitions, territorial inequalities.

## INTRODUCTION

The transition from education to employment is a critical phase in the life course of young people, shaping their economic and social trajectories. Across Europe, this transition has become increasingly complex, marked by structural changes in labour markets, evolving skill demands, and shifting demographic trends. These challenges are particularly pronounced in Italy, where the interplay of economic, social, and institutional factors exacerbates difficulties for young people seeking stable and meaningful employment.

In the European context, disparities in youth employment outcomes are closely tied to differences in educational systems, labour market structures, and socioeconomic conditions. Current levels of youth unemployment must be examined within the broader context of heightened labour market flexibility, the expansion of higher education, rising youth migration, and the enduring impact of family histories of long-term unemployment. Unlike previous economic downturns, the response to recent challenges has been marked by a substantial increase in European-wide policies and investments aimed at complementing and reinforcing national initiatives to address these issues (Eichhorst et al., 2015). Studies highlight that young people often face prolonged periods of unemployment or precarious work, with these trends being particularly acute in Southern Europe (Eichhorst & Marx, 2015). The inadequacy of school-to-work transition mechanisms, coupled with limited opportunities for vocational training and apprenticeships, has been cited as a key barrier (Brunello & Wruuck, 2021).

The high incidence of underemployment and temporary contracts, particularly for young people, reflects structural inefficiencies in the labour market and limited alignment between education and employment demands (Maguire, 2015).

In Italy, the situation is further compounded by demographic challenges and regional inequalities. Recent data show that Italian youth are among the most disadvantaged in Europe regarding employment opportunities, with low participation in high-quality vocational training and apprenticeship programs (Istat, 2022). In the 2023 INAPP-Plus survey, some specific questions were included to highlight the difficulties young people (18-29 years old) face in the transition from school to work and, in case they are employed, what those difficulties have been (Bergamante & Luppi, 2024).

## **1. DIFFICULTIES IN THE TRANSITION FROM EDUCATION TO LABOUR MARKET**

The situation of young Italians, compared to their European peers, shows greater difficulties in gaining solid access to the labour market and a low appreciation within the production system. The economic crisis has affected this scenario, mostly by postponing the autonomy projects of young Italians and prolonging the transition to adulthood. As the Italian National Institute of Statistics explained, the joint analysis of the timing of the exit from the family of origin and of the motivations suggests that the postponement of the transition to adulthood is increasingly taking on a structural character, due to the chronic nature of the main factors that determine it: prolonged education and training pathways, difficulties in entering and remaining in the labour market (Istat, 2022).

An analysis of the data shows that the greatest difficulties encountered by young people in the transition from school to work refer first and foremost to the perceived poor quality of the job offer with short or underpaid contracts (48% of young people, with a peak of 53% in the 18 to 24 age group) or with modest positions and the risk of underemployment (37% of young people, with a peak of 45% in the 18 to 24 age group).

Subsequently, among the obstacles encountered by young people completing their education, are the absence of adequate job placement services and the feeling of being alone in tackling the complexity of entering the workforce (36% on average and 44% for the youngest) and only lastly, lack of preparation for work (31% of the total and 38% for those aged 18-24). It is thus evident that as age increases, the difficulties encountered in the transition decrease. We can assume that this is due to the maturing of experience, but perhaps, more importantly, there is a link with the employment situation, which is likely to change during the decade between the ages of 18 and 29, during which young people shift from job seeking to employment.

The data show that the differences, apart from by age group, are to be read in relation to being or not being employed. In fact, 68% of young first-time jobseekers state that they encountered difficulties related to unsatisfactory contract offers because they were short or underpaid, and there is a slight difference by age (70% in the 18-24 age group and 66% in the 25-29 age group). The share of the unemployed who highlight that contract offers are unsatisfactory is also high (62%); only 44% of the employed, on the other hand, refer to this issue and, among these, the gap increases as age increases: 49% among 18–24-year-olds and 41% among 25-29 year olds. In our interpretation,

this data is not so much related to a change in the dynamics of matching in the labour market, which is unlikely in just a few years, as in the hypothesis that with the employment situation the memory of dissatisfaction with the offer is attenuated in individuals. Moreover, it is likely that those who accept a job offer tend to ‘convince’ themselves that the offer is more satisfactory.

Although to a lesser extent, responses related to unpreparedness or inadequacy for the job are also affected by the employment condition: 42% of young people seeking their first job and 36% of unemployed young people perceive it, compared to 29% of employed young people.

More age-related elements are the difficulty in finding adequate job placement services and the feeling of not being accompanied in the transition: despite being stated by 46% of young people seeking their first job, 41% of unemployed young people and 35% of employed young people, it is interesting to point out that the difference between the 18-24 year-old employed group and the 25-29 year-old employed group reaches fourteen percentage points (43% and 29%). This suggests, on the one hand, that with the maturing of experience, there is an increased ability to navigate the services made available to citizens to accompany their entry into the world of work, and on the other hand, that employment services are not always perceived as a determining factor in finding a job. In Italy, in fact, informal channels are the dominant tool for job search, especially for young people (Bergamante & Luppi, 2024). Sending CVs and direct applications to companies are the methods most commonly used by young people, along with relying on friends, relatives or acquaintances and reading job offers in the press, while employment centres are used by only 40% of young people; little interest is observed for temporary employment agencies and participation in public competitions (Bergamante & Canal, 2018).

Analysing data, we have found that gender does not have a significant influence on the difficulties encountered by young people in the transition from education to the world of work and instead confirms age-related differences. Small noteworthy differences between the two genders are only found among the younger age group, but with opposite values: young women experience more complexities due to short or underpaid contractual offers than their male peers (56% of women aged 18 to 24 and 51% of men), who instead experience more problems related to the job description and classification proposed and considered inadequate (49% of men aged 18 to 24 and 41% of women).

## **2. HOW GUIDANCE AND QUALIFICATION LEVEL IMPACT TRANSITIONS**

The study focused on the relationship between the difficulties encountered in the transition from school to work and the qualification held by young people. For almost all types of difficulties, the highest percentage is found in young high school graduates, followed almost always by young people with a middle school diploma. An important exception to this scenario lies in the unsatisfactory contractual offers, particularly reported by young graduates. This highlights a significant dissatisfaction among highly educated youth, further fuelling the well-documented phenomenon of the so-called “brain drain.” On the other hand, as already highlighted by other analyses (Bergamante & Canal, 2018), the prevalence of overeducation is greater than that of undereducation, especially for those under 30; from the employers’ perspective, this results in a production system that offers inadequate opportunities and undervalues the human capital of young people, often pushing the most qualified and eager for a job suitable for their education to move abroad.

Difficulties in the transition can also be linked to ineffective guidance services within the educational pathway. Studies highlight how young people are aware of the low level of guidance they have had during their school career, the lack of practical experience, the inadequacy of specific and transversal skills and a poor preparation on how the labour market works: only one young person out of three thinks that school is useful to understand how the world of work works and evolves (Rosina, 2019).

## **3. TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES IN FACING THE CHALLENGES**

With reference to geographical area, the constituency of the South and Islands generally has a higher number of young people who say they encountered difficulties in the transition from school to work, while the trends in the answers in the other areas of the country are different for each type of difficulty.

About half of the young people aged 18-29 in the South and Islands (52%) and the Centre (50%) found the contract offers unsatisfactory; the incidence decreases, albeit not considerably, in the North (45% in the North-West and 46% in the North-East).

With regard to underemployment and the lack of job placement services, the incidence of problems experienced by young people in the North-West is very close to that of their peers in the South and islands, while it decreases in the Central and North-Eastern regions.

These data certainly relate to the methods of job searching, which more often takes place through informal channels – requests to relatives and friends, sending CVs, searching on the Internet and consulting newspapers – rather than through intermediation channels. The use of agencies, especially private ones, is generally more widespread in the northern regions compared to those in the south, indicating a lower efficiency in some areas of the country, of the institutions in charge of facilitating the matching of labour supply and demand (Fadda, 2022).

Other studies emphasize that the uniformity of transition systems cannot be taken for granted (Raffe, 2014). Instead, significant territorial disparities persist, linked to variations in employment and unemployment rates. Italy exhibits particularly high levels of regional inequality, reflecting the country's longstanding territorial divisions, especially—but not exclusively—between the Center-North and the South. For example, in 2019, Veneto and the Province of Bolzano reported youth employment rates (ages 15–24) of 38.2% and 25.6%, respectively, alongside NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) rates of 8.7% and 11.1%. By contrast, Calabria and Sicily, at the other end of the spectrum, recorded employment rates of just 14% and 10.4% and significantly higher NEET rates of 28.4% and 30.3%. Similarly, the long-term unemployment rate for young people aged 15–29 shows stark regional differences. In Northern Italy, this rate stands at 4.7%, rising to 7.8% in Central Italy, and reaching a striking 21.9% in the South (Cefalo & Kazepov, 2020). These data underline the deep-rooted territorial inequalities that characterize Italy's labour market, significantly influencing the transitions young people face when entering the workforce.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this study underline the multifaceted challenges young people face in transitioning from education to employment. Structural inefficiencies in the labour market, insufficient alignment between education and job opportunities, and the underdevelopment of vocational training apprenticeship and guidance programs emerge as critical barriers. These issues are exacerbated by demographic challenges as well as pronounced territorial disparities.

Italy's case highlights the interplay between individual, institutional, and systemic factors that complicate school-to-work transitions. Young people frequently encounter precarious contracts, underemployment, and insufficient



support systems, with notable dissatisfaction among graduates, reflecting a mismatch between qualifications and labour market demands.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Policies should aim to enhance the dual system of education and vocational training, which has shown promise in other European contexts. Furthermore, strengthening institutional capacity for job placement services and increasing investment in underdeveloped regions could help bridge territorial gaps. European-wide initiatives, such as the Youth Guarantee program, could serve as models for targeted, region-specific interventions, promoting more equitable transitions for all young people. Finally, the findings underscore the urgency of fostering a dynamic labour market that values and effectively integrates young talent. Enhanced coordination between educational institutions and employers is critical to aligning skill development with labour market demands. By addressing structural inequalities and supporting targeted interventions, Italy and other European nations can mitigate the challenges of school-to-work transitions and ensure a more inclusive and sustainable future for their younger generations.

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# EDUCATION, EVOLUTION OF WELFARE MEASURES AND NEW INEQUALITIES

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## INTRODUCTION

The European social model, in crisis in its original configuration, is taking on new forms in response to the risks to which citizens are and will be exposed (Beck, 1999) in the economy and in the knowledge society (Foray 2006; UNESCO 2005). These changes are largely attributable to the global economy (Bauman 2001; Gallino 2000), to the increasingly competitive and deregulated market trends, and to the implications of the digital revolution that is redefining the nature of work and social relations.

In 2009, the Council of the European Union, through the communication *A strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training* (ET 2020)<sup>1</sup>, stated that “Education and training have a crucial role to play in meeting the many socio-economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges facing Europe and its citizens today and, in the years, ahead”. This recognition marks a crucial point (Ranci, 2004; Naldini, 2006; Paci, 2007; Margiotta, 2011) as it highlights how education and training no longer concern only the individual sphere but are increasingly becoming fundamental pillars for ensuring social cohesion and sustainable economic development.

## 1. EDUCATION AS A PILLAR OF WELFARE: THE LEARNFARE APPROACH

Learnfare policies (Lodigiani, 2020) fit into this framework. This term was born in analogy with the concept of workfare, and which makes the achievement of specific educational objectives a condition for subsidies or job opportunities. They constitute enabling measures aimed at creating favorable conditions for individuals to improve and actively participate in economic and social life.

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<sup>1</sup> Council of the European Union. (2009). Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'). Official Journal of the European Union, C 119, 2-10.

Learnfare policies are based on the assumption that the acquisition of skills, knowledge and abilities represent one of the keys to successfully addressing the challenges of contemporary society such as the digital and technological transition that require increasingly specialized knowledge. They are a resource to address the precariousness of work that requires constant updating to respond to the changing demands of the market, to put a stop to educational and social inequalities.

However, these policies are not free from paradoxes or risks. However, these policies are not free from paradoxes or risks. It is on this theme that the Panel entitled *Education, evolution of welfare measures and new inequalities*, wanted to collect contributions encouraging reflection on how learnfare initiatives can produce dual effects: if on the one hand, in fact, they promote a proactive welfare, which aims to prevent social exclusion through investment in people's skills, on the other hand, they expose themselves to significant critical issues. Often, these initiatives aim to create accessible, equitable and inclusive training spaces, but they transfer the burden of responsibility for maintaining their employability onto individuals, ignoring the structural dynamics that create inequalities: learning does not always and only depend on a desire for activation, it is closely linked to the learner's ascribed character endowments, in fact, the context plays a decisive role in the propensity to learn. People with fewer basic cultural resources and opportunities for access to training courses risk being further penalized, producing the distorted effect according to which a social policy can reproduce inequality. In our country, for example, the emphasis placed on self-training and the concept of 'lifelong learning', which theoretically now represents a recognized right, has not yet found full and concrete implementation.

## **2. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

Through the proposed Panel we wanted to develop a debate on how much and how learnfare policies are sometimes conditioned by a utilitarian vision of education, which reduces it to a mere tool for employability and economic productivity and on how much the intrinsic value of education as a vehicle for personal and cultural emancipation, which does not necessarily produce an immediate profit, is underestimated.

In order for learnfare to contribute to a real transformation of welfare, it is necessary to adopt a balanced and inclusive approach, which takes into account the paradigm of complexity (Morin, 1999) to understand society in its

dynamic, multidimensional and uncertain nature. It must take into account not only individual initiative but also the macro level, structural investments in education to ensure universal and quality access to education, from basic to higher levels, including training courses for adults and the elderly. Active inclusion policies are needed that aim to reduce the economic, cultural and social barriers that actually limit participation in learning courses and a more balanced balance between individual responsibility and collective support is required to recognize that learning must be adequately supported. In this perspective, great interest has been given to the analysis of phenomena that have shifted the focus from a vision centered on individual capabilities, centered on personal characteristics that allow the conversion of available resources into tools to pursue one's goals and build one's agency, towards an assessment of living conditions that determine different degrees of freedom. (Sen, 2000). This shift in focus involves a close observation of the social, economic, political and cultural context as an asset that significantly affects the actual opportunities of each individual and, in particular, educational opportunities understood as a tool for emancipation. This perspective, on which reflection has been encouraged, allows us to understand more clearly how social structures, public policies, norms and institutional dynamics concretely influence the opportunities that people have to develop and put into practice their potential starting from the analysis of political-institutional and governance capacities at national, regional and local levels, to plan interventions, to manage their concrete implementation starting from the needs and specific territorial features; to measure the concrete tendency to promote inclusion and active citizenship; to generate an attribution of value to the search for innovative interpretative and pedagogical models that offer a non-reductionist reading of reality and favor the development of educational practices oriented towards learning as a tool for building personal agency.

A truly effective and efficient learnfare requires the implementation of a complex and integrated system of services, designed to be not only continuous and constant over time, but also equipped with a high degree of flexibility, modular in relation to the specificities of the contexts.

It is crucial to invest in educational and training policies in the early years of life in a structural way. Only through a synergic coordination between institutions, local authorities, schools, families and communities will it be possible to face the social and economic challenges of contemporary times.

Each body involved, however, should share a unanimous vision of learning as a

universal right and of culture as a central value of current and future democratic societies.

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# NEW WELFARE AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES. THE ITALIAN CASE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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In recent decades, national and supranational institutions have redefined welfare models to respond to financial crises, digital and ecological transitions, population aging, and unemployment and pandemics. The Council of the European Union has highlighted the crucial role of education and training in addressing current socio-economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges. In relation to these, the reactive capacity of Italian education systems should constitute a bulwark in the face of new forms of risk and requires decisive interventions in this direction. The article analyzes the most recent ways of implementing education and training policies in our country that put the development of the individual and society at the forefront, highlighting how the measures undertaken in terms of welfare, in reality, can produce distorted effects that consist in generating or maintaining social inequalities rather than limiting them. Through the processing of secondary data, we therefore examine their actual effectiveness in responding to a widespread demand for equity across the country, mainly in relation to the institutional capacity to strengthen the educational offer in the field of education and vocational training, to create human resources capital, and to guarantee everyone an equal opportunity to implement their personal agency.

welfare; learnfare; education and training; inequality; capabilities

## INTRODUCTION

The European welfare state, born to mitigate the imbalances caused by the capitalist economy, reached its peak between the 19th and 20th centuries with the expansion of social security and the generalization of rights. However, in recent decades, globalization (Bauman, 2001), the digital revolution and market

transformations have put this model into crisis, highlighting new risks (Beck, 1999). To address these challenges, the European Union has adopted a paradigm of inclusive growth (Europe 2020 Strategy), focusing on employment, skills, fighting poverty, and modernizing social protection systems.

Rapid social and economic evolution, fueled by the knowledge society (Alessandrini, 2001) and growing tertiarization, is transforming work models. This will soon make current skills obsolete, requiring new skills and knowledge for the professions of the future, many of which are unknown today (Giddens, 1994). Since the 1990s, in order to mitigate the negative effects of a welfare system, welfare-to-work models have emerged, especially with the Lisbon Agenda of 2000. These systems are based on the idea that people must take action individually to quickly reintegrate into the labor market, with the threat of suspension of economic support in the event of non-compliance. Consequently, human capital has become a central element to invest in, to be developed and continuously updated throughout life. The welfare models adopted can be distinguished into two main approaches: the liberal workfarist models, which impose rigid conditions focused on immediate employment, and the enabling models of social-democratic inspiration, which privilege training, empowerment and personal growth as tools to improve employability and individual well-being. The 'learnfare' approach falls within this second approach (Lodigiani, 2020), a system in which everyone is put in a position to learn in an active welfare mechanism in which education, professional training and continuous learning are configured not only as a tool but also as a right-duty for the exercise of active citizenship, for employability and work and social inclusion. Born from North American programs for school reintegration, 'learnfare' is configured as an active welfare measure and focuses on the synergy between institutions to address the risks of global transition and values lifelong learning as a key component of active citizenship.

In this context, we analyzed in a limited way the Italian model of vocational education and training paths (referred hereafter as leFP), integrated in upper secondary education, through which it is possible to fulfill the obligation of education and training. Although leFP are aimed at promoting equity and inclusion, they reveal a paradoxical effect in their implementation: instead of reducing social inequalities, they risk perpetuating them on a national scale. This phenomenon highlights the need to shift the focus from the sole individual capacities of activation of each individual to the responsibilities and institutional capacities set up to guarantee the rights established by the Constitution and current legislation.



## **1. LEARNFARE AND THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (IEFP) SYSTEM**

The IeFP courses, introduced experimentally in 2003 and made official in 2011 within the national education system, allow the achievement of the qualification at the end of the third year and the diploma at the fourth: qualifications present in the appropriate National Repertory, shared between the State and the Regions with Agreements of 27 July 2011 and 19 January 2012, referenced at level III and IV of the European Qualification Framework (EQF), therefore usable on the national and community territory. Since 2016, as a further method of implementing the IeFP courses, the dual system has been introduced, which provides for a significant amount of hours of practical training to be used in work contexts. The IeFP training offer is ensured and organized in the regional territories by accredited training institutions and state and private higher education institutions under a subsidiarity regime, if provided for by regional planning, as well as by companies in the case of courses aimed at apprenticeship students, always following the shared national Repertory of professional figures for both three-year courses (22 qualifications) and four-year courses (21 diplomas) accompanied by minimum training standards. This offer has as its objectives the personal and professional development of young people, the acquisition by the latter of basic skills and specific professional skills that can be fluently experienced in the world of work and exported elsewhere. If we consider the organization of these courses as a form of 'learnfare' to guarantee social and civil rights throughout the country, we must consider it a battered and limping welfare practice as it asserts itself by presenting significant disparities between the different areas of the country. In Northern Italy, characterized by a dynamic productive fabric and a strong synergy between training institutions and businesses, these paths are a driving force for young people who, freed from school dropout phenomena, find employment more easily. Furthermore, they actively participate in the vocational training chain, which also includes IFTS and ITS paths. In Southern Italy, however, IeFP paths are often a secondary, fallback choice, undertaken by students with a difficult school background, where the number of young people who are Not engaged in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) reaches critical peaks.

With the reform of Title V of the Constitution, since 2001, the Regions have had exclusive competence in matters of education and professional training, without prejudice to the State's task of establishing the essential levels of

performance (LEP)<sup>1</sup>, principles of national unity, over which there is a lack of real control. The lack of uniform application of the regulations has led to heterogeneous results: while some Regions have adapted rapidly to the required standards, others have recorded delays and failures, thus amplifying territorial disparities in training and employment results.

## **2. THE CASE OF THE PNRR**

The PNRR, i.e., the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, was approved in 2021 by Italy to relaunch its economy after the COVID -19 pandemic and aims to rebuilding an economic and social fabric by combining and incentivizing opportunities related to the ecological and digital transition as well as improving the quality of work and citizenship services, primarily those focused on health and education. The Plan mentions leFP paths only once in Mission 5 – Component 1 – Investment 1.4 “Dual system” for which a total of 600 million euros have been allocated to strengthen the dual system, make education and training systems more in line with the needs of the labor market and promote the employability of young people and the acquisition of new skills especially in the most marginal and peripheral areas.

The resources for leFP courses have been distributed by the Regions mainly based on the number of students enrolled, using the data collected by the National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies (INAPP). This criterion, however, penalizes the development of leFP courses in Southern Italy, favoring Regions with already consolidated systems, mainly located in the North of the country. Here, in fact, there is greater integration between the world of training and that of work, consequently, the Southern Regions, which have a less flourishing productive fabric, receive a significantly lower share of resources, as demonstrated by the Directorial Decrees that decree the allocation of these. As an example, we refer to Decree no. 100 of 18 April 2024 which, adopting the criteria established by the Decree of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies no. 38 of 7 March 2024, allocates 97.014.815,00 euros to Lombardy, equal to 40% of the resources available for the 2023 financial year, out of a total of 240.000.000,00 euros.

These dynamic highlights a strong polarization: the dual system, rather than reducing territorial inequalities, risks perpetuating them, strengthening the systems that already function and neglecting the areas with greater difficulties. This disparity between North and South raises questions about the actual

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<sup>1</sup> Legislative Decree 226/05.

capacity of the PNRR measures and not only, to guarantee equal opportunities for access to a national training system that should be fair and homogeneous.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In the context of 'learnfare' policies (Margiotta, 2011) it is essential to shift the focus from individual capabilities to the responsibilities of institutions in creating adequate contexts for the full use of opportunities.

According to Sen's (2000) capabilities approach, the freedom of each individual to pursue their own goals does not depend only on the goods they possess, but also on their personal ability to convert them into tools for their own development. This concept, taken up by Nussbaum (2002) and other scholars, underlines how personal capabilities are determined by institutional, social, and legal factors. Consequently, institutions have a crucial role in ensuring equal opportunities for everyone to develop their potential. It was, therefore, a missed opportunity for the territories less equipped with professionalizing paths not to be adequately supported by the resources of the PNRR which, in the description of Mission 5, admits this risk, underlining that, despite the progress made, social and family support policies still need strengthening. In the context of leFP courses, it is necessary to strengthen multilevel governance that sees the role of the State strengthened in fact in supervising and therefore guaranteeing compliance throughout the territory of the essential levels of performance, overcome the criterion of the Notices, and make the system more stable, update the skills of teachers and trainers, and ensure equal opportunities for all to participate in a solid professionalizing chain with the Higher Technological Institutes (ITS Academy) and the Higher Technical Education and Training (IFTS).

It is highlighted that the lack of homogeneity in the implementation of leFP courses coincides with other economic and social inequalities in our country. The training offer is more fragile where it should be more present and solid, where the productive fabric is weak, where the education system is unable to address the problem of school dropout and where the number of Not engaged in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) increases dramatically. While on the one hand the principle of incentivizing the performance of the most virtuous regions is acceptable, on the other it is essential to guarantee young people throughout the national territory the right to access this type of training offer equally regardless of the region they belong to, whether it is more or less equipped in terms of productivity.

A change of pace requires social change, the adoption of a renewed culture, open to the influences of social innovation, described by Moulaert et al. (2013) as a new operational approach, based on new social relations and new ways of responding to collective needs, accompanied by a reconfiguration of social dynamics and a process of empowerment. This perspective is particularly significant if oriented to 'free' education from the rigidities imposed by expectations of success and requests for purely economic results. According to Moulaert et al. (2009), in fact, "those initiatives that aim to promote social inclusion through transformations in the behavior of individuals and institutions" are considered socially innovative.

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# TOWARDS CLIMATE JUSTICE IN EDUCATION: A TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

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The devastation of the climate crisis is experienced very differently among the people, communities and places most at risk: transformative climate action requires conceptually and empirically connecting the climate crisis with social injustice, economic inequality and health. Education in society is also called upon to contribute to climate justice and global sustainability, with actions to build a more just, stable and healthy future. Education is a critical sector of society in terms of preparing for the future and schools are among the most stable and forward-looking organizations in many communities. To reimagine what is possible, the climate crisis must be addressed in education alongside systemic change for social justice and structural change focused on economic justice, racial justice and energy justice. This paper aims to contribute to the debate on climate justice and education. It presents key evidence from an exploratory study in primary schools on climate change education as a response to the climate crisis. Attitudes and behaviors towards climate justice are explored for possible transformative change. The different visions that emerge underline the complexity of the phenomenon and the methods of intervention.

climate justice, education, sustainability, climate crisis, social injustices, economic inequalities, health.

## INTRODUCTION

The ecological context is characterized by global warming, resource scarcity and biodiversity loss, the accumulation of which gives rise to an amplification effect with uncertain consequences. Social conflicts related to environmental issues increase over time, drawing attention to the unequal distribution of environmental degradation and to the reduced access to resources and land,

which reinforce existing social inequalities (Singer, 2018). The degradation of the living environment presents health risks and accentuates the social gap and spatial segregation of the poorest populations: the environment becomes a question, no longer of conservation, but of social justice, and, even more, of social cooperation. The correlation between environmental disturbances and the most precarious territories (ex)poses the populations concerned to new forms of inequalities that accumulate with social and political ones (Taylor, 2000).

## **EUROPEAN CLIMATE JUSTICE FRAMEWORKS AS TRANSFORMATIVE OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION**

The right to a healthy environment for all and a fair distribution of environmental benefits and damages make the quality of the living environment and access to environmental goods a matter of justice. To align social processes and climate justice objectives, two policy frameworks have been used: the Green New Deal (GND) and energy democracy. The GND connects large public investments in clean energy with those in jobs, health and education to strengthen the sustainability and resilience of communities, to build justice beyond the narrowest conventional climate policies. Energy democracy focuses on the main driver of climate change, the dependence on fossil fuels and the resulting power dynamics, to reclaim energy decision-making and restructure energy systems for more equitable and renewable energy. This is not an easy challenge due to the significant changes that affect communities (Falzarano, 2024).

This contribution is mainly conceptual because, despite the targeted efforts to systematically review current school climate commitments, we have partially succeeded in identifying empirical examples to demonstrate the new paradigm shift proposed with the two climate justice frameworks. Exploring the transformative potential of specific climate justice initiatives in education represents an educational growth that starts from schools.

The commitment to climate justice is certainly an innovative opportunity in education.

## **METHODOLOGICAL NOTE**

The contribution aims to participate in the debate on climate justice and education commitment. The approach includes the application of two climate justice frameworks, the Green New Deal and energy democracy, to explore how education can promote and accelerate a transformative climate justice

response to humanity's intersecting crises.

Here we present the main evidence emerging from an exploratory study conducted in schools in the Campania Region that carried out climate change education projects during the school year. The project managers of 44 comprehensive institutes out of 518 – classes of lower secondary schools – that have carried out initiatives on climate crisis and social justice in line with the paradigm shift required by the EU were interviewed.

The analysis of attitudes and behaviors towards the phenomenon were also useful to identify possible transformative changes and to implement ad hoc training initiatives. The different visions that emerged underline the complexity of the phenomenon.

## **TOWARDS CLIMATE JUSTICE IN EDUCATION**

General incentives for sustainability expand the capacity of schools to implement targeted initiatives on climate justice. The necessary paradigm shift requires a renewed commitment to schools to guide students towards a more just and stable future from a climate perspective. As reference institutions, schools are among the most stable and far-sighted organizations in many communities.

Recently, the role of education in society is expanding with new opportunities and responsibilities. Following the measures of the PNRR, schools are called to contribute to the ecological transition and to the broader global sustainability. In the context of these macrophenomena, the transformative action of schools for the climate requires conceptually and empirically connecting the climate crisis with social injustices, economic inequalities and health. The devastation of the climate crisis is experienced very differently among the people, communities and places most at risk. Climate justice articulates a paradigm shift in how education seeks to respond to the climate crisis, promoting actions to build a more just, stable and healthy future (Sen, 2010).

Education can create multiple opportunities to resist, reverse, and repair climate injustices by leveraging its role to catalyze social change toward a more equitable, renewable energy future. Indeed, Green New Deal policies and energy democracy provide the framework for revisiting a wide range of proposed transformative climate justice initiatives in education.

## **FIRST RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY**

The main findings recorded by the referents in the context of the project initiatives are reported.

1. Most schools are beginning to use their influence and impact to encourage and prioritize social innovation and social change for climate justice.
2. Social actions toward climate justice are localized.
3. Basic behavioral changes alone are insufficient to address climate injustices, but they are certainly an approach to reducing climate impacts.
4. Students have debated a lot about whether climate justice requires not only shifting resources away from fossil fuels and carbon emissions, but also actively engaging in disruptive systemic change, encouraging healthy ecological actions.
5. Through a commitment to transformative climate justice, students around the world could realign and refocus their community engagement efforts to shape a more just, stable, and healthy future.
6. To reduce the suffering of the most vulnerable families and communities, massive direct investments are needed in building resilience, including access to food, clean water, and education in frontline communities. Climate justice requires “fundamental changes in how we (a) build and sustain relationships, (b) manage uncertainty, distress, pain, and shock, and (c) redistribute wealth, opportunity, risk, and responsibility.”
7. Addressing the challenges and opportunities for education to advance climate justice requires collective resourcefulness, innovative teaching and learning, networking strategies, and a compelling vision for the future. Harnessing the potential of schools requires creativity and institutional resourcefulness among those within education institutions and political leaders.
8. Growing recognition that the climate crisis is a symptom of broader socioeconomic and political dysfunction.
9. The urgent need for social transformation has become more evident with the pandemic and the increased concentration of wealth in the hands of a few.



10. Schools have the potential and opportunity to harness substantial intellectual, financial, physical and labour resources to promote transformation and reduce the devastating human suffering resulting from economic and climate injustices.
11. Although, at the macro level, it is not yet entirely clear to what extent education can contribute to the transformative changes that society needs to address crises, at the micro level, schools shape the contexts of belonging.

### **FIRST THOUGHTS: EDUCATION AND CLIMATE JUSTICE**

Disparities in current climate impacts exist at multiple levels, including global inequalities, inequalities within countries, and regional inequalities, particularly across race, class, gender, and disability. Initial inequality means that disadvantaged groups suffer disproportionately from the negative impacts of climate change, resulting in greater inequalities later on. The global injustice that countries that have contributed least to the climate crisis are among the most vulnerable is now widely recognized (Gough, 2017). Given the pervasiveness of these inequities, a transformative climate justice lens is critical to effective climate action including through the power of schools. While technology is an essential part of the transition to a more just, equitable, and climate-stable future, investments in the physical sciences and technological innovation have not yet been adequately balanced with investments in the humanities and social sciences, social infrastructure, social innovation, and social justice.

This lack of investment has failed to strengthen social bonds, thereby reducing community resilience, or our ability to collectively cope with and recover from crises. The lack of investment in social innovation and social justice has also limited our imagination about the role and potential impact of education in society.

It is clear that this narrow focus is starting to change as there is growing recognition that addressing climate change will require investment in transformative social, institutional, financial, and policy changes.

If social science research and social innovation were prioritized and funded at a higher level, technological innovation would be more effectively coupled with research to accelerate the social change that accompanies it. As influential and innovative institutions, education has the opportunity to lead by example and shift the conversation from an isolationist climate approach to a more holistic

and integrated commitment to climate justice through the functions and initiatives of schools both individually and in networks.

It is also necessary to recognize that schools shape the communities in which they are located.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As the climate crisis continues to exacerbate vulnerabilities around the world, a paradigm shift in how education engages in transformative social change could alter policy options for a more climate-just and stable future.

This paper suggests that when climate justice becomes a prominent topic in education, students not only begin to distance themselves from the status quo, but also participate in mitigating, albeit within their own limits, climate vulnerabilities and injustices.

Schools are critical places for the production, perpetuation, and dissemination of knowledge: in this era of climate change and instability, they can apply knowledge to promote systemic social change. To fulfill their mission of promoting the common good through learning and innovation, schools can reorient their educational and research initiatives towards building transformative climate justice in society, including through social partnerships (Steele, Rickards, 2022).

Educational institutions can become both exemplars and agents of social change. Climate justice requires a community engagement approach that extends beyond the individual educational institution. Climate justice efforts provide a cross-sector and interdisciplinary approach to identifying research priorities, educating students, engaging with local governments and communities, and supporting employees.

Considering the reality of a finite world, its ecological irreversibilities, leads to translating these interactions into existential interdependencies and reveals the tenuous relationship between the conditions of social equality and environmental limits. Social justice in a limited world requires thinking and inventing mechanisms of ecological cooperation, that is, cooperation between men and with nature, which can no longer be considered outside of environmental changes. It is about changing our view of our space of coexistence made of encounters and symbiosis and not of dysfunctional relationships between different agents.

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# MAPPING NEETS IN EUROPE AND ITALY: POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND CRITICAL POLICY ROLES

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Education and social justice represent two critical issues for young adults especially when related to contemporary times that have to face political uncertainties; rebalancing of geopolitical forces worldwide; epidemics that have just passed, the consequences of which have yet to be deeply investigated; energy, territorial, as well as food wars that are still ongoing; artificial intelligence; and finally other phenomena such as nationalistic protectionism and the claims of the female gender especially in the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean area. Young adult education represents a crucial moment in Italian welfare, as it provides an opportunity to match labor market (Strecker, López, Cabasés, 2021) supply and demand, is to some measure linked to the biographies of individuals and the development of society in a vision of social equity. Unfortunately, the various welfare initiatives over the years have not been free from evident social distortions and inequalities. It is in this scenario that our reflection on NEETs is inserted. This paper aims to represent the phenomenon in its current state, comparing it with the most recent studies (Ferrari, 2018). It wants to give evidence of the European and Italian situation in order to stimulate debate, and to consider the different policies developed in the last decade by the Italian State specifically dedicated to young NEETs. It wants to offer a tool for reflection on the same target audience, reconsidering the limitations and paradoxes that this targeting brings. It also wants to point out the inadequacy of Italian policies (De Luca Picione, et al.2023) designed to minimize and counteract the phenomenon, which includes individuals as diverse as e.g.: mentally ill; dissatisfied with the work and school environment; and economically disadvantaged youth. While on the one hand we see the anthropocentric view, which attributes educational and employment failure to individuals, essentially offloading the responsibilities of the state and local governments onto individual social actors. On the other hand, the neoliberal view tells of young people not studying and not working because of distrust in the future (Bonanomi, Rosina, 2022). The Toniolo Report 2023 highlights how education impacts life trajectories and is a determining factor in the transition to adulthood and satisfactory self-expression, and so in the well-being of individuals and social participation

(Caroleo, Rocca, Mazzocchi, 2020; Newman et al, 2014). Fragility and perceptions of the future (Bauman, 2000) are felt to be more critical and negative, so NEETs express a higher risk of marginalization and, therefore, social inequality (Vieira, Pappàmikail, Ferreira, 2021). In this view, individual abilities are diriment, unfortunately too often conditioned by education, training and job search systems. So the challenge for employment services is to work on the frustration caused by employment uncertainty; on the content of interventions, which are often outdated; on the role of emotions at play (Ylistö, Husu, 2021); as well as on the fragmented and scarce social policies aimed at young people, which make Italy (Mussida & Sciulli, 2023) the tail end in Europe (Assmann & Broschinski, 2021) in terms of employment services and support during periods of inactivity.

Education, Inequality, Inclusion, NEET, young adult, Welfare State Introduction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term NEET was first identified in 1999, in a document from the Great Britain Cabinet Office (Ferrari, 2018). Many years have passed since then: this conference seems to us an opportune moment to reflect on the phenomenon, its evolution, and its implications.

At a macro level, Italy ranks last among EU countries for young people aged 15 to 29 who are not studying, not working, and not engaged in training programs. According to data published by Eurostat (2022), NEETs in Italy are 17.7%, followed by Romania (14.5%) and Greece (14.1%). At a meso level, youth Observatories, OECD, ISFOL, and ISTAT in 2018 showed data approaching the number of 2.5 million NEETs. Today, the figure is almost 2.2 million: the decline affects all categories included in the definition, and it has a significant impact on the reduction of potential labor force. At a micro level in 2021, Sicily was at 30.2%; Campania at 27.7%, and the northern regions were also affected by the phenomenon, with 17.3% of NEETs in Lombardy and 13.5% in Emilia Romagna, as confirmed by the latest ISTAT data.

Reducing this rate is one of the European objectives concerning social rights. The goal is to lower the NEET rate among young people aged 15 to 29 to 9% by 2030.

Since the publication of our latest research (Ferrari, 2018), which highlighted the complex context in which the phenomenon manifests itself: a context where family, education, and work do not operate on separate planes but coexist, giving rise to complex and diverse dynamics; we have first witnessed an increase in the phenomenon, followed by a partial yet significant decrease in numbers.

Young adults seem increasingly less capable of “aspiring” to a social position that can guarantee them access to housing autonomy; family building; and job stabilization (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019; Appadurai, 2004). They seem less able to desire; build; or plan a future where they are protagonists, increasingly displaying a coexistence of adult-like behaviors alongside adolescent behaviors, clearly expressed within their family of origin (Bericat, Cassinello, 2012; Hardy & Carlo, 2008).

Uncertainty appears to outline the medium-term existential planning in the narratives of young adults in an increasingly fluid context (Bauman, 2000).

If isolation and loneliness were typical attributes of NEETs a decade ago, today they also appear as typical attributes of the phenomenon related to well-being and health (Neuman, 2014; Bonanomi & Rosina, 2022).

As the relevant literature shows, school and family are closely related to the phenomenon (Inchley, et al., 2016). On one hand, despite numerous school reforms (Schizzerotto, et al., 2018) schools still exhibit discrepancies. What emerged before the pandemic was an inability to use media and ICT technologies in teaching, an issue at least partially overcome by the necessities imposed on schools by COVID-19, which led to the development of various remote teaching models. This not only modernized traditional teaching methods but also contributed to a reevaluation of the teacher’s role. The different approach to teaching has stimulated better access to the school system, although in some cases highlighting inequalities between those who could afford computers and software and those who could not.

Central and local policies, more closely tied to the territory, have not been able in recent decades to create effective policies to reduce socio-economic and cultural gaps; territorial disparities; linguistic differences; or different religious affiliations. Inclusion, apart from a few happy cases, is yet to come (Panichella, et al., 2021; Gorinas, 2014; Penninx, 2005).

Policies for young people have not instilled trust in institutions among young adults. The consequence of these missed active policies and the lower attention to the school system, even in terms of economic investments by the central government, has inevitably impacted the role of teachers, partially delegitimizing the role of the school and the work of teachers in building a more equitable and inclusive society.

While school was and remains one of the central “strategic tools” aimed at minimizing and solving the NEET phenomenon, the *family* is the second central factor in studying the phenomenon, as shown by scientific literature (Saraceno, et al., 2020; Alfieri, Sironi et al., 2015; Bynner & Parsons, 2002).

The link between family and school is very strong: in fact, the family entrusts educational institutions with the task of transmitting knowledge, regulating behavior, and expressing themselves within the framework of a typically public organizational culture (Chambers & Gracia, 2021; Epstein, 1990).

It is undeniable that in recent decades, economic challenges have overlapped with political difficulties in the fields of education and welfare, as well as active policies for schools and families, generating crises; conflicts; distress; and social disparities. These issues have been further exacerbated by the current global geopolitical context, which has shown pandemics; wars; energy crises; and environmental disruptions over the past five years. In this complex scenario, the “youth extended in space and time” (Ferrari, 2018) becomes a strategy, a means of mitigation and shelter from the deprivation and fragmentation of young people’s expectations. Frustrated by the inability to access growth processes, young people voluntarily or involuntarily prolong adolescence.

## **2. YOUTH AND CHALLENGE OF AUTONOMY**

The National Youth Council and the Italian Youth Agency have recently presented the new report “Youth 2024: A Generation’s Balance Sheet” (2024), concerning the condition of youth in Italy. The report outlines the opportunities and challenges faced by young Italians, with the aim of devising new policies and adjusting the existing welfare system to meet emerging needs.

The demographic reduction of young people; the brain drain phenomenon; job insecurity; and territorial and gender inequalities impact the NEET phenomenon. Demographics, education, and employment are the main issues. Italy today faces a significant demographic challenge, highlighted by a substantial decline in births. Over the past two decades, we have witnessed a reduction of almost 3.5 million young people under 35, with a decline rate of

about 21%. This phenomenon has particularly affected the female segment, with a decrease of almost 23%. Additionally, there is a worrying “brain drain” with nearly 18,000 young graduates opting for emigration in 2021, an increase of 281% over ten years, comparable to the emigrations of the 1950s.

This scenario is accompanied by growing instability in the job market, where 41% of those under 35 are involved in precarious work, accentuating a condition of uncertainty and job discontinuity. This complex and unstable picture is compounded by territorial disparities, with Southern Italy recording significantly higher youth unemployment rates compared to the North, and where the average annual salary of young workers is significantly lower.

The significant changes in demographic structure, which stem from natural dynamics, are directly linked to the attractiveness of territories and the resulting migratory processes. Over the past twenty years, while the North has seen a 16.9% decrease in young people; the Central regions a decrease of 18.9%; the decline has been 27.3% in the South where, according to the latest available data, 36% of young Italians reside, compared to 45.1% in the North and 18.9% in the Center. The demographic winter particularly affects Southern Italy.

These unfavorable conditions are reflected in the ability of young people to access stable job opportunities and adequate remuneration, negatively influencing their quality of life and future expectations, thus further encouraging the phenomenon (Delli Zotti, & Blasutig, 2020).

If the issue of high skills is increasingly central to innovation processes and competitiveness among systems, it is particularly striking how the incidence of graduates in the 25-34 age group (29.2%) in Italy is significantly lower than the European average (42%). Unfortunately, the three-year degree has not resolved the issue of the lower number of graduates in Italy; indeed, we observe that graduates constitute only 29%, and many are fleeing abroad (+281% in 10 years). The issue of the lack of highly specialized and trained education contributes to the exacerbation of the phenomenon.

Another critical problem is unemployment, which affects the South more than the North, at a rate three times higher: in 2023, unemployment increased by 1.3 percentage points compared to 2022. The difficulty in finding employment is also correlated with the phenomenon we are analyzing; indeed, fewer job opportunities stimulate attitudes of disenchantment and disaffection towards production (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2023)

Adding to this challenging context is the particular situation of “youth employment,” which is increasingly unstable and discontinuous, now even in



the public sector. In Italy, young workers in the private sector (5.5 million, or 91.5% of all young employees) experience widespread and growing job instability: 40.9% of those under 35 have precarious contracts (temporary or seasonal), compared to 59.1% with stable contracts, i.e., permanent or apprenticeship contracts (it was 59.4% in 2018).

A collective effort is needed to promote quality education; job placement; social and gender equity; and to strengthen youth representation at all decision-making levels. The aforementioned contractual precariousness translates into structural discontinuity in employment and wages: in 2022, only 39.0% of young private sector employees received 12 or more monthly payments from their employer, while 32.7% were paid for less than 6 months, with devastating effects on their quality of life, life projects, and future pensions. We also believe that low wages contribute to reinforcing this phenomenon. In the last 5 years, we have witnessed a decline in salaries: in 2022, the average salary (15-34 years) of young adults in the private sector was 15,616 euros, while the average recorded in the public sector was higher, specifically 22,839 euros. Given this scenario, it is quite natural to expect a lack of trust in the future, institutions, and policies, which seem very distant from the real needs of young people.

We note that the working dimension is particularly involved in becoming adults, in embarking on paths of autonomy, and in planning one's future. Employment is strongly correlated with the dimension we are analyzing, as it represents a necessary precondition for taking control of one's life and could serve as a tool to counteract the NEET phenomenon.

The *Report* analyzed so far also shows that alongside stable employment, the transition to adult life requires the fulfillment of other material conditions such as: the availability of affordable housing (33.7% of responses); and the ability to save to cope with unforeseen events (20.6%). In fact, about 36% of the cohort analyzed is waiting to complete their studies (36.7%); 11.6% to find a job, even a temporary one; and 9.1% to have a stable relationship before leaving their parental home.

In light of these observations, we have reflected on the needs and urgencies necessary for achieving adulthood; independence from the family of origin; and full autonomy.

What do those under 35 need to become autonomous?

The primary condition seems to be finding stable employment. Similarly, to start a family, almost 70% of young people indicate the need for an adequate economic situation. Regarding parenthood, more than 60% of respondents

express a future desire to have children.

The experience of the pandemic and its profound impacts appear to have altered the hierarchy of factors determining young people's quality of life: the sample places health (both physical and mental) first, with an average rating of 8.9/10, ahead of family (8.6/10) and friends (8.3/10), the three contexts most affected by lockdown and social distancing measures. Although still important, education and culture (8.2/10), money (7.9/10), and affective relationships (7.1/10) rank slightly lower in the indicated hierarchy.

These data highlight the urgency of targeted social policies to improve the living conditions and prospects of young people in Italy, through the promotion of a more stable and inclusive labor market, greater valorization of skills, and renewed intergenerational dialogue.

At the bottom of young people's concerns are fears of having to work on holidays and/or at night (8.6%) and of having to move to another region or country (13.8%), painting a picture of young people that is completely antithetical to the superficial narrative of "lazy," overprotected individuals, too often instrumentally portrayed by the media or other commentators.

### **3. THE LIMITATIONS OF THE DEFINITION NEET**

The complexity of contemporary life forces young people to experience a prolonged, fragmented, and unpredictable adolescence (Pais & Ferreira, 2010). The "youth issue" has been on the European agenda for years, as it is transforming from an issue to a "social alarm" (Vieira, et al., 2021). Over the years, the NEET phenomenon has sparked numerous reflections and studies (Cojocaru, et al., 2022, Hango, et al., 2021; Wong, 2016). If we look at recent literature (Mussida, 2023; Caroleo, Rocca et al., 2020; Alfieri et al., 2020), what emerges very clearly are, first of all, the different indicators used in the various definitions the term encompasses; the diverse trajectories it implies; and the numerous and dissimilar situations that the NEET condition offers for analysis.

The differences among various studies in the literature are so vast as to be hardly comparable: for example, in Japan, the definition encompasses a different cohort than in Europe (D'amico, 2024; Zhang, 2022; ). Generally, the phenomenon concerns the age group 16-35 years, but in Japan, it even extends up to 65 years (people with such characteristics and such an advanced age are called "madao" in Japanese, meaning "useless old man").

In Norway, for example, active youth policies do not take into account the particular phase of transition to adult life, which would require special policies,

as it is known that this phase of life exposes young people to a condition of vulnerability (Gjersøe, 2020), and often some are pushed towards yo-yo paths that is, pathways of entering and exiting the NEET condition, constantly oscillating between education and job opportunities (Du Bois-Reymond, Andreu, 2012).

We then wonder how much welfare policies can influence the phenomenon not only in qualitative terms concerning young adults but also in quantitative terms relating to the phenomenon itself.

Moreover, there emerges a “judgmental tension” in the indicators used in the definitions, which mostly point to a condition of “social deficit,” not aligning with the standardized social model for youth integration (“they do not... study; they do not... work; they do not... train”). We notice in the definition a reference to a negative condition of youth. Therefore, the first reflection concerns the approach to research itself. We wonder if the literature produced so far has not revealed scientific shortcomings in addition to data on the phenomenon and definitions (Holte, 2018).

Similarly, we question whether, in exploring the phenomenon by cloaking it in elusiveness, ambiguity, and potential failures in different existential trajectories, the studies conducted so far have also contributed to constructing a negative and marginalizing narrative of a segment of young people who escape social models and are relegated to invisibility (Gaspani, 2018).

In our opinion, some critical issues arise in this regard. We naively ask: “If millions of young people do not study, work, or train, where do they end up?” It seems like a marginal issue, but it could provide answers to social policies concerning school, family, and work, and offer life trajectories different from established models.

Can young people who do not adhere to the rule-based social system propose different existential models? If so, which ones? Youth policies tend to regulate divergent and not socially shared models. The risk we run in not considering “different” life trajectories, relegating them to the margins, can be that of social exclusion.

Do NEETs genuinely express the will not to study, work, or train? Granted that part of the youth population might also express a divergent social stance, we wonder if another part, rather, challenges the regulated models and the intergenerational contract supported by the European Community, which tends to shape youth life trajectories in performances, times, and spaces it deems suitable for the global productive system. In the context of recent Eurofound

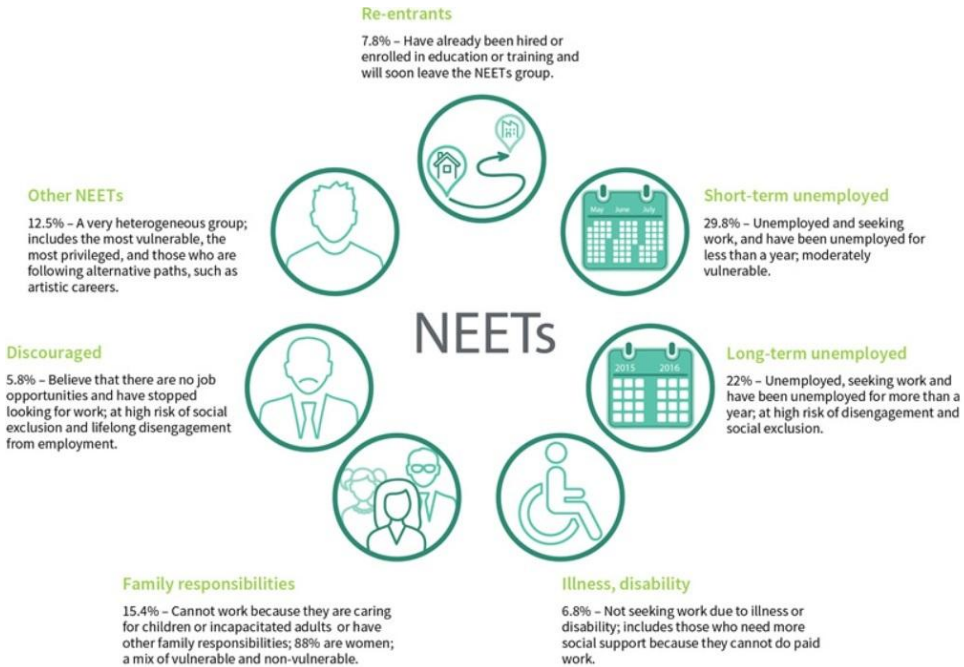
research (2024; 2021; 2016; 2012), an attempt has been made to highlight the heterogeneity of the sample, potentially providing insights into the scientific explorations conducted so far.

The 2016 study on the diversity of NEETs already provided a divergent perspective and introduced a new categorization into 7 subgroups, aiming to better understand the composition of this youth cohort. This example already highlighted the critical nature of the sampling, as shown in Image 1. Each of the listed subgroups is composed of a mix of vulnerable and non-vulnerable young people, who do not accumulate human capital through formal channels, both voluntarily and involuntarily.

The 2021 Eurofound study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people will include an update on the diversity of NEETs based on 2019 data, contributing to the definition of heterogeneity, which is always changing over time. Indeed, the sample includes a multitude of young people with very different characteristics:

- “Returning” (yo-yo youth), those who have been employed and will leave the NEET cohort but are known to potentially re-enter it shortly (Biggart & Walther, 2016; Du Bois-Reymond & Andreu, 2012);
- “Short-term unemployed,” those who have been out of work for less than a year and are at moderate risk of vulnerability;
- “Long-term unemployed,” those who have been out of work for more than a year and are at high risk of social marginalization;
- “Sick and disabled,” who need specific social policies to counteract social exclusion and often cannot work;
- “Care-givers,” who cannot work because they take care of children, the elderly, and the sick in their families;
- “Discouraged,” those who believe there are no job opportunities and have stopped looking for work, and are at high risk of social exclusion;
- “Other NEETs,” which include the most vulnerable, the privileged who can afford not to work, and those following “alternative paths” such as an artistic career.

Fig. 1. NEET; types and differentiations. Source: Eurofound (2023)



This brief enumeration already reveals some critical issues:

- The extreme heterogeneity it encompasses, without a real scientific explanation or even a systemic reason: the sick; the disabled; members of high social classes who can boast an income and do not have the obligation to work; dancers; artists...
- A strongly judgmental position by Europe in modeling educational and career paths, which does not allow for paths that are not aimed at producing economic capital. Think of artistic careers, which are defined as “alternative.” Alternative to what?
- A judgmental and implicitly marginalizing position towards those who express the will to take care of children, relatives, and the sick in the family by choice or necessity.

The axis on which the scale of greater or lesser inclusion moves is correlated with traditional jobs, not considering temporary or artistic jobs, and places inactive individuals and long-term unemployed on the same level, without bothering to make distinctions, which are at the basis of individual choices. The

vulnerability expressed by the European model is obviously related to employment status.

We notice, therefore, that there are strong limitations both in the definitions chosen at the European level and in the approximation of the different cohorts of the sample at the demographic and causal attribution levels in the proposed model.

Therefore, it is necessary, in exploring the phenomenon, to already highlight these limitations, as well as other limitations we have identified in the policies adopted so far.

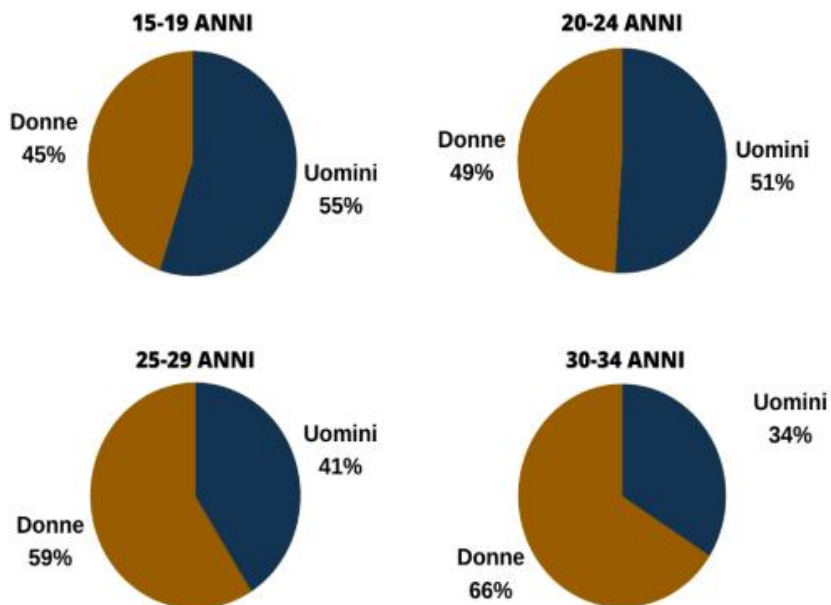
#### **4. NEET BEFORE AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC**

The pandemic crisis has also impacted the cohort of NEET individuals (Caroleo et al., 2020). However, what emerges from the most recent studies (Palmer & Small, 2021) is that the post-COVID NEET condition is greatly influenced by the age of the sample. Indeed, there are significant differences between young adults who are experiencing the transition from adolescence to adulthood (18-24 years old) and young adults who have already been engaging with the labor market for some years (25-34 years old).

These differences are attributable to the heterogeneity of the population segment and the difficulty in measuring such a segment (Jongbloed & Giret, 2022; Cavalca, 2021, 2015; Caroleo et al., 2020). There are also substantial differences between the countries of Northern Europe, where the population enters the labor market around the age of 21, and Italy, where the transition to autonomy is extraordinarily prolonged, sometimes reaching up to 34 years of age (ISTAT, 2024). However, the entire Mediterranean area (Italy, Spain, and Greece) is involved in this postponement of youth autonomy.

One of the most evident causes seems to be found in long-term unemployment, which would affect a positive outlook on the future and one's own existence, discouraging young people year after year in the search for new job opportunities (Caroleo et al., 2020; Bell & Blanchflower, 2010). The influence of negative past experiences would lead to what Ryan has called the "*scarring effect*," that is, contributing to solidifying the negative component of the past experience, overlaying a predetermined negative judgment onto the experience yet to come, to the point of conflating the dimension of search with the dimension of failure (Ralston, Everington et al., 2022).

Fig. 2. NEET in Italy according to gender and age. Source INAPP (2022).



Focusing, then, on case studies within the Mediterranean area, it emerges (Caroleo et al., 2020) that NEET rates have decreased, but the cohort of younger individuals (18-24) remains persistent, with the greatest difficulties encountered precisely in the transition from the world of education to the world of work. Indeed, we know that 1 in 3 young people aged 18-24 is a NEET, and 1 in 10 aged 14-19 is out of the education system. The pandemic has also accelerated the trend that we could define as “generational asymmetry,” which hinders pathways to youth emancipation (MLPS Report, 2020). Young people, especially those with lower educational qualifications, seeking their first employment, have been more disadvantaged after the pandemic, and when they have succeeded in securing employment, they have often been employed in less qualified roles, consolidating a trend that has been on the rise for some years of overeducation correlated with underemployment.

When considering the territorial dimension, the existence of a macro-block in the central-northern area, which is in line with or below the European average (15%), and a macro-block that persists in the southern area, where the most

critical issues are highlighted, with the NEET rate reaching almost 31% in Sicily (INAPP, 2022), becomes apparent.

Despite the multitude of factors that can determine the persistence of young people in the NEET condition, those that the Ministry of Labor generally indicates as the main risk factors are 7:

- Having a low level of academic performance;
- Living in a family with low income;
- Coming from a family in which a parent has experienced periods of unemployment;
- Growing up with a single parent;
- Being born in a country outside the EU;
- Living in a rural area;
- Having a disability.

The strategies to reduce inactivity, especially in the post-pandemic phase, risk proposing solutions not very different from those implemented to tackle long-term unemployment.

The recent reforms of the Italian labor market are explicitly based on the logic of “flexicurity” and mainly aim to support job transitions, combining active policy measures (e.g., employment services and training courses) with income support measures. In these active policies, albeit interesting, we glimpse a possible risk of crystallizing the yo-yo effect, once again anchoring flexibility to the world of work.

It would be necessary to work on unemployment benefits, avoiding the marginalization to which especially young people are exposed during the transition to adulthood, when they explore the different dimensions and numerous work contexts that the global world offers them between one job and another.

The latest Legislative Decree No. 60 of May 7, 2024, “Further provisions on cohesion policies,” focuses heavily on the reform of cohesion policies within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), aimed at accelerating and strengthening the implementation of interventions funded by the cohesion policy 2020-2027, which aim to counteract the disparities of the territorial macro-blocks mentioned earlier. Among the interventions aimed at young people, we recall:



- **Youth Bonus:** The measure grants private employers exemption from paying 100% of the social security contributions for their employees, up to a maximum limit of 500 euros per month for each worker nationwide, reaching 650 euros for the regions of Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Basilicata, Sicily, Puglia, Calabria, and Sardinia. The measure will be active for the years 2024-2025 for those who hire non-managerial personnel under 35, who have never been employed with an indefinite-term employment contract.
- **Women's Bonus:** The measure grants exemption, for a maximum period of 24 months, from paying 100% of the social security contributions due by the private employer, up to a maximum limit of 650 euros per month for each female employee, hired indefinitely between 2024 and 2025, falling into the following categories:

Women of any age, without a regularly paid job for at least 6 months, residing in the regions of the Single Special Economic Zone for the South;

Women of any age without a regularly paid job for at least 24 months, residing anywhere. The exemption does not apply to domestic work and apprenticeship contracts.

- **ZES Bonus (Single Special Economic Zone for the South),** which provides exemption from contributions for up to 24 months, and up to 100% for each employee hired as a subordinate, non-managerial position, until December 31, 2025.

Indeed, given the scope of these recent active labor and youth policies, we once again question whether these measures are delineated by a hegemonic culture typical of a certain value system (Drakaky et al., 2014). Considering the magnitude of the phenomenon, which transcends national and continental boundaries, we question the possibility of an institutional failure regarding the model of social development that contemporary society seeks to pursue. Reviewing the numerous studies and reports that address the phenomenon even in geographic areas distant from our own (Zudina, 2022; Berlin, Kääriälä et al., 2021; Mauro & Mitra, 2020), what we find is a strong correlation between three main factors:

- the variable of the labor market, increasingly unstable and flexible (Ralston, Everington et al., 2022), which does not aid young people in embarking on and stabilizing the path to autonomy;
- the variable that pertains to the school-to-work transition, in which a solid scientific educational preparation would help counteract

unemployment and vulnerability (Pesquera, 2022).

- Finally, the variable concerning more economic aspects, which refer to concepts such as the tax wedge, inactive insurance, minimum wage, and various others, which vary greatly from country to country.

It appears that, despite the decrease in the unemployed in Italy, the condition of NEETs has not been emancipated from gender differences; educational level; school qualifications; family background; territorial socioeconomic disparities; immigrant status; overeducation, just as before the pandemic. And if some factors have worsened, such as the latter, microeconomic indicators still strongly emphasize the phenomenon, prejudicing the life trajectories of young adults.

## **5. NEET: WELL-BEING AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

Among the various dimensions that scientific literature has investigated and correlated with the NEET phenomenon, which we have not yet mentioned in our review, emerges the poverty of the family of origin and the condition under examination here.

Scientific literature (Mussida & Sciulli, 2023; Papadakis et al., 2020; Mascherini, 2019) has highlighted that in the 22 European Union countries analyzed, poverty and the NEET condition are correlated. Sometimes another variable that plays a part in the phenomenon is represented by early school dropout (Parker, 2022; Bynner & Parsons, 2002), and another impacting factor is the condition of disability (Mascherini, 2019).

Unemployment also increases the risk of poverty and inequality: it seems to be a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape (Drakaki, et al., 2022; Gregg & Tominey, 2005). Research also shows that one NEET in the family exposes the entire family to the risk of poverty (Mussida & Sciulli, 2023).

Some studies show how the NEET condition affects the well-being and mental health of young adults (Tanton et al., 2021; Robertson, 2019; Reine et al., 2004), stimulating negative attitudes towards the future.

Other research presents correlations between the NEET condition, drug consumption, and crime (Filomena & Picchio, 2023; Coles et al., 2010; Gregg & Tominey, 2005).

We have already mentioned the scarring effect that the condition imposes on individuals' lives. It is therefore reasonable to hypothesize that there is a correlation between the NEET condition and its negative effects on the health

and well-being of individuals over the course of their lives. In particular, studies have been conducted in Italy on belonging to this varied cohort and on happiness (Rapporto Giovani, 2023). What has emerged is that education is a fundamental determinant in individuals' life trajectories and social success, and in turn, it is a predeterminant of individuals' well-being and health.

Policies for employment and young people must therefore be well-targeted and minimize educational and training inequalities from an early age and promote transitions to adulthood that are as collaborative and supportive as possible, because the NEET phenomenon should not be seen only as a cost to society but also as a missed opportunity for entire generations.

## **6. LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT POLICIES, NEET, AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

Having overcome the issue of modeling a hegemonic schema of young adulthood, conceived and proposed by several technologically advanced countries including Europe, which outlines the autonomy of young people according to perspectives of capital production, in line with the capitalist development model, we can now proceed with the reflection concerning the measures that the Italian central government has put in place to overcome the NEET condition, which currently represents a limit to the development of the standardized model, and precisely for this specificity needs to be investigated more thoroughly than has been done so far by research bodies.

If the aim is to counteract the phenomenon, acting not so much on the inclusion of divergent models, but on the marginalization of the same, with a relative numerical decrease of the phenomenon in quantitative terms, in our opinion investing in the quality of learning and skills can represent a winning strategy in reducing the NEET cohort in the medium and long term.

Examining the National Intervention Plan on NEETs, developed by the government, we identify two critical issues:

- a. the emergence of the phenomenon. It is not easy to intercept the many young people involved in the NEET condition given its heterogeneity. Relying on quantitative data, we have found, poses strong limitations to the definition of the cohort, and to the necessary distinctions of the different subgroups that compose it. Quantitative research at the macro level, therefore, does not give us a precise picture of the phenomenon.
- b. the fragmentation of services and the different responses developed at both central and local government levels partially render the services offered (desks, informational services, training activities, orientation,

counseling, placement services, etc.) ineffective. It would be appropriate to provide unitary responses and create territorial networks that dialogue with each other in offering services to counter the phenomenon. This variety of services often leads to disorientation and dispersion of public energies and resources.

Furthermore, given the high degree of internal heterogeneity within the cohort, it is necessary to design different policies. The internal heterogeneity within the concept of NEET emerges strongly when analyzing the reasons that keep young people out of the educational system and the labor market. The reasons for inactivity are attributable to a multiplicity of profoundly different conditions. It is to be considered, for example, the gender dimension, which creates a strong polarization because reasons for inactivity related to caregiving responsibilities, such as motherhood (in Italy, in 2020, 26% of NEET women are mothers, compared to a much lower 2% of fathers), represent a more decisive factor for women than for men.

The risk factors highlighted in the literature (Damaske et al., 2024; Bolívar, 2019; Brand, 2015; Mythen, 2005) coming from a low-income family; having a disability; growing up with a single parent; being from non-EU countries; and living in a rural area with low industrial and technological development, could already provide a map of territorial risk that stimulates specific policies to counter the phenomenon. For example, the use of AI could help prevent the phenomenon at least in part, and systematize the various services at a more organic level than the current one.

We observe that despite numerous studies, the main problem has persisted for decades, namely the activation of policies aimed specifically at preventing and managing the social risk underlying the phenomenon, which correlates poverty and social exclusion with this condition (Mussida & Sciulli; 2023).

The main challenge arising from the analysis and observation of the most advanced European experiences in youth policies inspired by social innovation lies in effectively integrating the need for strategic governance with the potential present in the territories. Essentially, it is about identifying mechanisms capable of reconciling the energies that emerge from the grassroots level, namely those of the various actors present in the territory, with the need to guide interventions within a unified national framework according to strategic governance.

So far, the problem of emergence has been addressed with traditional approaches: namely, through information desks, guidance and training, often in a rather haphazard manner among those who spontaneously participate in

various initiatives, mostly supported by regional policies for youth employment. Drawing on examples from European case studies (Petrescu et al., 2022; Mascherini, 2019; Carcillo & Königs 2015), it would be beneficial to promote interventions aimed at identifying inactive individuals on different Italian territories, even through widespread awareness campaigns, so that the services offered are known and individuals are sensitized. Moreover, specific and personalized intervention plans should be implemented, such as those for educational interventions aimed at young people leaving school (Youth Guarantee), to ensure effective integration between the labor market and employable young people, respecting the actual territorial needs.

### **6.1. Possible strategies for designing tailored policies at the local level**

One could hypothesize a first “pilot phase,” involving only certain territorial areas to proceed with mapping the phenomenon (quantification of the phenomenon; tools to intercept young adults and previous best practices; possible channels to identify the NEET condition and identification of territorial subjects that can be involved). Subsequently, through interviews with key informants and the involvement of youth associations and organizations; cooperatives working with young people; Youth Information Centers/Youth Spaces; and other entities identified by the Municipalities, information on actions to be taken could be collected. Only then could a much more customized service be offered than the current one, as it considers the phenomenon in a real territory and not at a theoretical level. In this specific case, initiatives capable of involving hard-to-reach young people, such as those who have dropped out of school; who face substance abuse problems; the homeless; the disabled; the economically disadvantaged, etc., who have not been identified until then to receive public support, would need to be defined.

This phase would be followed by engaging young people, which requires a particular effort because it is necessary to overcome the sense of distrust that young adults show towards institutions, and the disillusionment they have towards public policies. A particularly engaging avenue for younger people is gaming (Delli Zotti & Blasuting, 2020) and all activities related to the arts such as music or theater (Seddon et al., 2013), social media (Thornham & Gómez Cruz, 2017), as well as sports. These spheres of competence and knowledge seem to be more engaging than other areas of learning. There are numerous experiences already experimented with regarding techniques and methods for engaging young people, aimed at improving digital skills through gaming (Bonanomi & Rosina, 2022).

The last but essential step would follow, which is the phase of designing active policies for young adults and combating the NEET condition, a phase that we could call activation, namely the moment when the active involvement of a series of responsible subjects for active policies in favor of young people is envisaged, starting with the Employment Centers; accredited training Institutions, which offer the “Youth Guarantee” service, as well as many youth associations that are present in our territory.

Analyzing youth policies and the various measures implemented at local and central levels, among others, the GIOVANI 2030 portal (G2030) emerges: this is a platform that offers all the useful information to navigate through the various welfare measures. It is a first effort towards a unified construction of opportunities and projects for young adults. The tool aims to stimulate social inclusion and minimize inequalities, offering everyone the same opportunities to access welfare, a crucial point, as we have seen (Drakaki, 2022), to counter the NEET condition.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our scientific inquiry has revealed that, while education and social justice represent two critical concerns for young adults today, school and family outline the two central pivots, which impact on the life trajectories of individuals. However, we note from our research that also another dimension is involved in the transition to adulthood: that of employment. In fact, a stable and adequately paid occupation can offer a guarantee of planning for the future and reduce the disillusionment shown by young adults towards public institutions and social welfare systems.

Training, for young adults transitioning to autonomy, represents a crucial moment in their personal biographies and implies an active learning oriented towards productivity, as it represents a meeting point between the demand and offer of employment: continuous training is therefore a valuable tool for the autonomy of young people.

With this contribution we aimed at focusing our attention on those young people who are labeled as “NEET”: as this condition increasingly appears to be emergent and has significant implications for public welfare. Several years after our initial publication, we wanted to re-examine this target group to thoroughly understand its paradoxes and limitations. We aimed at verifying whether the labeling of this cohort, which has been ongoing for decades by public and private institutions, research centers, and universities, was mapped according

to principles of equity and free of judgmental positions.

From our scientific exploration, we have also noticed the emergence of an anthropocentric view that attributes the educational and occupational failures of individuals to single social actors, essentially shifting responsibilities away from central and local governments; on the other hand, over the decades, a neoliberal view has gained ground, depicting young people who neither study nor work as a result of a lack of trust in the future and a physiological inertia towards productivity of capital.

In our view, there is a need for collective commitment to promote quality education; job placement; social and gender equity; and to strengthen youth representation at all decision-making levels. The data at our disposal underline the urgency of social policies aimed at improving the living conditions and perspectives of young people in Italy. This can be achieved through the promotion of a more stable and inclusive labor market, greater appreciation of skills, and a renewed intergenerational dialogue.

The “judgmental tension” in the terms used in definitions and reports produced at the European level, which mostly refer to a condition of “social deficit” that does not fit the standardized social model for youth integration, do not foster an inclusive environment and unfortunately create new inequalities.

We wonder, therefore, if the scientific literature produced so far has not highlighted scientific shortcomings as well as data on the phenomenon and definitions.

Can young people who do not adhere to the standardized social system propose different existential models? If so, what are they? Do youth policies tend to standardize divergent and socially unshared models?

The risk we run in not considering “different” life trajectories, relegating them to the sidelines, could be social exclusion.

“Youth prolonged in space and time” (Ferrari, 2018) perhaps represents a refuge, a resilience strategy, or possibly a tool to mitigate the deprivation and fragmentation of young people’s expectations. Young people who, frustrated by the impossibility of accessing processes of growth and autonomy, willingly or involuntarily extend adolescence.

From our investigation, the “territorial issue” emerges persistently, outlining two macro-regions at the national level: the Center-North in line with the European average percentage of NEETs, and Southern Italy with a higher number of NEETs. However, factors such as coming from rural areas also weigh on the

condition, and certain social groups show a greater risk: children of separated parents, children of immigrants, people with disabilities, and those from families at risk of relative and absolute poverty. All these conditions seem to correlate with a higher risk of encountering the condition examined so far. An effort to solve the “territorial issue” seems to be made by Decree-Law No. 60 “Further Provisions on Cohesion Policies” of 7 May 2024 within the PNRR, which aims precisely at counteracting the disparities of territorial macro-regions with dedicated ‘bonuses’ for SEZ areas.

In our opinion, alongside current policies, measures of unemployment benefits should be introduced, avoiding the marginalization to which especially young people are exposed during the transition to adulthood, when they explore the various dimensions and numerous work contexts that the global world offers them between one job and another.

We then discussed the modeling carried out by the European Union regarding young adult models, according to which it is important for youth autonomy to be delineated and described by a standardized and shared model, where capital production and autonomy go hand in hand. We do not evade the social development model with our considerations; we simply want to foresee less marginalizing and more inclusive models of youth development, ones that consider trajectories towards autonomy that do not solely pivot on economic production. Instead, we want to consider those that are based on other dimensions not exclusively aimed at individual economic success and the pursuit of social prestige. For instance performers and artists, who are often included in the NEET group. But why do we consider an artist not autonomous? Why are they considered incapable of providing for themselves, relegating them to a position of vulnerability? We might consider their economic position vulnerable, but not necessarily non-autonomous because of it.

If the aim is to counter the phenomenon, not acting mainly on the inclusion of divergent models, but on their marginalization, with a relative decrease in the numerical terms of the phenomenon, in our opinion, investing in the quality of learning and skills can represent a winning strategy in reducing the NEET cohort in the medium and long term. Considering also developmental models that are more focused on knowledge and learning, and less work-centric, where active citizenship and personal development can include periods of skill and knowledge exploration alongside periods of work, without automatically falling into the cohort of the unemployed, avoiding social stigma and marginalization, we believe, can help to downsize the phenomenon.



In a globalized world, where the possibilities for personal expression, even within the workplace, can be numerous and diverse, and where it's likely that every young person will undertake various jobs throughout their life, it's also reasonable to take into consideration social safety nets allowing deviation from rigid developmental trajectories. Therefore, implementing interpretive approaches and educational practices, even for young adults, could be a solution to better engage with and map this phenomenon.

We notice that the various welfare initiatives over the years have not been free from distortions and, unfortunately, have led to pronounced social inequalities. Fragmented and insufficient social policies aimed at young people have made Italy the last in Europe in terms of employment services and support during periods of unemployment, lacking not only economic but also educational support during periods of inactivity.

A redefinition of the NEET issue and its precise territorial mapping is urgently needed for a deeper reconceptualisation of the phenomenon. Of course, scientific research, policies, and lifelong learning programs throughout the EU must be reconsidered for this target group.

Italy must undergo a thorough examination of how learning and training are organized in workplaces, not merely in quantitative and economic terms, but in how effectively the learnfare contributes to the efficiency and competitiveness of the country. This shouldn't lead to paralyzing standardizations, but should rather consider differentiated autonomy models based on age and location, respecting individual needs.

As the cohort is highly heterogeneous within itself, it's necessary to design different policies. The internal heterogeneity within the concept of NEET emerges strongly, when analyzing the reasons that keep young people out of the education and labor market. The reasons for inactivity stem from a multiplicity of profoundly different conditions.

The engagement of young people must necessarily follow this phase, which requires a particular effort, because it's essential to overcome the sense of distrust that young adults have repeatedly shown towards institutions.

These are crucial factors that should be carefully analyzed, leveraging the potential offered by the new technologies currently available. For example, the use of AI systems could enable the construction of a risk map in Italy, allowing for the design of appropriate policies, to prevent the NEET condition and activate interventions.

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# SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE ITALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: A CASE STUDY

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## 1. UNIVERSITIES BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL MANDATES

The ways in which universities foster social inclusion vary widely. Understandably, multiple dimensions of inequality are encompassed within this concept, including economic, ethnic, gender, and differing abilities that individuals may bring with them.

These changes bring new requirements and purposes to the academic education system, driving a vision of universities as institutions that are progressively more open to the wider citizenry and to their local communities (Paletta, 2004; Ballarino et al., 2010).

Within this framework, providing a structured scenario is not a simple task.

It is possible to identify mainstream trends, but the methods vary depending on the context: geographic, regulatory, institutional, etc.

According to literature (Indogenist et al., 2021; Criaco et al., 2013; Kibona, 2020; Boni & Walker, 2013; Sovi & Chavooshi, 2019; Aluko&Aluko, 2011) two general trends might be identified.

The first trend sees universities assuming a responsible role for fostering what is defined as *Human Capital*, based on individual learning or meeting the requirements for growth and development related to the knowledge economy. The second trend sees universities providing education that contributes to promote processes that empower capabilities (Sen, 2010; Nussbaum, 2014) useful in supporting social equity and inclusion.

In the next paragraph, the case study (Corbetta, 1999; Yin 1984) explores the experience of the University of Sassari (UniSS). The main aim is to identify how UniSS implements support for Students with Special Needs (SSN) and facilitates integration processes, such as academic access, educational success, and social inclusion related to student life experiences.



The research adopted both standardized and non-standardized approaches involving UniSS' staff as key informants. Data collection tools included semi-structured interviews, discussion games, a survey and participant observation. Secondary source analysis focused on national and regional laws, Ministerial Decrees, UniSS' regulations and the two last strategic plans, national statistical data and from the student office.

According to the methodology, it is important to reiterate the non-generalizable nature of the study aimed to explore.

## **2. STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS DEFINITION**

In national and international literature (Arengi et al., 2020; D'Alonzo, 2017; Tinklin & Hall, 1999; Holloway, 2001), the concept of SSN is typically linked to special education, encompassing students with disabilities, Specific Learning Disorders (SLD), or other Special Educational Needs, that require individualized learning programs and accessible services or facilities. In order to operationalize research object, in this case study we adopt a broader definition promoted by the *UniSS' student career guide*, since 2018:

- Students with disabilities, handicaps, and SLD, as defined by Italian regulations;
- Incarcerated students enrolled in the Penitentiary University Pole (PUP), who face restrictions on personal freedom or other restrictions outside prisons;
- Alias students, who are undergoing gender transition;
- Injured students, who are with temporary disabilities or illnesses;
- Pregnant or new mother students;
- Sensitive students, who have experienced violence, abuse, discrimination, or other traumatic events, such as terrorism, natural disaster, epidemics, or come from conflict-ridden areas or famine-stricken countries, including refugees or asylum seekers;
- Caregiver students.

## **3. DETERMINANTS OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES**

From the regulations' analysis, it emerges as in Italy different kind of protection across various societal sectors for people with special needs exist. The educational system is one of the sectors prioritizing strategies to guarantee

equal opportunities, participation and integration for vulnerable groups (Striano, 2010; Santagati, 2011; Bellacicco, 2018), often in inconsistently ways and lacking uniform protections.

As shown in Table 1, the legislative framework impacts on two different levels, and in some case, normative is not focused on universities but converted from other area, such as legislation for workers. The first level refers to the effects on the governance, in which it is evident a widespread presence of Rector's Delegates, alongside the establishment of a national coordination body, aimed at promoting shared inclusion policies through knowledge exchange among the members.

The second level refers to management processes. The effects are visible on universities instruments and strategies to foster and implement the access to the educational system and guarantee the right to education (distance learning, tuition fees exemption, devices, etc.).

For instance, area of Disability, Handicap or SLD students underlines a strong protection of the right to education for students with a certified deficit. Norms outline standardized, precise, and detailed national procedures and tools aimed at guaranteeing access to the educational system, supporting attendance and academic success, as well as facilitating personalized assessment methods conducive to academic achievement. Moreover, the law provides to guarantee the existence of Rector's Delegate.

Another example refers to the PUP. Over time, national regulations have generated specific directives and implemented binding protocols to manage the educational system at both the national and local levels and have implemented the National Committee of the Rector's Delegates.

As shown in table 1, a different situation emerges when considering other special needs categories, where both the activation and the organizational and management methods leave greater discretion to single universities.

As is clear from secondary sources, the legislative system fosters universities in implementing primarily social integrative processes in order to achieve *Human Capital*.

The access to the academic system appears largely aimed at promoting knowledge quantifiable in ECTS in order to certificate competences available to satisfy job market and improve knowledge economy. Less emphasis is placed on promoting processes that support social inclusion. These latter ones appear to be more influenced by a spontaneous initiative of universities.

Tab. 1. Italian legislation and processes for SSN.

SSN	Normative		
	Specific regulation for university	Discretion in process management	Rector's delegates
Disability/Handicap/SLD	Yes	Low	National University Conference of Delegates for Disability (CNUDD)
Penitentiary	Yes	Low	National Conference of Rectors' Delegates for Penitentiary University Pole (CNUPP)
Sensitive	Yes	Medium	International business commission/Negotiation, International cooperation and sport commission
ALIAS	Yes	Medium	Gender policies commission
Maternity	Yes	Medium	
Injuries	Yes	Medium	
Care giver			

In this framework, UniSS is not an exception. A review of various planning documents from UniSS highlights that the promotion of substantive equality—particularly in relation to teaching practices and their implementation—must be ensured across all areas of the SSN. Central to the integration policy is the provision of measures to facilitate course participation, supplementary educational activities, tax exemption, exam procedures, personalized study options, etc.

Referring social inclusion processes, in the next paragraph we analyse the case of UniSS' PUP.

#### 4. PRACTICES OF SOCIAL INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS IN JAIL

According to Saraceno (2013) and Castel (2010), the process of social inclusion is determined by two conditions: the active participation of individuals and the sense of affiliation.

From this perspective, the PUP case stands out as particularly relevant to our analysis.

As data shown, the students of the penitentiaries are considered at risk of social exclusion due to “social and relational isolation”, as reported by 60% of respondents. While the restriction of personal freedom and access to the system is guaranteed by law, the analysis also highlights the importance of academic and student life at UniSS. This approach aims to align the educational path with the broader goals of penal measures, particularly the rehabilitation of the offender.

This objective is achieved through three focused actions by UniSS. The first involves the “physical” interaction between students and the “academic world”, in order to reduce the perceived distance between the university structure and its members.

This is highlighted by initiatives that are typically carried out in university spaces being replicated within the prison. For example, students are given the opportunity to take exams and defend their thesis inside the prison in front of an examination committee, receive physical copies of requested books through library loans in collaboration with tutors, and participate in events like *European Research Night* (ERN) in the ambit of project SHARPER.

As the PUP coordinator puts it: “When the box of books arrives, it’s a celebration, and it’s one of the best ways to make them feel involved.” Regarding ERN, he adds, “I have t-shirts made for them from the project’ SHARPER, because of our third-mission initiative.”

The choices made reflect a strong desire to listen to and respond to the students’ needs to interact with both teachers and peers, and to be included in academic processes. As one student remarked:

To counter the risk of social and relational isolation, it would be useful to propose meeting days between university and penitentiary students, and vice versa. Sometimes, the boundaries are not as clear-cut as we think (Student 1).

Another student emphasized, “Creating real opportunities for interaction with professor would be important” (Student 2).

The second focus is on the method of embedding. UniSS fosters active involvement of incarcerated students in processes aimed at enhancing the educational programs tailored to them, adopting a bottom-up approach. Recently, this led to the creation of a theoretical/practical course in social and/or traditional agriculture within two Sardinian prisons. As the coordinator reports:

The student collective (...) developed a proposal to present to the PUP administration. (...) We did not impose a project from above; we started from their needs, from their lived experiences.

As one faculty member explains: “I arrived there with bags full of plants, so they didn’t just listen to a lecture, but touched the materials, which was already a lot for them”.

The third focus refers a sense of belonging and identification among incarcerated students within the student community.

This is underscored by the recent opportunity provided by UniSS for all students to undertake internships in prison in order to further peer to peer education. As the coordinator notes: “[This allows] them to connect with their peers enrolled in the PUP. Our goal is to bring ‘free’ students inside the prison.” This need is also reflected in student requests “[it is necessary] more supportive environment” (Student 3) and “collaborative activities with other students” (Student 4).

## **CONCLUSION**

In summary, the findings indicate at national level a growing sensitivity within universities toward embracing diversity and promoting social inclusion for SSN. The data suggest that universities respond to societal demands through a variety of principles and practices.

A preliminary approximation reveals two poles on a continuum where these principles and practices can be situated.

The first pole is structural, with the university system mirroring the dynamics of national social policies, which often regard beneficiaries as mere “service users” (Dal Pra Ponticelli, 2010; Gui, 2004). In this context, legislation plays a key role, guiding universities’ actions and interventions, affecting the protection of the right to study, and shaping governance processes to foster *Human Capital* through an accessible academic learning and education.

This framework aligns with the concept of social integration, as it pertains to a legal system aimed at ensuring access through formal measures, respecting differences, and applying the principle of substantial equality in accessing services and resources (Saraceno, 2013). This setup enables students to access differentiated and, in some cases, personalized learning and training opportunities (institutional mandate) (Douglas, 1990; Colozzi, 2009), supported by “dispensative”, “suspensive,” or “integrative” tools.

The second pole is more emancipatory and process-oriented, viewing the university as an inclusive space and a “site of social practice” (Merler, 1984), that promote social change, integrating and actively engaging with communities and stakeholders. The case study illustrates that, while the results are not generalizable, this pole aims to reduce inequalities by valuing differences and capabilities (Sen, 2010; Nussbaum, 2014) and acknowledging the socio-relational sphere, a hallmark of social inclusion in higher education.

In this framework, the focus is on promoting an environment that values equity and individuality, fostering an active participation and sense of belonging and “affiliation” (Saraceno, 2013; Castel, 2000; Striano, 2010) for community identification.

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# HOW CAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSUME AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH? A CASE STUDY ON HOMELESSNESS IN BRESCIA

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The study, entitled “Road Companions” (Compagni di strada), was conducted by the Research Center on Family and Childhood Education (CesPeFI) of the Catholic University of Sacred Heart between September 2022 and October 2023. Its objective was to investigate the specific intersectional phenomenon of homelessness in the urban context of Brescia, Northern Italy. The investigation employed a qualitative methodological framework, specifically ethnography, to enhance the ability to identify and make visible the numerous invisible subjects involved in the specific interstitial dynamics, intersectional contexts, and processes that characterise the phenomenon. The findings substantiate the assertion that the selection of particular typologies of educational approaches is of critical importance in addressing the reproduction of mechanisms of selection and exclusion, particularly when such approaches are informed by an interlinked perspective that takes into account contextual factors, individuals, social and territorial variables, as exemplified by the case of homelessness.

educational research approach; intersectional processes; homelessness.

## INTRODUCTION

The complexity of the phenomenon of homelessness – which combines in itself components of housing deprivation and social hardship, according to strongly processual dynamics (Consoli & Meo, 2020) – increasingly highlights the need for multidisciplinary and intersectional readings: indeed, the experience of

homelessness is typified by a multiplicity of forms of marginalisation (Pleace, 2016), both material and immaterial. Material forms of marginalisation include the absence of employment, housing, economic resources and health. Immaterial forms of marginalisation include the lack of familial and social relationships and the absence of professional networks. These experiences collectively constitute the most severe form of social exclusion. Consequently, an intersectional approach to the study of homelessness is a valuable methodology for identifying the exclusionary processes and social injustices that underpin the phenomenon of “poverty careers”, which ultimately culminate in the experience of homelessness itself.

In this regard, United Nations “Inclusive policies and programmes to address homelessness” recently declared:

Homelessness is a complex intersectional issue that highlights the challenges faced by Governments in protecting, respecting and fulfilling the human rights of populations in vulnerable situations. Homelessness occurs globally, transcending economic and governance systems and requiring more comprehensive approaches. Factors such as evolving inequality, unfair distribution of resources, changing family dynamics and the commodification of housing contribute to the phenomenon. (UN, 2023, p. 18).

In fact, evidences from homeless people’s life condition indicate that since this population lives in complex conditions of social unrest, very often correlated to other kinds of criticalities (such as health and mental diseases, addictions, alcoholism, troubles with justice, etc.) (Batterham, 2019), multidisciplinary and integrated approaches ensure a better analysis of this phenomenon.

Furthermore, evidence drawn from social workers’ professional experiences indicates that approaches characterised by interdisciplinary collaboration and interconnectivity facilitate a more efficacious engagement with the homeless population. (Consoli & Meo, 2020).

## **1. RESEARCH PROJECT “COMPAGNI DI STRADA” (ROAD COMPANIONS)**

The investigation was conducted in the Brescia urban area (Northern Italy) between September 2022 and October 2023 by the CESPEFI (Research Centre on Family and Childhood of the Catholic University of Sacred Heart, Brescia Campus). It was carried out with the collaboration of the non-profit voluntary association “Un Medico per Te” (A Doctor for You) and the participation of the “Cabina di Regia sulla Grave Marginalazione”, the Control Room for Severe

Marginalisation of the Municipality of Brescia<sup>1</sup>.

In particular, the association, composed of doctors who work on a voluntary basis for the health of homeless people, requested that the research centre conduct a study aimed at deepening their knowledge of Brescia's homeless population. This would enable them to provide a more adequate response to the health demand of their patients, who are refractory to care and difficult to reach. Ultimately, this would guarantee them the right to health, which is often denied by multiple complex dynamics.

### 1.1 Research plan

The research was undertaken with the following aims:

- (1) to gain insights into the subculture of homeless people within the urban area of Brescia;
- (2) to examine the knowledge and practices acquired by social workers employed in Brescia's diverse services for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Consequently, the research plan explored the following topics:

- “sliding mechanisms” and exclusion dynamics;
- distinctive features of homelessness' condition;
- way-out mechanisms/elements of personal resilience;
- hierarchy of homeless' priorities;

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<sup>1</sup> The Statistics and Data Study Centre of the Municipal Registry Office of the City of Brescia estimates the resident population in 2023 at 200,691 citizens, of whom 552 are homeless - however, this figure only includes the generality of citizens with a fictitious residence in via S. Marie del Mare, and therefore does not take into account the additional presence of other people in the area who are known to be homeless in reality (perhaps even known to low-threshold services), but who are not known to be registered. (<http://dati.comune.brescia.it/dataset/popolazione-residente-per-genere-01-01-2024>). The Municipality of Brescia has a large number of services for severely marginalised adults. In particular, in November 2017, the act of constitution of the “Cabina di regia” (control room) and the “Tavolo tecnico” (technical working group) on serious marginalisation was approved. It intervenes in the following areas: management of the Cold Emergency Plan, definition of the general design of interventions, comparison of the strengths and criticalities of services, identification of proposals for new emergencies and activation of experimental services. The ‘Cabina di regia’ is a stable co-programming body, while the ‘Tavolo tecnico’ deals with the study of specific situations. Both bodies can, depending on their purpose, extend their participation to other municipal actors or to representatives of third sector organisations or other bodies active in the fight against severe marginalisation. Nine actors of the third sector are present together with representatives of the municipality. The coordinating function of this system is in the hands of the Municipality of Brescia. This mode of constant comparison allows the service system to develop joint projects between the municipal administration and the third sector organisations (Comune di Brescia, Ambito 1 Brescia e Collebeato - Piano di zona 2021-2023).

- functional approaches to engaging individuals experiencing homelessness;
- perspectives from service providers for homeless people, with a particular focus on the insights of social workers.

The initial phase of the research, which had an exploratory nature, involved the creation and analysis of focus groups conducted with health workers and social workers who are employed in the homelessness field. The objective of this phase was to assess the most effective strategies for approaching homeless individuals based on the experience of services that are specifically dedicated to this population. Additionally, this phase aimed to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, attention, and sensitivity gained by experts in this field. In accordance with the evidence that emerged during this phase of the research, it was deemed appropriate to adopt an ethnographic approach (Bove, 2019), involving pure observation at very low threshold services, participatory observation at low/medium threshold services and finally interviews with homeless people living in housing services.

Therefore, the researchers carried out:

- n. 1 preparatory meeting with Control Room for Severe Marginalisation of the Municipality of Brescia;
- n. 2 observations at the breakfast distribution by religious and volunteers at Brescia railway-station square;
- n. 1 outgoing participatory observation with City Angels Association
- n. 1 participatory observation at “L’Angolo” Day Centre
- n. 1 participatory observation at the Help Centre
- n. 1 participatory observation at “Perlar” Day Centre
- n. 4 interviews with individuals residing in San Vincenzo, Caritas, and Asilo Pampuri’s social housing accommodation<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. RESEARCH RESULTS

In relation to the subject of the present discussion, namely the intersectional approach in educational research, the findings concerning the distinctive characteristics of the experience of homelessness, as they emerged from the study, are discussed in greater detail below. In our view, these findings

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<sup>2</sup> One participant had spent one year experiencing homelessness, two had accumulated years of experience in this context, and one had been prevented from residing on the street due to health-related circumstances. The sample included one women and three men, with ages ranging from below 40 to nearly 60 years.

demonstrate the composite nature of the phenomenon, highlighting the necessity to conceptualise it as an intersectional ‘sum’ of multiple phenomena and processes, to be understood both in their specificity and in their intersections.

### **2.1. Distinctive features of homelessness’ condition**

The research findings revealed a notable recurrence of specific elements and processes with a high impact on the living conditions of homeless individuals.

As for elements that pertain more to a personal sphere, the focus was on:

- high communicative fragility of the homeless people – the homeless people were observed to manifest a high level of communicative fragility. It was noted that this was due to a combination of factors, including an insufficient command of the Italian language, a form of cognitive decline, and in one case, psychiatric pathologies. It seems reasonable to assume that this aspect may have a detrimental impact on the relationship, in two distinct ways. Firstly, for those experiencing homelessness, speaking in such a challenging manner requires a significant degree of effort, and when this effort is unsuccessful, it can give rise to feelings of impatience, frustration and shame, which further alienate the individual from the relationship, leading to a sense of withdrawal. Secondly, the operators are also required to make a considerable effort to understand and express themselves in a way that is accessible to those experiencing homelessness;
- important incidence and impact of addictions – all of the individuals who were interviewed had experienced addiction, whether to psychotropic substances and/or alcohol, or gambling. Furthermore, both operators and volunteers concurred that the majority of homeless people are in such a life condition as a direct result of an addiction, provided that it is active;
- unaccompanied foreign minors and women – despite their dramatic nature, this research has only been able to partially intercept certain presences. The subject under discussion is the presence of younger foreigners who were previously unaccompanied foreign minors. It would appear that upon reaching the appropriate legal age, these young people are not promptly offered accommodation. In some instances, this may result from a desire to pursue alternative migration routes, while in others it stems from misinformation. As a consequence, they find

themselves without a secure place of residence, vulnerable to recruitment by criminals. The other presence that has just been intercepted (in particular in Brescia urban parks, during the night) and seemed very critical is that of women, particularly foreign citizens. These women appear to be in a state of vulnerability, both physically and mentally, and are subjected to a form of control exerted by their male counterparts. They appeared to be frightened, and in almost all cases, they reported living in emergency situations;

- increase in the number of homeless elderly people – it has been observed by numerous operators over the past five years at least that there has been an increase in the number of homeless persons over the age of 65. This represents a new category of service users, and it is necessary to initiate a joint reflection, in order to establish a congruent approach, between the services and policies that pertain to serious adult marginality and those that pertain to the elderly.

Furthermore, additional considerations pertaining to environmental factors are as follows:

- extreme complexity of life situations – from the narratives of the interviewed persons experiencing homelessness and the operators, situations emerge which escape any classification because they include multiple and very specific cases. This refers to a sort of perceived climate that concerns both the operators and the homeless people: the checkmate in which certain situations place the persons generates feelings of impotence, surrender, often even disinvestment, distrust;
- medical discharge and health protection of homeless people – many social and health workers are noticing an increase in ‘medical discharges’, i.e. the problem of finding accommodation for homeless people coming out of hospital, in need of convalescence and/or care and protection. This issue is becoming very important and needs to be addressed through officially structured institutional channels.

The homeless population of Brescia is therefore composed of “sub-populations” or crossed by specific “sub-phenomena” that require special attention, also from a health point of view: the presence of very young foreign adults, women in a particularly fragile state, people with addictions, the elderly, people with specific health problems requiring a semi-hospital regime, as well as situations of particular existential complexity and significant communicative fragility.

The intersectional approach of this educational research study is therefore, in a sense, the consequence of the recognition of the nature of the phenomenon, redefined in the light of the professional experience of social actors and confirmed by the observation of the target population itself. In this regard, the adoption of an ethnological framework has certainly fostered this “intersectional awareness”.

### **3. CONCLUSION. ADVOCACY AND MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESPONSES FOR AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH.**

In conclusion, if it is evident that

intersectionality today represents many things at once, it is an analytical method, a theoretical framework, a critical model, a heuristic device (Bruce & Yearley 2006), an ideological view and, above all, proposes an interdisciplinary (Lykke, 2010) and transdisciplinary approach and analysis (Santoni, 2022, p. 253).

and that “the Italian academy itself, as well as social research of an empirical nature, increasingly use this approach to investigate both emerging and structural forms of inequality” (Santoni, 2022, p. 253), specifically in relation to educational research, an intersectional research approach can help to counter the reproduction of exclusion and inequality, also through a kind of “advocacy” function, as it helps to make visible who and what is often kept invisible – in this case the homeless population. Finally, from a pedagogical point of view, recovering the complexity of the phenomena is often the first step towards thinking about ways of intervening in reality: in fact, we would like to point out that the results of this research have been the subject of further discussion with the doctors of the association “Un medico per Te”. In particular, Cespefi accompanied the clinicians on a critical path of reading and appropriating the results, with the aim of producing a sort of code of ethics or behavioural vademecum to support doctors in their relationship with homeless patients, in order to make the care relationship more effective and incisive. Here again, the openness of the intersectional approach to interdisciplinary working methods is reaffirmed – in the conviction that complex phenomena in turn require composite views and responses.

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# NEW EDUCATIONAL PARADIGMS AFTER THE PANDEMIC? THE CHALLENGE OF THE EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY

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The *Viceversa: Towards a Circular Education Model* Project has recently been funded by the Con I Bambini Foundation with the aim of enhancing an educational community in Certaldo (Tuscany). The community is a network of actors who have responsibilities in the education and care of children. The more community-oriented conception partly explains the legitimacy of care in teaching as one of its components. The interest in an open and equality-oriented education, capable of integrating the emotional sphere, is linked to the development of a perspective centered on valuable relational configurations where various actors can be involved and mutually influence each other. The purpose is to strengthen the educational community building a network of collaborative relationships, fueled by a plurality of actors living in the Empolese Valdelsa territory. The actors recognize the educational contribution they provide in their areas of intervention to ensure the well-being of children, mitigating phenomena such as social discomfort and school related distress (dropout, NEET, etc.) particularly after the pandemic (Colombo, Romito, Vaira, Visentin 2022). The intention of the community is to create an educational and care structure capable of supporting the system of relationships among the actors, providing multidimensional responses to the educational needs of young people.

educational community; young people; care and social inclusion; participation process

## INTRODUCTION

In our societies, new challenges have recently involved schools and educational institutions. Among the main factors, we can consider the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the socio-economic crisis (2008), the difficulty of integrating people coming from different countries (for their heterogeneity in terms of

ethnicity, culture, religion) and the consequences of new technologies on learning process. Moreover, we must take into account that traditional agencies (family, school, church, political parties) are no longer essential reference points for the socialization and youth growth compared to media, social networks and social groups that appear to be more in tune with youth needs.

Referring to the effects of the 2020 pandemic, it gradually became evident how much collective thinking and action would be needed to overcome the difficulties that arose between schools and families (Colombo, Romito, Vaira, Visentin 2022). The third sector organizations have reacted to the pandemic emergency with social responsibility, supporting processes of civic welfare beyond the scope of extracurricular activities. These efforts have ranged from volunteering to charity supporting socio-healthcare networks, often assuming the risks associated with the shortage of protective devices (Merico, Scardigno 2020). The possibility of integrating education in different places, following the perspective of polycentric educational processes, has shown the opportunity to start from outdoor education, sports/artistic forms, associationism and the experiences of socio-educational animation for young people (Merico, Scardigno 2020).

During that period, in our country, efforts were made to counter the rise in inequality, poverty and educational failure by developing “broad and advanced” educational communities (Luisi 2020, p. 902). This approach involved territorial organizations among schools, the promotion of teacher communities and the strengthening of network activities within – and between – institutions. As a result, local and neighbourhood-based forms of mutual support spread among schools.

Therefore, the approach of formative polycentrism has become relevant and timely once again, with the presence of multiple learning opportunities that redefine the functions of schools, attributing importance to multiple actors in education, whereby “every social space possesses its own formative significance” (Cesareo, 1974, 45; Besozzi, 2020).

## **1. EDUCATION AS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY: INTERDEPENDENCE AND CARE**

Today, the series of challenges facing educational systems across Europe can only be overcome through a joint effort by all those involved. Education is a shared responsibility of the whole community, working with different types of teachers, educators and professionals. The international scientific community has already provided a wealth of research showing the relationship between

community involvement and educational success (Gatt, Ojala & Soler, 2011).

We must consider the educational practices, starting with recognizing our interdependence (Lynch 2022, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). The educational context is made up of individuals who live in a state of strong connection and are therefore called to respond to the care needs that surround them (Morin 1994, 2014). In this perspective, it is essential to care for students by involving them in open dialogue and helping them feel like integral members of the educational community. Therefore, school becomes a “public-civil space” (Benasayag & Schmit 2003), a democratic environment aimed at promoting forms of coexistence and direct engagement of the students. This implies considering both the *content* delivered by educational institutions, which should be able to pay attention to others and to give care as well as the *practices* implemented.

The new ethics of care, as a conception of social relationships within and beyond the contexts usually defined by its standard references, considers *care* an indispensable paradigm for addressing the challenges posed by a global society that shows serious critical issues (Lynch 2022, Barnes 2015). A caring citizen would not just learn about the care of self, intimate others or colleagues, but also about the unknown, universal other to whom one is relationally defined in the global economic and social system (Lynch 2022). We need to understand how to sustain our relational life; we need to be educated on how to provide the proper support for the community (Lynch, Lyons & Cantillon 2007).

The educational field appears particularly interesting to investigate because there has recently been a discussion about the opportunity to acquire greater care-oriented goals concerning all the actors involved (Lynch 2022). For these reasons, it becomes essential to reflect on the practices implemented in educational contexts that aim to develop a new conception of care (Lynch 2022).

## **2. THE EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY**

An educational tool aimed at enhancing these characteristics is the “educational community”. Educational community has gained centrality in scientific debate because this concept has been entwined with the principles of permanent education and horizontal subsidiarity (Zamengo & Valenziano 2018, Faure, 1973). Although there is not a singular definition, the educational community is one that is made active through the exercise of participation and educates its members in citizenship and care. Its functioning is based on the realization of educational interventions through:

- The emancipation of individuals;
- The presence of real purposes;
- The identification of a wide range of actors involved in educational work, together assuming shared tasks and responsibilities.

The educational community is capable of (Del Gottardo 2016, 64):

gaining power over the management and resolution of its own daily problems, becoming a provider of services in a real implementation of the principle of subsidiarity and in the realization of community work.... [It] involves connecting citizens with formal and informal support networks that they can find in the territory but also in promoting all those networks of reciprocity and solidarity that spontaneously emerge within a community.

The community is established as the privileged space for authentic encounters and education takes on the role of promoting an aware citizenship, oriented toward building relational networks and sharing common projects (Broccoli 2019, Pedone, Moscato, Tumminello 2024).

Constituted by collaborative processes among local actors who share the commitment to promote inclusive and generative educational practices (Cau, Maino, Maturo 2021), the community is educational because it interprets needs and values of the participants and the potential of the institutions themselves. It is an *agora* in which the exercise of active citizenship is facilitated, characterizing itself as a place of participation and because it mobilizes resources and efforts to overcome discomfort and disadvantage, ensuring equal opportunities for young people (Paparella 2009).

The educational community is engaged in concrete actions, taking care of the activities, promoting transformative interventions and linking knowledge to life, trying to stimulate the students' autonomy. The model aims to develop a school more connected to life, one that is capable of triggering processes, builds connections with the world and creates alliances with families and territories (Furfaro 2022). This approach implies that a successful school will necessarily be involved in community building and regeneration as a value and a purpose. This is what Sergiovanni (1994) terms the '*gemeinschaft*' school; the school which above all values kinship, neighbourliness and collegiality above rational, contractual relationships ('*gesellschaft*').

### 3. THE VICEVERSA PROJECT

The *Viceversa: Towards a Circular Educational Model* Project stems from the significant experience of the participatory “Libera Tutti” Park in Certaldo (2017). The aim is to enhance the educational community that formed around that experience, building a network of relationships. All actors in the educational process are actively involved including students, teachers, parents, institutions and local entities in the Empolese Valdelsa area.

Figure 1. The Libera Tutti Park



The project’s initial phase was designed to give participants the opportunity to discuss their ideas of what may be valued as common good (Laval, Vergne 2022), what the educational community should strive for in terms of principles and actions most suited to convey them<sup>1</sup>.

The main goals were to raise awareness through debates, events, communication, to train with a training program, co-design with students and institutions in the community, formalize a community educational pact, mapping experiences in the area and networking the educational communities of the territory.

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<sup>1</sup> For information about see: <https://percorsiconibambini.it/viceversa/scheda-progetto/>

From September to November 2023, Viceversa hosted two roundtable events open to the public and a learning course aimed at those intending to participate in the project (almost 40 participants).

The activities took place over these months and were curated by the University of Siena (Department of social, political and cognitive sciences – DISPOC) with Narrazioni Urbane APS (a cultural association focusing on urban social renewal).

Project activities took place in a cultural hub (a slaughterhouse recently renovated). Most of the residents of Certaldo town who volunteered to be part of the *Viceversa* project have an active involvement in education and care because they work in formal education or in the field of social and community services.

Figure 2. The activities of the Project



During the first meetings with the researchers of the University of Siena, it was essential to start by problematising both the urgency for action in education and the notion of *community*. This was necessary to reflect on whether a place to belong was something constructed via the recursive negotiation of values, interests and objectives.

The second half of the learning course (from December 2023 to April 2024), was divided into 4 units, each led by a different educator affiliated with 3 local nonprofits:

- Polis Social Enterprise (dedicated to promoting cultural/artistic activities);
- Spazio Ipotetico (which organises circus and dance workshops);
- Circo Libera Tutti (engaging participants in juggling and other circus disciplines, conjoining educational and expressive aspects).

These meetings were meant to involve participants in practical experiences and provoke self-reflection through simulation and play thereby challenging the members to rethink their assumptions about gender, (dis)ability etc. The educators' role was that of facilitators, proposing activities and moderating the critical reflection. Participants were encouraged to express their own positions related to gender identity, ability, ethnicity, class, while at the same time sharing their life experiences.

Play with musical improvisation, juggling exercises, performance techniques readapted from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, created ways for participants to communicate with each other (without necessarily having to speak).

The core purpose of the experiences was to reevaluate what they might have taken for granted about one another and themselves (including needs, capabilities and comfort).

Since mid-April 2024, Viceversa Project has entered in its co-planning phase, aimed at systematising the community's identifying principles and sketching ideas for future educational actions. In this phase, both first and second-grade high schools were involved with the finality to collect the needs of the students (around 300 participants).

The outputs of the Project include:

- Activities that participants are developing with local schools;
- A "Values Charter", a document attesting to the identity, intent and substantive deontology of Certaldo's educational community.







## CONCLUSION

Viceversa Project adopted a holistic and inclusive approach to education, considering individuals' diverse needs and learning contexts. This approach aimed to recognize and value real-life experiences and relationships with the local area to promote empowerment and development for both students and the broader community. It highlighted the essential connection to be emphasized between the educational framework and the broader social and political sphere, capable of actively involving students, families, schools and institutional actors. The outcomes from the discussions at the working tables and the various activities carried out reveal the participants' desire to share experiences that provide opportunities for dialogue and reflection, aimed at co-constructing new educational and transformative paths. These efforts are directed toward a new community architecture that is genuinely inclusive, sustainable, democratic and educational (Pedone, Moscato, Tumminello 2024).

For the future, there is plenty about the project that remains to be seen:

- Whether individual transformations will converge into a *concerted, sustained effort for change* and keener understanding;
- How fruitful the *community's impetus will be* and *how long* it will last.

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# THE PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUNG MEMBER AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: SOCIAL JUSTICE WITHIN THE ITALIAN COOPERATIVE CREDIT BANKS

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Adopting the perspective of the capability approach and emphasizing the importance of being active agents within society, the present contribution aims to present the results of a research conducted in 2023 on the generation of young members of two Italian Cooperative Credit Banks, the Young Members Laboratory (Rome) and the Young Members Committee (Ravennate), born to give concreteness to the principle of democracy and valorize young member as a cultural and organizational resource necessary for social change. The main goals were to study, through mixed methods, the enabling and procedural aspect of the possibility for young members to take part in the groups, the characteristics of this participation and its intrinsic significance for the youth. The research results show that, within both groups, the participation assumes different intensities and modalities and the essentiality for these young people of the involvement as an end in the wave of the capability approach's studies. However, although the democratic process of these groups needs a deeper implementation, youth participation assumes an inescapable role.

Youth; Generation; Democratic participation; Capability approach; Agency

## INTRODUCTION: YOUTH AND PARTICIPATION

The role of culture is now widely recognised in various disciplines. Several cultural processes and *habitus* make it possible to differentiate and explain the origin and evolution of different social groups and organizations. It is also true in the field of economics, where it is feasible to distinguish between economic approaches, based on the monetary quantification of wealth and the

participation of a select few, and development approaches, based on a multidimensional concept of growth and prosperity and the essentiality of educational, cultural, political and structural elements and agency as a founding element of a democratic society. The crisis we are experiencing in its multiple dimensions, such as financial, geopolitical, cultural, and educational, has provoked new questions, criticisms and conflicts especially regarding people participation, agency and democratic governance (Caldéron Gutierrez, 2017) that remain critical questions in many areas of society (Sorice, 2019).

Among the many approaches that have emerged over time within the development paradigms and based on the democratic dimension, in the knowledge that the debate is still very much in the past (Latouche, 1998; Arndt, Volkert, 2011; Sen, 1999), is the Capabilities Approach (CA), theoretical framework of this paper and set up by A. Sen. Amid the fundamental pillars the author defines to reach human development is the agency, the action of the person who actively promotes change according to her needs and goals for personal and communitarian well-being (Ardigò, 1980). One of the possible expressions of agency is participation, which assumes both intrinsic relevance, as an activity of value, and instrumental relevance, as a means of achieving multidimensional well-being (Sen, 1999). In particular, the author attributes priority to the right of participation even before the possible spheres of its application. In this sense, Sen speaks about the enabling and procedural aspects that qualify this right, with the former relating to the possibility of getting involved in activities and the latter the process adopted.

Amidst the institutions developed within this context and based on active and democratic participation are the Credit Cooperative Banks (CCB) discussed in this paper, which were born from social rather than economic issues. Some Italian CCBs, in particular, have given concreteness to the principle of democratic participation through the constitution of a young members group (YM Group), born around 2015, at the suggestion of Federcasse, with youth generally between 18-35 years old. The main goals of these groups are to listen to the young people of the territory and the bank, increase their level of participation and create a new form of *intergenerational mutuality* to implement socially, educationally and culturally responsible transformation. As there is no standard form of shaping them, YM Groups can promote different participative modes depending on their structure and integration, thus entrusting young people with a more or less entrenched transformative role.

Youth reality, from the sociological point of view, represents a salient cultural

and organizational resource, often forgotten but capable of bringing about innovative social and cultural transformations (Mannheim, 1928). For this reason, and because of the importance of participation in the lives of young people, it seemed essential to investigate this reality and how young people themselves, sharing values and principles, reflect, act and adopt common strategies of action (Archer, 2006). In particular, this paper will present empirical research conducted between 2022 and 2023 on the young generation of two Italian BCCs carried out in an attempt to deepen, through mixed methods, the relevance that participation takes on for young people and the types, forms and characteristics of the participation process.

## **1. THE RESEARCH DESIGN**

After mapping the YM Groups in Italian CCBs, I focused on two specific case studies: the Young Members Laboratory of the CCB of Rome (Centre) and the Young Members Committee of the CCB of Ravennate (North). In an attempt to understand the actual possibility of young people being active agents in the bank and territory, according to the enabling and procedural aspect discussed in the CA, the main research questions were:

- How are the structure and the democratic process within both groups configured?
- What is the importance of participation among the young members of both groups?

Through mixed methods, I tried to corroborate research hypotheses and answer the research questions (Creswell, Plano Clark, 2001). The qualitative part involved secondary source analysis, interviews with the Supervisor of the two groups (2), semi-structured interviews with the young members (9) and participatory observation. For the quantitative part, a questionnaire was administered to the youth to understand the mode and intensity of participation and its significance. The sample addressed was reasoned based on two criteria: age and YM Group member status.

## **2. SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS: STRUCTURE, CHARACTERISTICS AND IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATION**

The first result that emerged from the research concerns the structure. Both YM Groups involve approximately 10-12 young people between 18- and 40-years old living in six different territorial areas, according to the bank, thus

representing six different Territorial Praesidia<sup>1</sup>. The Board of Directors chooses young people for the YM Group according to their status as CCB members, proximity to the world of cooperation and/or representativeness of the most widespread activities in the territory. The young members of the groups differ from the other youth members of the CCB but not of the core group: there is, therefore, a “double track of participation” (Supervisor YM Committee). One of the tasks of the young members of the two YM Groups is to represent the other young CCB members and to reduce the gap between them and the top generation by creating events for them. Despite this, as highlighted during the semi-structured interviews, there are no opportunities for exchange and confrontation between young people with different statuses, and often the other young people in the bank are not aware of the existence of the YM Group.

Figure 1: Characteristics of participation in the YM Laboratory and Committee. Source: Personal elaboration from primary data

<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>YM LABORATORY (CCB OF ROME)</b>	<b>YM COMMITTEE (CCB OF RAVENNATE)</b>
Will and possibility (Nie, Verba 1995)	Active but limited participation	Active but limited participation
Enabling and procedural aspect (Sen 2004)	Limited enabling aspect; Limited procedural aspect;	Limited enabling aspect; Integrated procedural aspect;
Intensity (Argawal 2000; Crocker 2007)	Consultive participation; Petitionary participation;	Deliberative participation; Petitionary participation; Consultive participation;

A further aim of the research was to highlight some of the main characteristics of participation by considering the enabling (possibility of involvement) and procedural aspects (use of participatory tools) (Sen, 1999), the dimension of

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<sup>1</sup> CCB Ravennate covers the areas of Faenza, Ravenna, Lugo, Imola, Forlì and Cesena; BCC Rome covers the areas of North Rome, Rome and Province, South Rome, West Veneto, East Veneto and Molise-Abruzzo.

willingness and possibility<sup>2</sup> (Nie, Verba, 1995) and the intensity<sup>3</sup> (Agarwal, 2001; Crocker, 2007). Comparing the situation in both groups, a distinct level of integration and participation of the youth has emerged (see Figure 1).

Firstly, in both groups, it is possible to witness the presence of the dimension of possibility and willingness to participate, albeit in a limited way: as mentioned before, the CCB chooses the young members participating in the two groups and they cannot voluntarily apply for this role. Therefore, the enabling aspect is also limited, even if it seems higher among the Young Members Committee since they can sometimes also apply voluntarily, as the Supervisor said.

Concerning the procedural aspect, the situation is peculiar. The type of participation of members is generally limited to the arrangement of events in the territory and bank and therefore appears to be an active but contained participation and, above all, does not seem to concern economic-financial choices. Moreover, the top management makes final decisions. The situation looks better within the Committee since young members have a more organisational role that includes participation in Local Committees, which are hierarchically higher branches of the whole structure with more significant tasks of solidarity in the territory.

Finally, regarding the intensity of participation, the type of involvement of young members of the Laboratory is similar to consultative participation, where the 'non-elite' (youth of the groups) participate and express their ideas but do not make decisions, which are the responsibility of an 'elite' (top management); petitionary participation, where the 'elite' must listen to the 'non-elite' even if the first group takes final decisions. In addition to this, we can observe the deliberative participation in the CCB Ravennate Committee, which envisages a more intense involvement of young people who take part in the scrutiny, discussion, choice, and implementation of decisions, albeit always limited and not relating to the entire banking structure.

Despite the structure of the two YM Groups and the difficulties related to the participatory process, the interviews and the questionnaire nevertheless revealed the widespread importance of participation as an intrinsically valuable activity in the wake of several studies (Putnam, 2004; Crocker, 2007). As two

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<sup>2</sup> Nie and Verba (1995) distinguish between willingness and possibility to participate (active participation), lack of willingness and possibility (extraneousness), possibility but lack of willingness (self-exclusion) and willingness but not possibility (exclusion).

<sup>3</sup> Agarwal (2001) distinguishes different levels of involvement: nominative participation, passive participation, consultative participation, petitionary participation, participatory implementation, bargaining, and deliberative participation.

young members stated when asked “Do you think participating in the YM Group affects your personal life?”:

(Reflects) It is a good question! Without question, it is a chance, a rare opportunity, let me say, for the small number of people who can take part in these initiatives; right now, I feel privileged to be part of it (M, YM Laboratory). Certainly (it makes me feel) valuable because it is not an opportunity given to all members, so the fact that, for some reason, they have chosen you is very gratifying! (L, YM Committee).

Furthermore, the questionnaire revealed that many young ‘quite/very much agree’ that “participating and being able to express their ideas is of great value” to them, makes them “feel part of a community and a group and value”, “contributes to their well-being and that of outsiders, and enables them to develop greater trust in institutions”.

To the question “Do you think participating in the YM Group gives a deeper meaning to your life?” “If yes, why?” put in the questionnaire, with seven closed-answer alternatives and being able to choose only two of them, many young people replied positively, stating they acquired new skills and goals, that participating allowed them to contribute to the well-being of other people and to make use of their abilities.

In addition, almost all the young members of the Laboratory and the Committee agree that the CCB promotes the participation of young people, families and businesses in the economic and social life of the area. Thus, there is a widespread positive perception amidst young people in YM Groups concerning the work and values promoted by the bank and the groups themselves.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, integrating the different research instruments, some reflections emerged. The two youth groups promote a controversial participatory process. While, on the one hand, it is defined by the element of possibility and willingness for young people to participate, on the other hand, the access is possible according to specific factors delineated by the Board of Directors, which thus makes limited the enabling aspect, an essential factor for concrete active participation as identified by the CA. Similarly, the procedural one is also lacking, given the limited tools available to young people, although the situation seems better in the YM Committee.



Figure 3: Mean of involvement of young people in the two YM Groups. Source: Personal elaboration from primary data

D14 Su una scala da 1 a 10, quanto ti senti coinvolto a livello emozionale e pratico dalle attività organizzate dal gruppo Giovani Soci?



Despite this situation, the young members of the Laboratory and Committee agreed that participation had an intrinsic importance that allowed them to feel part of a community and a group, to share principles and relationships and to feel involved emotionally and practically in the group. At the question “From 1 to 10, how involved do you feel emotionally and practically by the participation in YM Group?” it reached an average of 8.0 (see Figure 3).

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# JUVENILE OFFENDERS AND EDUCATION: WHICH TOOLS TO PURSUE SOCIAL JUSTICE?

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In line with international regulations, the Italian juvenile justice system is designed to protect the best interests of minor offenders and aid their personal development. Detention is considered a last resort for young offenders, but many come from marginalized backgrounds, making community-based measures difficult to implement. To ensure the principle of “residual nature of detention” in all situations, Italian law allows juvenile offenders to be placed in residential care facilities where a professional team of educators designs a personalized educational project to facilitate reintegration into the community. The project involves various educational settings such as schools, training centres, and cultural and sports associations, adopting an educational continuum perspective. The contribution presents some results that emerged from doctoral research, which aims to explore the educational practices adopted by educators working with juvenile offenders in residential care. The data results from interviews with coordinators and managers of residential care for youth in the Lazio region (Italy). The results highlight the heterogeneity of practices adopted by communities for minors in their collaboration with other key actors and educational contexts involved in the minors’ educational path, emphasizing their importance for the reintegration of minors.

adolescent offenders; residential care; educational practices.

## 1. RESIDENTIAL CARE IN THE ITALIAN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

The juvenile justice system addresses crimes committed by young offenders, balancing public safety with the protection of minors’ best interests (UN, 1989). In Italy, the juvenile criminal procedure (Decree of the President of the Republic 448/88) emphasizes aligning statutory provisions with minors’ personalities and educational needs. The system is founded on four core principles that guide its approach:

### 1. The Principle of Suitability

This principle emphasizes that statutory provisions must be tailored to the personality and educational needs of the minor. It is designed to protect the minor's status as a developing individual and to support their personal growth. To promote rehabilitation and reintegration, adolescent offenders are not only handled by the penal system but are also supported by social services, which assess their living conditions and implement personalized educational programs.

### 2. The Principle of Minimal Offense

This principle seeks to avoid unnecessary marginalization or increased exposure to criminal behaviours within the prison system. It prioritizes measures that offer the minor the best opportunity to reform and reintegrate into society.

### 3. The Principle of Destigmatization

This principle minimizes the negative labelling of minors in conflict with the law, aiming to prevent long-term social exclusion. Detention is applied only when necessary, ensuring that other measures are prioritized to promote rehabilitation over punishment.

In alignment with these principles, Italian legislation provides additional measures to support the effective application of these guidelines. Specifically, it guarantees minors' educational rights by addressing their developmental needs while fostering their reintegration into society. The legislative framework thus aims to rehabilitate young offenders through education and social services, prioritizing their development and reintegration over punitive approaches.

Many juvenile offenders come from socially marginalized backgrounds, which makes it difficult to apply community-based criminal measures. For that reason, especially for minors from deviant families or unaccompanied foreign minors, there is a high risk of reproducing the mechanism of injustice and marginalization. To ensure the principle of 'residual nature of detention' in all situations, Italian law allows juvenile offenders to be placed in residential care facilities. The Court can order this measure in the application of precautionary measures as well as non-detention measures. The Court decides the application of this penal measure in the case of the absence of family and/or inadequate living conditions, as well as financial and social support.

According to the latest available data (Ministry of Justice, 2023) there are 618 educational communities in Italy dedicated to the care of juvenile offenders,

although their distribution across the national territory is uneven. Out of the 14,754 minors under the care of juvenile social services, 1,034 are placed in educational communities managed by social cooperatives. Residential care facilities are governed by regional regulations and are structured to resemble a family environment. Those designed for young offenders are referred to as 'educational communities'. In these settings, a team of professional educators works on a rotational basis, either daily or hourly, rather than residing permanently within the community. Beyond their caregiving responsibilities, educators develop tailored educational plans and motivate minors to follow them through to completion. The educational communities respond to a dual institutional mandate: ensuring the execution of the sentence and facilitating the minor's reintegration into their social context of belonging (Mastropasqua et al., 2020). These facilities operate based on key principles, such as fostering the minor's personal, social, and familial strengths, minimizing the length of their stay in the community, and promoting participation in external activities.

In working with adolescent offenders, community educators play a key role in designing and implementing an individualized educational program. This program is considered a central tool for the involvement of juveniles within the community and must be developed with particular attention to their personalities, educational needs, and overall goals of empowerment and resocialization. In the specific case of adolescent offenders, the educational program must be in line with court guidelines and is subject to the supervision of the Office of Juvenile Social Services. Educators in residential facilities are only one of the main actors involved in the educational path of an adolescent offender. Individualized programs also rely on the involvement of local services, such as schools, training centres, and cultural and sports associations. Therefore, the educational experiences of minors living in residential care are carried out in several different educational settings, in addition to the residential care itself. The educational experiences lie not only in formal education but also in the non-formal and informal, in an educational continuum perspective (Merico & Scardigno, 2022). Collaboration with these local services is fundamental to ensure the successful reintegration of adolescent offenders into society, which is the primary goal of the juvenile justice system. Such collaboration also helps mitigate the risk of stigma by supporting the offender's social reintegration.

## 2. EXPLORATORY STUDY ON EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES WITH ADOLESCENT OFFENDERS PLACED IN EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITIES

### 2.1. Research design

The exploratory study is part of a doctoral research project and aims to investigate the educational work of residential communities for minors with adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system. The study was developed with the specific aim of exploring the educational practices and tools employed by residential communities working with adolescent offenders. Additionally, it seeks to identify the factors that either hinder or facilitate the implementation of effective educational practices within these settings. These objectives aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how such communities address the educational needs of young offenders. The study's objectives are further clarified through the following research questions, which guide the investigation:

- What tools and practices do educators in residential care for youth adopt to accompany adolescent offenders on their educational paths?
- What elements facilitate and hinder the success of the interventions put in place by educational communities?

Tab. 1. Ecological model for the evaluation of residential care: indicators for each subsystem. Source: Palareti & Berti, 2009, p. 1085.

<p>MICROSYSTEM: relational climate in the community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ Quality of adult–child relationships</li><li>◆ Protective and scaffolding function of everyday routines, rituals and rules</li></ul>
<p>MESOSYSTEM: system of child relationships (community/family/school/free time)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ Multiple and adequate relational opportunities</li><li>◆ Continuity and coherence between settings</li><li>◆ Continuity and coherence in a longitudinal dimension: importance of care plans as tools for bridging current and past care and for catering for future needs</li></ul>
<p>EXOSYSTEM: system of relationships among institutions and subjects that deal with the child and his/her family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ Informational continuity</li><li>◆ Management continuity</li><li>◆ Network founded on recognition of interdependence</li></ul>

MACROSYSTEM: socio-cultural context of the intervention

- ◆ Explicit and implicit theories at the basis of the intervention
- ◆ Aims attributed to the intervention (State assistance/education/therapy)
- ◆ Legal rules and procedures regulating the running of residential communities and the relations between them, social and health services and public institutions

The research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary tool for data collection. These interviews were conducted with coordinators and managers of residential care facilities for youth in the Lazio region, Italy, specifically those working with juvenile offenders. The sample included 27 educational communities for minors, selected from 35 residential facilities approved by the Ministry of Justice, with 21 interviews completed. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supported by MAXQDA software to ensure a systematic and detailed interpretation (Gizzi & Rädiker, 2021). The data analysis followed a mixed approach, with codes and themes developed using both top-down and bottom-up methods. Specifically, a systematic perspective was applied to organize the educational practices identified during the analysis (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Palareti & Berti, 2009) (Tab. 1).

## **2.2. Results and conclusions**

This contribution will focus on the findings related to practices carried out at the mesosystem level. The mesosystem refers to the network of interactions and relationships surrounding the adolescent, encompassing connections between their family, school, community, and free time activities. It represents the interconnection between these different contexts and emphasizes how their alignment and coherence can influence the adolescent's development. External activities are an integral part of the individualized educational plan, designed to enrich the adolescent's experiences and promote their engagement across various contexts. At this level, the quality of relational opportunities, the consistency across different environments, and the continuity of care over time are critical factors. Practices within the mesosystem aim to foster collaboration, maintain stability, and address the evolving needs of the adolescent, ensuring that each context contributes positively to their growth and development.

The themes and codes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews regarding educational practices at the mesosystem level are presented in Table 2.

The findings underscore the educational community’s pivotal role within the mesosystem, highlighting its collaborative efforts with community agencies, social services, families, and health services. This integrated approach provides minors with comprehensive support, addressing their educational, social, familial, and psychological needs.

Key practices include fostering school attendance, vocational training, and community engagement through socially useful activities, sports, and volunteer programs. Notably, criminal mediation emerges as a critical intervention, aiming to rehabilitate and reintegrate minors facing delinquency into society. Collaboration with social services emphasizes tailored interventions, consistent monitoring, and shared responsibility for the well-being of minors. Family involvement is strengthened through educational support, mediation, and collaborative efforts to ensure stability. Additionally, the connection with health services provides essential pathways to counter addiction, mental health support, and psychotherapy.

Tab. 2. Themes and codes emerged in the mesosystem.

System	Themes	Codes
Mesosystem	Educational community practices community-agencies	School attendance
		Vocational Training
		Socially useful activity/volunteer activity
		Sports activity
		Criminal mediation
		Leisure activities
		Pathways to semi-autonomy
		Exit support
	Educational community-social services practices	Relationship between social workers and minors
		Collaboration
		Visits of social workers
		Shared construction of the educational project
		Monitoring of social services



	Educational community-family of children practices	Educational work with families
		Educational support
		Mediating function of the educator
		Educational interviews
	Educational community – health services practices	Pathways to countering addiction
		Family psychotherapies
		Individual psychotherapies
		Psychological support

Overall, the results demonstrate the importance of interventions that actively involve other educational agencies in the minor’s developmental journey. Networking and collaboration among these systems represent a necessary key to promoting a holistic and effective approach to the educational and social inclusion of minors. The presence of different settings contributes positively to the development of a minor only when these environments are effectively interconnected through active collaboration, open communication, and a mutual exchange of information. When the connections between various contexts are weak, uncoordinated, or entirely absent, the mesosystem becomes fragmented, creating an unfavourable condition for the minor’s growth and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Creating educational opportunities beyond those provided by the community constitutes a fundamental tool for ensuring access to social justice. By expanding the scope of education to include diverse and inclusive settings, individuals are empowered to overcome systemic barriers and inequalities. Such opportunities enable the development of skills, knowledge, and social connections that are essential for equitable participation in society. This approach underscores the importance of education as a transformative force in promoting fairness and addressing structural disparities.

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# INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DISABILITY AND MIGRATORY BACKGROUND IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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This contribution explores the relationship between disability and migratory background in educational contexts, developing some themes of reflection that emerged during a Focus Group held within a regional project (Lombardy) aimed at improving the accessibility of local services for people with disabilities and a migratory background. The article investigates the potential of an intersectional, non-sectoral approach through the tools of Disability Critical Race Studies.

disability; migration; intersectionality; education;

## INTRODUCTION

This article presents reflections that emerged during the research project *Gender Studies and Diversity Management for Inclusive Public Administrations*, conducted as part of the PhD program in Gender Studies at the University of Bari. The research explores the intersection of disability and migratory background, with particular attention to recognizing the processes of disablement and the role of educational contexts in promoting social justice. The research employs the Realistic Evaluation method (Pawson, Tilley 1997) to identify contextual mechanisms that contribute to the implicit reproduction of inequalities and power asymmetries (M+C=O). The article examines one of the focus groups conducted during the empirical phase of the research, part of the CI SIAMO project – *Competencies and Integration Between Services to Encourage Access and Improve Opportunities for People with Disabilities and Migratory Background*, promoted by Fondazione ISMU ETS. The theoretical and

epistemological approach of the analysis is based on Disability Critical Race Studies which examines the relationships between ableism and racism and explores the construction of the hegemonic concept of normality.

## **1. FRAMEWORK: DISABILITY AND MIGRATION**

The relationship between disability and migration is a topic that is underexplored in the international academic literature. Disability remains marginal in studies on international migration, while disability studies have often neglected factors like migratory and socio-cultural backgrounds, to the point of being provocatively labelled *White Disability Studies* (Bell, 2006). At the international level there is a significant lack of statistical and scientific data; the available data are non-standardized and not disaggregated by type of disability or specific dimensions such as gender or, indeed, socio-cultural background. This lack of information contributes to a possible underestimation of the issue and its implications. Various estimates from international organizations suggest that this is a significant population from a quantitative standpoint. Furthermore, it is important to specify that *disability* encompasses a highly heterogeneous set: it may refer to pre-existing impairments, those acquired during migration, impairments resulting from harsh living, working, or housing conditions, or disabilities related to aging. At the same time, the issue of migration is equally vast, encompassing different legal conditions, statuses, and social definitions. Both issues are intrinsically connected to the social dimensions in which they are embedded. While both disability and migration are subjects of separate studies and interventions, most existing policies follow a *satellite* model with little or no communication between the two areas or the services responsible for them (Zanfrini, Formichi 2022). This hinders full access to rights and perpetuates discriminations embedded in institutional practices. In this context, my research explores the role of the educational setting as a field (Bourdieu, Passeron 1972) in which to identify the interstitial mechanisms that contribute to the re-production of power asymmetries (Foucault, 1977).

### **1.1. Empirical Research: Starting from Direct Experiences**

CI SIAMO project led by Fondazione Ismu ETS (lead partner), in collaboration with Ledha APS and Caritas Ambrosiana, is a regional project in Lombardy aimed at overcoming the institutional invisibility of people with disabilities and a migratory background, while highlighting the critical issues within the local service system. During the first phase of the project, Focus Groups (Bichi, 2007) were conducted, using a semi-structured guide, to identify the needs of people

with disabilities and a migratory background and to value their experiences. These groups included individuals directly involved – *experts by experience* – as well as local stakeholders. This contribution explores some of the insights that emerged during the Discussion Group titled *Minors, Schools, Educational Practices, and Diagnostic and Therapeutic Issues*, which was attended by 20 participants, including representatives from local school offices, neuropsychiatry professionals, teachers, educators, and social workers.

## **2. EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS**

### **2.1. Monocategorical analyses and multiple discriminations**

The first key finding that emerged from the Focus Groups is that schools represent one of the few contexts where it is possible to reach individuals with disabilities and a migratory background, addressing their diverse needs. Participants reported an increase in the number of young people with a migratory background – both disabled and non-disabled – within schools. This aligns with available data show that students with disabilities from families with a migratory background are significantly represented in schools (Bolognesi, Dainese 2020). In Italy, the right to education is a fundamental right guaranteed to all minors on the territory, without discrimination based on citizenship or the regularity of their stay. This positions the educational services context as the primary – and most accessible – point of reference for many young people with disabilities and a migratory background, as well as their families.

We, who work at the school office, clearly have connections with schools, families. We collaborate with neuropsychiatrists, medical professionals, and municipalities—essentially, with everything that revolves around students with disabilities or a migratory background. (Representative Territorial School Office)

The school functions as a bridge between the directly involved individuals and their families, and the providers of social and healthcare services, local services, and civil society. The school is the area with the most available information, in terms of numerical data, the extent of the phenomenon, and specific qualitative analyses focused on school inclusion. However, the available literature is mostly characterized by monocategorical and unidimensional analyses in which disability, migratory background, or socio-economic factors are represented as separate variables, with one axis often being prioritized over others. This is evident in the words of a representative from the Territorial School Office:

I would provocatively say that, paradoxically, a certified disabled student is sometimes almost more protected than a newly arrived student who has emotional and sometimes psychological vulnerabilities. (...) I would like to bring this aspect to the table, because if we focus too much on disability, we risk losing sight of what the main vulnerability actually is.

Disability and migratory background are not typically framed as interconnected identities or social dimensions. However, one teacher remarked: “There are also newly arrived students with disabilities”. Subsequently, another participant (School Educator) emphasized the importance of considering multiple complexities: “Often, the risk of discrimination is multiple, not just two intersections. There are linguistic, social, and economic disadvantages”.

Studies on students with disabilities and a migratory background have shown that the gender variable is often overlooked. However, Feminist Disability Studies have long highlighted, even within educational contexts, the multiple forms of discrimination faced by individuals socialized as women, particularly those belonging to minority groups (Taddei, 2022). The gender category warrants further analysis, especially in light of the international shift from integration model to full inclusion in schools, as promoted by the Salamanca Statement and UNESCO (2020). In this context, it is essential to implement systemic actions that transform learning environments into spaces capable of ensuring the right to quality education, participation, and academic success for all students, regardless of cultural, social, linguistic, gender, mental, or physical differences (D’Alessio, 2015). The shift in focus from an individual’s condition to the interaction between individuals and their surrounding environments should result in the recognition and removal of barriers to learning. However, the reality in schools still appears distant from this perspective, as an exploratory study by Chieppa (2017) highlights. Evidence suggests that an assimilationist and normalizing approach continues to dominate, struggling to view disability, socio-cultural background, and gender through an intersectional, rather than summative, lens. Differences among students are still interpreted as deficits, pathologies, or inferiority, which must be compensated by offering additional resources (Migliarini, Elder 2024).

## **2.2. “One thing is certain: our task is not to create new disabilities”<sup>1</sup>. Recognizing disablement mechanisms**

Despite the social interpretations of disability and the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) have fostered a

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<sup>1</sup>Representative of the Territorial School Office during the FG.

shift from a strictly medical view to a human rights-based perspective focused on social inclusion, however, international disability literature continues to prioritize a biomedical approach (Colombo et al., 2022). At least in the educational field, several scholars claim that the transformation of terminology has not been supported by explicit theoretical positions in favor of systemic change and thus has not resulted in a true paradigm shift (Vislie, 2003; Migliarini, Elder 2024). Although disability is still predominantly identified with pathology, during the Focus Group, several interventions pointed out that what is defined as disability is often connected to – or entirely determined by – the spaces in which this definition takes shape:

There are so many issues at the table, and these multiply when it comes to foreign students because the emotional aspect is central. Many students are uprooted from their country at 14 and placed in the Italian school system don't understand why they are here; they have friends and family elsewhere. Sometimes it takes them a long time to learn, and it's not a disability issue. Sometimes, however, there are objective problems. (...) Then there are also economic issues not to be underestimated. (Representative Territorial School Office)

This intervention emphasizes that what is sometimes interpreted as learning difficulties or disability is often the result of barriers encountered in a new and perceived hostile context. This perspective aligns with the UN Convention's definition of disability, which sees it as an interaction between individuals and contexts. It also resonates with earlier social models, which assert that a full understanding – and elimination – of disability cannot address factors like income, mobility, or institutional practices in isolation (UPIAS, 1975). In the school context, monodimensional approaches can become mechanisms for reproducing inequalities. The failure to recognize the backgrounds of students and their families can hinder an effective support process. Language and cultural barriers, complex bureaucratic practices, the use of specialized language, and the lack of cultural mediation practices prevent access to services:

This is a denied right: there is diversity, but it is assumed that everyone is the same. (...) This is an important point: the right to have one's difference recognized. (Representative of the Territorial School Office)

In other words, despite the emphasis placed on inclusivity and the importance of respecting the diverse cultural identities of people with disabilities (UN, 2006), there remains an attitude that denies the existence and legitimacy of

different interpretations of disability, health, and care concepts, other than the Western canon and the biomedical model focused on diagnosing pathologies understood as *deficits*. However, paradigms, classifications, nosographic etiologies, and diagnostic tools are strongly connected to interpretative and symbolic horizons of a cultural nature. These symbolic-cultural dimensions are translated into practices and policies within services. On the other hand, framing the topic by privileging a single analytical dimension and the dominance of the medical interpretation of disability, exposes the risk of pathologizing behaviors that are not understood or *culturizing* disorders that cannot be identified (Goussot, 2015). The failure to recognize cultural differences can contribute to minimizing or perpetuating discrimination and disadvantages, leading to forms of *racism without race*: this would be visible, for example, in the phenomenon of the over-representation of unaccompanied minors or asylum seekers in the categories of Special Educational Needs (Migliarini, 2017). Even during the FG, healthcare professionals reported the complexity of drawing the line between individual clinical issues or communication/language difficulties arising from interaction with a new social environment:

We are often called for cases involving children with severe vulnerabilities who need to create an entire project where social, cultural, and economic barriers are very high. (...) We risk diagnosing adolescents who in other contexts would not have been diagnosed, so we also have a responsibility in this sense and in the value that these adolescents attribute to themselves. (Child Neuropsychiatrist)

It is not about minimizing the importance of medical intervention when necessary and it is indisputable that it plays a fundamental role in improving people's lives; what is being questioned here is the dominance and hegemony of this perspective in the assessment of individuals and the failure to recognize cultural and social dimensions. Among these, socio-economic conditions are particularly relevant:

There are students with significant potential who are often underestimated, and there is an early tendency to steer them, even with the guidance provided in middle school, toward lower levels of education. Their social and family background almost becomes indicative of their destiny. Instead, there could be resources that could emerge. (School Inclusion Coordinator)

Intersectionality places subjectivities within multiple relations of power, interrogates positions, and requires ongoing interaction between knowledge and fields that appear separate; a critical tool that is indispensable to recognize



implicit mechanisms of disablement and ensuring that identity and social factors are never again *ascribed indicators of one's destiny*.

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# HUMAN CAPITAL AND R&D: UNLOCKING INNOVATIVE ENTREPRENEURSHIP THROUGH HEIS IN ITALY

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Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are central to fostering innovative entrepreneurship and regional development by increasing human capital and facilitating knowledge transfer through R&D. This paper explores the interplay between graduate supply and R&D in driving innovative startup creation across Italian provinces (2015–2021). The findings highlight a synergy between these factors: public R&D boosts graduate impact in the South, while university R&D complements the dense graduate presence in the North. These dynamics call for tailored strategies to optimize HEIs' roles as engines of economic growth, particularly in lagging regions.

entrepreneurship, higher education, innovation, startups, knowledge spillovers

## INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are critical in fostering regional development and innovation by serving as hubs of knowledge creation, skill development, and entrepreneurial activity. Over the past decades, HEIs have transitioned from traditional roles in teaching and research to active contributors to local ecosystems, directly impacting economic and social outcomes (Benneworth & Fitjar, 2019). This expanded role is particularly relevant in addressing regional disparities, as HEIs catalyze local development by producing human capital and driving innovation. HEIs contribute to regional economies by supplying skilled graduates and facilitating knowledge transfer

through research and development (R&D), fostering innovative entrepreneurship, a key driver of economic growth and competitiveness (Callon, 1994). However, the impact of HEIs on entrepreneurship is uneven across regions, with variations driven by institutional quality, R&D intensity, and absorptive capacity (Rodriguez-Pose & Ganau, 2022).

This paper examines the interplay between graduate supply and R&D activities as complementary factors influencing innovative entrepreneurship in Italian provinces (2015–2021). It investigates HEIs' roles in startup creation by producing skilled human capital and enabling startups' innovation capacity through research and technology transfer mechanisms (Del Monte & Pennacchio, 2020). A novel dataset explores these relationships, accounting for regional heterogeneity and institutional quality as mediators of HEIs' effectiveness.

Italy is an interesting case study, marked by large differences in the rate of innovative entrepreneurship and socioeconomic development across regions and by the prevalence of micro and small firms, whose management strategies and styles have been shown to adversely affect their ability to absorb externally generated knowledge, to the detriment of productivity (Esposito & Ferrante, 2024; Cardullo et al., 2024). Meanwhile, despite having a very low share of graduates in its labor force, Italy is a net exporter of graduates and faces a significant skills mismatch in the graduate labor market (Esposito & Scicchitano, 2022).

HEIs are key contributors to regional development, serving as hubs of knowledge creation, talent cultivation, and innovation. Their influence on local economies operates through direct and indirect mechanisms. Directly, universities produce graduates with the skills and expertise necessary for innovation and entrepreneurship, contributing to the strength of local entrepreneurial ecosystems. Studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between the concentration of skilled graduates and increased entrepreneurial activity, particularly in regions with robust institutional and economic frameworks (Benneworth & Fitjar, 2019; Marques, 2017). Indirectly, HEIs enhance regional innovation by establishing infrastructure to support entrepreneurship, including incubators, spin-offs, and knowledge transfer activities, which build the region's capacity to develop and absorb innovations (Papatsiba & Cohen, 2020; Ferrante et al., 2019). The extent of their impact depends on the quality of local institutions, the availability of complementary resources, and the absorptive capacity of firms (Agasisti et al., 2019; Del Monte

& Pennacchio, 2020).

The interplay between R&D activities and the supply of skilled human capital is central to fostering innovative entrepreneurship. R&D lays the foundation for knowledge spillovers, which drive technological advancement and support the emergence of innovative firms. Public and university R&D systems are essential in promoting startup formation, especially in knowledge-intensive sectors (Aghion et al., 2015). Meanwhile, graduates act as conduits of knowledge, bridging the gap between research and application. Their skills and expertise enable startups to harness R&D outputs effectively, enhancing productivity and competitiveness. This synergy is particularly pronounced in technology-driven industries, where the combination of research and human capital yields substantial economic benefits (Colombo & Piva, 2020).

Our study shows that public R&D is crucial for southern provinces, while university-driven R&D enhances innovation in the North. These insights call for place-based policies to integrate graduates into entrepreneurial ecosystems and address regional R&D disparities. This study makes three key contributions to the literature. First, it provides empirical evidence of the complementarity between graduate supply and R&D in fostering innovative entrepreneurship. Second, it highlights regional disparities in these dynamics, offering insights into how HEIs can tailor their strategies to local needs. Third, it emphasizes the dual role of HEIs as providers of human capital and facilitators of innovation, showcasing their potential to act as agents of local development in diverse economic contexts. The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 describes the dataset and empirical strategy used in the analysis. Section 2 presents the results. Section 3 concludes with policy implications and recommendations for future research.

## **1. DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

The empirical analysis aims to assess the effect of new graduates' supply and its interaction with R&D activities on the propensity to set up innovative business ventures. To this aim, we built a panel dataset of Italian provinces (NUTS-3 level) covering 2015-2021. We ran Fixed Effects regressions by controlling for province characteristics in terms of specialization, level of development, entrepreneurship intensity, and institutional quality. We also control for other channels through which universities can impact the creation of start-ups. The estimated equation is the following:

$$ST_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta_1 LG_{i,t} + \sum_{k=2}^4 \beta_k RD_{i,t}^k + \beta_5 LG_{i,t} * RD_{i,t}^k + \sum_{k=6}^h \beta_k X_{i,t} + \theta_t + \varphi_i + \gamma_1 * \varphi_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (1)$$

Where LG is the flow of local graduates; RD<sub>k</sub> is R&D expenditure (k=public, private, universities) which is interacted with LG. The vector X includes the following variables: stock of tertiary educated workers (TerStock), Overeducation (OE), number of active spinoffs (SpinOff), research productivity (ResProd), active licenses (Lic), institutional quality index (IQI), Value Added per capita (VApc), number of active enterprises (Enter), shares of manufacturing, ICT and private services (ManSh, ICTsh, and PvtSvcSh). The terms  $\varphi_i$  and  $\theta_t$  and province and time-specific fixed effects. We interact time dummies with area dummies (area=North-East, North-West, Center, South, and Islands) to control for general heterogeneity.

Data on innovative startups are provided by the Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy. As for the supply of new graduates, data come from the Ministry of University and Research (MUR). The stock of graduates in each province is obtained by aggregating individual-level data from the Italian Labour Force Survey. Overeducation is calculated by aggregating individual self-assessed data from the INAPP-PLUS survey. The number of university spinoffs and licenses are obtained from the annual NETVAL Survey on the growth and exploitation of public research results. Research productivity is calculated as the number of publications per researcher. Data on the number of publications are from OpenAlex, the open catalog to the global research system. The number of researchers (professors, assistant professors, or post-docs) is from MUR. Data on R&D expenditure are provided by ISTAT, the Italian National Statistical Institute. As for the context indicators, data on the total number of enterprises and Gross per capita Value Added in each province are provided by ISTAT. The economic structure of provinces is measured as value-added shares of manufacturing, private services, and ICT (source: ISTAT). Finally, the quality of institutions is measured by the Institutional Quality Index built by Nifo and Vecchione (2014). The final dataset includes 107 provinces observed between 2015 and 2021 for a total sample size of 749 observations. All variables except institutional quality, overeducation, and research productivity are standardized to the provincial population.

We estimate the model on the whole sample and perform a heterogeneity analysis by splitting the sample into North and South. The former include the macro-regions North-East and North West as well as Rome and the provinces of

Tuscany and Marche. Southern provinces include the macro-regions of the South Island, the provinces of Umbria, and those of Lazio, excluding Rome. This analysis is critical since it allows for understanding whether university graduates effectively stimulate innovative entrepreneurship in less-developed provinces.

## 2. RESULTS

Table 1 reports estimation results on the whole sample of Italian provinces. The first column shows that the supply of graduates is positively related to innovative startups independently of the amount of R&D expenditure. Columns 2-4 show the interactions between local graduates and R&D expenditure. The significant interactions are those between LG and, respectively, public and university R&D. These results indicate that the effect of LG increases in regions where R&D expenditure is above average.

Tab. 1. Full sample estimates

	1	2	3	4
LG	0.020**	0.007	0.014	0.005
	[0.010]	[0.009]	[0.014]	[0.011]
LG*RDpub	0.286**			
		[0.090]		
LG*RDpriv		0.017		
			[0.020]	
LG*RDuniv				0.135**
				[0.067]
RDpub	-0.176	-0.450**	-0.172	-0.177
	[0.184]	[0.157]	[0.185]	[0.176]
RDpriv	0.077	0.071	0.062	0.076
	[0.058]	[0.056]	[0.054]	[0.058]
RDuniv	0.163	0.146	0.162	0.085
	[0.143]	[0.142]	[0.143]	[0.146]
SpinOff	0.251*	0.268*	0.260*	0.277*
	[0.141]	[0.137]	[0.142]	[0.144]
IQI	0.075**	0.074**	0.074**	0.077**

	[0.034]	[0.033]	[0.034]	[0.034]
OE	0.064*	0.056*	0.062*	0.058*
	[0.033]	[0.034]	[0.034]	[0.033]
ResProd	0.029**	0.021	0.028**	0.026**
	[0.013]	[0.013]	[0.013]	[0.013]
TerStock	0.302**	0.270**	0.291**	0.300**
	[0.136]	[0.134]	[0.132]	[0.135]
Lic	0.009**	0.009**	0.009**	0.008**
	[0.004]	[0.004]	[0.004]	[0.004]
VApC	0.079	0.100	0.078	0.076
	[0.064]	[0.062]	[0.064]	[0.063]
Enter	0.075	0.078	0.071	0.097
	[0.458]	[0.426]	[0.452]	[0.443]
MANsh	-0.790**	-0.758**	-0.762**	-0.749**
	[0.379]	[0.377]	[0.373]	[0.376]
ICsh	3.085	3.027	3.076	3.267
	[2.205]	[2.202]	[2.200]	[2.191]
PvtSvcSh	-0.465*	-0.374	-0.450*	-0.381
	[0.273]	[0.266]	[0.269]	[0.259]
R <sup>2</sup> w	0.701	0.709	0.702	0.704
N	749	749	749	749

Standard errors in brackets. \* significant at 10% level; \*\* significant at 5\*\* level; \*\*\* significant at 1% level.

In Table 2, we report estimation results for Northern and Southern provinces. Estimated impacts are higher in southern provinces, where the interaction between LG and public R&D is also significant. In addition, in the south private and university R&D expenditure is positive and significant independently of the level of graduates. In Northern provinces, the significant interaction is between LG and universities' R&D. The results indicate that Southern provinces benefit more than Northern provinces from the presence of new graduates, particularly when a high level of public R&D expenditure complements it. In Northern provinces, HIEs alone can stimulate innovative entrepreneurship by combining education and research.



Tab. 2. Estimates on northern and southern provinces

	North				South			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
GradTot	0.018** [0.006]	0.008 [0.009]	0.021* [0.011]	-0.003 [0.010]	0.075** [0.027]	0.049* [0.027]	0.063** [0.027]	0.082** [0.026]
GradTot*RDpub		0.258 [0.190]				0.280** [0.117]		
GradTot*RDpriv			-0.007 [0.020]				0.105 [0.072]	
GradTot*RDuniv				0.179** [0.084]				-0.068 [0.096]
RDpub	-0.342 [0.234]	-0.504 [0.328]	-0.350 [0.240]	-0.271 [0.238]	-1.060** [0.399]	-1.371*** [0.352]	-1.068** [0.408]	-1.061** [0.418]
RDpriv	-0.26 [0.198]	-0.266 [0.199]	-0.263 [0.200]	-0.316 [0.200]	0.558** [0.217]	0.567** [0.212]	0.525** [0.216]	0.607** [0.243]
RDuniv	0.061 [0.067]	0.058 [0.066]	0.068 [0.073]	0.062 [0.067]	0.595** [0.207]	0.603** [0.195]	0.516** [0.170]	0.601** [0.205]
Spinoff	0.198 [0.158]	0.217 [0.154]	0.195 [0.160]	0.237 [0.154]	0.191 [0.265]	0.237 [0.266]	0.190 [0.267]	0.186 [0.271]
IQI	0.090** [0.040]	0.092** [0.040]	0.090** [0.040]	0.085** [0.040]	0.078* [0.042]	0.076* [0.040]	0.082* [0.043]	0.075* [0.041]

OE	0.105**	0.094*	0.107**	0.092*	0.061	0.055	0.060	0.064
	[0.048]	[0.048]	[0.051]	[0.048]	[0.045]	[0.045]	[0.044]	[0.046]
ResProd	0.022	0.015	0.023	0.011	0.016	0.008	0.010	0.015
	[0.016]	[0.016]	[0.017]	[0.017]	[0.015]	[0.015]	[0.015]	[0.016]
TerStock	0.093	0.079	0.098	0.113	0.273	0.243	0.260	0.270
	[0.146]	[0.143]	[0.149]	[0.139]	[0.192]	[0.193]	[0.192]	[0.193]
Lic	0.009	0.008	0.009	0.007	0.003	0.004	0.003	0.004
	[0.006]	[0.006]	[0.006]	[0.006]	[0.003]	[0.003]	[0.003]	[0.003]
VApc	0.111	0.107	0.112	0.100	0.002	0.057	0.024	-0.003
	[0.074]	[0.072]	[0.074]	[0.074]	[0.083]	[0.071]	[0.077]	[0.082]
Enter	8.872**	8.627**	8.937**	8.353**	-0.468**	-0.428**	-0.497**	-0.490**
	[3.505]	[3.456]	[3.564]	[3.529]	[0.210]	[0.208]	[0.208]	[0.214]
MANsh	-0.799**	-0.783**	-0.811**	-0.788**	0.179	0.273	0.121	0.154
	[0.328]	[0.332]	[0.343]	[0.321]	[0.483]	[0.476]	[0.509]	[0.487]
ICsh	3.25	3.259	3.25	3.683	2.138	1.999	2.255	2.148
	[2.654]	[2.668]	[2.653]	[2.608]	[1.599]	[1.595]	[1.576]	[1.594]
PvtSvcSh	-0.672	-0.655	-0.688	-0.56	-0.168	-0.05	-0.154	-0.203
	[0.430]	[0.426]	[0.446]	[0.431]	[0.259]	[0.255]	[0.240]	[0.248]
R <sup>2</sup> w	0.757	0.759	0.757	0.76	0.701	0.713	0.704	0.701
N	434	434	434	434	315	315	315	315

Standard errors in brackets. \* significant at 10% level; \*\* significant at 5% level; \*\*\* significant at 1% level.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence for the crucial role of HEIs as drivers of local development through their contributions to innovative entrepreneurship. By increasing the supply of skilled graduates and engaging in R&D activities, HEIs can significantly influence the creation of innovative startups, thereby fostering regional growth and reducing economic disparities. However, the effects are not uniform across regions, underscoring the importance of contextual factors and the complementarity between human capital and R&D investments.

In particular, the analysis demonstrates that the positive impact of graduate supply on innovative entrepreneurship is amplified in regions with strong public or university-based R&D activities. This complementarity highlights the dual importance of human capital as a fundamental input for innovation and R&D as a mechanism for knowledge generation and application. In northern provinces, where university R&D is more prevalent and private-sector ecosystems are better developed, the alignment between graduate skills and research capabilities drives high rates of innovative entrepreneurship. Conversely, in southern provinces, where private-sector R&D is weaker, public R&D investments play a pivotal role in enabling graduates to contribute effectively to entrepreneurial ecosystems. These results underline the differentiated pathways through which HEIs can enhance local innovation depending on regional characteristics (Benneworth & Fitjar, 2019; Agasisti et al., 2019).

The findings point to significant challenges in lagging regions, where the lack of robust institutional frameworks and entrepreneurial support structures constrains the ability of HEIs to leverage their contributions to local development fully. The mismatch between the supply of university-generated knowledge and the capacity of local firms to absorb this knowledge often results in underemployment or outmigration of skilled graduates. This dynamic further exacerbates regional inequalities, highlighting the need for targeted policy interventions to create an enabling environment for innovative entrepreneurship (Evers, 2019).

The implications of this study for policy are twofold. First, there is a clear need to invest in public and university-based R&D in regions with underdeveloped innovation ecosystems, particularly in southern provinces. Such investments can enhance local firms' absorptive capacity and foster graduates' integration into high-value entrepreneurial activities. Second, efforts to strengthen the

quality and alignment of entrepreneurial ecosystems with local labor markets are essential. In this regard, HEIs can lead by fostering collaborations with local stakeholders, offering entrepreneurial training, and supporting startup incubation and technology transfer initiatives (Ferrante et al., 2019; Marques, 2017).

In conclusion, the evidence presented in this study underscores the transformative potential of HEIs as agents of local development. By strategically combining their teaching and research missions with targeted regional engagement, HEIs can drive innovation, foster entrepreneurship, and contribute to sustainable economic growth. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of these interactions, particularly in the context of evolving regional and global challenges, to further elucidate the role of HEIs in shaping equitable and resilient innovation ecosystems.

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# MIGRANTS' CHILDREN, NATIVES AND UNDEREMPLOYMENT: DIFFERENCES IN INVOLUNTARY PART-TIME WORK ACROSS EUROPE

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Despite their growing importance in society, empirical findings reveal heterogeneous outcomes for second-generation individuals in terms of socio-economic achievement, including variations in employment likelihood and job quality. A particularly under-explored labor market issue is underemployment, proxied by involuntary part-time work: a condition reflecting unfulfilled employment potential and a loss of human capital. To address this gap in the literature, by applying multivariate statistical models to the Eurostat EU Labour Force Survey microdata, we examine the differences in underemployment between migrants' children and natives and across 9 European countries. The results highlight the existence of gaps between immigrants' children and natives in certain countries, with individual education emerging as a significant factor influencing the association between migration status and the likelihood of involuntary part-time employment.

immigrants' children; underemployment; labor market; involuntary part-time; second-generation; employment

## INTRODUCTION

Children of immigrants are becoming increasingly integral to European societies, drawing growing research and policy interest. The sense of "outsiderness" they experience (Beaman, 2017) leads to challenges in their integration across various dimensions (Fajth and Lessard-Phillips, 2023). Among the different dimensions, the labor market integration is a critical area of focus to test processes of inter-generational transmission ethnic stratification

and social inequality (Zhou and Bankston, 2016).

Various theories have been applied to describe the patterns of integration of immigrants' children into local societies. The assimilationist perspective, in line with the straight-line assimilation theory describing the first wave of European migration to the U.S. (Warner and Srole, 1945), suggests that the later the generation, the better individuals will be integrated into the receiving society (Alba et al., 2011). Some studies emphasize that children of immigrants often excel in their achievements, driven by "immigrant optimism" (Kao and Tienda, 1998) and the so-called "immigrant bargain" (Louie, 2012), which fosters strong motivation and determination (Ichou, 2014). This evidence of heightened ambition among immigrants' children was also observed in earlier migration waves, particularly in the early 20th century, when the enrolment rates of second-generation individuals were generally comparable to or higher than those of native white populations (Jacobs and Greene, 1994). In contrast, the theory of segmented assimilation posits that certain groups of immigrants may face the risk of acculturating to low-aspiring minority peers in urban environments, which can hinder their integration and upward mobility (Hirschman, 2001; Haller et al., 2011). The segmented-assimilation hypothesis provides a framework for understanding the discrepancies in research findings regarding the educational enrolment of recent immigrants and their children in the Western societies (Portes and Zhou, 1993)

Anyway, empirical results have shown heterogeneous outcomes for second generation individuals in terms of labor market achievement, like their likelihood of being employed and the quality of their job (Heath and Cheung, 2007; Heath and Li, 2023); so far, the comparative research on the gap between immigrants' children and natives has provided inconclusive and ambiguous findings (Bucca and Drouhot, 2024). Moreover, these mechanisms remain poorly understood in countries that have only recently emerged as migrant destinations, such as those in Southern Europe (Gabrielli and Impicciatore, 2022). Additionally, differently from the literature on first-generation migrants (Platt, 2005; Avola and Piccitto, 2020; Panichella et al., 2021; Piccitto et al., 2024), analyses devoted to inquiring the immigrants' children gap in labor market achievement seldom account for their social origin; as an important factor of social stratification, the social background of origin may play a role as a driver of the destiny of second-generation individuals (Kanitsar, 2024).

An important labor market outcome which has been overlooked by this literature is that of involuntary part-time, defined as the condition of someone

who would like to work full-time, but who has been unable to obtain full-time employment (Stratton, 1996): hence, this status reflects a condition of underemployment and a waste of human potential (Banerjee et al., 2024); it intersects other demographic individual characteristics and it can lead to economic hardship (Morrison and Lichter, 1988).

In order to fill this gap in literature, we compare the differences in underemployment between natives and immigrants' children in 9 European countries.

## **1. DATA, METHOD AND VARIABLES**

Multivariate statistical techniques are applied to the individual data of two Eurostat "ad hoc modules" of the 2014 and 2021 EU Labour Force Survey (LFS). This dataset represents the main source of statistics to study the European labor markets. The variables included in these data allow to precisely define the individual migrant's generation: indeed, the EU Labour Force Survey contains the information on the respondent's year of arrival in the 'local' country, as well as the information on the country of origin of his/her father/mother.

The sample is made by men and women aged 16-64, distinguished on the basis of their migration status as follows: a) native: born in the 'local' country with both native parents; b) second-generation: born in the 'local' country with both foreign parents, plus those born abroad with both foreign parents but migrated in the 'local' country when younger than 7 years. The used definition of second-generation individuals excludes those born from a 'mixed couple' (having one native and one foreigner parent). Indeed, children of 'mixed couples' have higher resources of country-specific cultural and social capital (Laureau, 2015), and this may improve their achievement in the 'local' context (Azzolini and Barone, 2013; Piccitto, 2023).

The outcome considered as proxy of underemployment is the likelihood of having an involuntary part-time job (value = 1 if the interviewee declares of having a part-time job because he/she "could not find a full-time job"; value = 0 if the interviewee declares of having a part-time job for other reasons).

To pursue our research goal, multivariate statistical analyses are used. In particular, several linear probability models are run (one for each country included in the analysis: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland), in order to inquire the association between migration status (distinguishing natives and second-generation individuals) and probability of having an involuntary part-time job. In our models we control for a



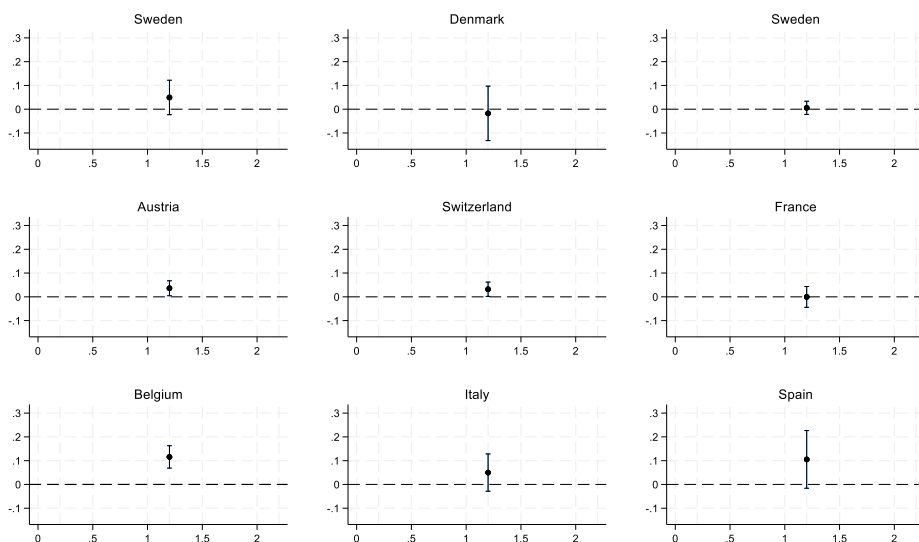
set of relevant socio-demographic individual characteristics: age; gender; education (upper secondary or less, tertiary or more); social background of origin, proxied the parental highest level of education (upper secondary or less, tertiary or more). We include in our equations also year fixed effects.

We specify two different sets of models. In the first (M1), we focus on the association between migration status and underemployment, net of the covariates described above. In the second model (M2), we include in our equation an interaction term between migration status and individual level of education; model 2, hence, allows to account for the conditionality of migrants' labor market outcomes on their level of education (Avola et al., 2023).

## 2. RESULTS

The results of model 1, aimed at highlighting if it exists a gap between migrants' children and natives in the chance of being in a condition of underemployment, are shown in Figure 1.

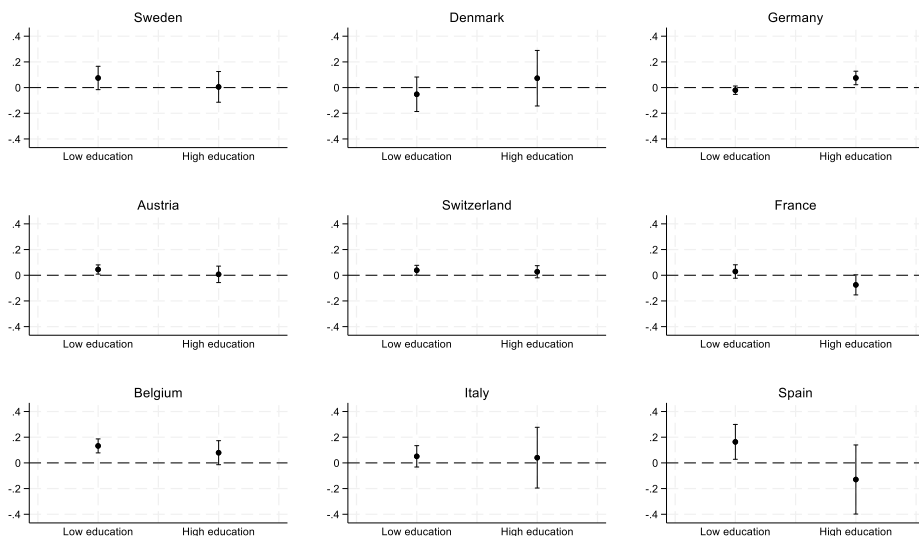
Fig. 1. Difference in likelihood of having an involuntary part-time job between second-generation individuals and natives. Notes: the dots represent the  $\beta$  coefficients based on the ordinary least squares models after controlling for age, gender, education, social origin. The lines represent 90% confidence intervals (c.i.).



The findings reveal that, in most of the countries included in our analysis, the probability of being an involuntary part-time worker is similar for second-

generation and native individuals. The differences between the two groups are not statistically significant at  $\alpha=0.90$ . However, in some countries, children of immigrants are more likely to be underemployed than natives. For instance, in Belgium, 28.1% of second-generation individuals are employed in involuntary part-time jobs, compared to 16.5% of natives. A higher likelihood of underemployment is also observed for second-generation workers in Austria ( $\beta=0.04$ ; c.i.=0.00; 0.07) and Switzerland ( $\beta=0.03$ ; c.i.=0.00; 0.06). In these countries, as in Belgium, second-generation individuals are significantly more at risk of being in involuntary part-time employment.

Fig. 2. Difference in likelihood of having an involuntary part-time job between second-generation individuals and natives by individual education. Notes: the dots represent the  $\beta$  coefficients based on the ordinary least squares models after controlling for age, gender, social origin. The lines represent 90% confidence intervals (c.i.).



The results of model 2, that quantifies the gap between migrants' children and natives in the chance of being in a condition of underemployment separately for highly- and lowly-educated individuals, are presented in Figure 2.

When looking separately at individuals with low and high education, a distinct pattern emerges in some cases. Indeed, in some countries the gap in likelihood of having an involuntary part-time job among second-generation individuals and natives appears only among low educated: it is the case of Spain ( $\beta=0.16$ ; c.i.=0.03; 0.30), Belgium ( $\beta=0.13$ ; c.i.=0.08; 0.19), Austria ( $\beta=0.04$ ; c.i.=0.01; 0.08) and Switzerland ( $\beta=0.04$ ; c.i.=0.00; 0.08).

Hence, it emerges that, for second-generation individuals in these four countries, their migration status is associated with underemployment only in the group of low educated people: education is an important factor in predicting the difference in underemployment between second-generation and native workers. Further research could shed light on the different factors influencing the involuntary part-time status for immigrants' children and their autochthonous counterparts (Busilacchi et al., 2024).

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# EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC STATUS DIFFERENTIALS: A COMPOSITION APPROACH TO SOCIAL ORIGIN DIMENSIONS

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In Italy, the benefits achieved by investment in education as human capital have not effectively reduced the influence of social origin, which continues to shape educational paths and outcomes, leading to inequalities in job access and income (Ballarino & Schadee, 2006; Ciarini & Giancola, 2016; Schizzerotto et al., 2018, Rizzi, 2023). The study analyses the link between socio-economic and cultural factors and educational attainment and analyses the cumulative effect of these variables on occupational outcomes among Italians aged 25 to 68. Employing Blau & Duncan's (1967) “OED” (Origin, Education, Destination) model, the analysis explores variations in social origin across these dimensions using Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) on European Social Survey data (2012, 2016, 2018, 2020). Results show how social origin influences educational achievement, affecting labour market access and relative income levels. Although education can reduce the impact of socio-economic background on job prospects, individuals' social origins still exert a strong influence. This suggests that education reduces inequality, but it doesn't entirely erase it.

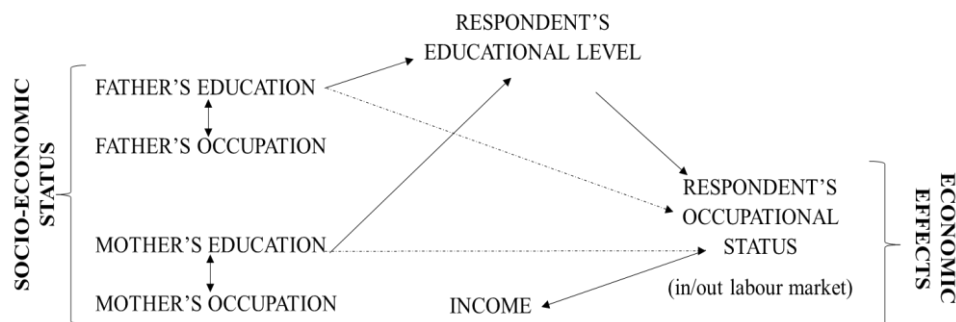
educational attainment; social inequalities; occupational outcomes; European Social Survey (ESS); Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA)

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND AIMS

The literature on educational returns highlights its link to positive outcomes, including better job prospects and income (Becker, 1964; Sen, 1999), as well as non-economic benefits like improved quality of life and poverty reduction (Solga, 2014). Despite reforms improving access since the 1960s, the Italian education system still shows unequal outcomes influenced by socio-economic

background and ascriptive factors (Barone, 2009; Ballarino et al., 2016). These variables impact students' aspirations, performance, and expectations, shaping their future roles in the labour market and society (Checchi & Ballarino, 2006; Pensiero et al., 2019; Giancola & Salmieri, 2020). The unequal distribution of resources can lead "privileged" and "disadvantaged" academic pathways, with higher socio-economic groups achieving better education and jobs through economic means, social networks (Coleman, 1988), and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1972). Conversely, lower-class individuals often face barriers that limit their opportunities for social mobility (Zella, 2010; Barone & Guetto, 2016). Based on this topic, this article examines the direct and indirect impact of socio-economic factors on education and the economic returns of educational investments. Research on social origins and life outcomes is depicted by the OED model (Blau & Duncan, 1967), showing how social origin (O), education (E), and outcomes (D) contribute to socio-economic inequalities (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1. The OED model revisited. Source: Blau e Duncan, 1967. Author's elaboration



Social origin affects educational achievement (O→E), links education to economic success (E→D), and directly influences life outcomes (O→D) (Ballarino & Bernardi, 2020). Family resources shape educational attainment by providing economic support and cultural capital which increase the likelihood of experiencing educational success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1972; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013). On the other hand, education directly impacts access to highly skilled, socially recognized positions in the labour market (O → D). Human capital theory (Becker, 1964, 1975) and economic approaches (Spence, 1973; Stiglitz, 1975) view education as both a "social mobility elevator" and a *signal* of skills, motivations, and traits used to handle the labour market. Socio-economic background can also directly influence career outcomes via parental support and social capital (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1972). Higher social background families build safety nets that shield children from downward mobility risks,

regardless of educational attainment (Ballarino et al., 2016). Studies support this model (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2015; Bernardi & Ballarino, 2016; Hällsten & Yaish, 2022), often using class schemes based only fathers' occupation and overlooking non-employment status.

In this study we propose a composition approach (Di Franco, 2016) that synthesizes social origin variables providing an alternative to the traditional causal approach used in these analyses (Erikson et al., 1979; De Lillo e Schizzerotto, 1989). The aim is to reconstruct social classes based on respondents' parents' socio-economic background, using the cultural capital framework (Bourdieu e Passeron, 1972). Specifically, the objectives are:

- develop a class scheme based on parental social positions (Bourdieu's social space, 1972) using a non-inferential approach;
- analyse how social origin shapes educational outcomes and class disparities;
- examine the indirect impact of socio-economic background on employment and income, focusing on inherited social space on employment status and income attained;
- investigate the mechanisms of intergenerational inequality by showing gender variations.

## 2. DATA AND METHODS

We explore these relations using four waves (2012, 2016, 2018, 2020) of Italian data from the European Social Survey (ESS) for a total of 20.686 cases. We excluded under 25yo and over 68yo subjects to avoid the spurious effect of the impact of those in training (<25) and who are retired from labour market (>68)<sup>1</sup>. It highlights how expanding education delays labour market entry by increasing participation in education and training. The selected sample is 14.098 cases, of which 49.2% were men and 50.4% women. From the dataset's 1,120 variables, we use respondents' highest educational qualification, employment, and income to analyse education's economic returns. These dimensions combined the ISCO 08 classification<sup>2</sup>, including respondents' non-employment status (11.2%), with data derived from reported annual household income. To reconstruct "cultural capital" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1972), the study collected data on parents' education and jobs, using the updated International Socio-

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<sup>1</sup> This decision addresses Italian pension policies that specify an age of 67 for retirement.

<sup>2</sup> The employment status variable was recoded into five categories as follows: 'Low' (11%); 'Medium Low' (20.4%); 'Medium' (19.4%); 'Medium High' (21.7%); 'High' (15.7%).



Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI) by Ganzeboom et al., 2010. Parents' employment status was defined using the ISCO-08 classification, including non-employment for both, due to the high proportion of non-working mothers in the sample (64%; 8640 cases). Excluding this condition might introduce substantial bias into the analytical findings.

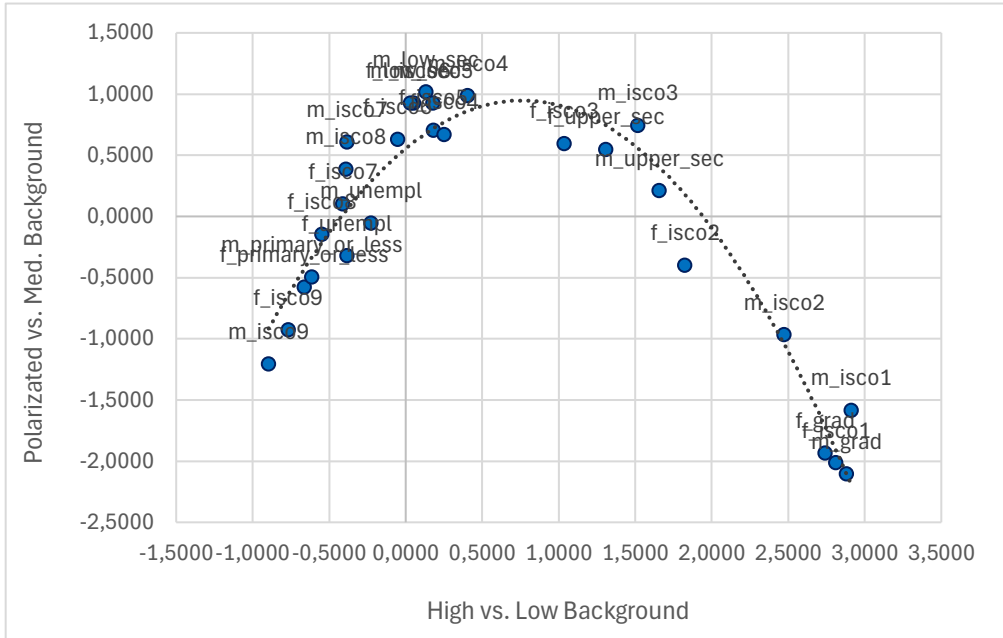
The analysis suggests three methodological steps.

- First, we use Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) to define the inherited social space, based on the social field (Bourdieu, 2018) elements of socio-economic background.
- Next, we apply Cluster K-means Analysis (CA) to analyse the relationship between educational attainment and background dimensions.
- Finally, we map the variables on the inherited social space to examine distribution and intergenerational mobility.

## **2.1. Composition approach**

The social origin dimension was developed using a composition approach with nonlinear multivariate analysis for categorical variables, focusing on identifying connections rather than cause and effect. Specifically, we use Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) and Cluster Analysis, avoiding probabilistic models and providing an alternative to the standard inferential approach (Di Franco, 2016). MCA enables simultaneous analysis of a set of categorical variables by extracting dimensions or factors that synthesize and reproduce the associations among the variables considered. On the other hand, Cluster Analysis classifies data by grouping similar cases together, offering another tool for interpreting the patterns identified through MCA. In terms of composition, the interplay between variables is shown in a multidimensional space, with closer proximity indicating stronger interdependence and larger distances suggesting weaker associations. Using MCA, we included parental occupation (ISCO) and education, producing two dimensions saved as matrix scores. The x-axis represents social origin stratification (low vs high), while the y-axis reflects class bias in average background (polarized vs medium). These dimensions were showed in a scatterplot (Fig. 2) with the original variables.

Fig. 2. The OED model revisited. Source: Blau e Duncan, 1967. Source: Autor’s elaboration of ESS (2012, 2016, 2018, 2020) data.

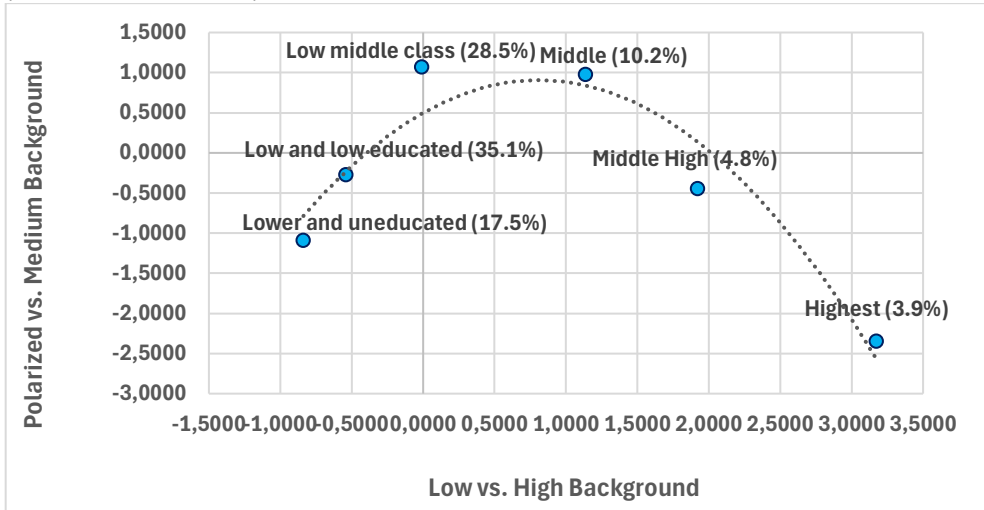


ISCO is scaled from 1 (highest) to 9 (lowest). As shown, a linear progression can be traced for both educational levels and ISCO occupations, except for the non-occupational status. Those with the lowest ISCO levels and education are distributed in the lowest social origin quadrant, while higher ISCO levels and university degrees fall in the high socio-economic origin area. Individuals in non-occupational status show greater association with a lower-middle socio-economic background, suggesting that their position also depends on factors other than social origin. Following the disposition on the inherited space, we employ a Cluster Analysis (k-means) to construct social classes reflecting the socio-economic background of the respondents. The analysis generated seven clusters, of which the last two were merged using a hierarchical criterion (dendrogram).

We plotted the average social origin scores for the clusters in a scatter diagram (Fig. 3) and showed the distribution in percentage terms. This representation revealed a clear differentiation among social classes based on the dimensions of stratification and class bias. The clusters align with the axes: lower classes (left) show negative polarization, while middle and upper classes (right) display positive polarization. The trend curve reveals a widening gap in average

background for lower socio-economic groups, narrowing at the middle class, and expanding again for higher socio-economic backgrounds.

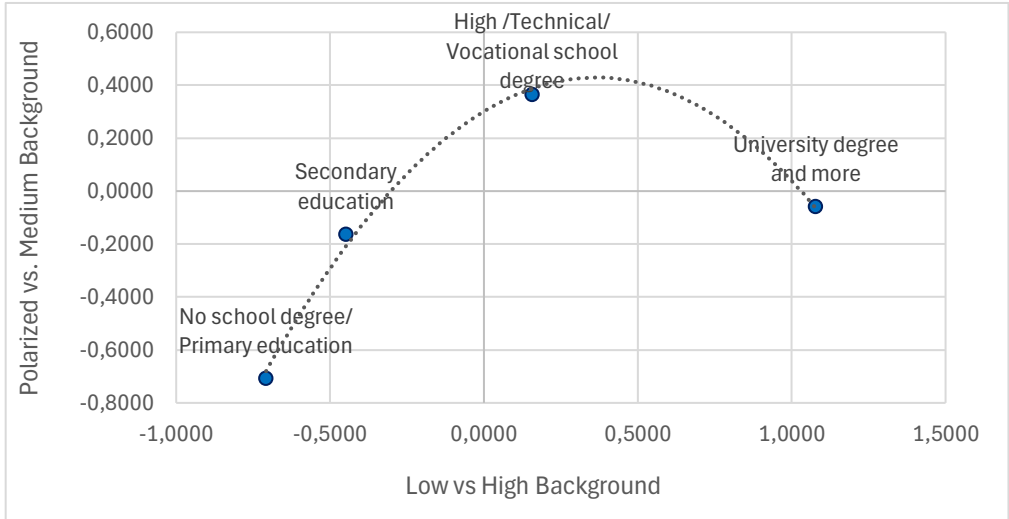
Fig. 3 Scatter plot of clusters produced using K means analysis. Source: Autor’s elaboration of ESS (2012, 2016, 2018, 2020) data.



### 3. RESULTS

We conducted an analysis of variance to show how ascriptive variables (gender, age) and acquired factors (education, employment, income) differ within the inherited social space. Younger age groups (25-34 and 35-44 years) are clustered towards the upper right, showing a higher socio-economic background and closer alignment with the average background. In contrast, older age groups (45-54 and 55-68 years) are located towards the lower left, reflecting a more modest background and a class polarization further from the average background. Gender appears neutral across both dimensions, while age shows a linear trend, increasing with social origin. Educational qualifications distribute along social origin (Fig. 4): individuals with no or primary education cluster in the lower-left, reflecting low socio-economic backgrounds and strong polarization. Tertiary education appears in the lower-right, indicating high socio-economic backgrounds but negative polarization, suggesting elite status. Middle school qualifications show a slightly higher position with reduced bias and medium socio-economic backgrounds. At least, high school diplomas are centrally placed, showing balance between social origin and polarization, with greater social heterogeneity.

Fig. 4 Educational Attainment distribution in the inherited social space. Source: Autor’s elaboration of ESS (2012, 2016, 2018, 2020) data.



Regards occupation (Fig. 5), people in high-status professions (ISCO 1-2) often come from privileged backgrounds, leaning toward higher social classes. In contrast, low-prestige jobs requiring basic skills (ISCO 6-9) are associated to lower social origins. Non-occupational individuals, like parents (Fig. 2), show average socio-economic backgrounds, slightly polarized toward lower classes. ISCO 3 and 4 show medium polarization with better social origins than ISCO 6-9, though less stratified than ISCO 1-2. ISCO 5 and 7 are also moderately polarized but lean negatively on the socio-economic scale.

The income deciles (Fig. 6) show a clear pattern: lower income groups (“J” and “R”) cluster on the left, reflecting persistent socio-economic disadvantage and low income. This pattern highlights the association between occupational status to earnings, showing how difficult it is for those less fortunate to climb the social ladder. Conversely, higher deciles (“K” and “P”) are on the right, linked to privileged origins and upper-class polarization. Middle deciles (“M,” “F,” “S”) hold a central, non-polarized position, suggesting limited mobility for those with average socio-economic backgrounds. Individuals within the uppermost decile cluster within the quadrant characterized by high social origin, thus showing a propensity for preserving their inherited status with limited upward mobility.

Fig. 5. Occupational status distribution in the inherited social space. Source: Autor's elaboration of ESS (2012, 2016, 2018, 2020) data.

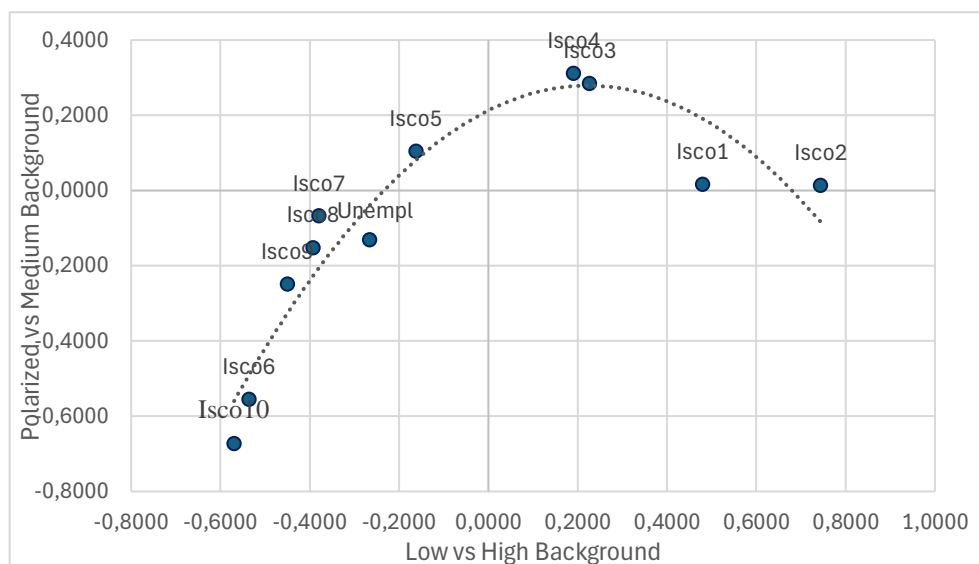
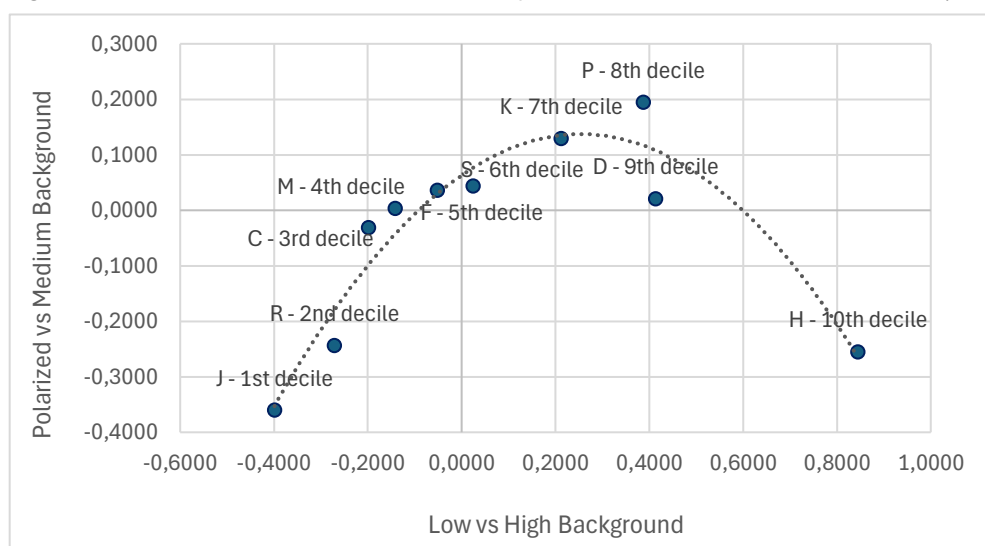


Fig. 6 Income distribution in the inherited social space. Source: Autor's elaboration of ESS (2012, 2016, 2018, 2020) data.



2016, 2018, 2020) data.

Tab. 1 Income distribution in the inherited social space. Source: Autor's elaboration of ESS (2012, 2016, 2018, 2020) data.

	<b>Occupational status recod</b>						<b>Totale</b>
	Out.occu	Low	Middle Low	Middle	Middle High	High	
<b>Lower and uneducated</b>	3,2%	3,3%	4,4%	3,5%	2,1%	1,0%	17,6% (2332)
<b>Low and low educated</b>	4,5%	4,3%	8,3%	7,4%	6,7%	4,0%	35,2% (4668)
<b>Low middle class</b>	2,5%	2,3%	4,8%	5,5%	9,0%	4,7%	28,8% (3826)
<b>Middle</b>	0,6%	0,4%	0,8%	1,5%	3,6%	3,1%	10,1% (1336)
<b>Middle High</b>	0,2%	0,1%	0,3%	0,7%	1,4%	2,1%	4,7% (627)
<b>Highest</b>	0,2%	0,1%	0,1%	0,2%	1,0%	2,0%	3,6% (477)
<b>TOT</b>	11,2% (1484)	10,4% (1385)	18,7% (2482)	18,8% (2490)	23,9% (3171)	17,0% (2254)	100,0% (13266)

Occupational status recod\*Social Origin class.% total. Valid Cases: 13266; Chi-quadrato: 2429.289; gl 25; sign .000; Contingency coeff.: .393

An analysis of intergenerational mobility (Tab. 1), which assesses the influence of family socio-economic background on respondents' life destinies, reveals a pattern of restricted upward mobility for individuals from lower classes, enhanced mobility for those from upper classes, and moderate mobility for individuals from middle socio-economic classes. People with limited socio-economic resources often face challenges finding stable, leading to lower-status jobs or unemployment. These individuals experience both reduced job opportunities and limited intergenerational mobility, alongside greater hurdles in their social climb. Conversely, individuals from "middle high" and "highest" social backgrounds keep an occupational advantage, leading to a higher probability of reaching top positions.

This trend highlights these individuals' ability to maintain their socio-economic advantage, increasing the likelihood of upward mobility. While here is some

short-range mobility, immobility is more common, especially for women (0.409)<sup>3</sup> compared to men (0.393).

## CONCLUSION

We can draw one methodological conclusion and one relating to theoretical and substantive aspects. From a methodological view, the compositional approach has shown its strength in synthesizing the different dimensions of social origin. This method offers several advantages: on one hand, it overcomes issues related to multicollinearity between individual variables, which is a common challenge in regression models. One advantage of these techniques is that it can address multicollinearity, a problem commonly found in regression models. It also allows to include categories that are often overlooked, such as non-occupational status, especially for mothers. The latter, in the surveys, are usually in a non-occupational status of a housewife that is excluded from the analyses. This approach is replicable in other studies and allows the use of generated clusters as dummy variables in analytical models, enhancing flexibility. On a theoretical and substantive level, the results confirm Bourdieu's (1972) framework of social and cultural reproduction and the link between social origin, education, and life outcomes (Blau & Duncan, 1967).

In addition, the data show mostly short-range mobility, with a clear tendency towards intergenerational immobility, reflecting structural challenges in overcoming social inequalities.

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<sup>3</sup> Statistic value for woman: valid cases: 6635; Chi-square: 1336.442. Statistic value for men: valid cases: 6576; Chi-square: 1197.922

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# BEING NEET IN ITALY IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

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Over the past three decades, the term NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) has gained global prominence in describing young individuals disengaged from education and the labor market. Originally coined in the late 1990s to describe British youth aged 16–18, the term now encompasses a heterogeneous social group with diverse characteristics depending on the context. In Europe, NEETs are primarily analyzed in terms of risks of social and economic exclusion for individuals aged 15–29, reflecting challenges in education and labor sectors. In Italy, the NEET phenomenon became significant in the late 1990s and worsened during the 2008 economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite a decline in the NEET rate from 26% in 2021 to 23% in 2022 (OECD) in Italy, it remains a critical issue. Factors such as educational poverty, school dropouts, and inadequate labour policies contribute to this persistent challenge. This paper examines the Italian NEET condition using data from the 2018 and 2021 waves of the PLUS survey (Participation, Labour, Unemployment, Survey) conducted by INAPP. Our findings aim to provide a nuanced understanding of this complex phenomenon and inform policy interventions.

NEET, education inequalities, labour market inequalities, youthness, social exclusion

## INTRODUCTION

The term “NEET,” which stands for “Not in Education, Employment, or Training,” first emerged in Great Britain in the late 1980s. Initially used in the British context NEET has gained recognition across various European Union member states. The Employment Committee of the European Commission (EMCO) officially adopted the NEET terminology as part of the European Union agenda with the Horizon 2020 strategy in 2010 (Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016).

Following its introduction into European public policy discourse, the NEET concept quickly became a vital framework for identifying the various vulnerabilities that young individuals face throughout their life paths. The economic crisis that swept through Europe between 2008 and 2009 led to increased rates of youth unemployment and inactivity, making the NEET issue a significant concern for the European Union (Avis, 2014; Mascherini & Ledermaier, 2016). Over the years, the term NEET has been interpreted in various ways by researchers and policymakers, resulting in a diverse group of individuals being classified under it.

In Italy, the NEET phenomenon gained significance since the late 1990s, with economic crises such as the 2008 financial downturn (Agnoli, 2014) as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to increased NEET rates in the country. According to OECD data for Italy in 2021, there was a NEET rate of 26% among young people aged 15 to 29. In 2022, this rate decreased slightly to 23%, though the NEET issue persists as a pressing concern in our context.

In this paper, we explore the factors that influence the likelihood of being NEET and the protective factors against this status of educational and labour exclusion. For our analysis, we will utilize data from the 2018 and 2021 waves of the PLUS survey (Participation, Labour, Unemployment, Survey) conducted by the National Institute for Public Policies Analysis (INAPP).

## **THE NEET PHENOMENON**

Contemporary scholarship has yielded substantial empirical and theoretical contributions regarding the NEET phenomenon across multiple disciplinary domains (Furlong, 2007; Maguire, 2015; Pacelli et al., 2023). Our systematic analysis reveals three primary theoretical frameworks through which researchers have conceptualized NEET status: educational trajectories, labour market integration, and transitions to adulthood. Recent scholarship has further enhanced these theoretical paradigms by incorporating analyses of gender disparities (Zuccotti & O'Reilly, 2018; Odoardi et al., 2023) and mental health outcomes (Quinlan-Davidson et al., 2023; Buckman et al., 2023).

Within educational discourse, two salient findings emerge: the correlation between early educational disengagement and subsequent NEET status, and the protective function of tertiary education against NEET outcomes (De Luca et al., 2020; Warburton et al., 2024). This educational paradigm intersects with scholarly examination of school-to-work transitions, wherein researchers have illuminated persistent structural inequalities that manifest during this critical

developmental period (Dorsett & Lucchino, 2014; Lazzarini et al., 2020). Such analyses are intrinsically linked to broader labour market dynamics (Caroleo et al., 2020). Furthermore, theoretical frameworks examining the transition to adulthood conceptualize NEET status as a potentially transitory phase that, if prolonged, may precipitate sustained social marginalization (Van de Velde, 2019). This body of literature emphasizes that NEET status should not be attributed solely to individual agency but rather understood within the context of broader societal transformations, necessitating a reconceptualization of contemporary transitions to adulthood (Carcillo et al., 2015; Van de Velde, 2019).

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

In this study, we utilize Survey (PLUS) data conducted by INAPP for the 2018 and 2021 editions. The analysis focuses on individuals aged 18 to 74 years. The data represent respondents' statements rather than directly collected administrative data.

To address the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) condition, we created two sub-samples of young individuals aged 18 to 29 for each edition considered. In the 2018 wave, the sub-sample represented 7,396,403 young citizens, with 8.3% classified as NEET. In the 2021 edition, the sub-sample represented 7,256,649 youngsters, of which 9.2% were NEET. We organized our analysis into three parts. In the first part, we conducted a distribution analysis of various ascriptive variables, including socio-economic origin, educational background, age, and gender. We created a dummy variable to represent NEET status<sup>1</sup> (see Table 1). Additionally, we developed new variables, such as an index for parental education<sup>2</sup> and a dummy variable representing whether the individual has a child or not.

In the second part of the analysis, we performed a binary regression model analysis for the editions from 2018 and 2021. For each edition, we designed three models to assess the influence of gender, educational background, age, area of residency, the parental education index, and whether the individual has

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<sup>1</sup> The indicator (NEET) identifies young people aged 15-29 who are neither employed nor in education or training in the four weeks preceding the interview. This includes any school or university education or training activity.

<sup>2</sup> The parent education index is an additive measure based on the educational backgrounds of both the mother and father interviewees. We conducted a contingency test on the variables representing the educational and professional backgrounds of parents. The relationship between parents' educational backgrounds was stronger compared to their professional backgrounds.

a child on the probability of being NEET. In the final stage of the analysis for the 2021 edition, we decided to split the regression model to include all the variables considered, with a distinction made by gender.

## BEING NEET IN ITALY

ISTAT data shows that the average percentage of NEETs in Italy was approximately 23% for both 2018 and 2021. In 2018 and 2021, the NEET population showed a female prevalence of approximately 25%, compared to 21% for males.

In both editions of the PLUS survey analysed, the sub-sample consisted mainly of individuals aged 18 to 24, accounting for around 60% of the respondents. This group was almost evenly divided in terms of gender. At the time of the interview, nearly 60% of the participants had obtained a secondary school diploma (ref. Tab1).

Tab. 1. Distribution of youngster characteristics participant source (PLUS)

Youngster	2018	2021
Female	48,70%	48,40%
Male	51,30%	51,60%
Primary/Middle school diploma	26,90%	24,50%
High School Diploma	57,60%	57,60%
University Diploma	15,50%	17,90%
Age 18-24	56,70%	60%
Age25-29	43,30%	40%
Nord-West	23,40%	23,70%
Nord-East	16,80%	17,80%
Center	18,30%	18,90%
South	26,90%	26,90%
Island	14,60%	12,70%

Table 2 presents three binary logistic regression models derived from the PLUS 2018 edition. The first model (Mod 1) includes gender, age, educational qualification, and geographical area of residence as independent variables. The findings indicate that being female increases the likelihood of falling into the NEET category by 2.5 times. Additionally, belonging to the 25-29 age group raises the risk by more than threefold. This result is also identified in research on the NEET phenomenon, indicating that older NEET individuals are at a greater risk of remaining NEET for a longer duration (Vugt et. al 2022; Odoardi et. al 2023). The geographic location in the northern regions of Italy plays a crucial role in decreasing the likelihood of youth becoming NEET.

Tab. 2. Determinants of being NEET data PLUS 2018, binary logistic regression. Source: Authors' elaboration of PLUS 2018 DATA  $p < 0.10$  \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

	Mod 1		Mod 2		Mod 3	
	Exp(B)	Prob	Exp(B)	Prob	Exp(B)	Prob
Female vs male	***2,582		***2,248		***2,541	
Age 25-29 vs 18-24	***3,293		***2,572		***2,15	
High School diploma vs Primary Middle school	***0,412	-58,8	***0,492	-50,8	***0,58	-42
University diploma vs Primary Middle school	***0,198	-80,2	***0,273	-72,7	***0,385	-61,5
Nord-west vs South	***0,528	-47,2	***0,526	-47,4	***0,562	-43,8
Nord-est vs South	***0,458	-54,2	***0,494	-50,6	***0,529	-47,1
Centre vs South	***0,561	-43,9	***0,579	-42,1	***0,583	-41,7
Island vs south	***0,879	-12,1	***0,878	-12,2	***0,907	-9,3
Children vs No_Children			***2,973		***2,858	
Parent-education_index					***0,856	-14,4
Constant	0,079		0,073		0,13	

Obtaining a university degree, in comparison to holding only a low secondary school diploma, results in an 80% reduction in the probability of entering NEET status (Vugt et. al 2022).

In the second regression model (Mod. 2), the presence or absence of children is introduced as an additional predictor alongside the previously considered variables. While gender and age maintain their statistical significance as determinants of NEET status, parenting emerges as the most significant factor for increasing this probability, independent of the other variables. The third model (Mod. 3) incorporates the parental education index to explore the relation between family cultural capital and NEET status.

The analysis of the logistic regression model, from PLUS 2018 wave, reveals a significant interaction effect involving the female gender, the age demographic of 25-29, and the presence of children, which notably elevates the likelihood of individuals being classified within the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) category. This empirical finding is corroborated by recent scholarly literature (Avagianou et al., 2022; Odoardi et al., 2023), highlighting how the gender disparity, shaped by both structural and cultural determinants, distinctly influences the socio-economic landscape within the Mediterranean region of the European Union. The impact of residential area is somewhat reduced in the third model, yet the existing north-south gap remains evident from previous models. The significance of educational attainment as a crucial protective factor against the risk of becoming NEET has been thoroughly documented in contemporary literature (Vugt et al., 2022). As elaborated in the initial segments of this article, the configuration and level of stratification within the educational system exert a profound impact on the duration of NEET status.

In Table 3, we present the results of our analysis of the PLUS 2021 dataset. In the first model, age does not show significant statistical relevance; however, gender is confirmed as a key factor increasing the risk of being classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Notably, the geographic disparity has widened compared to the surveys conducted in 2018. Having a high level of education is the most effective protective factor against the risk of becoming NEET, with individuals who hold a bachelor's degree experiencing a 77% decrease in their likelihood of falling into this category. Another important finding is the evolving impact of parenthood as a risk factor. While this variable was identified as a significant determinant in 2018, its influence has doubled by 2021. The analysis shows that individuals with children are approximately 4.5 times more likely to be in NEET status compared to those without children. Regarding the gender variable, although it continues to negatively affect women more than men, its overall impact has lessened. This phenomenon is likely due to the influence of the parenting variable, which has partially absorbed the effect.

Tab. 3. Determinants of being NEET data PLUS 2021, binary logistic regression. Source: Authors' elaboration of PLUS 2021 DATA  $p < 0.10$  \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

	Mod 1		Mod 2		Mod 3	
	Exp(B)	Prob	Exp(B)	Prob	Exp(B)	Prob
Female vs male	***2,093		*** 1,953		***1,925	
Age 25-29 vs 18-24	ns		***0,678	-32,1	***0,636	-36,4
High School diploma vs Middle school	***0,552	-44,8	***0,625	-37,5	***0,663	-33,7
University diploma vs Primary Middle school	***0,289	-71,1	***0,366	-63,4	***0,394	-60,6
Nord-west vs South	***0,568	-43,2	***0,58	-42	***0,612	-38,8
Nord-est vs South	***0,409	-59,1	***0,396	-60,4	***0,408	-59,2
Centre vs South	***0,633	-36,7	***0,65	-35	***0,687	-31,3
Island vs south	***1,057		***1,016		***1,017	
Children vs No_Children			***4,678		***4,781	
Parent-education_index					***0,916	-8,4
Constant	0,153		0,137		0,217	

Based on the findings, we conducted separate analyses of the PLUS 2021 dataset for males and females, using all variables from Model 3 (Tab 3) to examine how other intervening variables interact within these two gender groups (Tab 4).

Logistic regression models 1 and 2, as presented in Table 4, yield significant insights into the factors affecting NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) status, differentiated by gender. Being in the 25-29 age group functions as a protective factor, with a marginally higher incidence observed among males relative to females.

Educational attainment emerges as a critical protective factor, particularly for women: possessing a high school diploma reduces the likelihood of NEET status by 49%, while obtaining a college degree decreases this likelihood by 68.8%. Furthermore, parental socio-cultural background serves as a protective



element for both genders, although it exerts a more pronounced influence on females.

Tab. 4. Determinants of being NEET data PLUS 2021 splitted by gender, binary logistic regression. Source: Authors' elaboration of PLUS 2021 DATA  $p < 0.10$  \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

	Mod 1 Man		Mod 2 Woman	
	Exp(B)	Prob	Exp(B)	Prob
age 25-29 vs age 18-24	***0,604	-39,6	***0,641	-35,9
High School diploma vs primary/middle school	***0,922	-7,8	***0,509	-49,1
University diploma vs Primary/Middle school	***0,555	-44,5	***0,312	-68,8
Nord-west vs south	***0,503	-49,7	***0,711	-28,9
Nord-est vs south	***0,415	-58,5	***0,432	-56,8
Centre vs south	***0,717	-28,3	***0,67	-33
Island	***0,867	-13,3	***1,178	
Children vs no_children	***1,883		***7,4	
Parent-education_index	***0,933	-6,7	***0,909	-9,1
Constant	0,192		0,445	

Of particular significance is the impact of parenthood: while it elevates the risk of NEET for both genders, the degree of this impact is notably differentiated. For women with children, the likelihood of being NEET is approximately 7.5 times greater than that of women without children. Conversely, for men with children, the likelihood is roughly double that of their childless peers. This finding suggests that the responsibility of caregiving predominantly rests with women. (Odoardi et.al, 2023).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we aimed to identify the determinants of becoming a NEET both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Higher education serves as a crucial protective factor against NEET status in

Italy, emphasizing the urgent need for educational policies that address systemic inequalities, tackle early school leaving, reduce university dropout rates, and enhance student guidance services. Geographic location emerges as another critical determinant, with residence in the Northeast significantly mitigating NEET risk. This regional advantage stems from the distinctive structure of Italy's employment market, characterized by pronounced territorial disparities. The northeastern regions benefit from a particularly dynamic economic framework, supported by well-established industrial districts and an extensive network of small and medium-sized enterprises (Cinquegrana et. al, 2023; Lovaglio & Berta 2024). This environment significantly facilitates the integration of the youth workforce into the labour market, thereby reducing the prevalence of NEET status among young individuals in these areas.

The Italian social system reveals a concerning lack of support policies for parents, particularly women, seeking employment and economic independence. The 2021 PLUS survey results demonstrate that the pandemic emergency substantially amplified existing gender inequalities. The persistent gender gap associated with motherhood and unemployment risk potentially constitutes a form of economic violence – a phenomenon that remains understudied in current research. This highlights an important avenue for future investigation: examining the relationship between unemployment and gender-based violence, which deserves greater scholarly attention and analysis.

It is important to emphasize that the NEET condition is not static; rather, it can be viewed as a temporary state from which one can escape. The NEET condition becomes problematic when there is a prolonged stay in this state.

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# INDIGENOUS HERITAGE, WAR REFUGEES OR LANGUAGE FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES: EXPLORING LANGUAGE CENTRES' SOCIAL JUSTICE AND VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES EMPOWERMENT POTENTIAL

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Universities are adapting to significant changes driven by globalization, knowledge economies, and environmental challenges. So are Language Centres (LC) with their traditional focus on language education. LCs now address broader institutional objectives, including internationalization, intercultural awareness, democratization, and inclusivity. These expanded responsibilities align with the Third Mission of universities, a commitment to societal contribution, encompassing social, economic, and cultural development. The Masaryk University's Language Centre (CJV) is presented as an example of the new role of LCs. These evolving roles include offering courses in underrepresented languages, integrating international teaching assistants, and linking university students with local communities. A notable recent Third Mission activity, the EPSULA Project, aims at preserving the linguistic heritage of indigenous Latin American communities through technology and education. The CJV's response to crises shows potential of LCs' societal impact. Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the centre swiftly organized intensive Czech language courses for Ukrainian refugees, enabling over 480 students to integrate into Czech university programmes. This effort highlighted the CJV's adaptability and its capacity to foster inclusivity through comprehensive linguistic and cultural support. The example of CJV demonstrates how innovation and commitment can transform language centres into agents of positive global change.

Language Centre; Third Mission; inclusivity

## INTRODUCTION

University Language Centres (LCs) are adapting to significant changes driven by globalization, knowledge economies and environmental crisis. Due to those unprecedented challenges, universities have been reshaping their missions, extending their focus beyond education and research to include a broader societal contribution, their Third Mission (Compagnucci, Spigarelli, 2020). The Third Mission emphasizes the role of academia in fostering social, economic, and cultural development within their regions and beyond, while promoting social responsibility. LCs have never existed in isolation from their universities (Wulkow Memorandum, 2018), and similarly to their universities, the LCs have been forced to redefine their roles, too. They have been moving from their traditionally unique focus on language education to multifaceted service institutions which address broader institutional objectives at the intersection of diverse agendas, including internationalization, intercultural awareness, democratization, and inclusivity (Wulkow Memorandum, 2019).

Taking the example of the Masaryk University Language Centre, this text presents some of the LC's activities related to the Masaryk University (MU) Third Mission and analyses the most complex one, namely language support to Ukrainian refugees in 2022, to show typical characteristics of LCs which help them react to global events responsibly.

### **1. ROLLING BACK THE FEDERAL ROLE IN EQUITY MASARYK UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE CENTRE, *CENTRUM JAZYKOVÉHO VZDĚLÁVÁNÍ (CJV)***

The CJV serves as an example of a complex LC. With over 120 staff members teaching approximately 10,000 students each term, it is the largest LC in Czechia. Apart from its first and second missions in teaching and research, it engages in a wide range of activities related to diverse Third Mission initiatives. They include offering courses in lesser-taught languages, such as Swahili, creating modules on critical thinking and fake news in foreign languages, involving international students as teaching assistants (CJV, 2024) or connecting university students with local elementary and secondary schools, museums, and libraries (CJV, 2022). More globally, the CJV has also contributed to a bi-lingual programme development in Tunisia (CUDIMHA, 2022) and most recently, it has been coordinating a project which aims “to preserve cultural heritage, including the languages of the indigenous communities of Latin America that have never been recorded in writing” (EPSULA, 2024).

The EPSULA Project demonstrates how LCs can impact global social justice. The

initiative, developed with partners from Ecuador, El Salvador, Spain and Finland, has achieved significant impact already. The Ecuador and El Salvador academics have collected and recorded authentic audio and video materials among the indigenous communities, based on which the European teams developed educational modules. They are now being used in Ecuador and El Salvador. The social impact has also been visible in the Czech Republic, where a series of exhibitions on the Latin American communities (MZM, 2024) attracted local schools, expanding their awareness of diversity of world cultures, and motivated Latin American communities to be more active in the Czech society, fostering, thus, greater inclusivity and cultural awareness.

## **2. LANGUAGE SUPPORT FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEES**

The rapid response of the CJV to the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022 illustrates its adaptability and potential for societal impact. Following the Russian invasion, Czechia welcomed over 300,000 Ukrainian refugees, including university students. Within its Third Mission, MU recognized the urgent need for language support to facilitate the prospective students' inclusion into the Czech-speaking academic and social environment. In March 2022 already (the war began on 24.2.2022), the CJV was asked to prepare a plan of a language programme that would guarantee to Ukrainian students a possibility to reach a level of Czech language (around B2 CEFR) which would enable them to join Czech-taught university programmes by September 2022.

Thanks to its experience with tailored courses, flexibility in course development and quality management functioning scheme, the CJV introduced the programme in early April and was established the coordinator of the initiative at MU; Faculties of Education and Arts provided limited support within their limits.

As moving from one CEFR level to another takes typically 100-200 learning hours and since Ukrainian and Czech are both Slavic languages with some shared linguistic features, the language support was planned as a series of intensive courses (20-30 hour/week) in the period May-August, finishing with an exam at the end of August, so that the faculties could enrol the new students in September (the MU academic year starts in mid-September).

The challenges were significant and included unpredictable student arrivals, limited teaching and support staff, and insufficient classroom space. The highest expected number of students was 500 and they were not expected to arrive at once. That is why the system included successive openings with placement tests during May and June, with the last opening at the first week of



July. Organisationally, the most complex challenge was the scale of the programme. To make the language support effective, the maximum number of learners in a group was set to 15, which meant that the CJV had to be ready to accommodate students in 35 seminar groups in intensive courses of 20-30 hours per week for the period from May to August. That caused two major issues, namely classrooms and teaching staff.

The space issue was rather dramatic at the beginning of the programme, when teaching at MU was still taking place, but with the beginning of the exam period in mid-May, more classrooms were free to be used and all the MU faculties collaborated effectively, so that the programme could run.

The most dramatic challenge was to “find” potentially up to 45 teachers of Czech as a Foreign Language (CFL). The number of teachers of CFL in 2022 was rather limited due to a relatively low social demand (Czech language consists of approximately 10 million speakers). Therefore, the programme had to hire teachers from the whole region, and/or train teachers of Czech for the specificities of the CFL methodologies. The programme also encouraged Czech students to become “buddies”, who would practice Czech language with their Ukrainian peers, helping them improve their language and include them to the Czech society more naturally at the same time.

The focus on inclusivity was evident in the form and content of the final exam, which did not assess the CEFR levels of the students but categorised them into three groups according to their readiness to join the Czech-taught programmes. Group A were those who met the required proficiency level and could be admitted to the programmes, Group B were close to meeting the required proficiency level, so they were admitted to the programmes, but they were offered some continuous language support during the term, and Group C were those who did not meet the criteria and were offered intensive Czech courses for another term.

The successful initiative emphasized inclusion, treating refugee students as equals and integrating them into the academic community through additional language, cultural and emotional support programmes. At the same time, CJV’s ability to mobilize resources quickly and effectively (finally, 480 went through the programme) highlighted the importance of flexibility and innovation in responding to crises. This initiative could also show the potential of LCs to act as bridges between vulnerable populations and host communities.

## CONCLUSION

This text offers a deeper understanding of the current role of LCs, while reflecting the broader transformation of universities and their Third Mission focus. By providing traditional language education, supporting linguistic diversity, aiding marginalized communities, and addressing global challenges, LCs can play a crucial role. The work of the Masaryk University Language Centre, which has required addressing fundamental organisational challenges, fostering wide collaboration and embracing the complexity of the services provided, demonstrates how innovative approaches and a commitment to the Third Role can transform an LC into an agent of positive change, both locally and globally.

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# SCHOOL SEGREGATION AND SCHOOL DROPOUT IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS: THE CASE STUDY OF BOLOGNA

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The paper investigates the presence and the extent of ethnic segregation in public primary schools in Bologna. It begins with a theoretical discussion of key factors influencing school segregation in the South European context, focusing on the relationship between parental school choice and the ethnic and socio-economic characteristics of urban areas. Through geospatial analyses and descriptive statistics, the study examines patterns of ethnic segregation based on students' places of residence and school enrolment. The findings reveal significant segregation in 25% of public schools and demonstrate how student mobility – both native and foreign – amplifies the impact of residential composition on school composition. Furthermore, the paper identifies a positive association between school segregation and dropout rates, suggesting implications for students' educational trajectories and paving the way for future research on the effects of school segregation.

school segregation, school dropout, school choice, primary schools

## INTRODUCTION

Drawing on insights from North American research, an expanding body of European studies investigates the phenomenon of school segregation, which is defined as the presence of “significantly higher concentration of a minority group in a school than exists in the city as a whole” (Cordini *et al.*, 2019). While the U.S. literature predominantly attributes school segregation to patterns of residential segregation (Reardon, Owens, 2014), European research highlights additional factors that contribute to the emergence of ethnic and social segregation within schools. In particular, the institutional regulation of the education system and parental agency may exacerbate the impact of residential

composition on school segregation (Oberti, Prêteceille, 2017; Boterman et al., 2019). This dynamic is especially pronounced in cities across Southern Europe, where residential segregation mainly concerns the micro scale within neighbourhoods (Bonal, Bellei, 2018; Boterman et al., 2019).

In Italy, research on school segregation has grown significantly over the past decade, largely in response to recent migration flows. Indeed, the phenomenon is particularly studied in northern regions, where foreign populations are more concentrated. Consistent with other Southern European countries, residential segregation in Italy is largely confined to the micro scale within neighbourhoods. However, school segregation has been observed, primarily driven by the mechanisms governing school choice (Cordini et al., 2019). Specifically, municipal authorities define school catchment areas (hereafter CAs) by dividing the city into districts and assigning each area to one or more public schools, based on the proximity between students' homes and schools. While the CAs were once mandatory until the 1980s, they now serve only as a reference. In fact, not all families adhere to the CA; native and socio-economically privileged families often take advantage of this freedom, enrolling their children either in private schools or in schools located outside their designated CAs. In some cases, these choices are driven by a desire for social identification, but more commonly, they reflect a strategy to avoid schools in more disadvantaged areas. Consequently, school choice is closely tied to territorial characteristics, with the intensity and direction of school flows changing according to the socio-economic and ethnic composition of urban areas (Cordini et al., 2019; Wilson & Bridge, 2019).

Against this background, the paper aims to explore how and to what extent ethnic segregation affects primary public schools in the Municipality of Bologna. Bologna has a notably high proportion of foreign minors of school age (20%), significantly exceeding the national average of 11%. While a study on school segregation in Bologna has focused on secondary schools (Santangelo et al., 2018), no studies have specifically addressed primary schools, which have the highest proportion of foreign students<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, although residential segregation among foreign populations remains relatively low at the city level, Bologna demonstrates *interstitial segregation* (Bergamaschi, 2012), with certain micro-areas exhibiting higher concentrations of foreign residents. This micro-scale segregation potentially influences both the composition of local

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<sup>1</sup> Ministero dell'istruzione e del merito - Ufficio di Statistica  
[https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/7715421/NOTIZIARIO\\_Stranieri\\_2122.pdf/2593fc66-1397-4133-9471-b76396c2eb97?version=1.1&t=1691593500475](https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/7715421/NOTIZIARIO_Stranieri_2122.pdf/2593fc66-1397-4133-9471-b76396c2eb97?version=1.1&t=1691593500475)

schools and the school choice behaviours of families living in these areas. Finally, since 2015, the Municipality of Bologna has introduced a system that allows schools to report students at risk of dropping out to the municipality and request support for the implementation of targeted educational interventions. In the absence of detailed data on dropout rates at the sub-municipal level, the case of Bologna presents a valuable opportunity to explore the relationship between school segregation and dropout rates.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA, AND METHODS**

The paper presents the preliminary findings of an ongoing doctoral research project that investigates the existence and extent of school segregation within the municipal area of Bologna. This study investigates the presence of schools with a high concentration of foreign students (non-Italian citizens) and explores how residential composition and parental school choice shape patterns of school segregation. Funded by PNRR resources, the research is a collaboration between the Department of Sociology and Business Law at the University of Bologna and the Municipality of Bologna. Specifically, within the broader context of limited access to disaggregated statistical data at the sub-municipal level, this work relies on detailed data provided by *Area Educazione, Istruzione e Nuove Generazioni*.

The paper addresses the following research questions: 1) to what extent does residential segregation influence school segregation? 2) What is the impact of home-to-school mobility on school segregation? 3) How are the social and ethnic characteristics of residential CAs associated with patterns of student mobility? 4) Is there a relationship between school segregation and school dropout rates?

Within this framework, we analyse data for students residing in the Municipality of Bologna who were enrolled in public primary schools during the 2021/2022 SY (a total of 12,588 students, representing over 95% of all enrollees). The dataset includes detailed information for each student, such as citizenship, school enrolment, and CA, which allows for the identification of students who attend their designated school versus those who choose schools outside their CA. Additionally, by analysing requests for reduced school meal fees, we determine the Equivalent Economic Status Indicator (ISEE) for 56% of the students. Finally, we analyse data on students identified as at risk of school dropout<sup>2</sup> within the same SY. Public primary schools submit this data to the

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<sup>2</sup> The risk of dropout applies to students who exceed 20 days of unauthorised absence.

Municipality of Bologna to request targeted educational interventions aimed at providing necessary support.

The CA is used as the geographical unit of analysis for mapping and descriptive statistics on the residential distribution of the school population, enrolments, and home-to-school mobility. Although CAs are not legally binding, their geographical boundaries define the residential proximity zones for each school, thus enabling the analysis of mobility while accounting for the geographic distance between students' residences and their schools.

Public primary schools (56 in total) represent the education system with the best-developed territorial distribution and have smaller and more numerous CAs (41) compared to the middle schools (22). However, it should be noted that it was not possible to analyse data on students enrolled in private primary schools, which constitute 14% of the total population.

The analysis is conducted in four steps:

- We measure the segregation of foreign students (students without Italian citizenship) by calculating the Dissimilarity Index (DI). Residential segregation is calculated considering all the 41 CAs of the city, while school segregation is assessed based on the distribution of enrolments across the 56 primary schools in Bologna.
- Using georeferenced tools (*QGIS*), we examine the residential and school distribution of foreign students across the CAs to identify potential discrepancies between residential and school compositions.
- We analyse the between-CAs mobility of both Italian and foreign students, considering the socio-economic characteristics (average ISEE) and ethnic composition (percentage of foreign minors) of the CAs to assess how these factors are associated with student mobility.
- We analyse the distribution of students at risk of dropping out during the 2021/2022 SY to explore potential associations between school segregation and dropout rates.

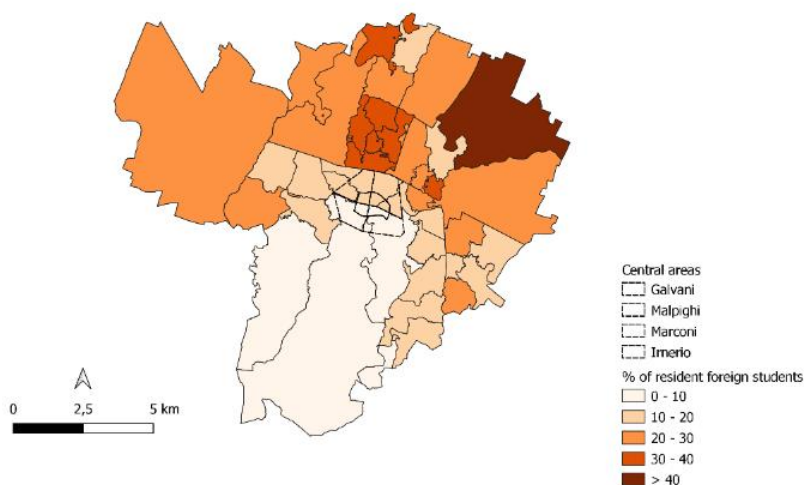
## **FINDINGS**

### **Residential and school segregation**

In the 2021/2022 SY, the proportion of students enrolled in public primary schools in the Municipality of Bologna is 21%. Consistent with findings from other Southern European cities (Boterman *et al.*, 2019), the results of the DI show low levels of residential segregation (0.216), confirming the absence of

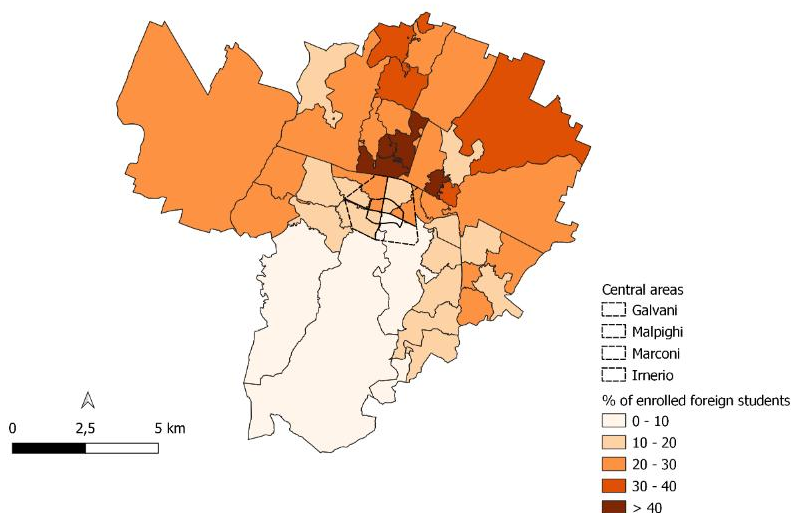
macro-concentrations of the foreigners in the municipal area of Bologna (Bergamaschi, 2012). However, as illustrated in *Figure 1*, the residential distribution of foreign pupils across school CAs is not homogeneous.

Figure 1: School CAs by share of resident foreign students (residential composition). 2021-2022 SY, public primary schools. Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the Municipality of Bologna.



The cartographic analysis revealed a clear distinction in the distribution of the foreign population, reflecting a historical divide between the northern and southern parts of the city (Bergamaschi, 2012). Specifically, a higher concentration of foreign students is observed in the peripheral areas of the northern section of Bologna. This division, marked by an invisible boundary along the railway line, appears to be driven more by socio-economic factors than by ethnic ones. Indeed, the north-south divide is also evident when examining the residential distribution of Italian students, based on the ISEE declared by their families. Nevertheless, even within the northern part of the city, the distribution of students with a migration background is not homogeneous: eight CAs have significantly high foreign student enrolment rates (exceeding 30%), with one CA showing rates above 40%.

Figure 2: School CAs by share of foreign students enrolled (school composition). 2021-2022 SY, public primary schools. Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the Municipality of Bologna.



The distribution of students within schools partially deviates from the previously described pattern. In particular, the DI for foreign pupils increases from 0,216 to 0,268. As evidenced by the comparison of *Figure 1* and *Figure 2*, a strong positive correlation (+81) exists between the residential and school compositions of the CAs. However, the findings indicate that the composition of primary schools not only reflects but also reinforces the spatial distribution of foreign students. Indeed, four schools show foreign student percentages exceeding 40%, whereas only one CA exhibits a similar proportion of foreign children within its residential population.

### Analysing Inter-Catchment Area Mobility

The discrepancies between residential composition (*Figure 1*) and school composition (*Figure 2*) can be attributed to mobility among both Italian and



foreign students. In fact, 36% of Italian students and 45% of foreign students attend schools outside their designated CA. To assess how the ethnic and economic characteristics of the residential area are associated with the decision to attend a school outside the designated CA, we calculate the percentages of Italian and foreign students attending schools outside their CA, in relation to the proportion of foreign children and the socio-economic characteristics of those areas (*Tab. 1*).

Tab. 1. Share of Italian and foreign students attending schools outside their CA. 2021-2022 SY, public primary schools. Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the Municipality of Bologna.

CA Share of resident foreign children	Italians	Foreigners
<10%	25,87%	69,23%
10-20%	42,28%	48,09%
20-30%	26,61%	35,57%
30-40%	48,84%	51,52%
>40%	43,86%	63,06%
CA Average ISEE of families	Italians	Foreigners
0-9.000	53,95%	60,42%
9.000-12.000	31,02%	40,87%
12.000-15.000	34,53%	42,10%
15.000-20.000	42,72%	55,66%
20.000-25.000	28,15%	75,00%

The analysis (*Tab. 1*) reveals mobility patterns that only partially overlap for Italian and foreign students. Mobility among Italian students significantly decreases in more affluent CAs (with an average ISEE > 20,000 euros) and in areas with a lower proportion of foreign minors (less than 10%). In contrast, foreign students – who generally exhibit higher mobility – continue to show considerable movement even in wealthier CAs and those with a lower proportion of foreign students. Both Italian and foreign students are more likely to attend schools outside their designated CAs when residing in economically disadvantaged CAs (average ISEE < 9,000 euros) or in areas with a higher concentration of foreign students (over 30%). Nonetheless, when examining the

mobility of students living in low-income CAs with a high percentage of foreign students (> 30%), clear distinctions emerge between Italian and foreign students. Specifically, 70% of Italian students attend schools where the proportion of foreign students is below 30%, while more than 50% of foreign students enrol in schools with a higher concentration of non-Italian students and greater socio-economic disadvantage.

### **School Segregation and School Dropout Rates**

The analysis of the school distribution of students at risk of dropout reveals that 67% of these students are enrolled in segregated schools. These schools, which account for 25% of the public schools in Bologna, are located outside the central areas of the city (*Figure 2*). They are characterised by a high proportion of foreign students (over 30%) and a significant share of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with their average ISEE being substantially lower than the citywide average of €13,000.

Although the data is partial and further research is needed, the results suggest a positive association between school segregation and dropout rates. Future studies should explore whether school segregation exacerbates disadvantages related to socio-economic or migration status and impacts students' educational trajectories.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Residential and school segregation is no higher in Bologna than in other southern European cities. Indeed, the Dissimilarity Index (DI) calculation shows no significant macro-concentrations of foreign students. However, 25% of public primary schools, mostly located in the northern part of the city, exhibit significantly higher proportions of foreign students compared to the citywide average and report the lowest average ISEE values at the city level. Additionally, these schools, identified as cases of school segregation, serve over 60% of students at risk of dropping out.

While school segregation tends to mirror the residential distribution of the population, it is further exacerbated by student mobility between CAs. The intensity of mobility among both Italian and foreign students varies according to the ethnic and socio-economic characteristics of urban areas. However, the direction of these mobility flows differs between native and foreign students. Specifically, Italian students tend to enrol in schools with fewer foreign students and lower socio-economic disadvantage, while foreign students appear unable

to escape a state of segregation.

Future research should explore the role of public housing, school admission policies, and educational provision in shaping patterns of school segregation and student mobility. Additionally, the economic and cultural characteristics of both Italian and foreign families should be considered in future analysis. Finally, the observed positive association between school segregation and dropout rates warrants further examination to better understand how segregation may impact students' educational trajectories.

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# TERRITORIAL PACTS: POSSIBLE TOOLS TO LIMIT SOCIAL EXCLUSION

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The objective of this article is to investigate the potential of non-formal education in addressing educational disparities, specifically through the examination of Territorial Pacts and to analyse some case studies. There are various types of Pacts that have gained popularity in educational settings, moving from Community Pacts to Educational Community Pacts (Boeris, 2018). The latter has been strongly supported by the Italian Government School Plan in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years, even during the ongoing pandemic crisis (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2020; Ministero dell'Istruzione 2021). These bottom-up practices aim to establish a strong social connection between the school and the surrounding territory. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of this connection. It is essential to form an alliance between the school, the territory, and third-sector entities to strengthen the educating community and guide students in their growth (Locatelli, 2021). This study aims to present two case studies of collaborative pacts implemented in the aftermath of the pandemic period in Italy, situated in two distinct socioeconomic contexts, to demonstrate the universality and versatility of the pact model in mitigating social exclusion.

Territorial Pacts; Social Justice; Territorial alliance; Third sector

## INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Sars-Covid 19 pandemic crisis, school dropout rates have increased, and Italy currently exhibits one of the highest rates of school abandonment compared to the European average. Data from Save The Children indicate that the school dropout rate in Italy is 12.7%, remaining the highest in Europe, second only to Romania and Spain, and far from achieving the 9% target by 2030 (Save the Children, 2022). At present, 13.5% of minors under 16 years of age experience material and social deprivation; approximately 1 million and

127 thousand young individuals (Save the Children, 2024). Evidently, within this substantial portion of the youth population, territorial disparities between Northern and Southern Italy play a crucial role (Save the Children, 2024). Poverty and school dropout are phenomena that must be examined on currently as they describe the same issue, which can have significant effects on young individuals.

Regarding the relationship between mental health and socioeconomic status, an noteworthy scientific study by Grüning Parache et al. was published in 2024. The study attempts to correlate family composition and socioeconomic status (SES) with the child's psychophysical well-being. The results of the analysis demonstrate that children from single-parent or extended families report more difficulties in relationships and lower levels of quality of life compared to children living in traditional families. However, this data must be interpreted in light of the socioeconomic status levels of the families, as the study shows that family structure is strongly interconnected with the SES indicator. Lower SES levels are recorded for single-parent or extended families compared to traditional ones. It emerges, therefore, that single-parent and extended families may experience more situations of economic difficulty compared to traditional families, and this is linked, according to the study, to a greater likelihood for the child to report behavioral problems and a decrease in quality of life (Grüning Parache et al. 2024). The results thus emphasize that the economic and financial capabilities of the family of origin may influence the child's mental well-being more than their structure. The study, therefore, underscores the importance of combating social inequalities and social poverty as one of the main causes of childhood distress (Grüning Parache et al. 2024).

This study, therefore, reveals that poverty and family economic difficulties can significantly affect the child's psychophysical health, leading to an increased likelihood of developing behavioral problems and, consequently, relational issues with peers. These data form the theoretical background upon which the reflection for this article is based, aiming to present potential tools to attempt to counteract school abandonment and dropout.

## **1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

In the aftermath of the pandemic crisis, Italian schools encountered the necessity to extend students' experiences beyond the confines of the educational institution, providing them with immersive and engaging opportunities, in an attempt to overcome the restrictive period recently

experienced. Furthermore, institutions also faced challenges regarding space safety due to post-pandemic containment measures. The disconnect between traditional didactics and children's concrete needs has additionally facilitated the establishment of a new approach to education.

The School Plan 2020-21 appears to offer a solution to these issues. The Plan demonstrates particular attention to addressing educational poverty and school dropout through the promotion of a participatory approach that valorizes experiences and resources already present in the territory. Among the instruments listed to address the pandemic situation and achieve the aforementioned objectives, the Community Educational Pact is proposed for the first time. At this stage, the Pact is presented as the instrument through which to find community-based solutions for adapting more suitable spaces for conducting school lessons. Indeed, these have been useful in allowing schools to remain open and functional without compromising safety, by relocating certain lessons to structures made available by local entities, such as parishes, museums, parks, and gardens (Calvaresi et al., 2021). Following this initial impetus for co-planning through Community Educational Pacts, and with the attenuation of the pandemic emergency, the pacts have reverted to a broader significance and an application more adherent to their original purpose, towards close collaboration between educational institutions and local entities in view of a common educational intent. Consequently, in the subsequent year's School Plan (2021-2022), the Pacts are endorsed as useful instruments for didactic activities complementary to traditional ones. This novel instrument aligns with the principles of scholastic autonomy, particularly with the school's capacity to independently manage relationships with territorial entities with which it collaborates, to implement inclusive educational activities for students. The pact is an instrument of shared administration that applies Article 118 of the Constitution, whereby the State and its associated entities, including schools, must commit to respecting and promoting the principle of horizontal subsidiarity, encouraging "the autonomous initiative of citizens, individually or in association, for the performance of activities of general interest" (Art.118, Italian Constitution). It is imperative to emphasize that Educational Pacts have also emerged as a strategy to combat social exclusion, as indicated by the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union in June 2021. The objective of the Recommendation is to prevent and combat social exclusion, to the extent of suggesting that Member States present, within nine months of the adoption of the Recommendation, an action plan to implement its guidelines until 2030. In this context, the establishment of the Child Guarantee and

Community Educational Pacts become indispensable instruments for implementing a policy supporting minors, also responding to Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda on providing quality, equitable, and inclusive education, and learning opportunities for all.

## **2. PROJECT DETAILS**

To illustrate the impact and efficacy of the Territorial Pact instrument, two case studies are presented herein. The selected territories are the Municipality of Bobbio and the Adriano district of Milan; two environments diametrically opposed in terms of geographical configuration and socioeconomic composition of inhabitants, yet comparable in their final outcomes.

### **2.1. The Case of the Adriano District, Milan**

The Adriano District is situated in the northeastern periphery of Milan, an area of recent construction. It is considered one of Milan's youngest districts, built between the 1990s and early 2000s, although the core of the district dates back to older constructions that served as a connection between the city of Milan and the countryside of Crescenzago. Demographically, in the areas of Old and New Adriano, a majority of family settlements are recorded, with a more numerous composition compared to the city average; 17% of these families have more than four members. In the Crescenzago and Via Padova area, the southernmost part of the district built in the 1960s, the presence of an older population is recorded; former families from the years of construction (Cognetti, 2020). Despite this presence, the district is predominantly characterized by young and very young inhabitants and foreign residents, exceeding the city average, and by a lower incidence of residents over 65, below the Milanese figure.

The primary school in the neighborhood, named after Vittorio Bottego, has been the protagonist of the Collaboration Agreement signed with the Municipal Authority and local associations. The agreement project was implemented within a broader framework project for urban regeneration of the Metropolitan City of Milan, funded by the Cariplo Foundation. In the Adriano district, specifically, the focus was on the need to revitalize Piazza Costantino, the square in front of the Bottego school, which had lost its original function and had become a parking area for automobiles. The collaboration established between the school and neighborhood associations has enabled students to engage in meaningful experiences and collectively care for a common asset, in this case, the square. The activities also included excursions in the neighborhood, during which children had the opportunity to listen to local histories narrated by elderly

residents. According to the teachers, these activities were particularly significant for young students, especially those with migratory backgrounds, as they provided an opportunity to learn about the history of their new place of residence, fostering a sense of belonging to a broader and more established narrative.

## **2.2. The Caso of Bobbio**

Bobbio, situated in the province of Piacenza within the Val Trebbia, is an Apennine territory of significant landscape interest, located at the convergence of mountains in the provinces of Piacenza, Genova, Alessandria, and Pavia. The geographical configuration of the valley has been a driving factor in the process of creating networks and local synergies among various community stakeholders. Indeed, in 2013, it facilitated the establishment of the Unione Montana Valli Trebbia e Luretta and was subsequently included in the Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne (SNAI) beginning with the new 2021-2027 programming period (Comitato Nazionale Aree Interne, 2022; Dipartimento per le politiche di coesione e per il sud, 2023). This Union encompasses municipalities of extremely small dimensions with very low population density. The area is significantly affected by a substantial depopulation phenomenon, attributed to the scarcity of services and infrastructural challenges in accessing these small municipalities. Of the resident population, 10.11% is of foreign origin.

In this area experiencing depopulation, a Community Educational Pact was implemented in 2021, enabling collaboration between the school, the Unione Montana, and local associations. Notably, beginning in 2020, the school became an Istituto Omnicomprensivo, encompassing 14 school facilities distributed across an area of approximately 70 km, traversing 7 municipalities along the Trebbia River Valley. The Community Educational Pact signed in these territories, therefore, was of considerable importance in strengthening the connection between entities and local realities situated at such great distances. The work that followed the pact's signing saw the school take a leading role in mapping community availability and the skills offered. Upon acquiring this information, specific projects were structured for each school facility and, consequently, for each reference community. Each school facility was thus able to present, over time, its applied civic education project, involving the community to concretize the concept of an educating community (Garioni & Bosoni, 2022).



### 3. OUTCOMES AND FINDINGS

The two case studies analyzed demonstrate that collaboration between schools and local entities can have highly positive effects on the entire population by fostering a sense of local involvement capable of overcoming cultural barriers. In the case of the Adriano district in Milan, the population with migratory backgrounds was involved in the design and discovery of the neighborhood to promote integration, at least for the youngest members, into the local reality. Even these small engagement actions can have significant repercussions on the life of a child with a migratory background, uprooted from their culture of origin against their will, in an attempt to restore meaning to their space and time; a neighborhood space and time inhabited and populated by numerous local actors. The broader purpose of the Pacts, therefore, is to create a dense network among schools, municipal entities, and local associations, in order to support the child's growth in all its phases, both within and, more importantly, outside of school. The Pact also provides the opportunity for local entities to fully participate in the education and accompaniment of the growing youth. The network that is created, in this manner, around the student has the potential to generate a sense of belonging, mitigating loneliness and also succeeding in compensating for economic deficiencies and difficulties of the children's families of origin. The community, in this sense, is placed in a position to support the children of the community and, with them, their families, making them feel part of something larger, which is the educating community.

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# SHAPING DESIRES. A WORKSHOP TO GIVE VOICE TO CHILDREN FROM POPULAR SCHOOLS

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## THE CONTEXT: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON POPULAR SCHOOLS IN ROME

My contribution is part of a wider research supported by the Education department of University Roma Tre, called *The other school. Popular education experiences between learning and social redemption* (Zizioli, Stillo and Franchi 2024).

The object and at the same time the context of the research is the Network of Popular Schools of Rome, established in 2020 as a result of a horizontal process of share of values, experiences and practices between the different realities of popular school place in several neighbourhoods, mostly peripheral areas of the city.

The research was carried out by a composite group of scholars<sup>1</sup>, with the fundamental contribution of the activists of popular schools, with a non-standard and qualitative approach (Bichi, 2002; Mantovani, 2000).

Among the objectives of the research are:

- To explore practices, identities and relations with community, public school and territory of the Roman popular schools, in order to understand the limits and potential of this experience with respect to the inclusion/emancipation capacity;
- To systematize the popular school experiences and to highlight the values underlying the practices;
- To identify the popular school's educator profile, skills and training.

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<sup>1</sup> The research team included: Elena Zizioli, project coordinator, and, in alphabetical order, Daniele Babusci, Lorenzo Barbanera, Giulia Franchi, Peter Mayo, Fiorenzo Parziale, Flavia Rossi Jost, Francesco Maria Salimbeni, Lisa Stillo, with fundamental support of popular school activists.

The tools of the qualitative methodology adopted are:

- participant observation: field notes and photo-documentation
- 35 not directive interviews to educators
- 5 focus group with popular school kids
- 2 workshops with popular school kids

As clearly emerges both from the interviews with the activists and from the focus groups conducted with the after-school participants, popular schools make the protagonism of childhood, the right to be heard of girls and boys, the right to be recognized as subjects and active participants in their experience, capable of making choices, the heart of their educational action.

The meaning is to empower them [kids] it is to make them autonomous and aware of what they do; we try to develop critical thinking in them, to help them understand why something was thought, develop it, understand why a conclusion was reached. (int. 4, Spin Time+).

There is also an education in listening during this snack time, which is one of the most important moments, because it is strictly educational (...) everyone must stay in the circle, everyone must take action to do something in common. (int. 1, A Testa Alta).

Here I find people to talk to, and they want to listen to me... if I have nowhere to go, I can come here and see my friends. What I like most about this school is that it is a friendly place, where I find friends and feel comfortable (focus group, MaTeMù).

## **MAKE RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN. DESIGN A WORKSHOP IN SUBURBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS**

The 1989 *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*<sup>2</sup>, and in particular its article 12 says: “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child”.

And in article 13:

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds,

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<sup>2</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child | OHCHR.

regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

The same articles were a precious stimulus for a change of perspective in sociological and pedagogical research, starting from the Nineties, in focusing on the children's perspective and for a conception of research no longer as research on childhood but with and for kids (Mortari – Mazzone 2010). Making the kids direct protagonists, giving them a voice (Amandini 2020), forced scholars to rethink investigative techniques and tools, recognizing their peculiar forms of communication compared to those of adults.

The more traditional qualitative research strategies such as observation, interviews and focus groups and an ethnographic approach have been joined by "unconventional" techniques such as friendship groups, drawing, photography, video, stories and narratives (Lahman 2008). In particular, the so-called Narrative Inquiry and Art-Based Research (Barone – Eisner 2011), also in accordance with the experience of Bruno Munari (1984) who places the workshop at the center as a space for experimentation and production of meaning, have recognized the power of storytelling and artistic practices in allowing kids, even the youngest, to express themselves freely and competently about their experiences and to read and interpret reality, providing original data, and making them truly co-researchers, thanks to the plurality of languages used (Barton 2015).

Starting from these reflections, it was decided to broaden the original research plan by designing an ad hoc reading and drawing workshop entitled *Let's take back the sky!*, aimed at those who attend popular after-school in two different popular schools involved in the research: *Mammuto* and *A Testa Alta*. The popular after-school Mammuto program was born in 2016 in the Rebibbia area from the local experience of the neighborhood committee. Thanks to the commitment of around ten activists, it offers free support in studies, art workshops and play and outdoor activities. It provides moments and spaces for aggregation and sociality, engaging in the fight against marginalization and promoting social issues which affect the entire community.

The popular school *A Testa Alta* was born in 2017 in the San Basilio district, in the north-east of Rome. The social and educational space stands in an abandoned place, occupied and reused to create a place of culture for all the inhabitants of the area, strongly characterized by drug dealing. The activists, around five at the time of research, provide support for homework, play activities and active citizenship projects to children from 4 to 13 years.

During the workshop, in Rebibbia, there were over forty children, coming from very different contexts, the majority with a migratory background, first and second generation, with a mixed age, mostly referring to primary school but also to lower secondary school. Some of them, as the activists tell us in their interviews, come from complex familiar situations or are hosted in “family home”.

In San Basilio, the group is smaller, around 6-7 participants, almost all females, and younger – several of them still attend nursery school –, they mostly come from Italian families and live in the surrounding popular buildings.

Participatory observation, recorded through notes and photographic documentation, was the privileged tool chosen. Conducting the activity directly as researcher, it was decided to provide two other researchers as observers to allow a better triangulation of the evidence that emerged, and a grid was preliminarily prepared which in part reflects the one used with adults in the interviews, to have a structured but open guide to read the main elements that emerged at a verbal and non-verbal level from the workshop.

The proposed activity start from an illustrated book, in its interweaving of images and words, as a powerful activator of identification, dialogue and multiple interpretations: *L'ammiraglio si è preso il cielo* (The admiral took the sky, 2022), written and illustrated by Marianna Balducci, a young and award-winning author who loves to put together photography and drawing. It's a tribute, declared since the dedication, to Gianni Rodari and his nursery rhyme “Il cielo è di tutti”, collected in the book *Filastrocche in cielo e in terra* (1960). With confidence in children's creativity and awareness of the liberating power of the word (Rodari, 1973), the teacher of Omegna will never stop questioning about the relationship between writing for children and political commitment and bringing to mind the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, he affirms the right to expression and to be heard for children:

Listening to them – states Rodari – is almost more important than talking to them, helping them clarify their ideas is more important than giving them ready-made ideas of any kind. They represent enormous reserves of energy, in a world that must face and solve immense problems (Zagni 1975, p. 32)<sup>3</sup>.

The objective of the activity, in a transformative idea of doing education and research, was to investigate with children their desires regarding their future, but also their environment and popular school, and is divided into some well-

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<sup>3</sup> Translation by the author.

defined phases (Franchi 2017) designed to be replicable in other similar contexts.

### **CARE, BEAUTY, PARTICIPATION. THE CHILDREN'S RESPONSE**

The first step was the circle time, a moment of mutual knowledge, exchange and meeting with the presentation of the researcher (“who I am” and “why I am here”), presentations of the participants (names, age), and some stimulating questions about the popular school and the neighborhood. In both contexts, the relationship of affection and trust between young people and educators and activists clearly emerges, as well as the awareness of the central role played by the popular school in children’s lives.

The second phase involves participatory collective reading. Everyone is invited to actively participate in a horizontal way so that every voice counts: by reading the illustrations and finding a shared meaning in the words. The mix of artistic techniques and Marianna Balducci’s ability to play on the structure of the book as an object to build her story fascinated and involved children.

In San Basilio, the small number of participants favored participation and understanding and revealed a great ability to decipher images even in those who had difficulty reading the text, confirming that the plurality of languages helps everyone to find their own expressive channel. The same happened with those with a migrant background and a poor knowledge of Italian in Rebibbia.

“The admiral took the sky, even if the sky belongs to everyone, but now everyone remembers it and has stopped staying silent” (Balducci, 2022). The message was perfectly clear in both contexts: the arrogance and obtuseness of power, “he is taking the sky from the earth... NO! Stupid human”<sup>4</sup>, “The sky belongs to everyone, you can’t take it!” (Mammut), as well as the invitation to react, “What would happen if they took it all away? What would you do? “, “I get angry”, “What would you have told him? “, “You can’t imprison animals!” (A Testa Alta), and to collective and direct action, “They all pulled together” (Mammut).

The third part of the activity is the presentation of the artistic workshop: everyone receives a “piece of sky”, making the gratuity and power of the gift concrete. The invitation is to represent through collage and drawing “a desire, something you would like to have or to do in the popular school, in your neighborhood, or try to imagine your future”. Examples created by other children are shown at the beginning to make the request clearer. It is a relaxed time in

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<sup>4</sup> The translation of the statements recorded by the observers during the workshop is by the author.



which everyone participates with enthusiasm; someone does it alone, someone else does it together with a friend. There is often anxiety to immediately show the result, to share it with the researchers and see one's contribution recognized.

The last fundamental moment is the restitution and group commentary of the collective "sky" built by kids. Among the elements that emerged from the analysis of the drawings and the words with which children interpreted them, we find the request of several transformations of the neighborhood by demanding more green and child-friendly spaces: "I would like the tree to become bigger", "I would like more grass". Even the popular school takes shape in the little pieces of sky and the requests generate moments of collective activation: "I would like a bigger and more spacious after-school". But above all they give shape to the importance that popular after-school has in their lives: "The popular school is everything in life, I would always stay here".

But we find also the right to housing, important battle connected to popular education, which occurs very often in the drawings, especially among older girls and boys and those with a migratory background. Many want a house for themselves and their family, "big and beautiful", a house represented next to that of their friends, or closer to the school. There are those who would like "everyone to feel at home in another house", tracing a red and flowery street between little houses made of sky, and when faced with a request for clarification, a companion explains with great awareness: "I would like everyone felt at ease even outside their own comfort zone". And finally: "care, love, beauty, discovery, participation", as a sort of synthesis of the results of research, on five blue fragments of sky a child wrote the profound value of popular school in their lives.

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# POPULAR EDUCATION: A BRIDGE TO PREVENT AND COMBAT EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND JUVENILE CRIMINALITY

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Talking about popular schools and popular education leads us to think about the great educators of the twentieth century such as Paulo Freire, Don Lorenzo Milani and Danilo Dolci. Popular school experiences left their mark because they gave voice and opportunities to the least and marginalized. These schools have been an antidote to the condition of educational poverty in various parts of the world (Stillo, 2022). Nowadays, educational poverty is still at the centre of the pedagogical debate due to its connection with other issues such as early school leaving and juvenile crime. Today, many young people, defined “street oriented”, do not know where to go and what to do, so they use to spend lot of their free time on the way, in the streets and squares (Iavarone & Girardi, 2018), where unfortunately many of them also experience first deviant behaviours. In these cases, popular schools can be a bridge on the way, a place of possible inclusion, awareness and empowerment (Sardelli & Fiorucci, 2020). This contribution aims to reflect on the role popular schools can play today in preventing early school leaving and juvenile criminality, offering experiences of transformative education, especially for young people at risk of marginalisation.

popular education; juvenile criminality; educational poverty; early school leaving

## 1. EDUCATIONAL POVERTY: A GLOBAL ISSUE

One of the greatest challenges that has always been shared by countries all over the world is the eradication of poverty in all its forms. Today there are new and old forms of poverty, but one among them particularly requires the attention of educational professionals: educational poverty. It is a form of poverty that especially hinders the development of boys and girls. In fact, one of the earliest

definitions of educational poverty is given by Save The Children, which in 2016 published a report called *Ending Education and Child Poverty in Europe*. In this document educational poverty is defined as a “process that limits children’s right to education and deprives them of the opportunity to learn and develop cognitive and non-cognitive skills they will need to succeed in a rapidly changing world” (Save the Children, 2016, p. 6). We can say that educational poverty is therefore a serious threat (Save The Children Italia, 2015) for the future of children. Indeed, it contributes to “deny opportunities for millions of children and increase their risk of social exclusion” (Unicef, 2024, p. 12). That is why eliminating this form of inequality is for the United Nations (UN) one of the goals to be achieved by 2030. Achieving this goal requires first providing access to quality, equitable and inclusive education that promotes lifelong, lifewide and lifedep learning opportunities (Open Working Group Proposal for Sustainable Development Goals, 2015). Thus, combating educational poverty falls under both Goal 1 “End poverty in all its forms everywhere” and Goal 4 “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” foreseen in Agenda 2030. Educational poverty is, in fact, a global issue. It is a complex phenomenon whose dynamics and implications can vary significantly across different regions and countries. However, the main consequences to which it can lead are the same, the most urgent among them are early school leaving and juvenile criminality. Combating educational poverty is therefore a complex but unavoidable challenge for the sustainable development of the planet and the human being.

## **2. EDUCATIONAL POVERTY IN ITALY**

In Italy, more than one million young people, under the age of eighteen, live in poverty (Openpolis, 2024); a condition that, according to Autorità Garante per l’Infanzia e l’Adolescenza<sup>1</sup>, most of the time causes poor school performance, behavioural difficulties, insufficient social integration and the development of deviant behaviour (2022). In fact, Italy is one of the European countries with the highest percentage of Early Leavers from Education and Training (ELET). According to the European definition, ELET are young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who have at most completed a secondary school degree and are not involved in training or education (Eurostat, 2022). Today, therefore, not only many youths in Italy live in poverty, but in addition 11.5 percent of them attend

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<sup>1</sup> Autorità Garante per l’Infanzia e l’Adolescenza is an Italian authority established in 2011 to protect and promote minors’ rights, in order to respect the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

school inconsistently, when they attend it. They are often children with absent families who experience the lack of positive references to follow. In addition, the absence of family-support hinders the development of meaningful life skills and leads those in education to exhibit deviant behaviour (Iavarone, 2018). The issue is that juvenile risk and deviance “lurk mainly in those social strata where children have a habit of growing up without significant adults, in contexts where the street is the only possible place to live and generate relationships” (Iavarone, 2020, p. 35). Today, in fact, young people are also defined as “street oriented,” (Iavarone & Girardi, 2018) a term used to denote the habit of spending most of their free time on the street, in roads and squares, because they do not know where to go and what to do. The problem is that on the street they frequently experience the first forms of deviance. For these reasons, juvenile crime is one of the emergencies that, together with educational poverty and school dropout, requires our attention to the world of youth.

### **3. DEVIANT BEHAVIOUR AND VIOLENCE AMONG YOUTH**

Violent crime in the world is a growing phenomenon. According to the World Health Organization (2015; 2024) the number of episodes of youth violence is worrying. The protagonists of these episodes are young people aged 10 to 29 years. In Italy, in May 2024, the Ministry of the Interior published a report stating that in 2023 there were 31.173 registered cases of minors who committed crimes (Servizio Analisi Criminale). The most committed crimes are those of the violent type: robbery, arson and sexual violence. The causes that lead to the manifestation of deviant behaviour among minors can be many, but according to several studies (Backman, 2017; Guetta, 2023; Iavarone & Girardi, 2018) there is a link with educational poverty and school dropout. The element that would unite these three phenomena seems to be the presence of fragile family and social ties, so these are phenomena that draw nourishment from the lack of community and meaningful educational references (Openpolis, 2021; Autorità Garante per l'infanzia e l'Adolescenza, 2022). So, it is necessary to think carefully about the possible educational strategies to be implemented in order to combat these three emergencies.

### **4. REDISCOVERING THE VALUE OF POPULAR SCHOOLS**

One possible solution to provide educational community experiences for these young people may be the rediscovery of popular schools. Talking about popular schools and popular education leads us to think about the past and the great

educators of the twentieth century such as Paulo Freire, Don Lorenzo Milani and Danilo Dolci (Aglieri & Augelli, 2020). Popular school's experiences left their mark because they gave voice and space to the least and the marginalized. They were born as an antidote to the condition of educational poverty experienced by poor people in different parts of the world (Stillo, 2022). However, as mentioned before, educational poverty is still a very current problem. Therefore, for today's street-oriented youth, who recognize the street as their place of belonging, it can be essential to rediscover the importance of community. Then this means that it is precisely in these cases that popular schools can turn into a bridge to the street, a place of possible inclusion, conscientization and emancipation (Sardelli & Fiorucci, 2020). A place that is open to all, a place where anyone, especially those who have no other reference points, can face with relationships, and find meaningful reference points.

The popular school as an alternative to spending leisure time in the squares and streets, for a "new way of 'inhabiting' urban space" (Zizioli, 2023, p. 131). A popular school that experiments and thus presents itself "as a social and neighbourhood presidium" (Zizioli, 2023, p. 131). Today, the transformative value of popular school experiences is already being rediscovered in some realities, but it is not enough. We need to invest and pay attention to this way of doing community, giving support to all those realities of popular education, such as oratories, which softly try to offer transformative educational experiences to young people in difficulty, giving them the opportunity to escape from their marginality destinies (Zizioli, 2024). Pay attention to small educating communities that strive to prevent disorientation and social exclusion of those who are already in a condition of marginality.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

It is necessary to recover and revalue the role that popular schools can play in the education of people on the margins and in combating various forms of poverty. Rediscovering the popular school as a place with "humanizing potential" (Stillo, 2022, p. 138) capable of transforming the street into an educational space (Lombardi, 2015) that can counter the inequalities of our time and their related consequences such as early school leaving and juvenile crime. In other words, a space that can offer alternative life opportunities and a chance for redemption for all young people living in fragile contexts (Borgna & Struffolino, 2022; Zizioli, 2023) that risk limiting and compromising their development as persons and as citizens.

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# PREVENTING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING: RISK FACTORS, EFFECTIVE INTERVEN- TIONS AND POLICIES

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## INTRODUCTION

Preventing early school leaving represents a key priority in European and Italian policy. The Council Resolution 2021/C 66/01 established a target of reducing school dropout below 9% by 2030, while Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR, 2021) highlighted dropout reduction and educational poverty prevention as strategic objectives within Mission 4 and Mission 5. With Italy's current dropout rate at 13.1%, significantly above EU targets, addressing this issue is crucial given its documented individual, social, and economic consequences (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014).

The general objective of this panel aimed to focus on three areas related to the phenomenon of early school leaving: investigations of risk factors; evaluations of interventions; and analyses of international, national, and local policies.

## 1. RISK FACTORS: MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

School dropout results from multidimensional factors at individual, family, school, and institutional levels (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; EASNIE, 2019; Hammond et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011). The panel presented several contributions examining risk factors through diverse methodological approaches.

The methodological challenges in defining and measuring school dropout were highlighted by Beri et al. (2024), while the TALENTED project research (Bonaiuti et al., 2024) offered a comprehensive framework examining multiple dimensions of dropout risk, consistent with contemporary ecological models (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Dupéré et al., 2015). The analysis of student-related factors, family variables, and teacher characteristics revealed complex

interaction patterns, with Miranda and Vespasiani (2024) proposing a research-training approach based on Self-Determination Theory to enhance teacher support for student motivation. Particularly significant were the territorial analyses by Gragnaniello et al. (2024) and Moccia et al. (2024) investigating dropout factors in Campania schools and areas affected by organized crime, contributing to understanding how socio-territorial contexts influence educational trajectories.

## **2. INTERVENTION STRATEGIES: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**

Internationally, interventions have been developed and evaluated to understand effective approaches for preventing early school leaving and improving key predictive outcomes. The panel presented several innovative intervention approaches reflecting current trends in evidence-based educational practice, ranging from experimental studies to comprehensive territorial programs.

The Kepler lab experience reported by Spampinato and Conficoni (2024) demonstrated through quasi-experimental methods how after-school interventions for underperforming immigrant students improved motivational orientation, self-efficacy, and classroom engagement. Similarly, the “Provaci ancora Sam” project (Pongiluppi & Bianchini, 2024) exemplified successful territorial integration, combining classroom prevention with support centers and adult education to address functional illiteracy and educational disadvantage. Within the PRIN TALENTED framework, Bruni et al. (2024) explored the potential of gamification through elements like points, challenges, and leaderboards to enhance student engagement and reduce dropout risk.

The importance of teaching approaches emerged strongly through the research by Germani (2024) examining 1,092 high school students using Self-Determination Theory, revealing how need-supportive teaching enhances intrinsic motivation while need-thwarting approaches increase dropout risk. These diverse interventions share key elements with successful international programs (Wilson et al., 2011), all emphasizing supportive learning environments, strengthened motivation, and positive teacher-student relationships.

## **3. INTERVENTION STRATEGIES: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**

School dropout needs to be addressed through an eco-systemic approach (EASNIE, 2019), involving actions at national, school, and individual levels. The

contributions analyzed multi-level policies for preventing school dropout through systematic evidence mapping.

The policy analysis revealed the importance of coordinated institutional efforts (Burns & Köster, 2016). The Metropolitan Observatory in Catania (Colloca & Piazza, 2024) demonstrated innovative stakeholder coordination, aligning with research on collective impact initiatives (Henig et al., 2016) and networked governance (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Their model of institutional cooperation involves judicial authorities, social services, and educational institutions. The analysis by Frega (2024) of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan contributes to post-pandemic educational recovery policies, while the E4PED project (Di Martino et al., 2024) aims to provide evidence-based practices addressing early school leaving. Within this project, Pannone et al. (2024) develops an Evidence and Gap Map to synthesize international evidence on prevention, intervention, and compensation programs, while Vegliante and Coppola (2024) explore NEET-related policies and school-to-work transition strategies, examining the strengths and weaknesses of current educational and employment policies.

## CONCLUSIONS

The contributions presented in this panel advance our understanding of ESL while highlighting key areas for future research and intervention. The research demonstrates how the complex interplay of individual, family, school, and socio-territorial factors requires sophisticated methodological approaches, though challenges in measuring dropout persist.

Promising intervention strategies integrate multiple professional perspectives and address both academic and socio-emotional dimensions, while policy studies emphasize institutional coordination and evidence-based frameworks. Moving forward, priorities include rigorous evaluation of long-term outcomes and development of flexible, locally-responsive institutional networks.

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# DROPOUT<sup>2</sup>: THE DROPOUT ON SCHOOL DATA DROPOUT

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The paper underscores the complexity of school dropout as a research topic, emphasising the challenges of comparison of data from various sources, crucial for policy and practical interventions. Despite extensive research, there is no universally accepted definition of school dropout, and national and international documents often conflate early school leaving (ESL, ELET) with dropout, leading to inconsistencies in data collection and reporting. This overlap obscures certain groups, such as repeaters and students in “educational mortality”, who, while not formally classified as dropouts, should be included in the discussion. These definitional ambiguities result in incompatible data collection methods and hinder coordination among educational agencies, complicating the development of cohesive intervention strategies. The paper reviews key definitions from various documents, illustrating how this umbrella effect complicates understanding the issue. Additionally, it discusses findings from the doctoral project “School Dropout and Dropout Data”, which systematically analysed 2,078 scientific articles on the subject. The study highlights the need for shared data systems to accurately monitor the phenomenon and develop effective strategies. A reliable understanding of school dropout is crucial to avoid misinterpretation and to guide targeted interventions, particularly at the local level.

dropout; data; systematic review

## INTRODUCTION – WHAT DO WE MEAN BY DROPOUT

UNESCO<sup>1</sup> defines “dropout” as

(...) the proportion of children and young people in the official age range who are not enrolled in pre-primary, primary, secondary, or higher levels of education. It is designed to show how many children or youth in each country or region should be enrolled in school but are not.

Similarly, EACEA (2020) identifies the phenomenon as

Students leaving education and training before completing the upper secondary level and obtaining a corresponding school leaving certificate. This broad definition encompasses the young people who, according to their own country’s definition, are considered to be early leavers. (Cfr. ELET).

In Italy, AGIA (2022) adopts a definition that highlights “non-use, incomplete or irregular use of education and training services by young people of school age”.

There is no globally shared definition of the concept of school dropout (Selda, 2014), nor a standardised method for its measurement (Lindhardt et al., 2022).

In the first phase of this research, a document analysis of the definitions and indicators used for the study of school dropout, both locally and globally, (Beri, forthcoming) was conducted. This highlighted the existence of different categories of definitions of school dropout: a. overlap of the terms “early school leaving” and “dropout” (Marina and Senthilrajan, 2024); b. dropout understood in more “inclusive” terms, including, in addition to abandonment, phenomena such as poor academic performance, repetition, frequent absences, temporary withdrawal, and dropping out of school (Besozzi, 2017); c. analysis of the phenomenon through attendance rates or comparison rates, in a positive light (Gansaonrè et al., 2023).

In addition, the parameters used to identify students considered as dropouts vary from country to country (and sometimes within the same country), highlighting: a. criteria based on age or academic delay in relation to norms (Hysing et al., 2023); b. criteria based on absence (Rodriguez et al., 2023); c. criteria based on possession of a diploma or other institutional qualification (Dekkers and Claassen, 2001).

This confusion leads to variations in “dropout rates” (Paguero et al., 2021) and, consequently, a lack of accurate assessment of the severity and extent of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://education-estimates.org/out-of-school/> last access 22/11/2024.



phenomenon, which is a major obstacle to the development of effective educational policies (Belfanz et al., 2020).

## **1. A PHD PROJECT**

This study is part of a PhD project (started in the 2023/24 academic year) at the University of Bergamo, within the doctoral course in “Human Sciences and New Welfare”, titled “School Dropout: the Dispersion of School Dropout Data”. The project’s main objectives are articulated in three phases corresponding to the different years of the doctorate:

In the first year, the project will analyze theoretical constructs and data collection methods regarding school dropout by reviewing national and international literature, with a focus on Italian, European, and global contexts. The second year will involve an empirical study of local realities, utilizing data from the Municipality and Province of Bergamo in collaboration with the University of Salamanca. Finally, the third year will focus on developing synthesis models to enhance the understanding and management of the phenomenon.

Although school dropout has been studied for a long time (Fuller, 1927), most research focuses primarily on causes and effects, overlooking two critical aspects: the precise definition of the concept and the in-depth analysis of measurement and quantification methods.

Early identification of students at risk of dropping out is essential for developing targeted prevention strategies (Pereira et al., 2024). Furthermore, the use of integrated data from various sources provides a stronger basis for policy makers than fragmented studies conducted in specific areas (Sileshi, Jemal, Feyisa, 2024). Based on these considerations, this research project aims to investigate these gaps.

## **2. THE PRESENT STUDY**

### **2.1. Aim**

This study initiates a systematic review of the literature on data related to school dropout (Pellegrini and Vivanet, 2018). It focuses on analysing sources, methodologies, and criteria used, extending on previous research (Beri, Agrati, Lazzari, forthcoming) that excluded grey literature.

The research questions that guided the review, based on PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), are as follows:

What are the data sources and methodologies used internationally to collect data on school dropout?

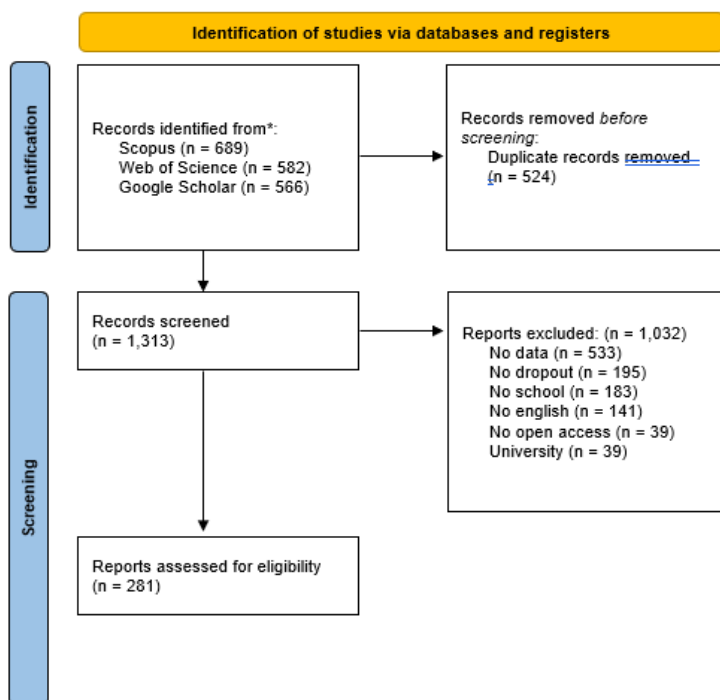
## 2.2. Eligibility criteria

The selected studies meet the following eligibility criteria (Cooper and Hedges, 2019): students up to upper secondary school; focus on school dropout, excluding other types of dropout (e.g., university); published between 2021 and 10 July 2024, in English and open access.

## 2.3. Research strategy

The search was conducted in SCOPUS, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using the search string: ‘dropout’, ‘school’, ‘data’. Limits were applied regarding publication year and language. Selected studies were exported to Rayyan<sup>2</sup> to remove duplicates. The initial screening assessed titles and abstracts, excluding articles that did not address school dropout or referred to non-educational contexts.

Figure 1 – Study selection process. Adapted from Page et al. (2021)



<sup>2</sup> Rayyan is an online software used to organise, manage, and accelerate the literature review process. <https://www.rayyan.ai/>.

A total of 1,837 records were identified by searching electronic databases. After removing duplicates (n = 524), 1,313 records were subjected to an initial evaluation based on title and abstract. Of these, 1,032 were excluded, progressing to the next stage of more detailed screening of 281 studies (Fig. 1).

### **3. RESULTS**

The initial screening and reading of articles yielded significant preliminary results. The large number of identified studies can be explained by the fact that many of them, while analysing related phenomena (depression, alcoholism, sleep quality, health, etc.), use data on school dropouts. However, there is a lack of studies that explicitly analyse the methodology, collection, and analysis of such data.

Key aspects include the variety of indicators and definitions of “dropout” from broad interpretations (Zanoni et al., 2023) to specific measures like the difference between enrolments and dropouts (Ronak and Rashimi, 2021), with significant methodological consequences.

Another issue is the lack of specific tools to measure school dropout. Many studies use adapted tools (Cho et al., 2023) or rely on a single question (Mbebi, 2023), compromising the reliability of results (Andersen et al., 2021).

Additionally, incomplete or erroneous data can distort the phenomenon (Cho and Bae, 2024). For example, student mobility, can lead to over- or underestimation of dropout rates (Galvis-Restrepo, 2022).

Furthermore, homogenising data from different agencies (Jiménez-Gutiérrez et al., 2024) is a complex process that requires greater initial sharing of meanings (Entwisle et al., 2004).

These aspects highlight the need for accurate longitudinal data, capable of not only to follow student movements (Galvis-Restrepo, 2022) but also to gather useful information for predicting the phenomenon (Balfanz et al., 2020). Indeed, dropout is not a sudden event, but the result of a gradual process of disengagement (Haimovich et al., 2021).

In this regard, data should not be collected exclusively at the end of the school year or study cycles but should also include crucial phenomena such as absenteeism and repetition. Indeed, many studies highlight a significant correlation between these factors and dropout, considering them predictive (Cho and Bae, 2024).

Consequently, the urgency of adopting predictive tools, not just descriptive

ones, emerges, such as those offered by Educational Data Mining (EDM), defined as “the use of data mining techniques to analyse and extract hidden knowledge from the context of educational data” (Oppong, 2023).

In the context of dropout, these techniques would allow the creation of early warning systems (Sandeep et al., 2014). Such systems, based on student data and the risk variables identified in the literature, produce “risk scores” that estimate the likelihood of dropping out for each individual. Students with scores above certain thresholds are identified as at risk, enabling policymakers to undertake targeted support actions (Xu et al., 2021).

Several states in the US and Europe have already implemented early warning systems to identify at-risk students using rich administrative data (Sara et al., 2015). The goal is to maximise the identification of at-risk students while minimising false positives.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite the extensive literature, school dropout remains complex and under-explored in key aspects such as the definition of the construct and the systematic collection of data. This study highlights the need for international standardisation of criteria and indicators and for integrated and longitudinal approaches for their analysis.

In particular, the importance of predictive analysis tools, such as Educational Data Mining, emerges for the early identification of risk factors and for supporting targeted interventions. These systems, which have already been tested in some international contexts, represent a crucial opportunity to optimise the management of the phenomenon, facilitating personalised interventions and a more efficient use of educational resources.

Cooperation between educational and governmental agencies in defining and sharing of constructs and indicators seems fundamental to a more accurate and inclusive measurement of school dropout, capable of considering even less evident forms of educational difficulties. A coordinated approach based on reliable data could significantly improve the effectiveness of interventions, allowing for more informed and targeted decisions. However, the success of such policies depends on the clarity of the definitions adopted and the accuracy of the reference rates. Errors in these aspects not only risk wasting resources but can also compromise the ability of programmes to achieve their objectives. It is therefore essential to develop well-structured policies to effectively address the global challenge of school dropout.

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# REVIEW OF FACTORS UNDERLYING THE SCHOOL DROPOUT PHENOMENON IN INSTRUMENTS USED WITH STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND TEACHERS

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School dropout remains a critical challenge for global education systems, with complex causes spanning institutional, individual, and relational domains. This paper examines the predictive factors underlying school dropout and evaluates validated tools for assessing these dimensions. Drawing on the TALENTED Project, the study discusses the roles of teachers, students, and parents and highlights how interventions targeting beliefs, attitudes, and teaching practices can foster student engagement and academic success. The project proposes a selection to use validated instruments, in order to provide an experimental approach to reducing dropout in school context.

drop-out, upper secondary school; review of factors and constructs; academic insuccess; early school leaving.

## INTRODUCTION

The TALENTED project aims to assess how various teaching methods and the broader school environment influence student retention or dropout. Teaching methods include diverse instructional strategies, curriculum designs, and pedagogical approaches that can either foster student engagement or contribute to their disengagement. Additionally, the school climate—encompassing teacher-student relationships, school safety, and peer interactions—plays a critical role in shaping students' attitudes toward their education. By examining how these factors interact, the project seeks to



uncover key insights into why some students become disengaged and ultimately drop out, paving the way for the creation of more effective intervention strategies.

The research is based on Rumberger's (2011) framework, which classifies the causes of dropout into two broad categories: social and school-related phenomena. These include institutional factors (e.g., school policies, teaching practices) and individual factors (e.g., student motivation, coping strategies). Additionally, relational factors (e.g., student-teacher interactions, parental involvement) are also considered within these categories, given their critical role in shaping school dynamics.

## **1. PREDICTIVE FACTORS OF SCHOOL DROPOUT**

To identify predictive factors, the project focuses on examining how elements such as students' emotions and motivations, as well as parents' and teachers' personal beliefs and expectations, influence student engagement, academic performance, and dropout rates. Research indicates that students are more likely to engage in their education when they hold positive attitudes toward learning and believe in their ability to succeed. Likewise, parental expectations and involvement play a significant role in shaping a child's motivation and school engagement. By analyzing these beliefs and attitudes, the project aims to explore how they can be aligned with educational practices to create a more supportive learning environment, thereby reducing the risk of disengagement and dropout. Building on existing literature, we conducted an analysis of key self-report instruments to evaluate their relevance and applicability in research. This effort aimed to identify tools that investigate the influence of teaching methods, teachers' beliefs, and biases on academic failure. Additionally, it examined how students' attitudes, experiences, study strategies, motivation, and engagement impact academic success, as well as the effect of low parental expectations on educational outcomes.

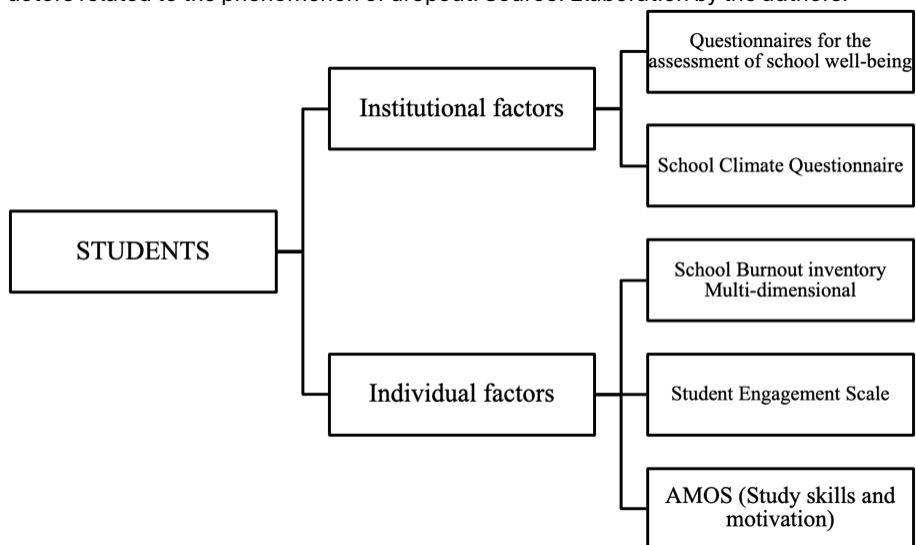
### **1.1. Students**

Individual factors contributing to school dropout include motivation, self-esteem, and academic performance, with students who lack motivation, have low self-confidence, or experience ongoing challenges being at a significantly higher risk of leaving school (Rumberger, 2011).

Institutional factors, as well as school climate and well-being, are a key construct to explore is school well-being, with a particular focus on the

student’s subjective perspective regarding the factors that shape their school experience. The analysis of these factors led to an examination of the tools presented in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. Factors related to the phenomenon of dropout. Source: Elaboration by the authors.



The *Questionnaire on School Well-Being* (QBS 8-18) (Marzocchi & Tobia, 2024) is a comprehensive tool for assessing various aspects of students’ school experiences, focusing on relationships, emotions, and self-perceptions. It includes subscales such as *Satisfaction and Recognition*, which evaluates acknowledgment and support; *Relationship with Teachers*, analyzing the quality of interactions with educators; *Relationship with Classmates*, exploring peer connections; *Emotional Engagement*, assessing students’ feelings about school; and *Sense of Self-Efficacy*, measuring beliefs about learning and cognitive abilities. Additionally, the QBS includes three items on *Causal Attribution Mechanisms*, which provide insights into how students interpret success and challenges, although they are not included in the overall School Well-Being score. The QBS includes versions for parents and teachers, allowing these stakeholders to evaluate a student’s school well-being from their unique perspectives, complementing the student version for a comprehensive understanding of the school experience.

Another important concept is *school climate* that is widely studied in literature due to its significant correlations with other critical dimensions, such as school dropout. Research highlights how a positive school climate is associated with

improved academic performance (Daily et al., 2020).

To thoroughly assess the school climate, two scales were developed: *Classroom Practices* and *School Atmosphere* (Grazia e Molinari, 2021). The first scale comprises six factors: perceptions of school rules, availability of student support resources, student involvement in decision-making, quality of teaching, teacher encouragement, and classroom management. The second scale includes five factors: student relationships, student-teacher dynamics, overall educational climate, students' sense of belonging, and perceptions of fairness within the school. Together, these scales offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the multidimensional nature of school climate and its impact on the school community.

The *Student Engagement Scale* (Mameli & Passini, 2017) is an Italian adaptation of AES, *Agentic Engagement Scale* (Reeve, 2013). This is another important tool to measure student involvement, that is defined as emotional, behavioral, cognitive and agentic as measured through distinct scales. Its structure is made of 38 items that analyses behavioral and cognitive engagement.

Burnout, widely recognized in the workplace, is also highly relevant in educational settings. Initially associated with teachers, it has recently been adapted to evaluate students' psychological well-being within a different context (Marôco et al, 2020).

The School Burnout Inventory (Fiorilli et al., 2014) is another instrument designed to measure the construct of school-related burnout. It consists of three subscales – exhaustion, cynicism, and inadequacy – which represent distinct dimensions of burnout.

The AMOS (Assessment of Study Skills and Motivation) (Cornoldi et al., 2022) is an all-encompassing tool for evaluating students' learning processes and attitudes in educational settings. It focuses on study strategies, cognitive styles, and resilience, providing insights to improve study skills and motivation. AMOS includes scales for assessing study strategies, learning approaches, cognitive styles, and abilities. Additional tools explore study practices, beliefs about studying, and assess anxiety and resilience. Together, these scales offer a comprehensive understanding of students' academic profiles, enabling educators to address their needs effectively.

## **1.2. Teachers**

*Teacher efficacy* is a key concept in educational psychology, reflecting teachers' belief in their ability to positively influence student learning. It has been defined

as teachers' confidence in their capacity to enhance learning outcomes, even for students who may be considered unmotivated or difficult. Ashton et al. (1984) described it as the belief in their ability to have a positive effect on student learning, while Guskey & Passaro (1994) emphasized it as a conviction that they can influence how well students learn, regardless of challenges.

Studies have shown that teachers with strong efficacy beliefs are linked to positive student outcomes, including higher academic achievement and improved classroom management (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Additionally, these teachers tend to foster greater student motivation and engagement in classroom activities, contributing to an overall more effective and dynamic learning environment.

Teacher efficacy is commonly evaluated using a variety of instruments, with the *Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale* (TSES) (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001) being the most widely used. Several Italian adaptations of this scale are available, including the SAED (Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale; Biasci et al., 2014) and the TEIP (Teacher Self-Efficacy for Inclusive Practice Scale; Aiello et al., 2016).

Teacher self-efficacy does not operate in isolation but is closely connected to other psychosocial factors that influence motivation and performance. These include professional aspirations, the level of recognition and respect perceived by teachers, and ultimately, their job satisfaction. A significant source of this satisfaction is teachers' sense of competence. Self-efficacy meets intrinsic psychological needs for competence, as described by Ryan & Deci (2000), and also contributes indirectly to job satisfaction by enhancing performance, which can lead to feelings of pride and tangible rewards. This interplay highlights the critical role of teacher efficacy in fostering both professional fulfillment and educational success. One of the questionnaires aimed at evaluating these various aspects is the MESI Questionnaire (Motivations, Emotions, Strategies, and Teaching), developed by Moè et al. (2010). This is a validated and widely recognized tool for analyzing teachers' motivational, emotional, and strategic profiles. It consists of six scales, totaling 130 items, and allows for an in-depth examination of dimensions such as self-efficacy, job satisfaction, incremental conceptions of abilities, and other key pedagogical aspects. This approach is grounded in empirical research showing that positive emotions and motivation, coupled with effective teaching strategies, can significantly influence the quality of instruction. In our study on school dropout, we have chosen to focus on the scales measuring self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and incremental beliefs. According to the literature, these dimensions promote more proactive teaching,

facilitate adaptation to complex situations, and, over time, can enhance students' motivation, thereby helping to reduce the risk of dropout. Employing MESI as an analytical tool is therefore strategic, enabling us to accurately outline teachers' profiles and to implement effective interventions targeting factors that contribute to early school leaving.

### **1.3. Parents**

Parental involvement plays a crucial role in children's academic success, with several tools developed to assess different aspects of this dynamic, but we did not identify any validated instruments available in Italian. International literature offers various tools that connect parental expectations to some factors influencing student outcomes. For example, these instruments assess how parental expectations relate to students' self-efficacy, self-regulation skills, study attitudes, and motivation. Some examples include scales like the *Parental Academic Expectations Scale* (PES), which examines the standards parents set for academic achievements and how these shape their children's performance (Wang & Heppner, 2002), *Parent and School Survey* (PASS), designed to measure parental involvement (Ringenberg et al., 2005). An aspect that can play a significant role in children's success is parental self-efficacy. In this regard, there is an Italian instrument that we have adopted for our research (Pastorelli & Gerbino, 2001). Our research on this type of instrument is still ongoing.

## **CONCLUSION**

The TALENTED Project highlights the importance of implementing evidence-based tools and interventions in addressing school dropouts. Future research should explore the scalability of these tools and refine strategies to adapt them to diverse educational contexts. The project aims to demonstrate how a multidimensional approach can mitigate dropout risks. Integrating tools allows for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between school climate, teacher efficacy, and student engagement. Key implications include teacher training to adopt growth mindsets and improve self-efficacy; encouraging active parental involvement through structured programs; designing interventions that prioritize emotional and cognitive student engagement.

The interrelationship between students, teacher and parents' involvement in students' educations is considered as a key point for the TALENTED project, insofar as we considered such factors as predictive for evaluating the dropout rate.

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# GAMIFICATION AS A TOOL FOR PREVENTING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING: A POSSIBLE PERSPECTIVE?

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Early school leaving is an urgent and complex problem that national and European institutions have long been trying to address (Council of the European Union, 2021; MIUR, 2014). A wide range of factors – both in and out of school – contribute to early school leaving, including household responsibilities, lack of parental guidance, large family size, poor economic conditions, failure in exams, lack of time for study, punishment by teachers, and lack of interest in studies (Baruah & Goswami, 2014). Financial resources, policies, student-teacher-parents' relationships, and academic performance also play a significant role (Orion et al., 2014). Within this framework, an interesting line of research and experimentation can be given by paying attention to teaching strategies and methodologies (Bonaiuti, 2014) that can reduce early school leaving. The present work aims to verify whether the use of gamification in education can contribute to reducing school dropout rates and is linked to broader research promoted by the PRIN project Teaching And LEARNING effectiveness to promote student achievement and prevent school Dropout (TALENTED) which aims to identify a series of didactic approaches to be applied in the school context to prevent school dropout.

gamification; early school leaving; Talented; high school; education.

## 1. EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES TO PREVENT EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Early school leaving is a complex phenomenon that affects the entire education system and encompasses different factors that cause young people to miss and irregularly attend school (Besozzi, 2017). These factors may include low academic performance, disciplinary problems, negative social orientation of



students, failures and frequent and repeated absences. Early school leaving affects all countries of the European Union and is nowadays of major importance in the international educational landscape.

The indicator used to quantify the phenomenon of school drop-out is known as ELET – Early Leaving from Education and Training, which refers to young people between 18 and 24 years of age who have left education with a secondary school degree or with a qualification of no more than 2 years of secondary school (Capperucci, 2016). Analysing ISTAT 2023 data, it is possible to note that the share of young people who have not completed education remains significant in our country (10.5%) even though the gap with the EU average has narrowed considerably over the years (from 4.7 percentage points to only 0.9). In Agenda 2030, the EU set the target of reducing the share of early school leavers to below 9% by 2030. Significant differences remain between Member States with several countries having already reached the target.

Early school leaving is an urgent and complex problem that national and European institutions have been trying to tackle for a long time (Council of the European Union, 2021; MIUR, 2014) because it leads to the increase of economic and social inequalities by counteracting the growth of countries. There are also many research actions working to curb this phenomenon; the PRIN TALENTED project “Teaching And LEarning effectiveness to promote student achievementNT prEvent school Dropout” of which the authors are part is an example. This project aims to identify several teaching approaches to be applied in the school context to prevent school dropout.

There are many studies that focus on the link between school dropout and the family and socio-economic background of the students; in contrast, there are few studies that explore the quality of classroom teaching and the use of active teaching strategies as factors that can contribute to combating school dropout (Lee & Burkam, 2003). However, we know how on the one hand active teaching strategies can influence student motivation (Schiefele, 2017) and on the other hand how quality teaching can play a crucial role in reducing the risk of dropout by improving students’ sense of belonging and satisfaction (Magen-Nagar & Shachar, 2017). A teaching approach that encourages active participation, critical thinking and the development of soft skills, such as collaboration and problem solving, proves to be crucial in maintaining high student motivation and preventing the risk of dropout.

Involvement is an important variable for students to develop meaningful and deep learning. Uninvolved students have lower evaluations (Finn & Rock, 1997)

and, longitudinal studies show that this outcome is correlated with the later decision to drop out (Alexander et al., 1997). Students who are engaged and involved, on the other hand, develop greater learning benefits (Fincham et al., 1989). It is therefore possible to assert that the less involved a student is in his or her studies, the higher the risk that he or she will drop out of school before completing his or her education. It therefore becomes important to use various active teaching methodologies (Johnson et al., 1981) in order to involve the students as much as possible.

## **2. TEACHING STRATEGIES AND PLAY**

In terms of instructional design, it is therefore appropriate to prefer strategies that promote engagement through forms of interaction. Compared to a receptive architecture, characterized by the absence of interaction and the transmissive role of the teacher, it is better to use behavioural architecture, based on the stimulus-response model, which implies forms of frequent interaction or other architectures such as situated guided discovery architecture or exploratory architecture (Clark, 2000; Calvani, 2011; Bonaiuti, 2014).

Within that context, a special space can be assigned to play. Play implies learning. The digital dimension further accentuates such a perspective: video games open new perspectives to learning (Prensky 2007) and identity construction (Gee, 2013). Games and video games, in relation to today's digital culture, allow us to experience our surroundings as a form of problem solving, as in active engagement, linked to experimentation and taking responsibility and with high emotional involvement (Jenkins 2010).

The attempt to use play as a tool for teaching is therefore shareable. However, the difference (Visalberghi, 1958) between properly *ludic* activities and *ludiform* activities, which resemble play but are conceived from the outset as a tool for learning, must be kept in mind. The transition from play/videogame to play as a teaching tool is a complex operation. And, in this sense, a multiplicity of approaches indicated by series of acronyms are proposed and used: Game-based learning (Bonaiuti, 2014), Edutainment (Buckingham, 2007), Serious games, Playful learning (Andreoletti & Tinterri 2023, p. 24), Gamification (Kapp, 2012).

### **3. GAMIFICATION AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING**

Without going further into the specifics of each approach, we focus on gamification, which has the advantage of being an extremely flexible approach. Gamification, understood as “the use of game thinking and game mechanics to engage users and solve problems” (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2001, p. XII), can be used in school settings in order to enable students to achieve specific learning outcomes.

In this sense, it is possible to distinguish between the mechanisms and strategies specific to gamification. The mechanisms are scores, levels, rankings, badges. The strategies, on the other hand, are flow, the possible alternation between physical reality, virtual reality and storytelling (Bruni & Silva, 2024). The use of gamification in teaching paths in relation to prevention turns out to have positive effects.

It emerges that by using these elements avoiding rigidly behaviourist approaches, the use of gamification in education has been shown to have a positive impact on student engagement and motivation (Colombo & Tièche Christinat, 2017; Guerrero-Puerta & Guerrero, 2021) found that gamification can improve students’ well-being and school engagement, potentially reducing the risk of dropping out of school. Similarly, Khaleel et al. (2020) found that gamification increases student engagement in difficult subjects, which could potentially lead to improved retention. Harrington & Mellors (2021) and Aleksic-Maslac et al. (2017) both highlighted the positive impact of gamification on student engagement and retention in tertiary settings, further supporting the potential of gamification to reduce school dropout. Thus, the categories of engagement, motivation, and well-being turn out to be central categories on which to focus further research activities.

### **4. MOTIVATION, ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK: SOME OPEN QUESTIONS**

From the framework examined, some research perspectives then emerge that imply a rethinking of the use of gamification not only in terms of pure effectiveness, but also in terms of enhancing the aspects that make it more functional in preventing and combating school dropout. In this sense, the aspects to focus on answer the following research questions:

- can gamification positively influence students’ motivation and thus prevent the phenomenon of dropout?
- what relationship exists between gamification and evaluation?

Regarding the first question, despite the proliferation of research on gamification in recent years, only recently have the underlying motivational mechanisms become the topic of empirical research. The two main categories of student motivation are intrinsic and extrinsic (Deci et al., 2001). The use of rankings can create competition among students and reduce their intrinsic motivation, especially when the point system is not provided as a form of feedback (Chan et al, 2018). For this reason, it is preferable to promote student motivation through specific and moderately challenging goals: when users were given a clear goal, in fact, their engagement increase compared to individuals who were told to simply do their best or who were not given an explicit goal (Lam, Hew & Chiu, 2018).

Regarding the relationships between gamification mechanisms and assessment, some commonalities emerge from the meta-analyses on the topic (Bai, Hew & Huang, 2020) that would make such an instructional strategy capable of improving student learning and positively affecting assessment, such as:

- the setting and sharing of specific goals, which helps students to direct their own activities to achieve them;
- recognition of one's effort, which can serve as a source of pride and lead the student to more active participation during classes (including through the use of badges as observable proof of their progress);
- third, gamification can provide feedback on the individual student's performance and the performance of his or her peers, helping students meet their need for competence.

The game-based formative feedback system allows students to quickly receive feedback that identified any errors in comprehension so they could correct them before moving on to the next concept (Bullón et al, 2018).

Thus, gamification can improve participation and be useful in combating school dropout by helping students in many ways, from increasing passing and participation rates to high student satisfaction (Viamonte & Figueiredo, 2019), although the latter is not in itself a guarantee of achieving higher levels of learning (Bruni & Silva, 2024).

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# PREVENTING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING: OBJECTIVES AND MILESTONES OF A NATIONAL PROJECT

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School dropout is defined as the lack of, incomplete, or irregular access to education and training services for individuals of school age (Authority for Children and Adolescents, 2022). This complex phenomenon negatively impacts the economic and productive growth of a country. Dropping out of school before completing one's studies is a key indicator that identifies individuals aged 18 to 24 who have attained at most a middle school diploma or who have interrupted their educational journey. The European Union aims to reduce the rate of early school leaving to below 9% by 2030. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) also emphasizes the need for strategies to prevent early school leaving in Italy, which has the highest rate of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) among young people. The Evidence 4 Preventing Early School Dropout (E4PED) project is a national research initiative selected under MUR-PRIN 2022 call and funded by the European Union—Next Generation EU, involving three research units from southern regions (Cagliari, Palermo, and Salerno), where school dropout is more prevalent. The project aims to provide education professionals with research evidence and effective practices to address early school leaving. Its objectives include synthesizing international evidence on the effectiveness of educational programs, analyzing the dropout phenomenon in the southern regions, and developing interventions to prevent school dropout in lower secondary schools in the South.

school dropout; early school leaving; evidence-based education; educational policy.



## **INTRODUCTION**

Evidence 4 Preventing Early School Dropout (E4PED) is a project of significant national interest (PRIN 2022, funded by the European Union—Next Generation EU). It involves three universities, specifically Cagliari, Palermo, and Salerno, in conducting research on the phenomenon of school dropout, with particular attention to the realities of Southern Italy. In line with European and Italian guidelines, the project aims to provide education professionals with a reliable source of research evidence and effective practices for addressing early school leaving. Countering school dropout, reducing territorial gaps and educational poverty are some of the main challenges that our country is committed to addressing, as outlined in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR, 2021). In particular, among the different missions indicated, the one relating to education and research defines the interventions to be implemented to support creating a sustainable and inclusive educational system.

In light of the current situation and the actions planned to stem school dropout, the PRIN 2022 project fits fully into the national scenario by developing along two lines: on the one hand, aggregating international evidence and territorial factors to provide updated documentation of reliable knowledge, on the other hand designing an intervention program, calibrated on the main contextual characteristics, to be implemented in lower secondary schools.

### **1. THE SCHOOL DROPOUT PHENOMENON**

The Authority for the Guarantee of Childhood and Adolescence defines school dropout as “the failure, incomplete or irregular use of education and training services by young people of school age” (2022, p. 20). From this statement, we can find the set of conditions attributable to the phenomenon that aggregate within it: non-schooling, definitive interruption from the education and training system (abandonment), repetition, temporary interruption of attendance, and the achievement of insufficient levels of basic skills.

The causes of dropout in primary and secondary schools are often linked to family factors, teaching methods, and the socioeconomic status of the family. In tertiary education, these causes are somewhat similar, but there are additional factors such as the student’s personal choices and the influence of the surrounding environment on their personality (Negut, 2020).

Wanting to recall the terminological change that has characterized the different historical moments, we have moved from conceiving scholastic failure as a variable dependent on socio-family factors of belonging to recognizing the

weight derived from individual factors, typical of the subject in learning and from relational factors that refer to the quality of interactions between teacher and student (Batini & Bartolucci, 2016).

In this regard, some argue that we can speak of different dimensions of dispersion or even of dispersions in the plural, given the variety of expressions and conditions through which it manifests itself. Just think of territorial location, age, and gender.

Dropping out of school, for example, goes beyond simple academic results, it is a process of disengagement on the part of the individual that develops over time and whose risk symptoms can be traced in absenteeism as well as exclusion or repetition (Lyche, 2010).

The expression *Early Leaving from Education and Training* (ELET) refers to young people who leave education and training prematurely, who do not continue their studies, or who are not enrolled in any type of training. This term does not only include early school leaving but all forms of leaving that occur before the end of secondary school. Therefore, in most national documents, early leaving “means not having completed compulsory education and not having completed upper secondary school” (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014, p. 21). This indicator, used at the international level to measure and monitor progress made about the objectives set at the European level, identifies the category of young people who, between the ages of 18 and 24, complete compulsory schooling at most or leave training prematurely.

In 2023, school dropout in Italy fell to 10.5%, a progressive decline compared to 11.5% in 2022 and 12.7% in 2021. Positive signals also arrived in front of the so-called implicit school dropout, unlike explicit school dropout, which refers to the share of children who do not reach sufficient levels in basic skills (European Commission, 2024; INVALSI, 2023; ISTAT, 2024). Over the past two decades, the adoption of evidence-based educational practices has seen significant growth. Evidence-based education aims to promote effective educational interventions through rigorous evaluations, to determine “what works and in what circumstances” (Calvani, 2012). This approach not only supports the decisions of educational policymakers but also provides valuable help to school professionals (Marzano & Calvani, 2020). According to the European Commission (2017), building a strong evidence base is crucial for enhancing educational systems. Several countries have begun initiatives to connect research, practice, and policy more effectively. Notable examples of this include the Education Endowment Foundation and the What Works

Clearinghouse. In comparison with the international landscape, Italy is falling behind other countries (Pellegrini & Vivanet, 2021).

## 2. THE PROJECT'S OBJECTIVES

Considering the premises put forward, the project intends to adopt an *evidence-based approach* to capitalize on knowledge of the phenomenon, through a current analysis of international evidence on dropout prevention programs in secondary schools.

In this frame, *Evidence 4 Preventing Early school Dropout (E4PED)* aims, in the two years 2023-2025, to:

- summarise international scientific evidence regarding the effectiveness of educational interventions aimed at curbing the problem;
- trace the phenomenon in Italy with a particular focus on the southern regions and the initiatives already present in the territory;
- develop an intervention program for lower secondary schools to be implemented in the school contexts of Southern Italy.

The project aims to conduct an updated systematic review of the effectiveness of programs designed to prevent early school leaving in secondary schools. This is necessary because there are currently no recent systematic reviews on this topic (Tanner-Smith and Wilson, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). At the international level, there are very few systematic reviews of programs designed to prevent and tackle school dropout. The most recent are the meta-analyses by Wilson et al. (2011) and Tanner-Smith and Wilson (2013), which include studies from 1985 to 2010. In addition to evaluating program effectiveness, the review will also analyze potential predictors and moderators that may influence the outcomes.

The European Commission (2019) emphasized that identifying predictors of early school leaving can aid in developing and implementing a monitoring framework. This framework, along with associated tools, can help schools recognize the risk of school leaving early on, allowing them to provide timely and effective support programs. Although numerous projects have been implemented in our country in recent years (mainly fragmented experiences or good practices, lacking a systematic evaluation of their impact), a common synthesis of international and national scientific knowledge and data is lacking.

Multidisciplinary research has shown that dropping out of school is a serious manifestation of academic distress, often evident through various predictors. Existing literature (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Hammond et al., 2007;

Rumberger & Lim, 2008) highlights several key factors associated with this problem: 1) family factors, the economic and cultural circumstances of a student's family play a critical role; 2) school factors, aspects such as the quality of teaching, relationships with teachers and the general school environment can significantly influence students' decisions to continue their studies; 3) personal factors, issues related to self-esteem, motivation and learning difficulties can lead students to drop out of school; 4) social factors, the socioeconomic and cultural context of the area in which a student lives can have a profound impact on their academic performance. The context analysis aims to provide a synthesis framework on the main factors that lead to early school leaving starting from the documentation of national and regional policies, from the best practices implemented, and through a concurrent triangulation design (Creswell et al., 2003) the main social actors will be involved. The information obtained will allow the design of a calibrated intervention program. To this end, the project will act as a reliable source of evidence by synthesizing the best international research with an analysis of the Italian context. This will support contextualizing evidence-based strategies and programs in Italian secondary education.

### **3. THE BREAKDOWN STRUCTURE**

The three objectives outlined are organized into six Work Packages (WP). Each WP contains a series of activities to be carried out. Leaving aside WP 1 (coordination) and WP6 (dissemination), a summary of the others is presented as follows. Starting from the conduct of a systematic review on interventions to counteract early school leaving through a meta-multilevel analysis on the effectiveness of early school leaving prevention programs based on experimental data (effect sizes and moderator analysis). Subsequently, based on qualitative data, a framework of the effective characteristics of the programs will be outlined (WP2).

Analysis of policies to combat school dropout adopted at national and regional levels, with particular attention to the Southern regions. In this sense, the adopted strategy will include the investigation of school websites, regional school office databases (USR), the National Operational Program database (PON), as well as Google and Google Scholar sources. Context analysis, through the construction and administration of questionnaires addressed to the main social actors, i.e. students, teachers, and young NEETs (WP3).

The information obtained will be used to define a program for teachers at lower

secondary schools (WP4). We will use the Educational Design Research approach (EDR, McKenney & Reeves, 2014) to develop our intervention. This activity includes the design and development of materials for students and school professionals. The materials and tools will be based on international evidence and the results of the context analysis. Subsequently, quality control will be activated. Academic and school experts in the field of early school leaving will analyze and verify the quality of the program through systematic tools designed by the WP coordination unit. According to the final phase of the EDR, the program will be reviewed by the multidisciplinary team after data has been collected and analyzed during the testing phase (WP5).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Knowing to prevent and contrast is certainly the main line of direction that the presented project intends to pursue. The objectives, defined and detailed in specific activity packages, aim to increase the knowledge base on school dropout, paying particular attention to the regions of Southern Italy. In this sense, it contributes to updating the existing literature by providing a systematic review examining the effectiveness of programs designed to reduce school dropout rates, to provide a summary framework on international evidence and the characteristics of the Italian school reality. Subsequently, it will be possible to design, implement, and evaluate an intervention program, built ad hoc, also considering the contextual variability, and to be allocated to lower secondary schools. These actions will converge in a single purpose: to formulate guidelines to be addressed to professionals and policymakers, including a monitoring structure to be reserved for school institutions.

### **Acknowledgments.**

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# SUPPORTING STUDENTS' MOTIVATION: A KEY FACTOR TO REDUCE INTENTIONS TO DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL

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This study examines school dropout through Self-Determination Theory (SDT), focusing on the role of teaching style. According to SDT, teachers' behaviors are crucial in supporting or thwarting students' basic psychological needs, which significantly impact their motivation and persistence in education. Using a cross-sectional quantitative approach, the study involved 1,092 high school students who completed measures assessing need-supportive and need-thwarting teaching, intrinsic motivation, and dropout intentions. Results show a significant association between teaching style and intrinsic motivation, which significantly reduces dropout intentions, even as a mediator. Findings suggest the importance of teacher training programs focusing on motivational strategies to improve their practices, as fostering a supportive teaching environment can promote better learning outcomes for students.

school drop out; self-determination theory; students' motivation; teaching style

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, policymakers have increasingly recognized school dropout as a critical issue in many education systems. The phenomenon of school dropout encompasses not only students who formally leave their studies without obtaining a diploma but also “implicit dropout” which refers to the failure to achieve expected competencies and learning outcomes despite completing secondary school. Addressing the impact of dropout and inadequate basic skills remains a persistent challenge for education and training systems, with profound implications for society, the economy, and individual well-being (UNESCO/OECD/Commonwealth, 2024). At the European level, the goal is to reduce the school dropout rate to below 9% by 2030. The Italian average dropout



rate is still 10.5% (ISTAT, 2024), highlighting a significant gap compared to the European benchmark. These figures highlight the urgent need to better understand the factors behind school dropout. Identifying its causes can help prevent risks and promote protective factors, supporting targeted strategies to prevent early school leaving, boost engagement, and bridge the gap between expected and achieved competencies. The question of why some students choose to drop out has been explored from various perspectives. The complexity stems from the intricate interplay of contextual factors, such as socioeconomic status or school functioning, and individual characteristics, including self-efficacy, self-esteem, engagement, and motivation (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Batini, 2023). Recognizing the need for practical and effective strategies to prevent dropout, it becomes crucial to focus on “malleable factors”. Among these, students’ motivation emerges as a pivotal element and a key area for intervention. Building on this understanding, it is essential to examine school dropout from a motivational perspective. One of the most widely used theoretical frameworks for understanding school dropout in motivational terms is Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The present study, grounded in the SDT framework, investigates dropout intentions in relation to students’ motivation and one of the contextual factors that, according to this theory, serves as a primary source of support or barrier to their motivation: teachers’ motivational behaviors.

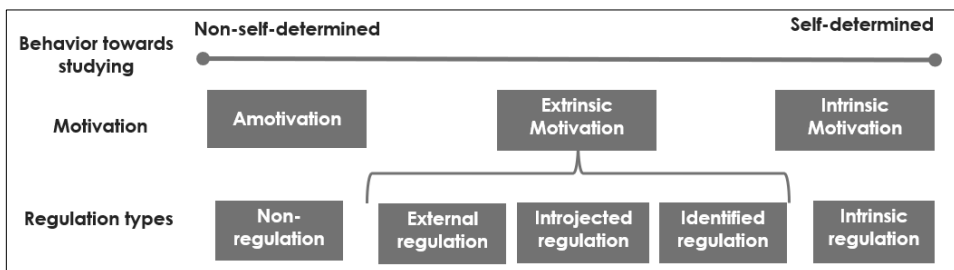
## **1. THE SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT**

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) is a macro-theory that explores motivation, personality development, and well-being, focusing on social and cultural contexts that influence self-determination in behavior. A central aspect of the theory is the existence of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, considered essential for personal growth and well-being (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). The fulfilment of these needs enables the process of *internalization*, through which individuals regulate their behavior autonomously, perceiving themselves as free and in control of their actions. In the school context, SDT focuses on fostering students’ interest in learning through the self-regulation of motivation. Students consistently seek to satisfy their basic psychological needs, which in the school context refer to a sense of autonomy in school activities, a sense of belonging and connection with teachers and classmates (relatedness), and the perception of effectiveness in their studies (competence). Satisfying these needs supports the internalization of motivation toward activities that are initially regulated by

external factors.

SDT distinguishes different types of motivation along a *continuum* (Fig. 1), from amotivation (lack of intention) to intrinsic motivation (pleasure and satisfaction derived from the activity itself). Between these extremes lie various forms of extrinsic motivation, differing in their degree of self-regulation: from external regulation (driven by rewards or punishments) to introjected regulation (based on self-esteem and guilt), to identified regulation, where the student assigns personal value in school activities (Guay, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Intrinsic motivation is considered the prototype of self-determination, closely linked to engagement, academic success and well-being. National and international studies emphasize the importance of learning environments that support students' self-determination, fostering not only better educational outcomes but also greater satisfaction, engagement in learning, and reduced school dropout rates (e.g., Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Bureau et al., 2022; Howard et al., 2021).

Fig. 1. Self-Determination Continuum. Figure created by the author.



According to SDT, in students' learning environments, the most critical factor for satisfying their basic psychological needs and fostering the process of self-determination is the way teachers interact with them. What teachers "do" and "say" during lessons to engage students in learning activities can be described as their *(de)motivating style* (Reeve et al., 2022), which varies depending on whether it supports or thwarts students' needs. Need-Supportive Teaching involves teachers actively listening to students' ideas, respecting their choices, providing constructive feedback, understanding their perspectives, and regularly checking on their well-being. Need-Thwarting Teaching includes behaviors such as issuing authoritative orders, interrupting students, making negative comparisons, offering public criticism, or using unkind language. Adopting a Need-Supportive Teaching approach can significantly promote a positive and sustainable learning environment. Conversely, avoiding Need-

Thwarting Teaching behaviors is crucial to ensure students' educational journeys are not negatively impacted (Ahmadi et al., 2023; Howard, Slempp & Wang, 2024; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). For these reasons, understanding how different teaching styles influence students' autonomous motivation is crucial for acquiring deeper insights into how they develop and persist in their educational journey.

## 2. THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study is part of a broader longitudinal research conducted in several secondary schools in Rome (Germani, 2023). The general aim of the research was to evaluate how students perceive their teachers' *(de)motivating styles* and how these perceptions affect their psychological needs over time within the school context. The specific aim of the present study was to investigate the relationships between need-supportive and need-thwarting teaching, students' intrinsic motivation, and their intention to drop out. This is a cross-sectional quantitative analysis involving a convenience sample of 1,092 students (mean age = 15.70 years; 60.80% male; 39.20% female) from a high school. Students participated by completing a digital questionnaire distributed through the *Qualtrics* platform during school hours.

### 2.1. Measures

The questionnaire administered to the students included, in addition to questions related to sociodemographic aspects, the following scales:

- *Need-Supportive Teaching and Need-Thwarting Teaching*: these constructs were measured using a previously validated scale (Germani, 2023) based on teachers' motivational behaviors (Ahmadi et al., 2023). The scale evaluates the extent to which students perceive their teachers' interpersonal behaviors as either supportive of or obstructive to their psychological needs. The scale consists of two dimensions: *Need-Supportive Teaching* (Example item: "They try to understand my point of view"), and *Need-Thwarting Teaching* (Example item: "They interrupt me while I am speaking"). It includes a total of 18 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = very often). Students were asked to indicate how frequently the behaviors described in the statements occurred.
- *Intrinsic Motivation*: this construct was measured using the *intrinsic regulation* subscale of the Italian version of the Academic Motivation

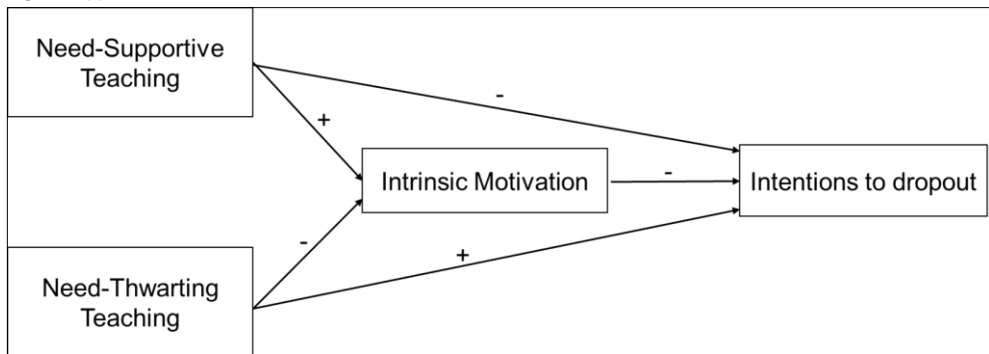
Scale (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2008). The subscale consists of 4 items (example item: “Because school allows me to continue studying topics that interest me”) rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 4 = very much). Students were asked to evaluate the extent to which each of the listed reasons for attending school corresponded to their personal motivations.

- *Intentions to Dropout*: this construct was measured using 3 items designed to assess students’ intentions to persist in attending school rather than dropping out (example item: “I sometimes consider dropping out of school”) (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

## 2.2. Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was carried out using a Path Analysis, assuming (as shown in the hypothesized model in Figure 2) that Need-Supportive Teaching increases intrinsic motivation and is also negatively and directly associated with fewer dropout intentions. Conversely, the model assumed that Need-Thwarting Teaching decreases intrinsic motivation and directly increases dropout intentions. Additionally, the direct association between intrinsic motivation and intentions to drop out was tested.

Fig. 2. Hypothesized model



Following the SDT framework, which posits that motivation can mediate the relationship between context and various outcomes, the model also examined the indirect effects of teaching style (supportive/thwarting) on dropout intentions as mediated by intrinsic motivation.

Descriptive and reliability analyses were conducted as the initial step. The

analytical model was estimated using the Maximum Likelihood method, with a significance level of  $p. < 0.05$ .

**2.3. Results**

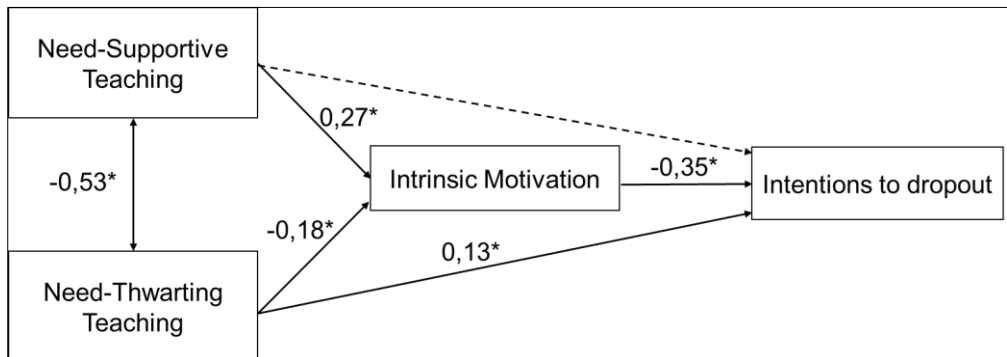
The descriptive and reliability statistics are presented in Table 1, including the mean, standard deviation (SD), and Cronbach’s alpha ( $\alpha$ ) for each construct.

The model (Fig. 3) shows standardized ( $\beta$ ) coefficients, and as we can see, all direct paths are significant except for the one between Need-Supportive Teaching and Intentions to Dropout.

Tab. 1. Descriptive and reliability statistics

Scale/dimension	Mean	SD	$\alpha$
Need-Supportive Teaching	2,37	0,65	0,83
Need-Thwarting teaching	2,34	0,72	0,85
Intrinsic motivation	2,67	0,68	0,83
Intentions to dropout	1,75	0,86	0,86

Fig. 3. Direct paths. The dotted line indicates a non-statistically significant result.  $*p < 0.001$ .



Notably, while Need-Supportive Teaching does not show a significant direct association with dropout intentions, Need-Thwarting Teaching is directly and positively associated with dropout intentions. Additionally, intrinsic motivation is positively influenced by Need-Supportive Teaching and negatively impacted by Need-Thwarting Teaching. Intrinsic motivation also shows a direct and negative relationship with dropout intentions, meaning that students who are more intrinsically motivated have a lower chance or reduced tendency to

develop intentions to drop out of school. Regarding the indirect effects, results indicate that both Need-Supportive and Need-Thwarting Teaching styles indirectly influence dropout intentions through intrinsic motivation:

- Need-Supportive Teaching → Intrinsic Motivation → Intentions to dropout:  $\beta = -0,10$  ( $p < 0,001$ ).
- Need-Thwarting Teaching → Intrinsic Motivation → Intentions to dropout:  $\beta = -0,06$  ( $p < 0,001$ ).

### 3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present paper addressed the critical issue of school dropout using the framework of Self-Determination Theory to understand the role of teachers in preventing this phenomenon. A key aspect is what teachers do and say to engage students in their learning. Therefore, the teaching style, which can be either motivating or demotivating, plays a central role.

Results showed that the teaching style adopted by teachers in the classroom is significantly associated with the interest and enjoyment students exhibit toward school and academic activities. Need-Supportive Teaching plays an important role, especially in fostering intrinsic motivation, which, as observed, contributes to reducing dropout intentions, even when it acts as a mediating factor. Building on the findings, this paper offers some practical and pedagogical insights to address school dropout. By emphasizing the role of teachers' behaviors in supporting or hindering students' intrinsic motivation, the results suggest several potential areas for intervention. For instance, teacher training programs focusing on motivational strategies could not only enhance teachers' ability to support students' psychological needs but also reduce need-thwarting behaviors (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Additionally, implementing systems for student feedback could help teachers adjust their methods in response to students' perceptions. By addressing these areas, educational institutions can foster a more supportive and effective teaching environment, reducing dropout intentions and enhancing students' learning success.

However, this study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. The research relied on a convenience sample, focusing on students from a general high school, whereas dropout rates are typically higher in vocational schools. Furthermore, only intrinsic motivation was examined, excluding other types of motivation that might have different impacts (Bureau et al., 2022; Howard et al., 2021). Moreover, future research should take a more comprehensive approach, exploring the combined roles of teachers, parents, and classmates in fulfilling

students' needs and motivation, to increase a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to students' overall school success.

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# AN INVESTIGATION ABOUT THE RISK FACTORS OF SCHOOL DROPOUT IN CAMPANIA

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This study delves into the determinants of school dropout in Campania. According to the literature (Trincherò and Tordini, 2011; Batini and Bartolucci, 2016; Nuzzaci and Marcozzi, 2019; Rumberger, 2011; Lundetræ, 2011; Nakajima et al., 2018), there are many risk factors for school dropout. They can be traced back to individual, family, socioeconomic and institutional dimensions. As part of a PhD at the University of Salerno, an empirical investigation was conducted. It involved a sample of students, teachers and school managers from Campania schools where dropout rates are high. A mixed methodology was adopted (Creswell and Clark, 2011). It combines quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The former were collected through semi-structured questionnaires, adapted from validated tools (Batini and Bartolucci, 2016). Qualitative data were collected through interviews and focus groups. The final objective of the research is the design of targeted prevention interventions. The preliminary results of the descriptive analysis of the quantitative data highlight a significant divergence of perceptions between the actors involved. Students place greater responsibility on factors outside their control. While teachers and school leaders focus on the socioeconomic and family context of students.

descriptive analysis; school dropout; risk factors; prevention.

## INTRODUCTION

School dropout is a complex phenomenon. It can be confused with others. This makes its definition difficult. The need to define school dropout in a precise and unambiguous manner is not only linked to a terminological issue, but to the

resulting difficulty in measuring the phenomenon. Indeed, official reports focus on formal abandonments. But, in this case, school dropout is compressed into a more restricted phenomenon.

Specifically, the construct of school dropout recalls the following aspects (Batini and Scierri, 2019): formalized dropouts that occurred before completing compulsory schooling or obtaining a diploma/qualification; irregular frequencies; not frequencies; evasion of obligation; repetitions; attendance and achievement of the qualification without having produced any learning.

The statistical data, however, refer only to formalized school dropouts. They are measured above all ex-post through the comparison between the percentage of qualifications obtained and those not obtained (Batini and Scierri, 2019; Miur, 2021).

According to an international study (Rumberger, 2011), school dropout is caused by a mix of individual, sociocultural and school factors. The individual factors are: attitudes, absenteeism, low learning results; problematic behaviors at school; the failures; changes of residence and school. Contextual factors are: aspects relating to the family context (e.g. educational style and parental support); aspects relating to the social context (e.g. sociocultural characteristics of the place where one lives); aspects relating to the school context (for example, composition of the school population, resources and school climate). Similarly, according to a national study (Nuzzaci and Marcozzi, 2019), the risk factors for school dropout are of three types: push-out factors (e.g. difficult relationships with teachers, failures and uninvolved teaching methods); pull factors -out (e.g. the desire to undertake a career path); falling-out factors (e.g. the feeling of inadequacy, discomfort at school and learning difficulties). they evolve, interact and reinforce each other. In detail, they can be traced back to the context of origin, the school context and the individual characteristics of young people (Solomon, 1989; Batini and Bartolucci, 2016; Batini et al., 2018; Batini, 2023).

## **1. THE DESIGN OF A RESEARCH ON SCHOOL DROPOUT IN CAMPANIA**

Based on the theoretical framework, the general objective of the research is the analysis of the dynamics and determining factors of school dropout, to identify effective prevention and combating strategies. The specific objectives are:

- identification of the determining factors of school dropout;
- collection of opinions on the phenomenon of school dropout and proposals for improvement from pupils, teachers and school managers

- of schools at risk in Campania;
- promotion of the prevention of school dropout.

To operationalize the objectives, hypotheses and research questions were explained. More precisely, the questions posed are the following: which schools are most exposed to school dropout? What are the main reasons that push young people at risk in Campania to disperse? For them, what prevention interventions can be useful?

These are some of the questions that moved the work and guided the formulation of the hypotheses. On the basis of the literature (Benvenuto and Sposetti, 2005; Batini and Bartolucci, 2016; Dell'Anna and Ianes, 2021), it is hypothesized: to find motivations linked to the economic and educational poverty of the social context to which one belongs; to detect motivations linked to the methodological, didactic, evaluative and organizational aspects of training processes aimed at young people; to encourage the reduction of the phenomenon by raising the awareness of stakeholders (pupils, teachers). The research sample was selected using non-probability reasoned choice sampling. It includes schools in Campania at high risk of dropping out. These schools were identified based on the data on school dropout reported in the Self-Assessment Reports (RAV) for the 2021-2022 school year. This type of sampling made it possible to involve a sample of students, teachers and school managers, capable of providing an in-depth and detailed perspective on the phenomenon. Students in the last year of 4 middle schools in the province of Naples and in the two-year period of 102 high schools distributed across the five provinces of Campania were involved. It should be noted that sampling became voluntary when some schools refused the request to participate in the research.

To answer the research questions, a mixed empirical methodology was adopted (Creswell and Clark, 2011). In fact, the research develops in two main phases. Initially, two semi-structured questionnaires were administered, previously validated by Batini and Bartolucci (2016), and adapted to the specific context of this research. The Orienta DropOut questionnaire was addressed to students to collect data on their sociocultural background and perceptions relating to the school experience. At the same time, the Orienta Dropout questionnaire: cognitive survey on school dropout was administered to school managers and teachers to delve deeper into the teaching practices adopted and the dropout prevention strategies implemented.

Afterwards, a case study was carried out in a secondary school which, among

those sampled, agreed to participate in this phase of the research.

In line with the research model proposed by Stenhouse (1985), the present study was divided into several phases. Firstly, we selected the Campania schools with a high rate of school dropout.

Subsequently, we collected the data in various ways: documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews with the school director and a group of teachers; focus group with a group of students; participant observation in a class of the selected school.

The quantitative data was subjected to descriptive analysis and the qualitative data to thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). The integration of the outcomes will allow the development of a multidimensional explanatory model of the phenomenon, capable of capturing the complexities and interconnections between the different intervening factors. Based on the results of this research, a personalized and contextualized prevention and support intervention will be designed. It will make it possible to reduce school dropout in the school that participated in the case study (Graganiello, 2024).

## **2. THE PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS**

The administration of the two questionnaires began in April 2023 and ended in May 2024. The extended administration times are due to the difficulties encountered in establishing contact with schools and obtaining their consent to participate in the research.

Regarding the sample of students, 1097 responded to the questionnaire. The sample is made up of 59.3% males, 39.4% females and 1.3% students who did not specify their gender. The age of the students varies between 13 and 19 years old, with a greater concentration in the 14-15 year old range. This data is consistent with the school years involved. 92.2% of students attend secondary school, of which 94.9% in the province of Naples. This data is confirmed by the sampling of schools located mainly in the province of Naples, where the phenomenon is most alarming.

As regards the educational level of the parents, 42.6% of the fathers obtained a lower secondary school diploma as the highest qualification, 9.2% a three-year professional qualification, 28% a diploma of secondary school, 12.9% have a degree. A residual portion has not completed primary school or obtained a master's degree; while less than 1% have obtained a PhD. Somewhat similar data are recorded for mothers. Furthermore, 93.9% of fathers are employed. While 54.8% of mothers are employed, while 45.2% are not.

From the descriptive analysis of some of the data collected through the questionnaire addressed to the students, we can see, in general, a widespread opinion among young people regarding the crucial role of the teaching methodologies adopted by teachers in determining the risk of dropping out of school. 75.2% of students consider practice as a fundamental complement to theory for effective learning. However, only 39.6% declare that they have experienced a teaching approach that adequately integrates theory and practice. This significant gap suggests that teaching is still focused on frontal lessons and the notional transmission of concepts, rather than encouraging experiential and active learning.

The data is confirmed by their proposals to combat school dropout. A strong consensus emerges on the importance of introducing teaching activities that foster creativity: 60.5% of students “very much agree” and 33.6% “fairly agree” with this proposal. Furthermore, 73.3% of students agree that the design of teaching activities should be based on the cognitive matrix, interests and personal history of the students (Robinson, 2015).

Tab. 1. Item 18 – “In your opinion, how much do the following reasons affect school dropout?”

		Steps likert scale					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Individual factors</b>							
1.	Deviant behaviors	10,6%	13%	19,9%	22,7%	19,9%	13,9%
2.	Lack of motivation to study	1,8%	7,4%	13,9%	14,3%	33,3%	29,3%
3.	Repetitions	14,3%	17,1%	26,8%	15,5%	15,7%	10,6%
4.	Absenteeism	7,9%	10,6%	17,1%	19,9%	21,8%	22,7%
5.	Unfair assessments	28,2%	26,4%	20,8%	12,5%	7,5%	4,6%
6.	Inability to ask oneself “what I will do when I grow up”	5,5%	17,6%	22,2%	14%	18,5%	22,2%
<b>School factors</b>							
1.	Conflicting relationships with teachers	18,7%	15,5%	22,8%	20,1%	15,8%	7,1%
2.	Non-engaging teaching	15,3%	18,5%	18,9%	14%	22,7%	10,6%
3.	Bad peer relationships	13,4%	16,6%	21,3%	21,8%	18%	8,9%
4.	Absence of decision-making spaces	19%	26,4%	18,5%	16,2%	12,5%	7,4%
5.	Teaching centered on frontal lessons	16,7%	26,4%	18%	10,7%	15,7%	12,5%
6.	Not sharing learning objectives with students	25,9%	22,7%	19,5%	12%	13,4%	6,5%
7.	Absence of network work between school-family-territory	6,5%	8,3%	17,6%	20,4%	21,7%	25,5%
8.	Inadequacy of orientation activities	15,7%	21,9%	19%	18,5%	14,3%	10,6%
<b>Socio-economic and family factors</b>							
1.	Economic poverty	11,1%	14,4%	13,4%	23,7%	24%	13,4%
2.	Educational poverty	5%	8,9%	16,2%	13,9%	29,2%	26,8%

Regarding the sample of teachers and school managers involved, 262 responded to the questionnaire. 24.1% were male, 75.9% female. While the third option did not find any responders. The majority are in the age groups between 40 and 59. Specifically, 30% are concentrated in the 40-49 year age group, while 38.8% are positioned in the 50-59 year age group. The 30-39 and over 60 age groups account for 13.8% and 17.4% of participants respectively. No presence was recorded in the 20-29 age group. The distribution of years of service shows a relatively homogeneous distribution between the bands considered. 53.7% had observed the phenomenon of school dropout with average frequency during their work experience. Only 6% had observed it with very low frequency, while no one denied ever having experienced it. Like what was observed for the students, many teachers and school managers work in secondary schools in the province of Naples.

Item 18 of the questionnaire aimed at teachers and school managers uses a six-step Likert scale to evaluate their perception of the influence of each risk factor on school dropout: a score of 1 indicates the minimum influence, 6 the maximum. Among the individual, socio-economic and family factors, the respondents identified the following as most affected: deviant behaviors of young people (56.5%); poor motivation (76.9%); absenteeism (63.5%); economic poverty (61.1%); educational poverty of families (69.9%). In contrast, school factors were perceived as less influential: dysfunctional teacher-student relationships (57%); uninvolved teaching (52.7%); use of face-to-face lessons only (61.1%); disorganization of orientation activities (56.6%) (Tab. 1).

They recognized the importance of intervening on some scholastic aspects for the prevention of school dropout. Among these: innovative teaching methodological choices (89%); planning of personalized training courses based on students' interests and needs (81.2%) (Tab. 2).

Tab. 2. Item 4 – “In your opinion, how effective could the following actions to combat school dropout be?”

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Promote inclusive teaching based on active methodologies	3,7%	2,3%	5%	25,5%	36,6%	26,9%
2.	Know the personal and family history of each student	1,9%	5,6%	2,7%	26,9%	32,4%	30,5%
3.	Reduce the acquisition of knowledge in favor of the development of skills	6,5%	11,6%	17,6%	19,9%	27,3%	17,1%
4.	Encourage the contribution of each student’s personal experience	3,2%	3,7%	8%	25,9%	30,5%	28,7%
5.	Plan teaching activities based on students’ interests	5%	5,5%	8,3%	23,2%	31,5%	26,5%

## CONCLUSIONS

The study found significant dissonance in perceptions of factors contributing to school dropout among students, teachers and school leaders. Students attribute responsibility for dropping out to factors outside their control. On the contrary, teachers and school managers place emphasis on factors linked to the socio-economic and family context of students.

This divergence is supported by research (Batini and Bartolucci, 2016; Szabò, 2018). Regarding the perceived role of innovative teaching methodologies, students express a desire for active and personalized learning, highlighting a discrepancy between their expectations and the actual experience in the classroom. This result aligns with the conclusions of Batini and Bartolucci (2016), who underline the importance of teaching that can motivate and involve students.

Considering these results, the importance of promoting close collaboration between school, family and territory is confirmed. The construction of solid and lasting relationships represents a condition for the development of personalized and integrated interventions, capable of responding to the specific needs of each student. Strengthening the education system is essential and requires a multidimensional approach capable of investing in various crucial areas. First, it is essential to promote the continuous training of teachers, to guarantee the constant updating of their teaching skills and the ability to personalize learning. Secondly, to strengthen the involvement of families in the educational process. Thirdly, to develop collaborative networks between the school and local institutions (Asquini, 2018).

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# PEER FEEDBACK AS A LEVER FOR ENHANCING READING COMPREHENSION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: AN EVIDENCE-BASED EXPERIENCE

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The scientific debate linked to the topic of student participation in assessment processes has contributed, over the years, to the definition of the construct of “assessment for learning” (Assessment Reform Group, 1999) as an evolution of the concept of “formative assessment”. According to the literature, placing students at the center of the evaluation moment responds to the dual purpose of making them more aware of the learning objects and, at the same time, of building their own evaluation literacy. In this scenario, research has highlighted the key role of feedback in learning processes (Black & William, 1998), considering it particularly effective (Dann, 2018; Parkin et al., 2012) to encourage the development of metacognitive skills and of self-regulation. Its effectiveness appears to increase when it is provided by peers. As noted by Hung (2018), however, experiments related to the topic of peer evaluation are still few in schools, compared to what has been carried out in academic settings. Considering these premises, this contribution intends to investigate what effects the use of peer feedback produces on the quality of primary and secondary school students’ work and how it influences their critical evaluation skills.

peer feedback; assessment; literacy assessment

## INTRODUCTION

The ability of each person to direct their own choices represents, in today’s complex society, a crucial element for building a personal growth path. In this regard, education appears to be a valuable and indispensable means to foster the development of skills that allow the individual to self-orientate and take

control of his choices and his life in its different phases (Batini, 2015). The role played by the formal education system is decisive. A coherent design for the development of these skills requires a teaching posture that allows the construction of learning environments that promote and support reflective and transformative processes (Grange & Patera, 2021). School comes to be understood as a privileged place in which pupils can cultivate the dimensions of the person, of the citizen and of the future worker. For this to happen it is necessary to overcome the vision that separates evaluation from teaching, relegating it exclusively to its function of verifying results, to assume the perspectives of assessment for learning and assessment as learning that constitute evolutions of the broader concept of formative evaluation (Scriven, 1967). The latter, understood as a continuous process that accompanies the entire teaching process, making continuous feedback available on learning processes and products, plays a strategic role in the progressive development of students' self-assessment and metacognitive regulation skills, which play a significant role throughout their lives. In the light of these premises, this paper aims to better define the possibility of implementing the practice of peer feedback in primary school, highlighting its potential, according to what emerged from the experience conducted in some third classes in the Campania region. From a lifelong learning perspective, the objective is also to illustrate the possible ways to introduce this teaching strategy in upper secondary school to contribute to the development of critical skills.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Peer feedback (PF) is grounded in well-established theories of social constructivism and collaborative learning, which emphasize the social nature of learning and the value of peer interaction in cognitive development. In this theoretical framework, Vygotsky's theory (1934), with the fundamental concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), emphasizes that students learn best when they can engage in tasks that stretch beyond their current abilities, also with the support of more knowledgeable peers. Within this framework, PF fits in as a practice that not only helps students internalize added information but also enables them to take ownership of their learning process. By giving and receiving feedback, students receive the scaffolding they need to reach higher levels of understanding and skill. Research by Johnson and Johnson (1999) supports this idea by showing that cooperative learning environments enhance both social and cognitive competencies. Through structured PF sessions, students learn to provide constructive criticism and build a sense of mutual

respect and accountability, which enriches the classroom environment. This collaborative process fosters essential social skills, such as empathy and open-mindedness, which contribute to a positive classroom climate where students feel supported and engaged. PF also aligns with theories of metacognition, as it encourages students to actively reflect on their learning strategies, set goals, and self-regulate. Flavell (1979) introduced the concept of metacognition, highlighting its central role in effective learning. PF encourages students to engage in metacognitive activities by prompting them to think critically about their peers' work and their own. This reflective process allows students to develop awareness of their cognitive processes, strengthening their capacity for self-assessment and adaptation. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that involving students in feedback cycles supports a deeper understanding of the material and helps develop "evaluative literacy," the ability to critically analyse and assess one's own and others' work. When students participate in PF, they are not only gaining feedback but are also actively contributing to a communal learning experience, where they learn to view mistakes as growth opportunities rather than setbacks. This social-constructivist view positions PF as more than a teaching strategy: it must be seen to foster an inclusive, student-centred environment that values collaborative growth; it becomes a form of shared knowledge construction, where learning occurs through active engagement and dialogue. PF thus facilitates learning as a dynamic, interactive process where students build a more comprehensive understanding of academic content while also developing essential communication and critical thinking skills. According to Topping's research (1998), PF fosters a culture of continuous improvement, where students benefit from mutual feedback cycles that refine their work and broaden their understanding through regular, structured reflection. This process is especially valuable in supporting the development of lifelong learning skills, as it empowers students to become proactive, self-directed learners capable of critical reflection and adaptability. Through the combined influences of social constructivism, cooperative learning and metacognitive theory, PF emerges as a multidimensional strategy that supports students in building not only academic skills but also the social and cognitive tools necessary for meaningful engagement with complex tasks. This framework provides a solid foundation for exploring PF's broader applications in secondary education, where students' critical thinking and evaluative abilities can be further cultivated and applied across different learning contexts.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The “Peer Feedback – Reading Comprehension – Reciprocal Teaching” (PF-RC-RT) program was introduced to third-grade classes in the Campania region during the 2023/2024 academic year. This modified version of Reciprocal Teaching (RT) incorporated PF sessions to enhance students’ reading comprehension and encourage evaluative skills. The study involved 25 teachers and about 700 students, who were divided into a control group (CG) and an experimental group (EG). The research was divided into four phases:

- Preliminary assessment and teacher training: teachers from EG received specialized training on PF strategies. They were provided with tools to guide students in offering constructive and effective feedback. This step was crucial for ensuring effective PF implementation.
- Intervention through Reciprocal Teaching with PF: both groups engaged in Reciprocal Teaching activities, a structured reading approach designed to improve comprehension. However, in EG, PF sessions were integrated. Students were organized in pairs, anonymously exchanging summaries and offering constructive feedback. This exercise encouraged students to reflect on their own understanding while critically engaging with their peers’ work.
- Structured feedback and revision process: students in the experimental group conducted peer evaluations based on clear, structured guidelines. After receiving feedback, each student pair reviewed and revised their summaries accordingly. This iterative process allowed students to refine their understanding and practice applying feedback constructively.
- Evaluation and reflection through post-tests and questionnaires: to assess comprehension gains, both groups completed post-tests like initial assessments. Open-ended questions gathered qualitative insights on students’ experiences, exploring the perceived benefits and challenges of providing and receiving feedback. Teachers also provided feedback, noting how PF impacted classroom dynamics and student engagement.

## **3. INITIAL RESULTS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS OF THE PF PROGRAM**

The initial results reveal that PF activities have had a positive impact on reading comprehension and metacognitive awareness among primary students. Students shared that engaging in peer feedback helped clarify their thoughts,

improved the quality of their work, and boosted their confidence in self-assessment. Teachers also observed that PF sessions fostered a supportive classroom environment, enhancing student engagement and mutual respect among peers. The feedback process proved effective in promoting a collaborative approach to learning, where students came to view assessment as a shared effort rather than a solitary task. They noted that both receiving and providing feedback enabled them to identify strengths and areas needing improvement, making learning more meaningful and deepening their comprehension through this iterative cycle. PF also encouraged students to develop metacognitive skills and think critically about their learning. By assessing each other's work, students learned to self-assess and regulate their own learning processes, a critical element for lifelong educational success. Many students said that giving feedback to others reinforced their own understanding as much as receiving feedback did. Teachers, for their part, observed a generally positive change in classroom dynamics, with many students demonstrating greater motivation and a greater sense of awareness of their own learning. Although PF activities were beneficial overall, teachers noted that some students needed additional support to provide constructive and high-quality feedback. This highlighted the importance of structured guidelines and the need to implement these practices continuously to ensure the effectiveness of PF sessions.

The success of peer feedback (PF) in primary education presents an opportunity to extend its practice into secondary education, where students' cognitive, social, and metacognitive skills are more advanced and ready for further development. In this setting, PF could serve as an essential tool not only to enhance academic performance but also to promote the development of skills that can be used in life and work contexts. By embedding PF into secondary classrooms, particularly in technical and vocational training programs, students could better connect academic learning with real-world applications, ultimately facilitating a smoother transition into the workforce. To explore PF's applicability in vocational settings, this study proposes a collaboration with a technical institute and an industry partner, TESI, a company in the aeronautics and technology sector. The collaboration will enable students to experience PF in project-based, professionally relevant scenarios, thereby enhancing their academic experience with industry-aligned skill development. This approach not only provides contextually rich learning opportunities but also helps to reduce the gap between classroom learning and workplace expectations. The model (Marzano, 2023a; 2023b) for PF in vocational education includes defining

shared criteria, task presentation, structured peer review, reflection, and consensus-building. Through this model, students learn to provide constructive criticism and develop an attitude of continuous improvement, which is essential for long-term professional success. The longitudinal approach will allow for tracking PF's effect on students as they transition from the fourth to fifth grade and eventually into the world of work. In vocational contexts, PF reinforces skills like teamwork, adaptability, and communication, essential in today's dynamic professional field.

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# THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF SELF DETERMINATION THEORY: A RESEARCH TRAINING PROJECT

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*Self-Determination Theory* focuses on motivation, well-being and personality development, emphasizing the role of cultural and social contexts in fostering self-determined behaviours. In education, SDT aims at encouraging students' intrinsic motivation and self-regulation in learning, which positively impacts educational outcomes. Teachers play a key role by implementing supportive behaviours that nurture students' intrinsic motivation and self-regulation. Research applying SDT in schools has helped classify teacher behaviours, though questions remain about which behaviours best support students' motivational needs. This study seeks to deepen understanding of factors that promote high school students' motivation, focusing on active teacher involvement. Adopting a Research-Training approach aims to enhance teachers' professional development through training, allowing them to refine and apply techniques in their classrooms. The study includes a theoretical review of SDT and an operational section detailing the project framework, preliminary analysis tools, and proposed structure for classroom training interventions.

self-determination theory; motivation; self-regulation; professional development of teachers.

## INTRODUCTION

Motivation is crucial in impacting various academic success factors, including student performance, engagement in positive social behaviours, well-being, and the risk of dropping out. The recent INVALSI report (2024) reveals that high school students in Campania show unsatisfactory performance in assessed subjects, with notable differences in achieving minimum learning standards across educational tracks. Additionally, data on dropout rates in Naples municipalities (2024a) and Campania's provinces (2024b) indicate that just

over half of first- and second-year high school students in Campania attend irregularly, a concerning statistic, as these students are at high risk of eventually leaving school. In response to these issues and aligned with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP, 2021), a Research-Training program is being developed in selected technical schools to enhance teaching methods, refine strategies and tools, and implement effective educational practices.

## **1. OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

In line with the established goals, this work has two main objectives: first, to examine the principles of *Self-Determination Theory* (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017), and second, to introduce *Project-Based Learning* (PBL; Zhang & Ma, 2023) as an effective teaching strategy for fostering motivational self-regulation in high school students (Chiu, Chai, Williams, & Lin, 2021; Liu et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2011).

This leads to the main research question: which SDT factors can be applied to PBL practices?

## **2. Self-Determination Theory**

The SDT, proposed by Ryan and Deci (2017), is a broad theory that emphasizes the critical role of the social context in enhancing individual well-being through self-regulated motivation. Self-determination is defined as the ability of individuals to engage in autonomous, self-regulated behaviours aimed at achieving specific goals (Deci & Ryan, 2013) and is closely linked to the concept of the locus of causality (De Charms, 1968), which refers to people's perception of the main drivers motivating them toward their goals.

In the context of education, SDT highlights the essential role of teachers in either supporting or obstructing the self-regulation of motivation. Through the teaching strategies they implement, teachers can influence students' motivation by either fulfilling or thwarting their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Reeve et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The need for autonomy refers to the desire for school experiences that allow students to feel a sense of choice and freedom during learning. Teachers can help satisfy this need by understanding students' perspectives and acknowledging their emotions (Black & Deci, 2000). The need for competence involves students' sense of efficacy in academic tasks, which teachers can nurture through constructive feedback (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The need for

relatedness pertains to the desire for meaningful connections with teachers and peers involved in school activities.

Fulfilling these three needs enhances students' ability to self-regulate their motivation, while the frustration of these needs can impede self-regulation.

SDT places different forms of motivation regulation on a continuum (Ryan & Deci, 2017). At one end of the continuum is the absence of motivation, where students lack purpose in their studies and have unclear reasons for their actions. Moving along the continuum, extrinsic motivation is divided into four categories: external and introjected (externally regulated), and identified and integrated (more internally regulated). At the far end of the continuum is intrinsic motivation, where students are driven by the intrinsic enjoyment and benefits of studying, representing the highest level of self-determination.

Numerous studies, both domestic and international, have shown a positive relationship between intrinsic motivation, academic achievement, and students' perceived well-being (Alivernini et al., 2019; Black & Deci, 2000; Bureau, Howard, Chong & Guay, 2022; Filippello et al., 2020; Howard et al., 2021; Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Reeve et al., 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2020), highlighting the importance of creating learning environments that foster the self-regulation of motivation.

### **3. Project-Based Learning**

Activities based on the PBL strategy allow students to start by analysing real-world problems, putting them in a position to develop practical solutions for addressing critical or unique situations they may encounter during their educational experience. Thus, the learning community evolves into a research-oriented community. The activity, focused on problem-solving or project creation, serves to uncover the connections between theory and practice. In this setting, investigative and analytical approaches are geared toward fostering collaborative and meaningful learning (Marzano, Vegliante, Miranda & Formisano, 2017; Miranda, 2021).

PBL involves organizing students into small groups, each tasked with developing a project that progresses through four key stages: ideation, planning, execution, and conclusion (Zecchi, 2012). Each stage includes specific activities, deliverables, and assessment rubrics. In the ideation phase, students define the project concept by addressing: 1) the target audience for the project, 2) the needs and requirements of the audience, and 3) the product features necessary to meet those needs. These steps are structured into a split tree map, which the

teacher assesses using a dedicated rubric. In the planning phase, students determine the tasks required to create the product, assign responsibilities within the group, and establish timelines for each task. The final output for this phase is the work plans, which are evaluated with a specific rubric.

The execution phase involves implementing the plans developed in the earlier stages. The more the teacher provides cognitive resources, the more students will be encouraged to transform knowledge into “know-how”, which helps develop learning-to-learn skills. Finally, in the conclusion phase, students present their product to the class, and the teacher evaluates it using the appropriate rubric.

#### **4. Research-Training as a Potential Unifying Approach**

The principles of SDT and the core features of PBL are central to a research project designed to address the challenges introduced earlier, specifically, improving the self-regulation of motivation through active student engagement in instructional practices. Methodologically, SDT and PBL come together in a Research-Training (R-T; Asquini, 2018) approach, which aims to foster an ongoing dialogue between researchers and teachers. This approach seeks to connect theoretical frameworks with educational interventions that encourage meaningful learning.

In the first phase of the research, a workshop on SDT and PBL principles will be held for teachers, who will then collaborate to co-design customized interventions for their classrooms. This process will include periods for monitoring and reflection, allowing teachers to identify challenges and opportunities, thus supporting their professional development (Reeve et al., 2022).

Through R-T, the PBL strategy will be introduced, building upon SDT’s key principles and sharing classroom practices that promote student motivation. Numerous studies have shown that PBL is effective in meeting students’ basic needs, thus fostering self-regulation (Chiu, Chai, Williams, & Lin, 2021; Liu et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2011).

PBL provides students with a greater sense of autonomy in learning activities, as they are encouraged to choose, with teachers’ guidance, the topics for lessons. The active role students take in PBL practices allows them to reflect during the process, feel more responsible, and enhance their perception of the effectiveness of the learning environment.

Moreover, PBL improves the quality of relationships among students and

teachers, fostering a positive classroom atmosphere. The collaborative nature of PBL encourages students to interact in pursuit of a shared goal: developing a project. Teachers act as facilitators, offering ongoing feedback and stimulating discussion through guiding questions.

From a methodological standpoint, a mixed methods approach (Trincherò & Robasto, 2019) will be employed to gather essential data to validate the intervention's effectiveness and explore potential relationships between key variables. Specifically, a quasi-experimental design will be used, with structured questionnaires and standardized assessments administered before and after the intervention.

The questionnaires will include scales that measure academic motivation (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2008), satisfaction and frustration of basic needs (Buzzai et al., 2021), perceptions of teaching styles (controlling and supportive) (Jang, Reeve, Ryan & Kim, 2009), and the intention to drop out of school (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). Evaluation tests, developed with input from teachers of the involved subjects, will assess the intervention's impact. Additionally, focus groups with teachers will provide deeper insights into contextual challenges, helping to refine the implementation of PBL based on the specific needs of the classroom.

## **5. Conclusions and Future Directions**

This work is driven by the challenges facing the educational system in Campania, as highlighted in reports on school dropout rates from the USR Campania (2024a; 2024b) and the latest INVALSI report (2024). These challenges prompted a review of the literature to identify theories, concepts, and teaching strategies that could improve student success by focusing on the crucial role of motivation.

The indicated literature review that combining the principles of SDT and PBL could be an effective approach to motivate students and support their academic achievement. The active involvement of those directly affected by the educational experience, facilitated by the adoption of a R-T approach, adds considerable value to this study. The decision to use R-T is motivated by the need to address specific challenges within a network of schools in Campania, requiring tailored solutions.

By looking forward, this study could also examine how students influence teachers' choices of classroom strategies, an area with limited research both nationally and internationally. The focus on this aspect stems from the

recognition that teaching and learning activities, and the motivation they generate, are the result of a reciprocal teacher-student relationship. Therefore, focusing solely on the teacher's influence on student motivation may be too narrow, as students can also affect the quality of educational activities through their behaviours, which in turn can impact teacher motivation (Liu et al., 2024).

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# EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN CAMORRA TERRITORIES: AN EXPLORATORY RESEARCH ON THE MOTIVATION TO STUDY

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This research examines academic motivation in children living in multi-problem contexts, where economic and social hardships accumulate, particularly those linked to deviance and delinquency. The study is set in a region of Campania where Camorra, a criminal organization that has deeply infiltrated into the social fabric, is present. In such a multi-problem environment, these challenges can foster, especially during childhood and adolescence, a sense of fatalism and low agency, combined with limited self-determination and self-efficacy. In this study, motivation is described as a dynamic, relational force emerging from the interaction between individuals and their surroundings, as well as from the perception of positive and negative aspects of the context. The research hypothesis is that motivation, conceived in this manner, may represent an area of development potentially resilient to environmental adversities, provided it is supported by intentional, targeted educational intervention. Methodologically, the approach is inspired by the Response-to-Intervention (RTI) model and is carried out within a sequential exploratory research design.

early school leaving; risk factors; inclusive education; disadvantaged contexts

## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of early school leaving presents an interpretative complexity that reflects its multidimensional nature. Some elements could be identified, particularly about two opposing viewpoints in this debate: on one side, a “simplistic sociological approach” that links early school leaving to social class and marginalization (Ballarino & Checchi, 2006); on the other, a superficial

criticism of schools' inability to "remove obstacles" in the educational path (Castoldi & Chiosso, 2021). Given these considerations, the approach in this research is connected to a phenomenological perspective that identifies three interconnected dimensions: sociocultural factors, institutional-school factors, and individual factors (Bertolini 1997). It emphasizes how early school leaving, in its various forms, represents one of the main challenges in the democratization of schools and society in general. Schools maintain social cohesion (Dewey, 1916/2018) through their inherent role. In this context, inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) represents a paradigm leading the transformation of educational contexts (Dainese, 2017). It's a pedagogical principle that recognizes and values individual differences as resources for the entire school community, focusing not so much on individual characteristics but on the environmental barriers to learning and participation.

## **1. APPLYING A RESPONSE-TO-INTERVENTION FRAMEWORK TO ENHANCE MOTIVATION TO STUDY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

The complexity of early school leaving extends beyond what a simple definition can capture. The issue demands consideration from different viewpoints.

Analysis of early school leaving literature reveals two main categories of factors: individual factors, such as performance, behavior, and background; and external factors, which include influences from families, schools, and communities (De Witte et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2011). However, when analyzing these factors, a pattern emerges that gives greater weight to demographic and personal characteristics and family dynamics, considering school factors only secondarily, and to an even lesser extent, factors related to community, labor market, and peer relationships (Thyssen et al., 2010).

A key definition relevant to this topic (Estevao & Alvares, 2014) introduces a distinction between formal definitions, based on the mandatory schooling age, and functional definitions, which assess achieved competency levels. The functional definition states that early school leaving occurs when students leave education without the necessary skills and qualifications for employability, regardless of their age (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017).

From an operational perspective, interventions in this area are organized within a three-tier framework: the first level (prevention) aims to address risk factors early before they manifest; the second level (intervention) focuses on managing existing risks; and the third level (compensation) provides alternative pathways

when the educational process has not followed its optimal course.

In this sense, this study explores the role of academic motivation as a potential protective factor, focusing on an intervention aimed at children living in difficult, disadvantaged contexts.

The research hypothesis is that motivation, described as a ‘dynamic’ and ‘relational’ force (1970), while influenced by the sociocultural context, may represent an area of development potentially resilient to environmental adversities when supported by intentional and targeted educational intervention.

In this perspective, understanding motivation as a dynamic process emerging from subject-environment interaction involves moving beyond a deterministic view that would identify it as a static, isolated personal trait. This process tends to develop and modify within a complex system of relationships involving the schools, the families, and the meaning that education can assume in that specific sociocultural context, viewed from an ecosystemic perspective.

The study is set in Pianura, a municipality in Naples, Campania. This area was selected because it has multiple overlapping disadvantages that hinder social progress and democratic participation (Clarke & McCall, 2013)

It’s an area where educational, economic, and sociocultural difficulties accumulate, further complicated by the presence of criminal organizations (Direzione Investigativa Antimafia, 2023) and their explicit and implicit influence on daily life. In this sense, juvenile delinquency and deviance, while not necessarily products of organized crime, are influenced by it both behaviorally and in terms of the value system guiding their life interpretations (Ravveduto, 2017).

The study aims to investigate the potential relationship between academic motivation and disadvantaged contexts; and to identify characteristics of effective educational interventions that promote agency (Aiello, 2018). Agency, from an inclusive perspective, refers to the set of capabilities, competencies, and abilities that enable individuals to act in transformative ways and to “*creare mondi possibili*” (Aiello, 2018), particularly in overcoming both systemic and personal socio-educational disadvantages. For individuals born into disadvantaged contexts, their culturally influenced paths are constrained not only by limited opportunities, but also by challenges in effectively engaging with the opportunities that do exist within their environment

The research employs the Response-to-Intervention (RTI) approach (Johnson et al., 2006) within a sequential explanatory research design (Creswell, 2009). It is

conducted in three phases (A, B, C) from January 2024 to June 2024.

The preliminary exploratory phase involved analyzing *Life Stories* collected through periodic semi-structured interviews with parents of children participating in the Integra project. The selection of the Integra project as a reference context is based on the fundamental dimensions that characterize its approach to educational disadvantage over its twenty-year experience (Sabatano, 2015; Sabatano & Pagano, 2019). The project functions through an integrated community network, promoting dynamic partnerships between schools, families, and health and social services.

Regarding *Life Stories*, the textual corpus was subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) utilizing MAXQDA software (De Gregorio & Lattanzi, 2012; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). Using an inductive approach, the analysis identified recurring patterns in the data. The results revealed complex socio-familial dynamics in most of the sample, in particular early adultisation. The analysis revealed several recurring themes: parents who dropped out of school early, individuals who became parents at a very young age and direct or indirect links to criminal organisations

During Phase A, screening was conducted using the AMOS 8-15 Study Approach Questionnaire (QAS) (Cornoldi et al., 2014), which initially revealed a relatively homogeneous situation with uniformly low motivation patterns across the group.

At Tier 1 (Johnson et al., 2006), the Integra protocol was implemented across all participants. During Phase B, monitoring activities included checklist assessments and focus groups with children and families. For the children, five focus group sessions were conducted, each comprising five participants. The sessions explored two main questions: ‘How has your motivation to study changed since joining Integra? Why?’. Before addressing these questions, the children’s emotional states were assessed using a visual analog. Code frequency analysis revealed several main themes. Skills- Competent and support themes were predominant, with 25 occurrences each, suggesting their central importance in participants’ experiences. Self-confidence recorded 20 occurrences, followed by ambition with 19. Trust in others and rules showed an equivalent incidence of 16 occurrences each. The personalization theme recorded 14 occurrences, suggesting that children are likely to perceive educational intervention as a broad action rather than highly personalized. Focus group data were then compared with checklist results (Seidman, 2006), which evaluated children’s behaviors during the intervention on a 1–5 scale. A

relationship emerged between children who received lower average checklist scores and those who expressed poor study motivation in the focus group. Participants who reported negative changes in their perceived motivation also recorded significantly lower scores, especially on sections related to personal goals, collaboration, and sharing.

In Tier 2, the educational intervention was recalibrated based on data from the monitoring phase. A new measurement in Phase C revealed a clear trend: study motivation increased by an average of 1.32 points, and variation decreased compared to the initial measurement. Additionally, the minimum score rose from 8 to 13, and the standard deviation fell from 2.68 to 2.01 points.

## **CONCLUSION**

Preliminary findings suggest that Integra's educational intervention may enhance study motivation. Initial results from the protocol implementation indicate possible directions for future development, aligning with the incremental approach of the chosen methodology. The data from Phase C indicates a trend towards increased motivation, while the analysis of the different responses to the intervention suggests the potential benefit of a Tier 3 level to address more nuanced needs.

The combined analysis of the checklist data and focus group responses offers valuable insights into the nature of motivation in challenging contexts. The relationship between observed behaviors in checklists and focus group findings—particularly in areas of collaboration and sharing—strengthens the hypothesis that motivation is not merely an individual trait but rather a quality shaped by complex relational dynamics.

The consistency between lower checklist scores and reported low motivation in focus groups, especially regarding collaborative and participatory aspects, reinforces the importance of maintaining a systemic perspective. This finding points to motivation emerging from an interconnected network of influences rather than existing as an isolated characteristic.

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# THE INTERPROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION BETWEEN TEACHERS AND SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS FOR THE PREVENTION OF SCHOOL FAILURE AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING. THE *PROVACI ANCORA SAM!* PROJECT

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School failure and early school leaving remain significant issues in Italy and globally. Since 1989, the “Provaci ancora Sam” (PAS) project in Turin has addressed these challenges in primary schools, lower secondary schools, and CPIA (Provincial Centers for Adult Education), particularly among students with migratory backgrounds. PAS initiatives include “Prevenzione primaria,” which fosters collaboration between school social workers and teachers to engage all students in primary and lower secondary schools, continuing through extracurricular activities led by associations. “Tutela integrata” targets under-15s without a lower secondary diploma, offering support in four community centers across Turin. The “progetto CPIA” operates in three adult education schools, focusing on dropout students and foreign minors, including those with limited literacy or education in their home countries. The PAS’s overarching goal is to prevent social marginalization by fostering inclusive classroom environments, innovative teaching practices, and a supportive atmosphere both in and beyond schools. The inter-professional collaboration between school social workers and teachers aims not only to ensure school attendance but also to cultivate a genuine enthusiasm for learning among students.

school failure; early school leaving; school social workers.



## INTRODUCTION

School failure and early school leaving continue to represent, in Italy as in the rest of the world, a very widespread problem that affects thousands of pupils. The number of students who complete compulsory education is much higher nowadays, however, the knowledge they gain is so fragile and superficial that they tend to forget it shortly after they have completed their lower secondary education, thus creating the phenomenon known as “functional illiteracy” or “implicit dispersion”.

Since 1989, in Turin the *Provaci ancora Sam!* (PAS) project has been dealing with these problems in primary, lower secondary schools and CPIA (Provincial Centres for Adult Education) attended by young adults, especially with migrant backgrounds.

In these pages we will trace some of the lines that characterize the Turin case on preventing and facing school dropout, especially in relation to the impact of school social workers in educational contexts.

### 1. “EXPLICIT” AND “IMPLICIT” SCHOOL DROP OUT

In Italy, schooling is no longer a “social elevator” and now selection is mainly “class-based”. This seems to be the picture that recent data return about Italy. According to the OECD report (*Education at Glance, 2022*), Italy is characterized as one of the countries with the lowest educational mobility in Europe. Apparently, only 8 percent of young Italians between the ages of 25 and 34, whose parents have not completed upper secondary school, obtain a university degree. This is decidedly low compared to the OECD average of 22 percent. The percentage rises to 32 percent among young people whose parents have a secondary school diploma, and reaches 65 percent among those with parents who have a university degree. These are alarming figures revealing that Italy is a country where it is the “lotteria della natura,” and not talent, that determines the educational and life paths of young people (Save the Children 2017, 8).

The registry of the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit today considers 23,000 pupils “at risk of dropping out” in lower secondary school – those of greatest concern – and 112,000 in upper secondary school every year. National data also report that the dropout rate of foreign pupils in recent years has been five times higher than the one of Italian students. Those who are most at risk are precisely the students born abroad.

What is described in the previous lines brings to attention a rather well-known

phenomenon in Italy, namely that of implicit school dropout. However, for several years what has been of concern is the so-called explicit school dropout. Nowadays, in fact, it is no longer only relevant “how many years” students attend school, but “how” and “how much” they learn. According to the 2015 PISA data and the 2019 national standardized test results (INVALSI), one out of four pupils in Italy does not achieve minimum proficiency in mathematics. For Italian, one out of five 15-year-olds has serious difficulties in analysing and understanding the meaning of written texts, and one out of three pupils does not reach proficiency (level 2) in at least one of the three subjects deemed fundamental by OECD for enjoying the full rights of citizenship.

In 2021, the percentage of early school leavers reached 12.7 percent, with higher rates observed in Southern regions, peaking at 21.1 percent in Sicily. This means that more than one out of ten students leave education prematurely. Adding to this challenge are those students who complete their studies but fail to meet the expected learning objectives. The rate of implicit early school leaving at the end of upper secondary school amounts to 9.7 percent nationally, with significant regional disparities and a peak of 19.8 percent in Campania. In a nutshell, this indicates that one out of ten graduates possess skills equivalent to those who leave school after completing lower secondary school.

Unprepared young people face considerable challenges, both in pursuing higher education and in entering the workforce. Compounding the issue, Italy already holds the highest number of NEETs (youth aged 15 to 29 not engaged in employment, education, or training) in Europe.

## **2. THE PROVACI ANCORA SAM! (PAS) PROJECT**

The 2022 *Invalsi Report* (Rapporto Invalsi 2022) which analyses factors influencing proficiency levels in the three assessments that track students’ progress over time (Italian, mathematics, and English), identifies several significant variables. These include gender, schooling, curriculum, social and migratory background, and the characteristics of the region where students live. The data suggest that by the end of secondary school, 7.1 percent of students nationwide obtain a diploma without acquiring the expected skills after 13 years of education.

It is now evident, not only to experts, that the issue of school dropout must no longer be treated as an emergency to be tackled with exceptional measures and tools. Instead, it requires serious attention and long-term interventions as well as comprehensive strategies.

School, extracurricular activities, broader educational community and local social actors must work together to address this challenge through both preventive and remedial actions. For the past few decades, the PAS project has been addressing these challenges in primary and lower secondary schools in Turin (Rivoira 2006). The project tries to counter all forms of school segregation through a cooperative approach centred on educational activities. What truly makes a difference is the joint effort and synergy between school social workers and teachers.

The PAS project has a decades-long history. It was launched in 1989 by the Turin's Council of Education, later joined by the Council of Rights and Social Policies, in collaboration with the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation, Fondazione per la Scuola and Ufficio Pio<sup>1</sup>, as well as the Ufficio Scolastico Provinciale (succeeded by the Ufficio Scolastico Regionale).

Each year, the project supports several non-profit organizations in order to cooperate with state schools across the city. Such organizations work to prevent and combat both school failure and dropout through their school social workers.

Collaboration between institutions and educational organizations in the area has enabled the creation of a network capable of supporting students on a relational level, promoting their inclusion both in school and within their broader social context.

The coordination of such diverse resources has not only helped schools in preventing and addressing school dropout, but also encouraged the exchange of skills and approaches. Thus, teachers, traditionally more focused on academic achievement, have also gained valuable insights and strategies from school social workers, particularly in fostering students' emotional and social engagement.

The implementation and experimentation of new educational approaches and teaching methods have expanded the scope of educational efforts, well beyond traditional school hours and contexts. Innovative teaching methods are being tested to equip students with the tools needed to develop their individuality and become critical, engaged citizens. The focus is not only on fostering the desire to attend school but also on encouraging students to excel and perform well at school.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the history and mission of Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation and its bodies, such as Ufficio Pio, visit the website here below: <https://www.ufficiopio.it/en/history/> (last visit: December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024).

Central to this effort is the promotion of collaboration and the exchange of skills and best practices between teachers and school social workers, enriching their approaches and strategies (Bianchini, Lucatello, Damiani 2021). At the same time, addressing urban inequalities—such as the digital divide, school segregation, educational poverty, and unequal access to services—forms a crucial part of the broader mission to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

These initiatives targeted primary and lower secondary schools, as well as classes for young adults and foreign minors within Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIA). Additionally, the associations involved in the project organise extracurricular activities for minors in need to promote educational continuity between school and extra-school (Pongiluppi 2021).

The first action of the PAS project is called *Progetto di prevenzione primaria* (primary prevention project). It aims at reducing school dropout in approximately 200 classrooms, including fourth and fifth grade of primary school, as well as the first, second, and third grade of lower secondary school. In the 2023/24 school year, the project involved 37 schools, 20 associations, and more than 4,500 students.

The activities are carried out by school social workers during four regular school hours each week for the entire school year. They cooperate closely with teachers, co-planning activities based on the specific needs of the class and the teacher's schedule. They also co-manage the classroom time, employing various methods such as co-teaching, hands-on workshops, and group work.

The same activities carried out at the CPIAs focus on 16-18-year-old students of foreign origin and/or recent migrants, often with limited schooling in Italy. These efforts aim at helping them to achieve their lower secondary education diploma as well as continue their education in upper secondary education or vocational training, and, more generally, foster their social inclusion. In the 2023/2024 school year, over 300 students were involved in these initiatives.

The second action of the project is called Tutela Integrata (Integrated Protection). It is targeted at students dropped out of lower secondary school and it is implemented in four classes located in parishes. Four core teachers collaborate closely with school social workers who participate to the lessons for the whole time. These classes involve 50 minors, aged 14-15, who failed more than once and are at high risk of school failure and early marginalization. The aim is to support them in obtaining their lower secondary school diploma and to guide them in continuing their education and vocational training path.

In recent years, the activities of the project have extended beyond the school year and continue during the summer break through the “Summer” initiative (the third action of the PAS). During the summer break, school social workers carry out activities to help students reinforce their socialisation and learning skills, in order to continue the work done throughout the school year. Such activities were previously co-designed by teachers and school social workers to recover and integrate basic, socio-emotional, and citizenship skills. The goal is to better prepare students to face the upcoming school year with greater success.

### **3. SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS AND TEACHERS**

Over time the PAS project has experimented several activities planned and led together by both teachers and school social workers. These include actions with the entire class group, as well as support for specific cases outside the school. In practical terms, such work consists of co-programming, co-planning and involving school social workers in class councils. Other key components include laboratory teaching, continuity between primary and lower secondary schools, promoting networking activities outside school, and extensive evaluation and monitoring efforts. Thus, the project fosters inter-professionalism between teachers and school social workers (Bianchini Lucatello, Damiani 2021).

Thanks to the research conducted on the PAS project, the Bachelor’s Degree in *Educazione professionale* of the University of Turin has introduced into its curriculum a course focused on school social workers. This course, consisting of 27 hours of lectures and an internship, is available to both undergraduate students and social workers engaged in activities to counter school dropout. Its objective is to provide participants with the tools needed to work effectively in schools, collaborating with teachers to tackle educational challenges.

Such experience led the University of Turin to create the First Level Master’s Degree in *Expert in Educational and Teaching Processes at School* (ESPEDA). The first edition enrolled 70 students, mostly teachers or aspiring teachers, along with a few school social workers. As of the 2024/25 academic year, the master’s degree is entering its third edition and the number of teacher and school social workers is more evenly distributed.

ESPEDA is designed around a Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) approach, providing a comprehensive pedagogical framework. The program offers 60 university credits, equivalent to 1500 hours of blended learning, and it is divided into general and workshop-based subjects. It is

specifically tailored for school social workers and teachers allowing trainees to either complete the entire curriculum or select individual modules that align with their professional objectives. Throughout the course, trainees actively collaborate, fostering a shared educational culture and exchanging best practices, ensuring a dynamic and enriching learning experience.

The internship is a central component of the program, divided into two phases. The first phase consists of 100 hours of in-school experience, giving trainees hands-on exposure to classroom dynamics. The second phase includes 50 hours of supervision with a university mentor, fostering critical thinking and analysis of the classroom experiences. These internships take place in schools participating in the PAS project, providing trainees with the opportunity to actively engage in educational initiatives focused on tackling school dropout and promoting inclusion. Trainees gain valuable insights through a multi-professional perspective, working closely with school social workers, teachers and other professionals of social services, providing support to individuals or groups in need. This collaborative environment offers a unique opportunity to develop comprehensive educational strategies that not only address academic challenges, but also consider the social needs of students. By engaging with professionals from different fields, trainees are better equipped with effective solutions that foster both school results and social inclusion of the pupils they will be working with.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The initial goal of the project, which began over 30 years ago, has evolved into a shared mission among a growing community of stakeholders, including university. The challenge of addressing both implicit and explicit school dropout cannot be tackled with emergency measures or extraordinary resources. As outlined in this article, it is essential to implement long-term actions that build on experience and critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of educational innovations. Looking ahead, one of the key goals will consist of adapting the educational offer for future teachers and school social workers including multidisciplinary approaches and fostering interprofessional collaboration.

In this context, ongoing education for both teachers and school social workers must promote innovative strategies that envision a school open to its community and responsive to change. This includes the hybridisation between the two professions in today's educational landscape.

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# STEPPING OUT OF FAILURE STORIES BY STEPPING IN THE *KEPLER LAB*: A QUASI-EXPERIMENT ON AFFECTIVE-MOTIVATIONAL AND INSTRUCTIONAL MECHANISMS OF PROGRESSING

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Kepler is a project realized in Treviso (Northern Italy) to combat educational poverty among lower secondary school students. Most of the students who entered the lab had a migration background, told educators stories of failures and aligned with a self-debilitating condition of *learned hopelessness*. We evaluated the Kepler educational afterschool lab as a group experience mediating students' academic progress through measures of distal and proximal academic motivation, social relation and learning attitude. The quasi-experiment showed, longitudinally, an improvement on the treated group—compared to matched controls—in terms of global self-perceived motivation, self-efficacy beliefs referred to school behaviour, and learning styles. A cross-section model to study the effect of proximal motivation (*flow*) on self-efficacy beliefs shows that a greater quality of experience in the educational lab (higher flow) increases capability to concentrate in academic tasks. Across individuals, this effect is nevertheless fully mediated by *elaboration-based learning strategies* and *positive internal attributions*. This result highlights that affective and cognitive components related to the self—i.e., positive internal attributions—and habits acquired by instruction—i.e., elaboration-based learning strategies—are both needed and conducive to improve core aspects of self-efficacy beliefs.

motivation, flow, intersubjectivity, self-efficacy beliefs, learning style, school achievement.



## INTRODUCTION

A famous aphorism from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is that 'it is possible to fail in many ways, while to succeed is possible only in one way' (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1925). This aphorism is part of Aristotle's moral reasoning about *eudaimonia*, the highest good for the *polis* represented as a person's flourishing, where well-being is inherent both to living well and doing well. To reach and preserve *eudaimonia*, a person needs an *héxis* (Latin: *habitus*), an acquired capability (or disposition) to navigate contrary emotions through reason and practical wisdom: this habituation to exercise virtues ensures a person's optimal functioning in their everyday activity, a practical reason to consider *eudaimonia* both an individual and collective good.

Students who entered the educational afterschool lab of the Kepler Project, evaluated in this study, shared a variety of 'stories of failures' with educators during their first encounters. As in the aphorism, these stories differed in many respects. However, besides unsuccessful school achievements, most of the stories shared two common aspects: a migration background and an experience of perceived marginalization in the classroom environment.

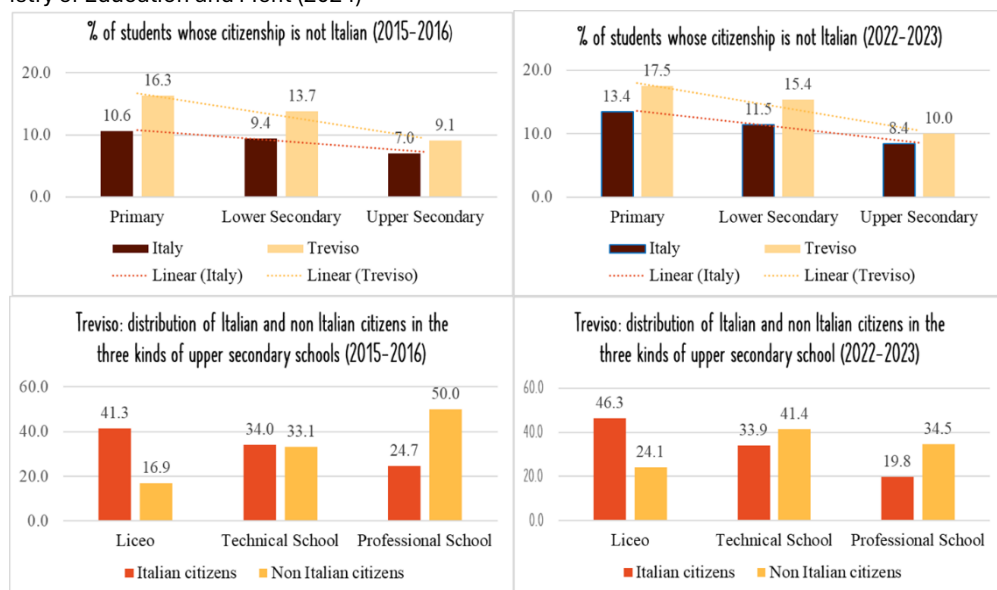
The Kepler Project is one of 169 initiatives funded by Con i Bambini in the second call for proposals implementing the Fund to Combat Child Educational Poverty (Financial Law 2016). The first call, "Adolescenza" (Adolescence), asked the projects to define their most important outcome as "preventing early school leaving." Conversely, the second call, "Nuove Generazioni" (New Generations), drew greater attention to the contexts of experience that induce school leaving and asked for a more holistic assessment of school discomfort. It also invited thinking about projects' potential outcomes within a process-based understanding of change, where intermediate outcomes, such as improved affective and cognitive attitudes, support "harmonic personal growth" and "prevent phenomena of educational poverty" (Con i Bambini, 2022).

### Policy context

The rate of adolescents and young adults (ages 15 to 24) who abandon formal education before obtaining an upper secondary school degree is particularly high in Italy, especially when compared to other European and OECD countries. This rate is notably higher among native-born individuals with foreign-born parents (28%) and among foreign-born individuals who arrived as children (29%), in contrast to native-born individuals with native-born parents (18%) (OECD/European Commission, 2023).

In Treviso (Veneto Region), where the Kepler Project was implemented, the percentage of residents aged 0-18 who were not Italian citizens increased from 7.8% in 2002 to 21.1% in 2014, with a slight decrease to 17.5% in 2019. Consequently, the local school system enrolled an increasing number of pupils with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. One way to understand some negative consequences of this unprepared change in cultural composition is by examining the percentage of non-Italian citizens attending the three levels of the school system: primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools. Figure 1 shows how this percentage decreases from the first to the last level of schooling, as children of foreign-born parents are more likely to leave secondary education before completing it. Compared to the rest of Italy, where the situation worsened over the period considered in the figure, this pattern in Treviso was steeper but stable.

Fig. 1. Career differences between students with and without the Italian citizenship. Source: Ministry of Education and Merit (2024)



Another important aspect of inequality in a school system with an increased variety of student cultural backgrounds arises when considering “school choices” at the end of lower secondary school. At this point in a student’s career, the Italian school system tends to track upper secondary school candidates according to their presumed levels of ability. Students who are not Italian citizens are much more likely to enter professional schools, which hampers or significantly reduces their chances of obtaining tertiary education.

The local school system in Treviso shows some signs of improvement from this perspective over the eight years considered. In 2015-2016, half of the students who were not Italian citizens were enrolled in professional schools. By 2022-2023, most of these students were enrolled in Technical Schools (41%), which allow students to pursue tertiary education. The percentage of students enrolled in Licei, designed to prepare students for tertiary education, also increased from 17% to 24%.

### **Outline of the Kepler Educational Afterschool Lab**

The Kepler educational afterschool lab accepted about 50 students per year across three schools in Treviso. Lab activities started at the beginning of the school year and continued until the end. Students were all in the second and third years of lower secondary school. Those in the third year received individual assistance in preparing for their final examination. During the school lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic, educators met individually with students in the lab, preserving a sense of continuity in lab activities.

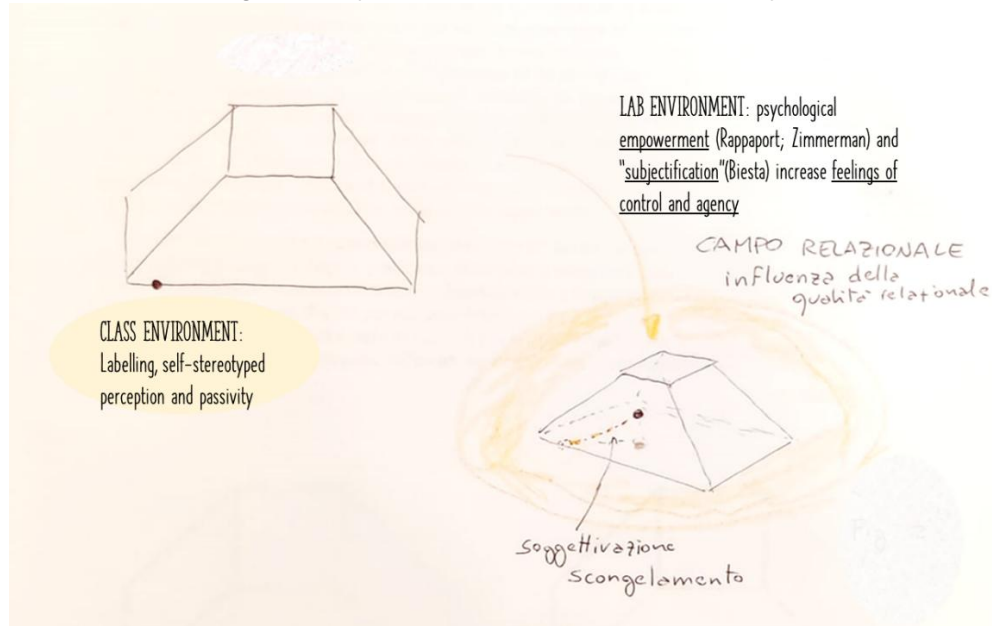
The theory and practice of the lab are briefly described here in words and illustrated using an image. At the beginning of each daily educational relationship, educators listened to stories of failures experienced by each student in the lab, “as a diving suit that they cannot distinguish from their skin” (lab educator’s expression). The upper-left image in Fig. 2 represents the student’s position in the class environment, depicted as a two-dimensional space constrained by perceived performance (grades) and sociocultural barriers. This class experience strongly conditions the student’s feelings of agency, keeping them at the margins. A message arising from this everyday classroom experience is rationalized as “you can’t change” and internalized as “I can’t change”—leading to a phenomenon known as learned helplessness (Kloosterman, 1988). In sum, the force field established in the class environment favours external attributions of failures, low motivation and, consequently, a conservative effect on learning.

The bottom-right image in Fig. 2 represents the lab environment as a wider three-dimensional space where students perceive more opportunities. They can play with peers, make mistakes, present artifacts from their cultural background, and do things they are ashamed to do in the class environment—such as going to the blackboard and explaining how to solve a math problem. Building their new social position from scratch, the developing relationships with educators and peers contribute to a sense of control and agency. The hindering factors of the class environment are reinterpreted in a new collective narrative and group

identity (Rappaport, 1995).

Group members in the lab can both learn and become aware of their learning process, progressively internalizing causal attributions. This process of change in individual psychological functioning—psychological empowerment—is mediated by the intersubjective dimension of the lab group (Rappaport, 1997; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1998).

Fig. 2. Lab environment compared to the class environment: outline of the subjective experience of students entering the Kepler lab. Source: Lab's sketch by Andrea Conficoni.



## METHOD

We implemented a quasi-experimental research design to assess changes in psychological, social, and academic attitudes of students who entered the Lab in the second and third years of the Kepler Project. During the first academic year of the research design (2020-2021), we administered self-report measures during the first school term (quadrimestre) and at the end of the second term to students attending the lab (treated group). We administered the same self-report measures to students who attended the same classes as the lab participants (comparison group) but only at the end of the second term. During the second academic year (2021-2022), we administered the questionnaire twice, during the first term and at the end of the second term, to both treated and control students.

Self-report measures were administered online, on Qualtrics, using the IT facilities of each scholastic institute. Teachers and educators just supervised the students during the task. We assessed students' social and psychological attitudes within four domains: motivation, social relations and social discomfort, school-related self-concept, and academic learning style.

### **Motivation**

We considered both proximal and distal motivational constructs. A short *Flow* scale (Martin & Jackson, 2008) was included to evaluate proximal feelings of active well-being and task absorption in class and, for the treated group, in the lab. Two measures of academic motivational orientation—*Intrinsic* and *Extrinsic Motivational Orientation in the Classroom*—were adapted from Lepper et al. (2005). Finally, we summed the responses to five items from a large psycho-pedagogical self-evaluative questionnaire (Capuano, Storace, & Ventriglia, 2013) to create a short new measure of *General Feelings of School Motivation* (Cronbach  $\alpha = .77$  for the first term;  $.69$  for the second term).

### **Social relations**

Social isolation, or, by reconsidering the scale's reversed score, a qualitatively and quantitatively perceived assessment of *Social Relations with Classmates*, was assessed with a self-report measure validated in Italian (Alivernini & Manganelli, 2016). Additionally, we adapted four items from Capuano, Storace, & Ventriglia (2013) to build a new measure of *Social Discomfort* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .67$  for the first term;  $.62$  for the second term).

### **School-Related Self-Concept**

We adapted eleven items from the psycho-pedagogical self-assessment (Capuano, Storace, & Ventriglia, 2013) to form a new self-report measure of *Self-Attribution of Capability* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$  for the first term;  $.73$  for the second term) and *Academic Self-Efficacy Beliefs* to assess self-efficacy beliefs about study subjects and learning activities (Bandura, 2006). Finally, we used six items from the psycho-pedagogical self-assessment to measure *Negative Reputation in the Family*—a negative feedback to self-concept associated with parents' judgments on school performance and behavior (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$  for the first term;  $.84$  for the second term).

### **Academic Learning Style**

All self-report measures of academic learning style were constructed using items from Capuano, Storace, & Ventriglia (2013): twelve items were assembled

to measure behaviors associated with *School Anxiety* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$  for the first term;  $.87$  for the second term); five items were assembled to represent *Mnemonic Learning Strategies* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .69$  for the first term;  $.66$  for the second term); four items were summed to represent *Elaboration-Based Learning Strategies* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .67$  for the first term;  $.69$  for the second term); and five items were interpreted as an index of Class Involvement (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .62$  for the first term;  $.67$  for the second term), indicating degrees of voluntary involvement in class activities. We also included students' assessments of *Class Performance Goals* and *Class Learning Goals* (Alivernini, Manganeli, & Lucidi, 2017, 2018), aimed at evaluating the influence of different pedagogical orientations on students' motivation.

## RESULTS

A pre-post analysis of self-report measures in the first year showed small improvements in several measures for the group of students in the Lab who answered the questionnaires twice ( $N=25$ ). A paired sample t-test suggested that only the General Feelings of School Motivation increased significantly (Tab. 1). However, considering the clear problem of statistical power, three other measures of change might be considered marginally significant: Self-Attribution of Capability and Elaboration-based Cognitive Strategies, which relate to academic self-concept and students' learning styles, and the items on the flow scale referred to the sense of concentration and control.

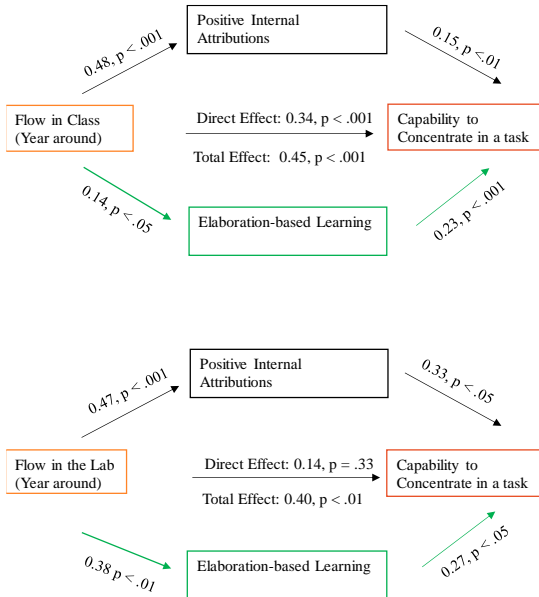
In the second year, we matched the treated group with a control group, using a propensity score, estimated with age, sex, a socio-economic condition index, and a linguistic-cultural background index as independent variables in the logistic regression. A t-test comparing the mean values of the treated group ( $N=50$ ) and unmatched controls ( $N=212$ ) at the first survey (first term) showed a statistically significant difference for almost all the self-report measures, consistently suggesting a sharp disadvantage for the treated group. Conversely, the same comparison between the treated group ( $N=50$ ) and matched controls ( $N=50$ ) showed an advantage for the matched controls only on five measures: Self-Efficacy Beliefs (both measures reported in Tab. 1), Self-Attribution of Capability, and Motivational Orientation (both Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation).

The difference-in-difference evaluation design (Tab. 1) does not show statistically significant effects at the canonical statistical thresholds. Nevertheless, we consider meaningful, and not far from being statistically

significant, those outcomes highlighted in bold characters in the table. Improvement refers to Self-Efficacy Belief, especially considering the two items expressing the student’s perceived capability to concentrate on school tasks, general feelings of school motivation, and elaboration-based learning strategies.

Taking these results as important for understanding the mechanisms of progress through the Lab experience, we also tested, cross-sectionally, the hypothesis that experiencing flow in the Lab might increase positive internal attributions, provide instructions to improve elaboration-based learning, and overall increase Self-Efficacy Beliefs through a greater capability to concentrate on academic tasks. The analysis reported in Fig. 3 shows that a causal model where flow enhances the capability to concentrate on academic tasks applies to both groups of students. Nevertheless, for matched and unmatched controls, flow reported in the class environment directly affects the capability to concentrate on a task: learning strategies and internal attributions partially mediate this causal pathway, but the direct effect prevails. On the contrary, for the treated group, the flow level reported in the Lab is fully mediated by better learning strategies and positive internal attribution in its pathway towards an increased capability to concentrate on academic tasks.

Fig. 3. Mediated effect of flow experience on Capability to Concentrate in a Task (upper figure referred to matched and unmatched controls, bottom figure referred to the treated group). Source: our elaboration on Kepler’s survey dataset



Tab. 1. Pre-post and Difference-in-Difference evaluation designs (first and second year). Source: our elaboration on Kepler’s survey dataset.

CONSTRUCT	First Year			Second Year						
	Pre-Post on Treated			Pre-Post on Treated		Pre-Post on Controls		Difference-in-Difference		
	$M_{T2}-M_{T1}$	t	p	$M_{T2}-M_{T1}$	SD	$M_{C2}-M_{C1}$	SD	$(M_{T2}-M_{T1})-(M_{C2}-M_{C1})$	t	p
<i>Motivation, Self-concept and Learning Strategies</i>										
1 Flow in class	0,2	0,91	0,371	-0,3	1,1	-0,1	0,9	-0,24	-0,77	0,442
2 Flow in the lab	0,1	0,33	0,747	-0,3	1,0	-	-	-	-	-
...of which "sense of concentration and control"	<b>0,5</b>	<b>1,46</b>	<b>0,157</b>							
3a Self Efficacy Beliefs Subjects				0,2	0,6	0,1	0,6	0,13	0,55	0,587
3b <b>Self Efficacy Beliefs Behavior</b>	Not included in the first survey			<b>0,1</b>	<b>0,8</b>	<b>-0,2</b>	<b>0,7</b>	<b>0,30</b>	<b>1,07</b>	<b>0,288</b>
...of which "Capability for attention & memory"	questionnaire			0,1	0,8	-0,2	0,8	0,33	1,11	0,267
...of which " <b>Capability to concentrate in a task</b> "				<b>0,3</b>	<b>1,2</b>	<b>-0,2</b>	<b>1,0</b>	<b>0,49</b>	<b>1,38</b>	<b>0,170</b>
4 <b>Self-Attribution of Capability</b>	<b>0,2</b>	<b>1,62</b>	<b>0,119</b>	0,0	0,6	-0,1	0,4	0,12	0,67	0,506
5 Intrinsic Motivation*	-0,2	-1,51	0,143	0,0	0,5	-0,1	0,5	0,07	0,36	0,716
6 Extrinsic Motivation*	-0,2	-0,97	0,342	-0,2	0,6	0,0	0,5	-0,14	-0,82	0,414
7 <b>Social relations with classmates</b>	0,2	1,38	0,179	0,0	0,5	-0,1	0,4	0,14	0,87	0,388
8 Relational Discomfort	0,1	0,93	0,360	-0,1	0,8	0,0	0,7	-0,09	-0,42	0,673
9 School Anxiety	-0,1	-0,61	0,545	0,0	0,6	-0,1	0,5	0,04	0,21	0,831
10 <b>General feelings of school motivation</b>	<b>0,5</b>	<b>2,63</b>	<b>0,015</b>	<b>0,0</b>	<b>0,9</b>	<b>-0,2</b>	<b>0,6</b>	<b>0,27</b>	<b>1,16</b>	<b>0,246</b>
11 Mnemonic Learning Strategies	-0,1	-0,67	0,512	0,0	0,7	-0,1	0,6	0,05	0,22	0,826
12 <b>Elaboration-based Learning Strategies*</b>	<b>0,3</b>	<b>1,57</b>	<b>0,129</b>	<b>0,2</b>	<b>0,7</b>	<b>-0,1</b>	<b>0,9</b>	<b>0,30</b>	<b>1,03</b>	<b>0,303</b>
13 In class participation	0,2	1,40	0,175	-0,1	0,6	-0,2	0,6	0,10	0,46	0,646
14 Reputation in the family (negative)	0,0	0,01	0,993	-0,1	1,0	0,0	0,6	-0,09	-0,35	0,730
<i>Perception of class environment</i>										
15 Class Performance goals	-0,1	-0,51	0,612	-0,2	0,7	0,0	0,7	-0,17	-0,85	0,394
16 Class Learning goals	0,0	-0,33	0,743	-0,2	0,7	-0,2	0,6	-0,08	-0,38	0,708

\* Scales with an asterisk have been improved after the first administration. The pre-post design in the first year adopts the first version. Second year evaluation designs report the improved version.



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# EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND THE NEET PHENOMENON IN CAMPANIA REGION

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NEETs are young people between the ages of 15 and 29 who are not in employment, education or training. These are young people who, despite having completed a course of study, have not been able to access the labour market. Some have dropped out of training, deciding not to engage in any activity. Others for contingent reasons (geographical mobility, maternity, illness, family problems or needs) cannot study or work. This means that NEETs are not excluded from the traditional formal channels of building and accumulating human capital. What are the factors that produce the exclusion of young Italians from the education and work system? How and why does this disconnection happen? How do NEETs fit into the broader picture of youth hardship? What strategies, measures and services exist in the areas concerned (Southern Italian Regions) to facilitate the transition from school to work? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these tools? Are they consistent with the goal of socializing at work? What measures and processes should be implemented to prevent slippage into the NEET status and/or to encourage the reactivation of young NEETs? Starting from these questions, this paper aims to map the phenomenon in question, starting from a review of the literature in order to identify strengths and weaknesses regarding policies and services for the transition school work and socializing at work. In this way, a picture of the main educational lines and measures adopted to promote qualification and schooling is given, with particular attention to the Campania Region.

neet; policies; dropout

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of NEET was first introduced in 1999 by the Social Exclusion Unit of the United Kingdom, an agency created to address and prevent social issues

among young people aged 16 to 18 who, by leaving the educational and labour systems, risked finding themselves in marginal situations (Mascherini et al., 2012; Agnoli, 2014). Among the main risk factors for remaining in this condition are foreign origin, gender, residence in areas with high unemployment, school dropout, and low socio-cultural family background (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999).

Twenty years later, the term NEET is used to analyse “different manifestations of a complex and varied phenomenon” (Agnoli, 2014, p. 13). Various studies (ILO, 2015; Eurofound, 2017; OECD, 2017) have shown that NEETs constitute a heterogeneous group, with very different conditions among them. Despite the various definitions in the international literature, there is a consensus in recognizing that they are young people particularly at risk of social exclusion in adulthood (Eurofound, 2016).

Operationally, a person is considered NEET if they are not employed and are not participating in training courses, whether formal or informal. The inclusion of inactive individuals is seen as beneficial, as it highlights the critical situation between youth and employment. This group includes not only those who are unsuccessfully seeking work but also those who have stopped looking. The latter represent the most vulnerable segment, at risk of social marginalization if timely and appropriate active policies are not implemented. However, this aspect is controversial, as among the inactive there are also those who are unwilling to accept a job. If they are not eligible for employment activation programs, their inclusion in the NEET count seems illogical.

It is important to note that among those who claim not to be currently interested or available, there are also individuals working in the informal economy and women engaged in informal caregiving activities. These individuals could be integrated into the labor market if adequate tools were provided to reconcile work and family. This contribution aims to illustrate the opportunities offered by some policies implemented in recent years in the Campania Region, aimed at reducing the gap between the educational system and the world of work, thus preventing young people from slipping into the NEET condition.

## **1. FROM ELET TO NEET AND THE INTERVENTION POLICIES IN THE CAMPANIA REGION**

Lazzarini and colleagues (2020) examined the phenomenon, highlighting the link between school failure or difficulties in the educational path and the risk of becoming NEET. As noted by Brunetti and Ferri (2018), early school leaving is

often associated with conditions of vulnerability and phenomena of ‘NEETing’ (Amendola, 2022), where a temporary situation like school dropout transforms into a lasting lifestyle. Furthermore, the European Union’s initiatives to prevent early school leaving, included in the Europe 2020 Strategy, link the high dropout rate to the prevalence of the NEET condition. The difficulties faced by students can turn into a path with no viable exit options.

Seen over the longer term, the proportion of NEETs among 16-18 year olds has fluctuated between 8 and 10% from the mid-1990s. From 2008, nevertheless there has been a decline, which, again, may be partly explained by the raising of the age of compulsory education (Department for Education, 2014b). Trends in the proportion of NEETs among 19-24 year olds from the third quarter of 2009 to the third quarter of 2014. Although there are notable fluctuations, a clear curvilinear trend can be detected: the proportion of NEETs first rises to 22% in the third quarter of 2011 and then declines (with ups and downs) to 17,6% in the third quarter of 2014. Thus, the number of NEETs has gone down both among adolescents and young adults. Moreover, they have sunk below pre-crisis levels, given that the proportion of NEETS among 19-24 year olds stood at 18% in the third quarter of 2008 (Department for Education, 2013). Thus, the economic crisis appears not to have produced a lost generation as was feared by many. On the other hand, people who were 19 and older in 2009 are 25+ in 2015, meaning that they no longer fall in the 16-24 NEETs category and have thus dropped out of sight for policy makers. It could well be that the crisis has had lasting effects on this generation.

## **2. EXAMPLES OF POLICIES ADOPTED IN FAVOR OF NEETS IN THE CAMPANIA REGION**

Regarding the policies aimed at NEETs, a significant program to prevent and counteract this phenomenon, with a notable impact in the Campania Region, is “Youth Guarantee” (Garanzia Giovani). This program has provided training and job opportunities for young people, including NEETs. Potential beneficiaries could register through the MyANPAL portal or the regional ClicLavoro Campania portal and be directed by Employment Centers to training courses or internships. In May 2023, ANPAL published a national report on the program, analyzing the period from 2014 to 2022. There were 1.717,038 participants, of which 85% were managed by Employment Centers (Look4Ward, 2023). A total of 1,092,243 measures were activated, with nearly 57% related to extracurricular internships. The employment insertion rate was 66.4%, with over

half a million employed by the end of 2022. In particular, the program was most successful in the provinces of Caserta, Naples, Avellino, Benevento, and Salerno.

The Digital Republic Fund is a collaboration between the public and private social sectors (Government and the Association of Foundations and Savings Banks – Acri), which aligns with the digitalization goals set by the NRRP and the National Complementary Fund. This fund, active experimentally from 2022 to 2026, has €350 million financed by banking foundations. It operates within the National Strategy for Digital Skills, developed and updated in the context of the Digital Republic, a national strategic program coordinated by the Department for Digital Transformation. The goal is to reduce the digital divide and promote education on future technologies, supporting the country's development. The initiative is based on synergistic actions that connect experiences and skills across all sectors. A key contribution comes from the National Coalition for Digital Skills, which includes public and private entities adhering to the manifesto for the Digital Republic, proposing concrete actions to improve the digital skills of the population. In Campania, four projects have been launched that selected and supported 76 free training courses aimed at providing essential digital skills to create new job opportunities for NEETs, women, the unemployed, and workers at risk of unemployment due to automation.

The NEET Youth Hiring Bonus, established by the decree-law of May 4, 2023, no. 48, converted by the law of July 3, 2023, no. 85, offers private employers an incentive of 60% of the gross monthly salary for hired NEETs (under 30 years old) for a maximum of 12 months from the date of hiring. As of December 31, 2019, 125,866 applications had been submitted, of which over 70,000 were approved (74,056, equal to 58.8%). The companies that benefited from these contributions are mainly located in the more developed regions (75% of accepted applications), with Lombardy region (20%), followed by Campania (12,520 hires) and Veneto (9,585).

The GOL Program (Guaranteed Employability of Workers) has been extended to young NEETs (under 30 years old). Initially reserved for beneficiaries of active policies such as RdC and NASPI, it now offers extracurricular internships lasting up to twelve months. With Executive Decree no. 1 of 08/01/2024, a public notice was approved to implement the internships provided by Mission 4 of the GOL Program in the Campania Region, funded under the NRRP, extending the twelve-month extracurricular internships to fragile or vulnerable workers, including young NEETs.

## CONCLUSION

Young NEETs find themselves in a situation of particular vulnerability and discouragement, often due to insufficient family support, inadequate education, lack of work experience or negative experiences, and low trust in institutions and public policies. It cannot be expected that they will seek help through national portals or public offices; therefore, it is essential to identify and reach them, often with proposals that capture their attention. It is important not only to adopt a “push” approach, meaning “I help you out of a negative situation” (which many do not clearly perceive), but especially a “pull” approach, offering attractive opportunities that encourage them to embark on paths of improvement.

Countries with more efficient Employment Centers (CPI), known as Public Employment Services (PES), have demonstrated a greater capacity to gather information on NEETs, both directly and in collaboration with the school system, to offer specific programs. However, even in these countries, some young people remain invisible for various reasons, including family issues, psychological problems, or addiction-related issues.

In Norway, services for young people in vulnerable situations include the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), follow-up services (FUS), and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service (SAMH). NAV offers both state-funded labor market services and municipal social services, and is responsible for providing labor market measures to NEETs, in addition to preventing work. Its mission is to contribute to creating an inclusive society and a functioning labor market, also providing income through various benefits.

As Lőrinc and colleagues (2020) emphasize, experiencing ‘NEETing’ can have long-term consequences on future job opportunities, earnings, psychosocial well-being, and health, resulting in high costs for society as well. To address the NEET phenomenon, analyzing the educational trajectories of young people can provide researchers with valuable insights, helping to understand how to prevent the deprivation of growth opportunities that many young people are beginning to experience.

The experiences of Youth Guarantee and other initiatives in Italy and Europe have shown that without targeted outreach strategies, young people who most need reactivation programs remain excluded from public policies. Early identification of certain determinants of NEET status can support policymakers’ work, suggesting measures to contain the spread of this phenomenon and reduce the number of young people at risk of social exclusion.

What seems to be lacking is the intent to create a unified and structured system, and the real challenge lies in introducing widespread listening among the various public and social actors involved, particularly students (Batini & Giusti, 2023), the Ministry of Youth Policies, and Employment Centers. In fact, according to a mandate contained in Legislative Decree 150/2015, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies is tasked with defining the essential levels of performance and establishing a “Specialized Guidance” service, which includes skills assessment services, individualized interviews (also in small groups), counseling, and information on the system and methods of skills certification. This service aims to make individuals more aware of the context, to enhance their professional and educational history, and to identify their skills and personal resources (Nicodemo & Coppola, 2023). A person-centered approach that focuses on their potential is fundamental to promoting empowerment and a sense of self-efficacy (Nota & Soresi, 2000). Therefore, it would be incorrect to consider the NEET condition as a simple generational trait, without recognizing the public responsibility for not developing effective labor policies or training and guidance activities capable of overcoming the risk of skills misalignment.

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# THE VERTICAL STRUCTURE OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN ITALY

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This paper examines the combined effects of individual characteristics (such as gender, family, and migratory background) and contextual variables (including socio-economic and cultural context, school composition, tracking, and territorial distinctions) on Italian students' academic performance. The study seeks to explore the interaction between micro- and macro-level mechanisms and their influence on educational outcomes, drawing on Coleman's theory (1990) of collective effects. Using OECD PISA data from 2018 and 2022, this research provides a novel diachronic analysis of educational inequalities within Italy, which has received limited attention. Educational disparities at the upper secondary level stem from a mix of individual and contextual influences, such as territorial differences and school-specific factors. Previous literature has highlighted the influence of school social composition on educational achievement, while also examining the impact of family background on segregation within Italian schools (Benadusi et al., 2010; Argentin et al., 2017; Giancola and Salmieri, 2020). Italian schools reflect diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds shaped by regional factors, institutions, and local environments. This research applies a multilevel regression analysis to interpret inequality structures across territorial, school, and individual levels, examining disparities in reading performance to assess changes over time and post-Covid impacts on student performance.

school performance; inequalities in education; territorial differences; multilevel techniques.

## INTRODUCTION

Comparative analysis of European national education systems consistently reveals disparities in the effectiveness of the Italian education system. These

differences are clear in underperformance and considerably disparities in the academic attainment of fifteen-year-old secondary school students at both national and regional levels. These competence gaps lead to inequalities after students leave school. According to the European Commission, developing competences is crucial for individuals to engage in society and the workforce, and to fully enjoy their rights as citizens (EU, 2010). Sociological studies on educational inequalities identify a range of contributing factors operating at the individual, school, and territorial levels. Many analyses have focused on the intermediate level, the school level, analysing the effects of the social composition of individual schools in different territories (Benadusi et al, 2010; Argentin et al, 2017). Other studies have showed that the social background of students in Italian schools plays a determining role in the level of segregation observed (Giancola and Salmieri, 2020). Besides these two levels, there is also the territorial level. In Italy, schools and students' families are intertwined in relation to different territorial contexts. These contexts are characterized by different socio-economic and cultural combinations, which are shaped by a range of factors, including institutions, politics, and the local environment. In our study, territories (geographical areas) represent the highest hierarchical level of aggregation for inequality factors.

## **1. AIMS OF THE STUDY**

This study examines how individual and ascriptive variables (gender, family background, migratory background), along with contextual variables (socio-economic and cultural context, school composition and tracking, territorial differentiation), influence the academic performance of Italian students. The aim is to investigate the mechanisms operating at both macro and micro levels and their interplay (Coleman, 1990), which shape individual choices and how the combination of these produces collective effects (macro-micro). Competences in Reading and Math do not refer to the mere ability to read a text or calculate results, but the former refers to the ability to understand and integrate what is written with pre-existing knowledge. The second to the skills needed to apply basic mathematical principles and processes in everyday contexts and to examine the logical coherence of one's own and others' arguments (INVALSI, 2019). Reading and math skills are crucial, and the disparity in Italian students' test scores for these subjects reveals a significant inequality issue. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1972), inherited cultural capital within a family can be a key factor in achieving better academic outcomes. Conversely, the theoretical framework of Rational Action Theory

(RTA) focuses on the intentional actions of students and their families, who choose to participate in education based on rational decision-making (Boudon, 1974; Mare, 1980; Jackson, 2013). As the educational system continues to expand, a hierarchical differentiation emerges, placing students from lower social classes at a growing disadvantage in accessing higher levels of education. The importance of social capital has been emphasized by other Scholars, such as Coleman (1988, 1990). Coleman's theory extends Bourdieu's concept of social capital by incorporating the role of social networks, enabling a shift from focusing on interactions within groups (micro level) to understanding social action on broader scales (meso and macro levels). Social backgrounds are shaped by a multitude of factors, encompassing both familial (micro context) and broader societal, institutional, and geographic influences (macro context). Using Coleman's framework, we examine the factors and processes that influence school performance in Italy.

## **2. DATA AND METHODS**

We used the data collected by OECD in PISA 2022 (OECD-PISA, 2023). Data were collected using a stratified typological sampling method in which in each geographical area a certain number of schools were extracted and within these schools, a certain number of students were extracted. From each layer, has been extracted a random sample. The resulting sample is 465.085 weighted cases. The hierarchical structure of the data collection process is clear in the PISA dataset. Consequently, we must analyze the arrangement of variables based on individual, ascriptive, and contextual characteristics within both horizontal and vertical configurations. When examining the vertical structure, the lowest level includes variables pertaining to individual student characteristics. School-level variables are present at the intermediate level. At the highest level, the territorial variables are the grouping variables. Besides the vertical dimension, we can also consider the horizontal dimension. The horizontal dimension is clear at the intermediate level when we look at school choices (lyceum, technical, and vocational). Choices that impact school results and are linked to individual and contextual aspects. This research investigates educational inequalities by utilizing reading and mathematics achievement as dependent variables. The research methodology is structured in the following stages:

- (1) In a first part we analyse the scores of both Reading and Math to see variability (using means and S.D.).

- (2) Then we analyse the configuration of educational inequalities within and among the five macro-territorial areas considered in the PISA survey.
- (3) Lastly, Multiple linear regression models and a multilevel regression set (Bottoni, 2022) will be used to construct an interpretative model of the vertical structuring (macro-area, school, individual) of inequalities.

### 3. RESULTS

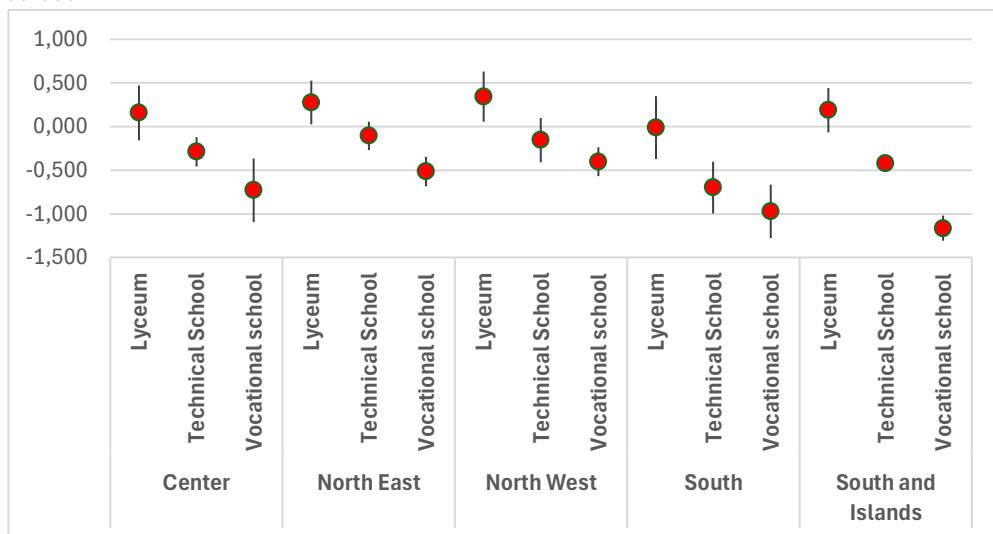
The initial focus of the study is to present data concerning the mean and variability of mathematics and reading scores across the five territorial macro-areas. As illustrated in Table 1, students living in the North-East exhibit consistently high average performance in reading and mathematics, while demonstrating relatively low levels of variability. A significant difference in performance is observed compared to the North-West region, where average performance persists at a high level but is accompanied by a greater degree of variability. Southern and Island regions show lower average performance compared to other regions, with varying performance levels across locations. The results are consistent with previous studies (Benadusi et al, 2010; Argentin et al, 2017).

Tab. 1. Mathematics and reading scores descriptives in different geographic areas. Source: Authors' elaboration of PISA 2022 dataset

Geographic Area	Score	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.	Variance
Center	Math	274,3	778,82	475,159	78,9371	6231,07
	Reading	212,99	706,7	488,34	80,0809	6412,95
North east	Math	187,35	752,38	501,621	76,0173	5778,63
	Reading	198,03	745,76	510,55	77,2196	5962,87
North west	Math	255,37	724,09	501,374	83,9509	7047,75
	Reading	253,75	732,68	503,983	83,329	6943,73
South	Math	237,06	678,81	438,48	79,2491	6280,41
	Reading	192,39	713,04	454,352	83,0628	6899,42
South and islands	Math	275,31	666,24	446,568	76,9435	5920,3
	Reading	241,48	699,37	462,555	83,0021	6889,35

Proceeding to the next stage, we analyse the distribution of average ESCS values across the five geographical regions for each of the three tracks (Fig. 1). When considering the northern regions (east and west), a pattern emerges wherein the average socio-economic and cultural characteristics are elevated, and the spacing between the three tracks is remarkably consistent. Conversely, in the southern regions, the three tracks have lower average ESCS values and show distinct distances between them. The structure of the three tracks depicted in Figure 1 for the southern areas, the South, and the Islands provides clear evidence for this statement.

Fig. 1. Scatter plot showing Socio-economic and cultural background variability by Track and Geographical Area. All coefficients are significant for: .000. Source: Authors' elaboration of PISA 2022 dataset.



Before turning to the regression models, we calculated intraclass coefficients (ICC) to see the variability between maths, reading and ESCS scores in the five geographical areas (Bottoni, 2022). According to the values shown in Table 2, the variability in mathematics and reading scores is higher in the North-West area than in the other areas. This shows that the educational outcomes across the different schools in the area vary significantly. The North-East exhibits the least socio-economic and cultural variability, suggesting a more uniform background among families. This contrasts with the areas in the South displaying the highest variability, suggesting a more complex situation in the Mezzogiorno.

Tab. 2. Intraclass Coefficient (ICC) for Reading, Math and ESCS results by Geographic area. All coefficients are significant for: .000. Source: Authors' elaboration of PISA 2022 dataset

Geographic Areas	ICC		
	Math	Read	ESCS
Center	0,383	0,308	0,216
North East	0,354	0,298	0,147
North West	0,478	0,399	0,207
South	0,349	0,334	0,287
South and Islands	0,357	0,364	0,235

To analyse the vertical structure of inequalities, we constructed three linear regression models using insertion modelling (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). The dependent variable is Math scores. In the first model, we only inserted the individual-level variables. In the second model, we added the school composition variable as a second-level variable. Finally, we included the macro area variables at the highest hierarchical level.

Analysis of the first model shows a significant track effect influencing mathematical performance, with variables, such as grade repetition and socioeconomic status (ESCS). This evidence reveals that a student's social background is a strong factor influencing their academic success in Italy (Giancola and Salmieri 2020; Pensiero et al., 2019). The second model includes information that approximates the social composition of the school. The tracking effect is observed to diminish in Table 3. At the highest level of aggregation in the third model, the track effect and significant geographical differentiation are once again observed. The impact of the school is partially absorbed by the third-level variables in this instance.

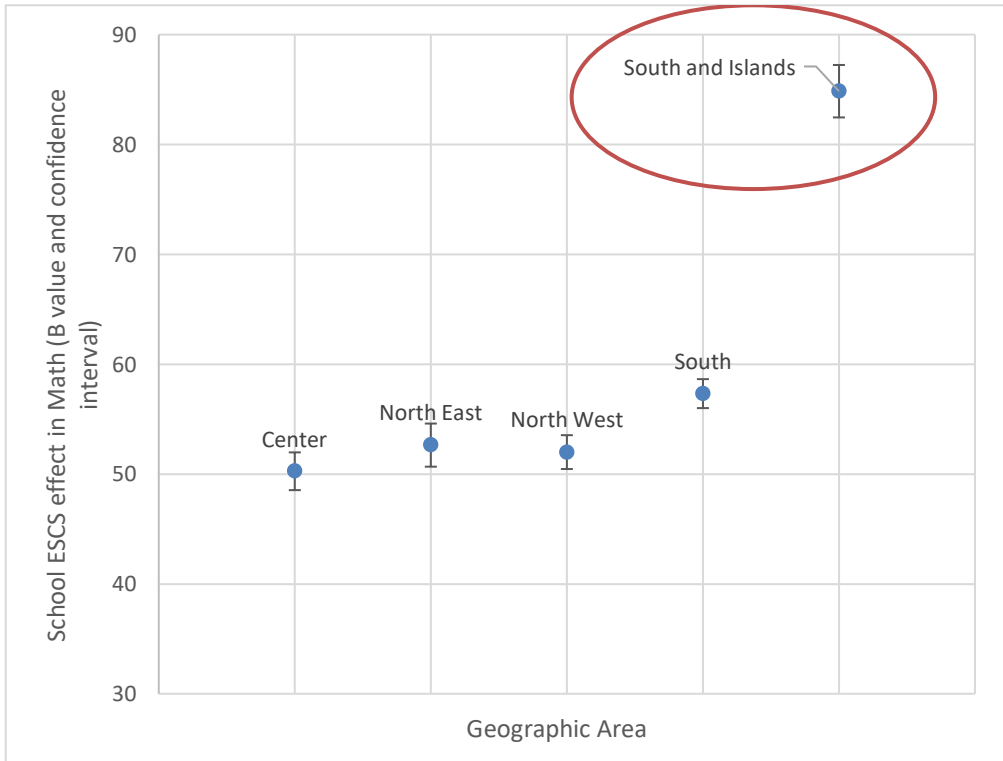
Tab. 3. Vertical Inequalities in Reading and Math. Multiple linear regression models. Dependent variable: Reading (Model 1-3); Math (Model 1-3). All coefficients are significant for: .000. Source: Authors' elaboration of PISA 2022 dataset.

	Reading			Math		
	Model1	Model2	Model3	Model1	Model2	Model3
R-square	0,218	0,27	0,311	0,235	0,32	0,37
(Constant)	432,117	468,981	451,684	441,648	488,619	467,091



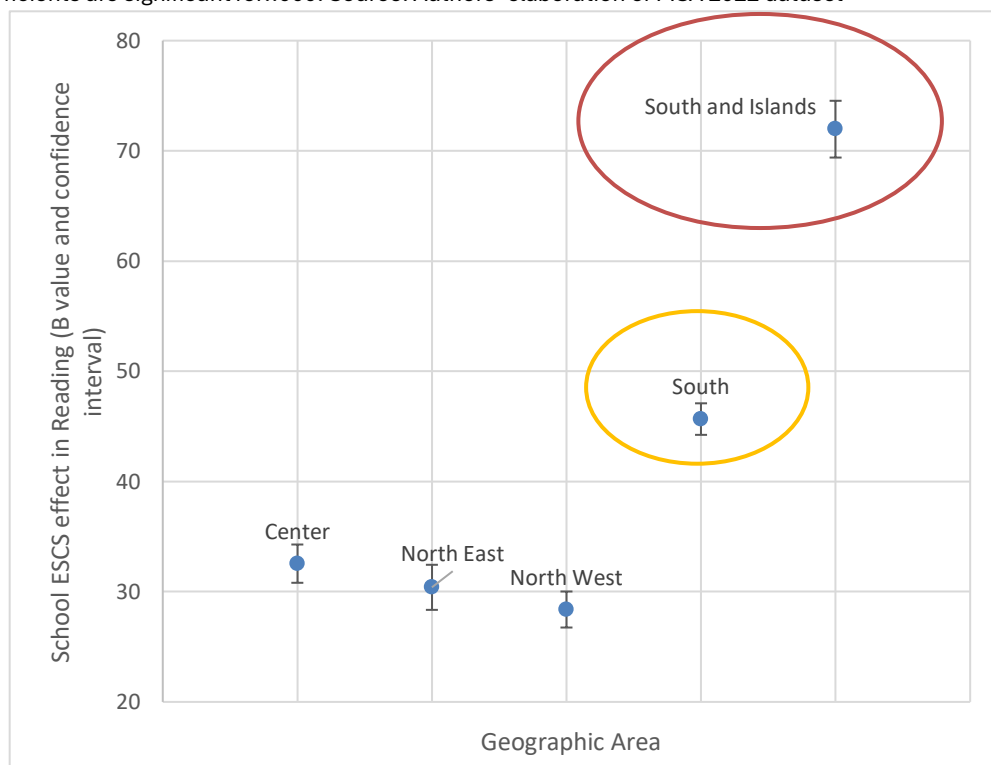
ESCS Index	20,092	10,737	9,423	23,4	11,48	10,059
Female_vs_Male	10,366	12,424	10,435	-28,761	-26,138	-28,213
Second_gen	6,198	-2,341	-13,225	12,587	1,707	-10,106
First_gen	-21,657	-27,83	-34,432	-13,124	-20,989	-28,049
Grade_repetition	-26,665	-26,351	-30,685	-34,256	-33,856	-38,811
Lyceum	73,716	25,961	51,435	70,257	9,409	37,507
Technical School	37,379	17,146	26,362	42,533	16,753	27,196
ESCS_Mean		63,899	39,133		81,417	54,606
North East			23,001			25,9
North West			17,115			23,348
South			-19,329			-16,915
South and Islands			-27,831			-29,433

Fig. 2. Scatter plot focusing on the vertical regression: Effect of School ESCS on Math. All coefficients are significant for .000. Source: Authors' elaboration of PISA 2022 dataset



By applying the same analytical process to reading scores, a strong school ESCS effect can be observed in Southern Italy (both South and South and Islands). The graph (Fig. 3) clearly shows the differentiated impact of family background on the two southern areas. Reading performance in the South and Islands area is significantly influenced by ESCS level, with the impact nearly double that observed in the Center area.

Fig. 3. Scatter plot focusing on the vertical regression: Effect of School ESCS on Reading. All coefficients are significant for  $.000$ . Source: Authors' elaboration of PISA 2022 dataset



## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Analyses with PISA 2022 data confirm the already known trends (Giancola and Salmieri, 2022). Geographical area, assumed as the highest-level variable, reproduces much of the North-South divide in terms of economic and employment opportunities. It shows how school actions are deeply influenced and shaped by the local context. This shows that the impact of the local area remains mostly limited to intra-school dynamics. In fact, the decomposition of social origin effects reveals a double disparity for Southern Italy. The first

disparity confirms and refers to a clear geographical division between Southern and Central-Northern regions (Ballarino and Checchi, 2006; Giancola and Salmieri, 2020). Secondly, internal differentiations between the South and the South and Islands are evident. The results for these analyses show the presence of a stratified pattern of educational inequality, which requires further investigation and more attention from educational policies. The track effect is once again confirmed as a problematic node in the Italian education system that seems to escape the radar of reforms that, instead, seems accentuating internal differentiations (Benadusi et al., 2020; Giancola and Salmieri, 2022). Finally, gender and migration background exert a constant influence, net of the variables included in the models, revealing the persistent vulnerabilities of the Italian school system (Panichella et al., 2014; Giancola and Colarusso, 2020; Romito, 2022).

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# NON-PREDICTED TRAJECTORIES: EDUCATIONAL CHOICES OVER THE REPRODUCTION OF PREDICTED PATHS

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The sociological literature on education predominantly focuses on the phenomenon of the social reproduction of educational inequalities. What is often lacking is an analysis of cases that deviate from this pattern of social reproduction. In this study, based on primary data collected in the Lazio region in 2023 from a sample of 2.860 students, the aim is to examine those cases that deviate from the educational trajectories predicted by their cultural capital and to describe them. The study will also explore the determinants of upward and downward educational mobility, as well as post-secondary educational choice expectations, with the aim of uncovering the more hidden mechanisms of the educational system.

social reproduction, non-predicted trajectories, educational choices, educational mobility,

## 1. OVER THE REPRODUCTION

Over the past decades, the Italian educational system has undergone significant internal changes. One of the most noteworthy developments has been the steady expansion of participation at the primary and lower secondary education levels, approaching near saturation. This was followed by an increase in participation in upper-secondary education characterized by both dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Ballarino & Panichella, 2014). Upper-secondary education introduces several distinct features that significantly impact individuals. It is structured into a tripartite tracking system, where school differentiation plays a crucial role: on the one hand, track choice is heavily influenced by students’ family backgrounds, while on the other, the track attended shapes educational outcomes and future decisions (Giancola & Salmieri, 2022; Giancola et al. 2023). Following upper-secondary education,

participation in tertiary education has increased, though only marginally (Giancola & Bonanni, 2024). The likelihood of enrolling in tertiary education and completing a degree is strongly determined by social class differentials, as well as other factors such as gender, track attended, and prior academic performance (Snee & Devine, 2014; Romito, 2021a). At both the upper-secondary and tertiary levels, class-based disparities continue to reaffirm the principle of the Maximum Maintained Inequality (MMI) hypothesis (Raftery & Hout, 1993). While much of the scholar's focus has been on educational inequalities and the mechanisms of reproduction, this study aims to identify, quantify, and describe those cases that fall outside the patterns of reproduction (OECD, 2011). These are referred to as “deviant cases.” The additional objective is to explore the mechanisms underpinning such cases (Van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007). Specifically, the analysis focuses on the transition from upper-secondary school to post-secondary, whether students pursue further studies, enter the workforce, or follow a combination of both options. The aim is to move beyond a reliance on theoretical frameworks that exclusively address social reproduction (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Barone et al. 2021), expanding the interpretative scope to account for nonlinear trajectories, with a particular focus on cases that *deviate* from established predictions.

## **2. DATA AND METHODS**

We use primary data collected from a large-scale survey conducted in 2023 among students at the end of upper-secondary school in the Lazio region (which includes the metropolitan city of Rome, Italy's largest urban area). The survey comprised 2,860 respondents. To investigate mechanisms that extend beyond the dynamics of social reproduction, we observed groups using a typology that intersects a synthetic index of cultural capital—constructed by combining parental educational attainment—and post-secondary school choice expectations. These groups were analyzed through bivariate analysis with categorical variables and synthetic metric indices derived from principal component analysis (PCA). The analysis focuses specifically on those groups that deviate from the trajectories predicted by their cultural capital. Finally, these deviant groups were further examined using binomial logistic regression models to explore the determinants and the conditional probabilities of the factors influencing upward and downward educational mobility.

### 3. ANALYSES

The following analyses seek to introduce an innovative framework for the study of the sociology of education, with particular emphasis on the operationalization of analytical categories that are often overlooked in academic discourse. These categories have the potential to offer new insights for scholars, thereby contributing to the expansion and enrichment of sociological research on education. The innovative strength of this approach lies in its capacity to reconsider and reformulate key concepts, ultimately leading to a more comprehensive understanding of educational inequalities and processes of social mobility.

#### 3.1. Non predicted trajectories

To identify the categories for analysis, we use a typology that intersects the cultural capital index with students’ post-secondary expectations—work, pursue further studies, or combine both. This approach defines a matrix. Along the main diagonal are cases of social reproduction, while at the two extremes lie those cases that deviate from the direct relationship between the dimensions of the typology.

Tab. 1. Typology between family cultural capital and post-diploma expected choices (*chi-squared=153,9; contingency coeff. = 0.226*). Source: Authors elaboration.

		Familial cultural capital index			Total
		Low capital	Medium capital	High capital	
Enroll university or work	Work	15,1%	10,8%	5,8%	31,7%
	University and work	7,8%	7,5%	6,4%	21,7%
	University	12,5%	15,2%	18,9%	46,6%
Total		35,4%	33,5%	31,1%	100,0%

In terms of educational mobility, we classify as *ascendant* those students who come from low cultural capital backgrounds and expect to continue their studies either at university or by combining university and work. Conversely, *descendant* students are those who opt to enter the workforce despite having medium or high cultural capital backgrounds. All other cases are categorized as educational reproduction. In 63.1% of cases, we observe educational reproduction. Ascendant students represent 20.3% of the total, while



descendant students account for 16.6%. Expanding on the main diagonal, we can identify *heirs*—students from high cultural capital backgrounds who choose university after secondary school—making up 40.5% of the sample and exemplifying upward reproduction. *Stable* students, those from medium cultural capital backgrounds who choose to both work and attend university, comprise 7.5% of the total. Finally, *low trapped* students, those who come from low cultural capital backgrounds and choose to enter the workforce, represent 15.1% of the sample and reflect downward reproduction.

### 3.1.1. Characteristics of deviants by gender

Among the *low trapped*, 66.2% are male and 33.8% are female. In the *stable* category, 40.5% are male and 59.5% are female, while among the *heirs*, 57.6% are female and 42.4% are male. Along the reproduction diagonal, females tend to maintain their educational status at high and medium levels, whereas males are more likely to remain trapped. Looking at the *ascendant* category, 59.8% are female and 40.2% are male, showing a roughly 20 percentage point advantage for females. This suggests that girls are more likely to achieve upward educational mobility, moving from low to high educational levels. Conversely, males are overrepresented in the *descendant* category, comprising 69.3% compared to 30.7% of females, with a gap of approximately 40 percentage points. Analyzing further, 23.2% of males are categorized as *descendants*, and 16.4% as *ascendants*. In contrast, 24.3% of females are *ascendants*, while only 10.3% are classified as *descendants*.

### 3.1.2. Differences in the school context

By educational track (general, technical, and vocational), we observe that among the *low trapped* students, 52.2% pursue a technical track, 32.8% a vocational track, and only 15% a general track. In the *stable* category, 69% follow a general track, while 31% are divided between technical and vocational tracks. Among the *heirs*, 81% choose a general track, with 15.3% and 3.7% enrolled in technical and vocational tracks, respectively. In the *ascendant* group, 60.3% are in a general track, 30.7% in a technical track, and 9% in a vocational track. For the *descendants*, 24.4% are enrolled in a general track, while 45.9% pursue a technical track, and 29.7% a vocational track. The general track serves as a driving force for upward mobility and is a key factor in maintaining high cultural capital. In contrast, enrolling in a vocational track may lead to downward mobility. This is particularly evident when examining group distributions, where 35% of vocational track students belong to the *low trapped*

category, and 34.7% fall into the *descendant* category. Furthermore, when assessing perceived performance on a scale of 1 to 10 in Italian, mathematics, and overall, we find that *descendants* report the lowest performance among the ideal types, with mean scores of 6.76 in Italian, 5.74 in mathematics, and 6.83 overall. The *ascendants* have means like those of the *stables* and *heirs*, scoring 7.64 in Italian, 6.72 in mathematics, and 7.72 overall. These findings provide a framework for interpreting individuals' self-perceptions, which can reinforce their educational conditions.

### 3.1.3. *The role of experiences and relationships*

Two additional factors we examined relate to school experience and social relationships. We first constructed a negative school experience index and then a generic relationality index, both of which serve as indicators that could contribute to a broader measure of social or informational capital. Both indices are metric. Regarding the negative school experience index, the *low trapped* and *descendant* groups exhibit the highest means, at 0.26 and 0.36, respectively. In contrast, the other groups show negative values, with the *ascendants* averaging -0.13. This suggests that negative experiences may significantly influence perceived aspirations for mobility. On relationality index, the *low trapped* and *descendant* groups again report the lowest values, with means of -0.40 and -0.25. *Ascendants* have a mean closer to zero at 0.09, while the *stable* and *heir* categories report means of 0.12 and 0.18. Although the positive values are not substantially high, the negative values are noteworthy and relevant to our analysis.

## 3.2. What determines being a deviant?

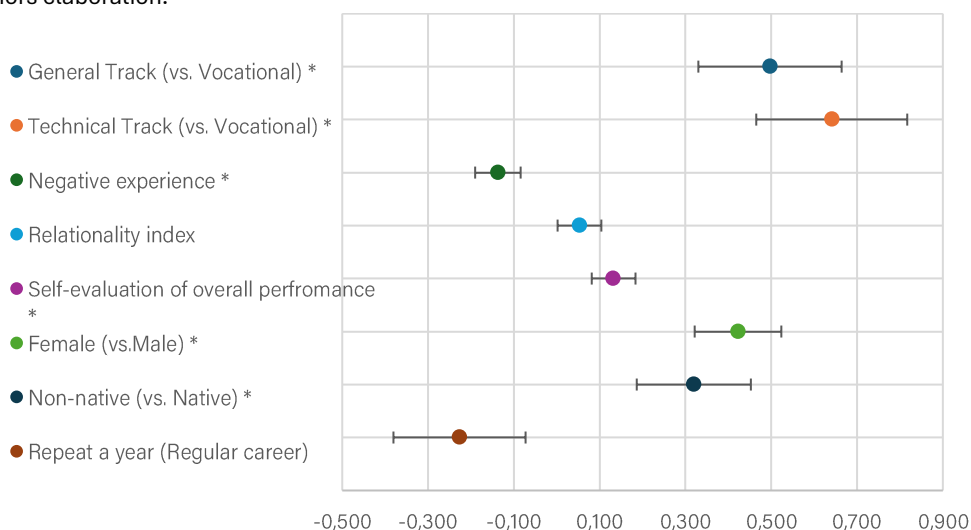
Using the variables described thus far, we developed two binomial logistic regression models to examine the probability of belonging to the descendant and ascendant groups. In this section, we present two point-error plots to display the B values, illustrating the “strength” of the effects observed.

### 3.2.1. *The determinants of being ascendant*

Focusing on the deviant cases, we examine the determinants and probabilities (calculated as  $[\text{Exp}(\beta) - 1] * 100$ ) of being classified as an *ascendant*. Initially, we consider the educational tracks, using the vocational track as the reference category. Enrollment in a general track (B = 0.49) increases the probability of being an ascendant by 64%, while enrollment in a technical track (B = 0.64) raises this probability by 89.8%, both calculated net of other variables and in relation to vocationally enrolled students. A negative school experience (B = -

0.13) reduces the probability of ascending by 12.8%. The relationality index is not significant. Self-perceived overall performance ( $B = 0.13$ ) is positively associated with ascendant status, increasing the probability by 14.1%. Being female rather than male ( $B = 0.42$ ) enhances the probability of being in this category by 52.5%. This model also includes variables related to migratory background and the experience of repeating a year in school. Being a non-native rather than a native student ( $B = 0.31$ ) increases the probability of upward educational mobility by 37.6%. In contrast, the experience of repeating a year is not significant.

Fig. 1. The determinants of being ascendant (B values and Standard Error;  $p < 0.01$ ). Source: Authors elaboration.

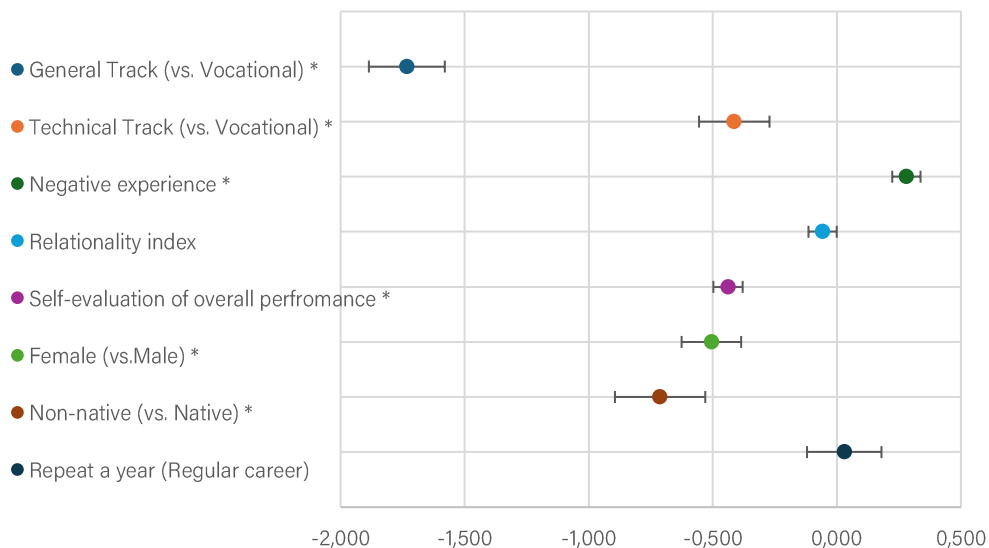


### 3.2.2. The determinants of being a descendant

Here the argumentation shifts, allowing us to discuss protective effects for negative values and downward pressure for positive ones. Enrollment in a general track, as opposed to a vocational one ( $B = -1.73$ ), protects against being a *descendant*, reducing the probability by 82%. The enrollment in a technical track ( $B = -0.41$ ), relative to a vocational track, decreases the probability of being in this category by 33.8%. Unlike the previous analysis, the effect of the general track appears to function more as a protective factor than as a push factor. A negative school experience ( $B = 0.28$ ) increases the probability of being a descendant by 32.3%. As in previous analyses, the relationality index remains non-significant. Self-reported overall performance ( $B = -0.43$ ) decreases the probability of being a descendant by 35.5%. Furthermore, being female rather

than male ( $B = -0.50$ ) reduces the probability by 39.6%. Being a non-native student, using native origins as the reference category ( $B = -0.71$ ), decreases the probability by 50.9%. As noted earlier, the experience of repeating a year is not significant. These results not only elucidate the determinants of being a descendant but also provoke further discussion on the implications of having a migration background, which appears to decrease the likelihood of being an ascendant while simultaneously offering protection against being a descendant. The motivations influencing these outcomes seem to play a substantial role (Bonanni & Moreschini, 2024).

Fig. 2. The determinants of being descendant (B values and Standard Error;  $p < 0.00$ ). Source: Authors elaboration.

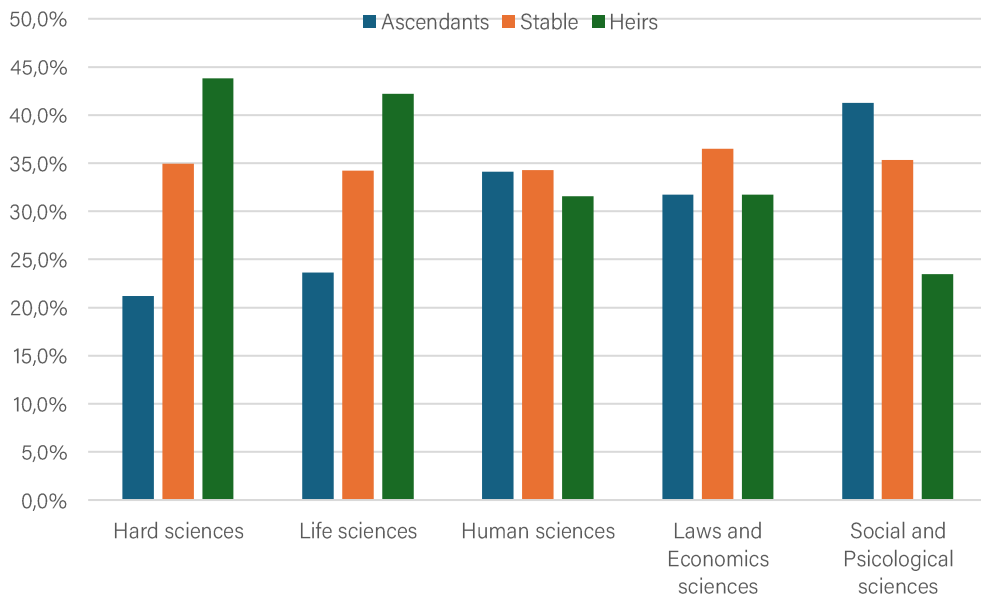


### 3.3. The choices of deviants

In conclusion, we examine the expected choices made by *ascendants*. They show a preference for psychological and social sciences, which account for 41% of their selections, followed by human sciences at 31.4%. These choices are complemented by law and economics, which comprise 31.7% of cases. Psychological sciences (35.3%) and social sciences, as well as law and economics, are particularly favored by the *stable* group. In contrast, *heirs* tend to dominate in the hard sciences (43.8%) and life sciences (42.2%). In summary, while *ascendants* exhibit intentions of upward mobility, they are

inclined to pursue fields that are already saturated, which, according to evidence from the Italian context, offer lower socio-economic returns compared to other areas.

Fig. 3. Expected academic field chosen by ideal types of students. Source: Authors elaboration.



#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis reveals that reproduction is more pronounced than mobility, at least in terms of expectation. In line with literature (Bernardi & Valdés, 2021) we indeed observe how *sticky* educational expectations are with respect to social origin. We know how real the same phenomenon is then when we turn to actual social mobility: low fluidity between classes is nothing more than the effect of low educational mobility, which in turn is the result of an expectation bias based on ascriptive factors, career and educational choices (according to the principle of the “chain effect” as in Giancola & Salmieri 2022). Treating educational propensities as factors of mobility, the possibility of leaving the path of educational reproduction affects 36.9% of students, with the primary driver being the chosen educational track—general and technical tracks for *ascendants* and vocational tracks for *descendants*. Although performance plays a role in the first model, its impact is particularly significant concerning the probability of being classified as a *descendant*. Consistent with expectations, women are more likely to be *ascendants*, while men tend to be *descendants*.

Among deviant cases, a crucial variable is the lived experience in school, especially for *ascendants*, as indicated by the determinants. When examining expected choices after school, it is noteworthy that, despite efforts, *ascendants* tend to opt for social sciences, economics, and humanities, while hard and life sciences remain marginal. Given that the latter fields typically offer better payoffs in the labor market, the inequalities observed during the upper secondary cycle are perpetuated in tertiary education, resulting in field segregation and affecting potential educational outcomes. Thus, we can conclude that educational mobility pathways are not successes of the educational system but are rather the result of individual inclinations, effects related to choices (e.g., being in the class or school with a favorable social composition) or pure randomness (having one or more encouraging or judging and guiding teachers beyond the classic biases present in this type of process). The combination of these observations is thus in line with the dual role of the school as a factor of mutation and reproduction at the same time and, taking up Atkinson's expression (2015), education – once again – can be a great equalizer or great divider.

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# DO DECENTRALIZED CAMPUSES PROMOTE EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY? THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TURIN

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Since the 1990s, through legislative measures such as Law 168/1989, Law 537/1993, and Ministerial Decree 47/2013, the University of Turin, like many major Italian universities, has established decentralized branches. These teaching sites—also referred to as “extra-metropolitan locations” or “satellite campuses”—are situated in municipalities other than that of the university’s registered headquarters. Currently, the University of Turin operates seven decentralized locations, offering a total of 24 degree programs. Existing research has shown that decentralized university sites can contribute to local economic development while addressing institutional objectives such as reducing congestion at the main campus. This study seeks to explore whether these decentralized teaching sites also serve as effective instruments for reducing inequalities in educational opportunities. Specifically, it examines their role in promoting university access for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and non-traditional student groups, such as working students or adult learners. The empirical analysis utilizes a unique dataset combining administrative records with survey data collected via a multipurpose questionnaire administered to first-year bachelor’s and master’s degree students at the University of Turin in the 2022-2023 academic year (N = 17,041).

decentralized campuses, educational opportunities, education policies

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant developments in the Italian university education system since the late 1990s has been the growing trend of “territorial decentralization” (Goglio and Parigi, 2014; Rossi and Goglio, 2018; Colombo



and Salmieri, 2022). This term refers to the establishment of decentralized branch campuses across the country, which remain administratively and financially dependent on their respective main university campuses. According to the definition in Ministerial Decree (D.M. n. 987/2016), a decentralized campus is one where “teaching or research facilities are located in a municipality different from that of the university’s legal headquarters.”

To better understand this phenomenon, it is important to note that in recent decades, the Italian tertiary education system has undergone general expansion, aligning with international trends, albeit to a lesser extent. However, unlike other European countries, this expansion has not led to a differentiation of tertiary education into university and non-university pathways (as an example, the UK has introduced University Technical Colleges, Germany has established Universities of Applied Sciences, and Sweden has created University Colleges). In contrast, Italy has largely retained a university-centric system, with limited development of post-secondary technical training options, such as the Higher Technical Institutes (ITS). Consequently, the expansion of higher education in Italy has primarily been achieved through the territorial decentralization of university teaching. This has included a broad distribution of university course offerings across the country, an increase in the number of degree programs, and the establishment of new campuses, often situated in smaller urban centers known as “decentralized campuses.”

This decentralization trend has influenced nearly all Italian state universities. By the early 2000s, around 80% of Italian state universities had implemented some form of decentralization in other municipalities. Currently, only seven universities have not established decentralized campuses, while approximately 220 municipalities in Italy host such campuses.

This paper builds on existing research highlighting the importance of decentralization in enhancing access to university education for traditionally underserved student groups (Animale and Seri, 2009; Bratti et al., 2008; Cersosimo et al., 2018; Viesti, 2018). Using the University of Turin—a large university in northern Italy hosting about 80,000 students—as a case study, this research examines the central question underlying this investigation: can university decentralization positively impact equality in educational opportunities? Specifically, does decentralization facilitate access to university education for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds or those with technical or vocational secondary school qualifications?

## 1. DECENTRALIZED CAMPUSES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TURIN

The University of Turin operates eleven decentralized campuses. Some of these are classified as “metropolitan campuses” because, while they are located outside the municipal borders of Turin, they remain within the province. Examples include campuses in Collegno, Grugliasco, Orbassano, and Venaria. In contrast, “extra-metropolitan campuses” are situated in municipalities outside the province of Turin. These include campuses in Alba, Asti, Biella, Cuneo, Ivrea, Savigliano, and Aosta. Notably, the Aosta campus is located beyond the regional borders, within the Aosta Valley Region. To assess the impact of decentralization on educational opportunities, this study focuses exclusively on the extra-metropolitan campuses distributed across the Piedmont Region, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. Extra-metropolitan campuses of the University of Turin. Source: own elaboration on University of Turin administrative data (2024)



## 2. DATA AND METHOD

The analysis relies on a unique source of primary data: a compulsory online survey completed by all first-year students at the University of Turin. After data cleaning, the final sample comprises 15,570 students, including 10,144 (65.2%) enrolled in the first year of bachelor’s degree programs, 3,957 (25.4%) enrolled in the first year of master’s degree programs, and 1,469 (9.4%) enrolled in single-cycle degree programs (*lauree magistrali a ciclo unico*, lasting five or six years). To perform a meaningful comparison between students at satellite

campuses and those at the main campus, we selected only “twin courses,” defined as bachelor’s and master’s degree programs offered at both the main campus and satellite campuses with identical course structures. Table 1 provides a summary of these twin courses and the corresponding number of first-year students. The data are analysed using descriptive statistics and by means of a logistic regression model, to estimate the likelihood of enrolling in a degree program in a satellite site compared to the same course in the headquarters.

Tab. 1. Number of first-year enrolled students for twin degree programs, offered both at satellite campuses and university headquarter. Source: own elaboration on University of Turin data.

Bachelor degrees – Satellite campus	Town	Nr.	Bachelor degrees – Turin (headquarter)	Nr.
Business Economics	Cuneo	61	Business Economics	845
Education	Savigliano	44	Education	69
Nursing	Aosta	18	Nursing	127
Nursing	Asti	67	Nursing	332
Nursing	Cuneo	98		
Nursing	Ivrea	75		
Educational Sciences	Savigliano	135	Educational Sciences	408
Sport Science	Asti	191	Sport Science	272
Sport Science	Cuneo	82		
Social Work	Biella	56	Social Work	104
Biomedical Laboratory Techniques	Cuneo	10	Biomedical Laboratory Techniques	29
Medical Imaging Techniques	Cuneo	9	Medical Imaging Techniques	18
Herbal Science Techniques	Savigliano	41		
Total bachelor degrees		887	Total bachelor degrees	2204
Single-cycle degree - satellite campus			Single-cycle degree - Torino	
Law	Cuneo	24	Law	686
Primary Education Sciences	Savigliano	146	Primary Education Sciences	193

Total Master degrees (CU) – satellite campus		170	Total Master degrees (CU) – Torino	879
Total – satellite campuses		1057	Total – Torino	3083

### 3. RESULTS

The survey investigated various aspects influencing the decision to enroll in university. However, for the purposes of this study—namely, estimating differences in the socio-economic composition of the student body across different sites—the authors focused on a specific set of demographic and socio-economic variables. The descriptive statistics below emphasize demographic variables such as gender and socio-economic factors related to individual students and their households, including the type of secondary school attended, parents’ education, and parents’ occupation. Additionally, the paper briefly examines the timing of students’ decisions to enroll in university.

At the individual level, variables such as gender and type of high school reveal notable differences. Female students are slightly overrepresented at satellite sites (+4.4 percentage points), while male students are underrepresented (-4.5 p.p. at satellite sites). Similarly, students from less prestigious secondary school tracks are more common at satellite sites. For instance, students from professional high schools (+10 p.p.) and technical high schools (technological track, +2.6 p.p.) are more prevalent in satellite site degree programs. Conversely, among students who attended academic tracks (*lyceum*), those from more prestigious tracks—such as the classical and scientific lyceums—are more represented at the headquarters (+6 p.p. and +11 p.p., respectively). On the other hand, students from the social sciences *lyceum* are overrepresented at satellite sites (+5.5 p.p.). These differences are not driven by variations in the fields of study, as the analysis focuses on identical degree programs offered at both the satellite sites and headquarters (see Table 1).

When examining students’ socio-economic backgrounds, as indicated by parents’ education and occupation, some notable differences emerge, particularly concerning education. Students whose parents have a higher level of education are overrepresented at the headquarters (e.g., parents with a university degree, +7 p.p., or a doctoral degree, +4 p.p.). In contrast, students whose parents have low-to-medium levels of education are more likely to be enrolled at satellite sites (e.g., parents with a lower secondary degree, +6 p.p., or an upper secondary degree, +4 p.p.).

Regarding parents’ occupation, the differences are smaller but still observable.

Students at satellite sites are slightly more likely to have parents who are self-employed (+4 p.p.) or blue-collar workers (+3.5 p.p.), whereas students at the headquarters are slightly more likely to have parents who are managers or liberal professionals (+3 p.p.).

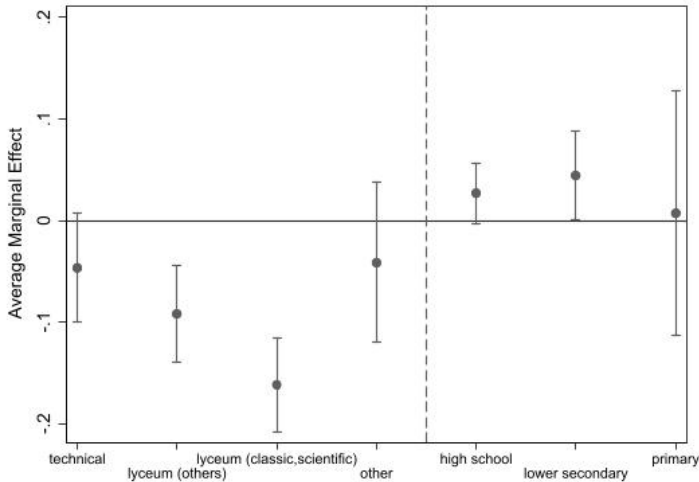
Table 2. Students' characteristics in the satellite sites and in the headquarter campuses of the University of Turin (%). Source: own elaboration on University of Turin data.

	University of Turin	
	satellite campuses	headquarter (twin courses)
Gender		
male	29,7	34,2
female	69,9	65,6
not declared	0,4	0,3
High school degree		
Science Lyceum	21,5	32,2
Social Sciences lyceum	22,4	16,9
Technical Institute – Economic Sector	10,5	12,1
Linguistic Lyceum	8,5	11,3
Classic Lyceum	3,5	9,3
Professional/Vocational Institute	16,2	6,4
Technical Institute – Technological Sector	8,7	6,1
other	5,3	3,0
Art Lyceum	2,7	2,2
Music and dance lyceum	0,7	0,4
Parental education (highest degree among parents)		
No qualification	0,7	0,3
Primary school	0,8	0,5
PhD, Medical Specialization	4,0	8,3
Lower secondary	19,2	12,8
University Degree (Bachelor/Master)	21,1	27,9
High school degree	54,3	50,2

Finally, we compared the timing of students’ decisions to enroll in university as a proxy for their motivation and commitment to academic studies. The baseline assumption is that students with stronger socio-economic backgrounds, higher motivation, and long-term academic goals are more likely to have made this decision well before their final year of upper secondary school, possibly with the support—or in some cases, the pressure—of their families. These students are expected to enroll more likely in courses at the more prestigious university headquarters; in contrast, students exiting upper secondary school without clear plans and lower academic commitment may perceive satellite campuses as a less “risky” choice (e.g. due lower costs of mobility). Indeed, students who decided to enroll in university very early—during primary or lower secondary school, or the early years of high school—are more likely to be enrolled at the headquarters (+11 p.p. and +3 p.p., respectively). Conversely, enrollment in satellite campuses is more frequent among less committed students, such as those who decided to pursue university studies only after completing their high school exit examination (+12 p.p.) or during their final year of high school (+2 p.p.).

This preliminary overview suggests that satellite campuses—even when controlling for the field of study and comparing identical degree programs—tend to attract students from less prestigious upper secondary school tracks, those who are less academically oriented (e.g., those who chose an academic path late), and those with weaker socio-economic backgrounds, as indicated by medium to low parental education levels.

Fig. 2. Average Marginal Effect (with 95% confidence interval) for the probability of enrolling in a satellite site (vs. headquarter). Source: own elaboration on University of Turin data.



To test the robustness of this preliminary descriptive analysis, we ran a logistic regression model to estimate the impact of socio-economic background (proxied by high school type, parental education, and parental occupation) on the likelihood of enrolling in a satellite campus versus the headquarters. The model also included a control variable for the student's province of residence. Figure 2 presents the average marginal effects (AMEs) for different groups, illustrating the likelihood of enrolling in a satellite campus. The left panel shows estimates based on secondary school type, while the right panel presents estimates for different levels of parental education.

The results partly confirm earlier trends, highlighting the significant influence of students' academic backgrounds compared to parental backgrounds. Students with stronger academic preparation are much less likely to enroll in satellite campuses (-16 p.p. for students from the academic track of *lyceums* and -9 p.p. for other types of *lyceums*). In contrast, the influence of parental socio-economic background, proxied by education and occupation, is less pronounced. Students whose parents have low levels of education are slightly more likely to enroll in satellite campuses (+4 p.p. compared to students with highly educated parents), but parental occupation does not show any statistically significant effect (for this reason not shown in Figure 2).

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

This paper offers an exploration of the socio-economic composition of the student body at different campuses of a large generalist university in northwestern Italy and its implications for reducing inequalities in access to higher education. The establishment of local satellite campuses has been a long-debated topic in Italy, and this study aims to shed light on the role of these campuses within the higher education system with new original empirical evidence.

Using a new dataset encompassing all first-year students at the University of Turin, the analysis reveals that extra-metropolitan campuses tend to attract a distinct segment of the student population. These students are generally characterized by lower socio-economic backgrounds and weaker academic orientations compared to those enrolled at the university's main campus. The ability of satellite campuses to attract first-generation students—those who are the first in their families to access tertiary education—and students with lower academic orientation (e.g. graduates of less prestigious high schools or those without a clear academic plan until the end of high school) can be viewed as

both a distinctive feature and a strength of these campuses. From this perspective, satellite campuses make a meaningful contribution to addressing gaps in Italy's higher education system. They serve as an informal response to the lack of institutional differentiation in the tertiary education sector and, in a country that ranks third-to-last in Europe with attainment levels 12.5 percentage points below the EU27 average (Eurostat 2024), satellite campuses also play a critical role in increasing tertiary education attainment among young people (aged 25–34).

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# I'LL BE A DOCTOR: MEDICAL SPECIALIZATION CHOICES FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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The aim of this paper is to investigate gender differences in medical education in Italy, with a focus on medical specialization schools. On the one hand, medical education is characterized by a high rate of feminization, but on the other hand, especially in the field of specialization, significant gender differences emerge, showing a greater presence of men in some branches and of women in others. The field under study is therefore particularly interesting because it presents an apparent paradox: a professional sector characterized by high social and occupational prestige, high levels of remuneration and significant career opportunities, largely accessible to women, but at the same time a strong gender segregation within specialties. These differences are often associated with inequalities in wages, career expectations, and social prestige. In order to analyze the social processes, relational mechanisms and gender stereotypes that underlie this segregation, the paper aims to reconstruct the situation of gender imbalance in Italian medical specialties and its variation over the medium term. For this purpose, we analyze cross-sectional and longitudinal secondary data provided by the Ministry of University and Research, building an original national dataset of students in medical specialization schools.

medical specialization; gender segregation; gender stereotypes; gender inequalities

## INTRODUCTION

The medical profession, while historically male-dominated, has seen increasing female representation over time. In particular, although there are some differences in different national contexts, in most advanced countries the

number of women enrolled in medical schools and specialty schools has increased substantially in recent decades, and women now tend to be in the majority compared to men.

At the same time, if we move away from an overall view and look at individual medical specialties, significant gender imbalances remain in both training and employment. In different national contexts, some specialties continue to be male-dominated and others female-dominated, often reflecting stereotypes about alleged gendered aptitudes.

Studies attribute this divide to a combination of perceived personal attributes, cultural beliefs, societal expectations, barriers within medical training and workplace environments. These factors perpetuate the notion that men and women have distinct abilities, driving women towards “people-oriented” specialties and men toward high-stakes, technically demanding roles. These trends are influenced by both implicit and explicit biases within the medical profession (Errani et al., 2021; Pelley and Molly, 2020).

Such gender imbalances are not neutral with respect to professional outcomes: in fact, male-dominated specialties tend to be better paid and more prestigious than female-dominated ones (Errani et al., 2021). Moreover, the consequences of this gender gap are also relevant for patients, as several studies show that gender is not a neutral variable in the doctor-patient relationship (Chekijian et al., 2021).

Drawing on the literature and previous research, this paper aims to provide a detailed picture of the phenomenon in the Italian context, which can serve as a basis for exploring the systemic and individual factors that contribute to gender inequality and for proposing policy adjustments that can promote gender equality in medical education and the medical profession.

## **1. WOMEN AND MEDICAL SPECIALIZATION: AN UNBALANCED STORY**

As noted above, while there has been a significant increase in the medical field in all OECD countries (OECD, 2023), women are still far from being equally distributed across medical specialties. Studies conducted in individual national contexts show a strong under-representation of women in the surgical field – with the only partial exception of pediatric surgery – while the specialties with a strong concentration of women are, for example, gynecology and obstetrics, pediatrics, child psychiatry, general medicine, oncology, and geriatrics.

Thus, empirical evidence shows that women are overrepresented in fields associated with the female body and childhood, as well as in fields that

emphasize interpersonal skills and caregiving. These fields are perceived as “naturally suited” for women due to long-standing stereotypes about nurturing qualities (Burgess et al., 2018). In contrast, specialties with a higher concentration of men-in addition to those that involve the male body, such as urology-are, for example, orthopedic surgery and similar surgical fields, due to the perception that these fields require strength, endurance, and technical skills traditionally associated with men (Ali et al., 2015). In this regard, some authors propose a distinction between person-oriented and technique-oriented specialties, attributing the former more often to female-dominated fields and the latter to male-dominated fields (Manuel et al., 2009).

Some interpretive approaches emphasize the reproduction of gendered roles and tasks within organizations that reproduce widespread stereotypes and assign different tasks to men and women (e.g., the operating room to men, outpatient activities to women). Thus, the observed differences in specialties would not be due to innate abilities or inclinations, but rather to the guidance that women would receive, primarily within their educational backgrounds, towards more care-oriented activities and professional choices (Cavaletto, 2017; Gaiaschi, 2022). In a broader sense, gender stereotypes seem to be relevant not only in the “construction” of different roles for men and women within organizations, but also in influencing the maturation of individuals’ educational and professional choices (Šimunović and Babarović, 2020).

Other approaches emphasize processes of occupational closure in male-dominated specialties (Vicarelli, 2008), which generate implicit or explicit gender discrimination (Trinh et al., 2020). In surgery, for example, it has been pointed out that the allegedly greater precision of men, long used to motivate the strong closure of the specialty to women, was based on the exclusive availability of instruments based on the dimensional standard of the male hand (Ali et al., 2015). Barriers to women’s participation in certain specialties are thus identified in gender discrimination, but also in the possibility of being exposed to sexual harassment as early as the internship stage (Stratton et al., 2005).

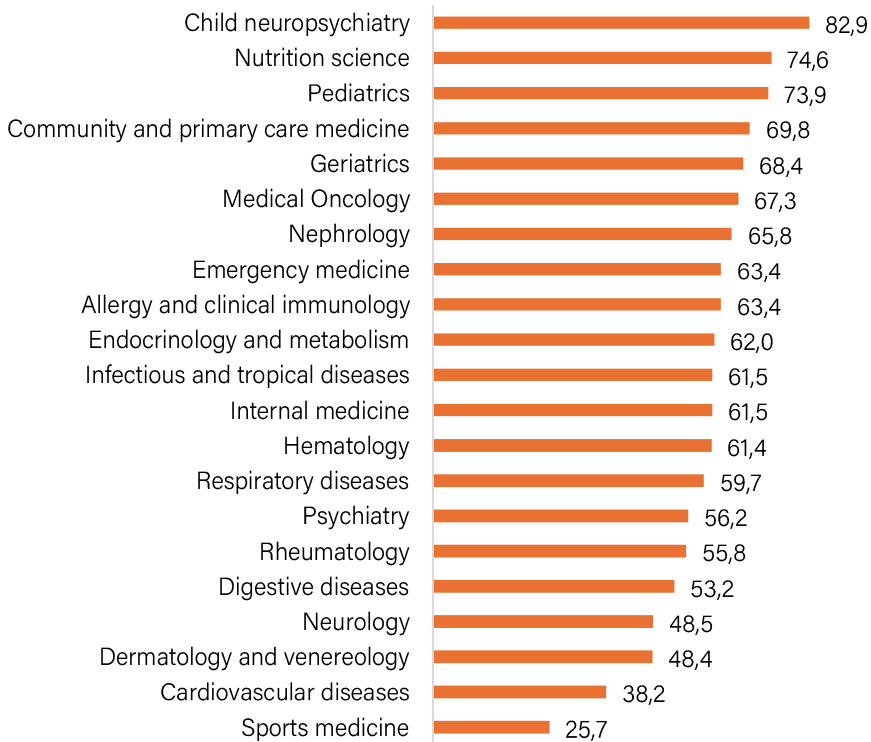
Finally, some strands of the literature attribute gender segregation to women’s preference for certain specializations that allow for an easier work-life balance (Levaillant et al., 2020), with flexible time management, less long shifts, and, in some cases, the possibility of part-time work.

## 2. ENROLMENTS IN ITALIAN SPECIALIZATION SCHOOLS: A GENDER ANALYSIS

Even in Italy, as research on individual specialties has already shown, women enrollment in medical schools has gradually increased over time, but gender-based occupational segregation remains prominent across medical specialties (Cavaletto, 2017; Giaschi, 2022).

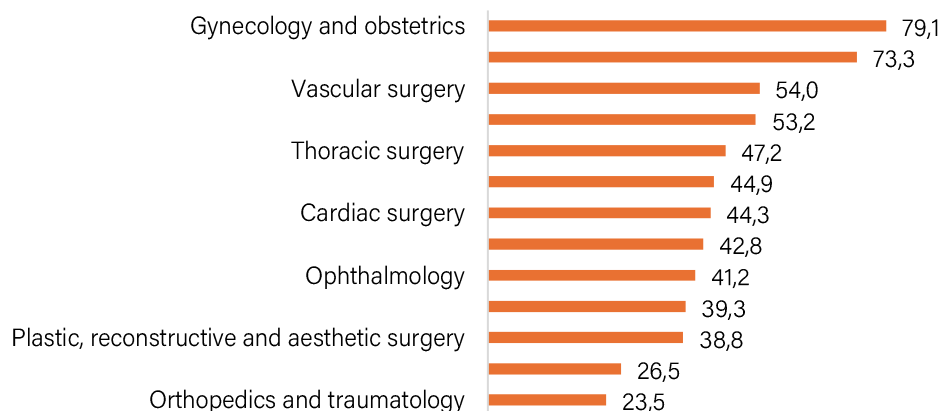
Analyses carried out on an original dataset – constructed on the basis of data provided by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research on enrolments in specialist medical schools between 1998 and 2020 – show a balanced starting situation in 1998 (51.5% female students) and a consequent growth of the female component until 2009, when it reaches 64.5%. Since 2010, however, there has been a partial increase in the proportion of male students, although they remain in the minority (43.4% in 2020). But this general trend is the result of a consistent process of horizontal segregation of training choices, which becomes clear when we look separately at the three areas into which graduate schools are classified: medical, surgical, and clinical services.

Fig. 1. Feminization rate in medical specialization schools – Medical Area: Italy 2020. Source: Authors' processing of data provided by the Ministry of Education, University and Research.



In the medical area, there has long been a clear predominance of female residents: from 2000 to 2020, the proportion of female residents never fell below 60 percent, and between 2007 and 2012 it even exceeded 70 percent. In 2020, as shown in Figure 1, only two of the specialties are predominantly male (sports medicine; cardiovascular diseases) and only two have a significant gender balance, with percentages between 45 and 55 percent (dermatology and venereology; digestive diseases). All other schools have more than 55 percent female enrollment, and seven have more than 65 percent female enrollment (child neuropsychiatry; pediatrics; nephrology; geriatrics; community and primary care medicine; nutritional sciences; medical oncology). Many of these reflect the *care* stereotype and offer a better work-life balance. This seems to confirm the reproduction of a cultural pattern in which women tend to gravitate toward specialties that are more *people-oriented* and more *plannable*, with a greater possibility of balancing work and family life (Davis and Allison, 2013).

Fig. 2. Feminization rate in medical specialization schools – Surgical Area: Italy 2020. Source: Authors' processing of data provided by the Ministry of Education, University and Research.

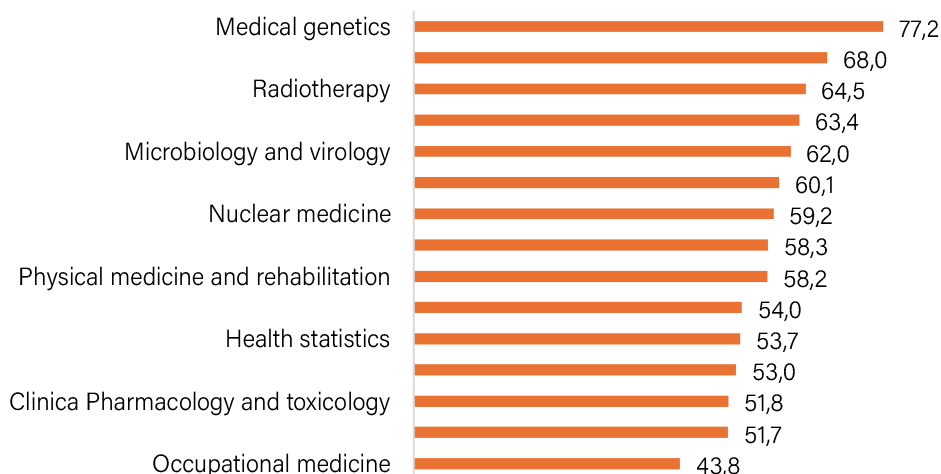


In the surgical area, the male component is still in the majority, although there has been a gradual increase in the female component over the years: in 1998, 31.1% of residents were women; in 2020, 48.1%. As Figure 2 shows, eight of the 13 schools in this area still remain predominantly male, while three are balanced (general surgery; vascular surgery; thoracic surgery). Finally, there are two specializations with a greater female presence: pediatric surgery and gynecology and obstetrics, which not coincidentally deal with the bodies of women and children.

The clinical services area shows a trend very similar to the medical area, with a female predominance: women account for more than half of the residents throughout the period 1998-2020, and more than 65% between 2006 and 2013. As Figure 3 shows, only occupational medicine shows a slight male imbalance; five specialties are gender-balanced (radiodiagnosics, hygiene and preventive medicine, forensic medicine, health statistics, and clinical pharmacology and toxicology), while all the others schools are predominantly female-dominated, with medical genetics and clinical pathology and clinical biochemistry being particularly prominent.

An analysis of the gender composition of medical schools therefore reveals a clear picture of horizontal segregation. There is a large majority of women in the medical area, which is the most feminized; a large presence of women in the clinical services area, which is also the one with the largest number of gender-balanced schools; and, finally, a male predominance in the surgical schools. Within the three areas, there remains a strong differentiation of educational choices based on social roles and gender stereotypes, which underscores the strong resistance of traditional segregation dynamics.

Fig. 3. Feminization rate in medical specialization schools – Clinical Services Area: Italy 2020. Source: Authors’ processing of data provided by the Ministry of Education, University and Research.



At the same time, the longitudinal perspective of the original dataset constructed from data provided by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research also allows us to appreciate relevant changes that have occurred in some specialties, rendering a dynamic and evolving picture. In the surgical

area, for example, the three currently most gender-balanced specialties – general surgery, vascular surgery, and thoracic surgery – were male-dominated in 1998 and have gradually rebalanced over time. Also in the surgical area, pediatric surgery was male-dominated in 1998 and has then become feminized over time. Other specialties that have had a similar process – from male-dominated to female-dominated, although with different intensities – are emergency medicine and respiratory diseases in the medical area; forensic medicine and radiodiagnostics in the clinical services area.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

In Italy, medical school enrollment has shown a gradual increase in female participation. However, gender-based segregation continues in specific specialties. Studies show a consistent overrepresentation of women in clinical services area and an underrepresentation in surgery area.

Gender stereotypes, organizational challenges, and societal expectations continue to shape medical specialization choices, limiting the diversity of talent in critical areas of healthcare. Addressing these barriers requires multifaceted approaches, including gender-sensitive policies (i.e. increasing access to training for women in surgery and providing supportive resources for men in caregiving-oriented fields), mentorship programs, and changes in medical training structures (Carbone et al., 2024).

By fostering inclusivity and supporting diverse career paths, the healthcare system can improve patient outcomes, as varied perspectives and skills lead to more comprehensive care solutions. Creating equitable policies that encourage a balance across all specialties would not only diversify medical teams, but also enhance patient care by bringing a variety of perspectives and skills into each field.

Future research should focus on uncovering and mitigating hidden biases in medical education and exploring the potential of technology to support gender inclusivity in physically demanding specialties. Developing policies that enable balanced representation across fields would not only serve the interests of medical professionals but also benefit the healthcare system as a whole.



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# EMERGING YOUTH, IDEAL AGES OF TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD AND STUDENTS' POST-DIPLOMA SCHOOL CHOICES

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This paper aims to understand the role played by perceived social norms regarding the ideal age of having the first child in shaping the post-diploma choices of students in the fifth class of high school. In most of the literature on the topic of school choice, in fact, the role of ascribed variables and students' academic performance in determining school paths and the school-university-work transition has been analyzed. This study, on the other hand, aims to hybridize two theoretical strands: the first studying the stages of the transition to adulthood according to the imperatives imposed by tacitly internalized social norms and the second analyzing the reproduction of inequality in education. On the one hand, social norms and, in particular, age norms, institutionalize life paths by stabilizing transition times and roles to adulthood (Tosi 2017; Billari & Liefbroer 2007). On the other hand, post-diploma school choice is a privileged moment of observation to understand the processes of production and reproduction of social and educational inequalities (Pitzalis 2012; Cataldi & Pitzalis 2014; Tarabini & Ingram 2018) because it is in the transition between school levels that social selection takes place (Boudon 1973). The post-diploma choice, therefore, represents a decisive step in the school career and, more generally, in the life of students because it constitutes an essential stage towards the transition to adulthood (Arnett 2000, 2007, 2016). This stage may be conditioned by social, value, and identity expectations that are linked to one's family environment and the opportunities offered by the territorial context to which one belongs (Cefalo & Scandurra 2021; Iammarino et al. 2018). The hypothesis on which this study is based is that, in addition to the role played by the ascribed variables, the social norms perceived by students regarding the ideal age of having their first child may influence their decision to continue their studies, all else being equal, given certain contextual conditions in which young people live and experience. In addition, due to greater social pressure for women, it is hypothesized that gender may have an influence on the perception of the ideal age at which to have the first child (Bergnéhr 2009; Bernhardt & Goldscheider 2006). The study used data from the first phase of the MAYBE project – 'Moving into Adulthood in uncertain times: Youth Beliefs, future Expectations, and life choices between changing social values and local policy in

initiatives', which interviews students before school graduation and has as its main objective to investigate the role of values and choices in the transition to adulthood. Particularly relevant in the study is the attention given to the regional context of reference, Lombardy, which is very heterogeneous in terms of youth services and initiatives offered at the local level. Through the application of logistic regression, the contribution shows how the ideal age perceived by students on a stage considered to be among the main ones for the transition to adulthood, such as having their first child, can orient the decision of the post-diploma school pathway.

social norms, school choice, transition to adulthood, emerging youth, local context

## INTRODUCTION

The contribution titled “Emerging youth ideal ages of transition to adulthood and students’ post-diploma school choices,” presented at the Third International Conference of the journal “Scuola Democratica”, is based on data collected through the MAYBE project. MAYBE’s primary goal is to analyze the role of values in the transition to adulthood and is funded by the Cariplo Foundation through the 2021 Social and Humanities Research Call<sup>1</sup>. This contribution analyzes a subsection of the MAYBE questionnaire administered to secondary school students in the Lombardy region, with the specific goal of investigating the influence of social norms on post-diploma school choices, particularly in their decision to enroll in university. The contribution fits within a theoretical framework that integrates two main lines of research: the first, on youth transitions and social norms, focuses on the stabilization of social behaviors based on the perceived ideal age for certain life choices; the second, on social and educational inequalities, explores the role of social origin and gender norms in educational choices.

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<sup>1</sup> The project’s Principal Investigator is Simona Guglielmi, and the research team includes: Ferruccio Biolcati Rinaldi, Rossella Bozzon, Eralba Cela, Maria Tullia Galanti, Nicola Maggini, Francesco Molteni, Giuliana Parente, Andrea Turkovic, Gonzalo Franetovic, Alice Sanarico, and Ester Bonomi.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ajzen's (1991, 2011) theory of planned behavior provides a useful framework for explaining how social norms influence individual intentions and behaviors. Specifically, age norms continue to regulate fertility intentions and other key life decisions (Billari & Liefbroer, 2007; Dommermuth et al., 2015; Mencarini et al., 2015). Age norms serve as a social reference for determining the most appropriate time for life decisions, such as having children or pursuing higher education (Tosi, 2017).

Simultaneously, studies on social and educational inequalities have demonstrated how social origin remains a significant factor in school decisions (Triventi & Trivellato, 2009; Argentin & Triventi, 2011; Argentin & Pavolini, 2020; Giancola & Salmieri, 2022). Students from families with high cultural capital are more likely to continue their studies at the university level, while those from less advantaged backgrounds tend to opt for shorter, vocational educational paths (Boudon, 1973; Pitzalis, 2012; Cataldi & Pitzalis, 2014). Gender inequalities are another key aspect: despite the "Gender Gap Reversal" (Rosin, 2012; Reeves, 2022), women remain underrepresented in some disciplines, such as STEM, and face difficulties in the labor market (Schwartz & Han, 2014; Huber & Paule-Paludkiewicz, 2023). Other studies (Pitzalis, 2012; Cataldi & Pitzalis, 2014; Tarabini & Ingram, 2018) have highlighted that the choices students make between educational levels are privileged moments of observation, as they allow researchers to see the social selection operated by the educational system based on pre-existing ascribed characteristics that inevitably shape students' educational paths (Boudon, 1973). Additionally, the post-diploma choice is a pivotal step in young people's transition to adulthood, as it marks the move toward autonomy and independence, often pushing them out of their family home for study or work reasons (Arnett, 2000, 2007, 2016).

## 2. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The analysis is based on two main hypotheses:

- H1: The perceived ideal age for having children influences students' propensity to enroll in university. Specifically, those who perceive an older ideal age are more likely to continue their studies compared to those who believe the ideal age for having children is younger.
- H2: A gender moderator effect is hypothesized: women are expected to be more influenced by social pressure related to motherhood, reducing their propensity to continue their studies compared to men.

### **3. METHOD**

The sample used in the analysis includes 2756 fifth-year high school students from Lombardy, selected through stratified sampling by province and school type. The independent variable is the ideal age to have the first child, divided into three categories: “up to 26 years,” “from 27 to 29 years,” and “over 30 years.” The dependent variable is the post-diploma school choice: enrolling in university or opting for vocational and technical training paths. The logistic regression model controlled for variables such as gender, family cultural capital, school type attended, grades in Italian and mathematics, perceived ease of finding work, and the presence of a university in the student’s home province.

### **4. RESULTS**

#### **4.1 Ideal age and post-diploma choice**

The logistic regression analysis confirms the first hypothesis (H1): students who perceive an older ideal age for having children are significantly more likely to enroll in university. Specifically, students who believe the ideal age for having children is over 30 years old are more likely to pursue higher education than those who perceive the ideal age to be under 26. This result aligns with studies by Dommermuth et al. (2015) and Mencarini et al. (2015), which highlight how social norms influence both fertility behaviors and educational choices.

The second hypothesis (H2), which hypothesized a gender moderating effect, was not confirmed. Although women generally have a higher propensity to enroll in university than men, the interaction between gender and the ideal age for having children was not statistically significant. This suggests that social pressure related to motherhood may emerge later, outside the school context, influencing life choices in subsequent stages.

Another interesting result concerns the different propensity of men to enroll in university: men who perceive a younger ideal age for having children are less likely to enroll in university, probably due to cultural norms that push them toward the role of breadwinner (the man who economically supports the family). This aligns with what Connell (2012) and Reeves (2022) reported regarding the traditional representation of gender roles.

Tab. 1. Logistic regression model regarding the relative propensity of students to enroll in university by ideal age group and gender

	Model 4		
	B	Sign.	Exp(B)
Costant	-4,166	0	0,016
Ideal age child + 30 yest old (Ref. Cat.)			
Ideal age child Until 26 years old	-0,354	0,015	0,702
Ideal age child From 27 to 29 years old	-0,069	0,625	0,933
Woman	0,212	0,225	1.24
Professional school (Ref. Cat.)			
Lyceum school	2,024	0	7.569
Technical school	0, 445	0	1.56
Cultural Capital High (Ref. Cat.)			
Cultural Capital Lower	-0,855	0	0,425
Cultural Capital Medium	-0,451	0,001	0,637
Italian Grades	0,389	0	1,477
Math Grades	0,194	0	1,214
Disagree/Don't know Ease find job	0,134	0,172	1,143
Province with University	0,170	0,082	1,185
Woman*Ideal age child Until 26 years old	0,265	0,254	1,303
Woman*Ideal age child from 27 to 29 years old	0,128	0,580	1,136
Observations	2593		

## 4.2 Gender and Territorial Inequalities

Although women are numerically predominant in university enrollments, as evidenced by the Gender Gap Reversal phenomenon, inequalities in access to certain disciplines and job prospects persist. Women are often

underrepresented in STEM disciplines, where men are more numerous, and they face challenges in translating academic achievements into equivalent career opportunities. This discrepancy may be explained by gender norms that regulate social expectations regarding professional and family roles (Schwartz & Han, 2014).

Territorial inequalities are another key factor. The results indicate that the presence of a university in the province of residence increases the likelihood of enrolling in university, highlighting how educational opportunities are unevenly distributed at the regional level. This phenomenon, also discussed by Cefalo and Scandurra (2021) and Iammarino et al. (2018), reflects the North-South divide in Italy, where access to higher education and the labor market is influenced by the socioeconomic context.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research confirm that social norms regarding age continue to play an important role in determining young people's educational choices. The perception of an advanced ideal age for having children is associated with a greater propensity to enroll in university, while those who perceive an ideal age under 26 tend to prefer shorter educational paths geared toward the labor market. Although women are generally more likely to enroll in university than men, the effect of the perceived ideal age for having children does not vary significantly by gender.

### Acknowledgements

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# THE CHOICE OF FIELD OF STUDY AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL: THE ANALYTIC APPROACH OF MAPPING 2.0 AND MAIN RESULTS

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This paper presents the main results from a survey highlighting the students' decision-making process at the end of upper secondary education, showing the propensities toward those continuing their studies at the tertiary level in the various subject fields and displaying the baskets of university choices. The aim is to reconstruct the network of future propensities among the various university fields of studies using Social Network Analysis, from data collected by the Mapping technique (Giancola et al., 2023). To achieve the goals, we developed a survey conducted between March and May 2023, in the city of Rome and the Lazio region. We collected 1953 cases of students who decide to pursue their studies at the tertiary level, from a total sample of 2860 respondents. The results support the validity of the technique in representing the distinct effects of ascriptive factors (e.g., social origin, gender) and school career variables (e.g., academic track choices) on decision-making. The power of inertia of ascriptive variables seems to be reconfirmed in both the decision to pursue university studies and among the various fields of tertiary study.

educational choices; social inequalities; mapping technique; social network representation

## INTRODUCTION

The topic of educational choices and transitions between different levels of schooling has gained significant attention within academic research. Starting with Bourdieu (1972) and Boudon (1979), through the models proposed by Mare (1980) Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) and Michelle Jackson (2013), social

research has highlights how educational choices represent ‘crucial decisions’ (as defined by Cavalli & Facchini, 2001). On the one hand, they can be considered as dependent variables influenced by ascriptive factors and macro-dimensions such as motivations and perceptions (Giancola & Salmieri, 2024) and shaped by educational systems and quasi-markets between institutions (De Feo & Pitzalis, 2017). In this sense, educational choices become a field for the production or reproduction of educational and social inequalities.

Once made, academic pathways act as an independent variable affecting educational success probabilities (e.g., completing education), cognitive test performance, educational aspirations, and occupational destinies (Giancola & Salmieri, 2024). These outcomes also depend on the chosen track—linked to formal tracking or institutional differentiation—and the socioeconomic and cultural composition of schools (Giancola & Salmieri, 2022a).

Educational choices are often quantified as decisions at a specific moment, such as continuing or dropping out, or selecting a type of school. However, they result from complex processes where ascriptive, motivational, institutional, and social dimensions intersect with experiential and contextual factors, including random influences. Informational capital—shaped by the extension and quality of social networks—also plays a key role. This approach emphasizes the process behind choices, considering multiple dimensions simultaneously. The “multiple contingencies” hypothesis (Giancola & Salmieri, 2022a) highlights how individual, family, contextual, and structural factors interact in decision-making, moving beyond mono-causal models. Despite this, the oversimplification persists, as it is difficult to define educational choices operationally beyond the current standards. Qualitative studies (Cavalli & Facchini, 2001; Romito, 2016) have successfully reconstructed the decision-making process through narratives, but their typifying nature limits broader applicability. Mixed-method approaches, given the complexity of decision-making, offer valuable insights with significant theoretical implications.

Psychological studies on educational choices combine cognitive processes—addressing beliefs and informational gaps—with socio-emotional aspects (Lindsay & Norman, 1983). Quantitative decision-making methods, used in behavioural economics (Kahneman & Tversky, 2013), provide empirical insights. Gati and Asher’s three-phase model (2001) views choices as a decomposed process (pre-screening, exploration, choice), though it is unsuited to survey-based approaches. For more in-depth studies, Krumboltz et al.’s tools (1986) enable critical analysis of alternatives. These approaches commonly

view choice as a process of complexity reduction.

Another research area comes from marketing (Hauser and Koppelman, 1979; Joiner, 1998), where groups of products or services are presented to consumer panels to analyse market structure, competition, niches for new products, and advertising strategies. Though specific to marketing, these methodologies are relevant for studying educational choices, especially in the context of higher education offerings, which are presented as discrete yet potentially related alternatives.

## **1. MAPPING EDUCATIONAL CHOICES: A METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL AND DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGIES**

The mapping tool for educational choices draws from decision psychology, marketing, and social research methods (Giancola et al., 2022). It is not just a data analysis technique but starts with data collection, using a questionnaire. Part of a larger survey given to broad populations; it presents students with a game-like format. Eighteen academic fields are listed, and respondents select one of four positions for each:

1. “Currently, it is your top choice”;
2. “Currently, it is among your alternatives”;
3. “Currently, you are not considering it”;
4. “Currently, you have already excluded it.”

The four positions<sup>1</sup> offer an ordinal variable for each item, characterized by ranked categories with unequal distance. Options i) and ii) represent the positive side of the choice spectrum, while the negative side is reflected by options iii) and iv). All respondents are required to provide an answer for each element included in the mapping. The survey requires supervision, and randomizing item order helps avoid bias. At the end, an open-ended question asks respondents for their top choice, probing or assess alignment with the decision clusters identified through multivariate analysis. Instead of Mare’s (1981) dichotomous transition model focusing on “continue/stop,” the filter question on post-secondary plans allows for uncertainty, enabling the use of the mapping tool. This approach, adopting a configurational technique, goes beyond Mare’s model and the critique by Breen and Yaish (2006). The goal is to

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<sup>1</sup> These response options are linked to the prompt: “Now I propose a kind of game. I will list several fields of university study. For each, you must indicate your level of interest and preference as follows...”

analyse how choices interact or exclude each other. Specifically, the aim is to identify “baskets” where elements are highly interchangeable. By identifying groups of simultaneously chosen or considered disciplines, researchers can infer whether the choice process is based on differentiation or similarity, reconstructing the cognitive process linking preferences across fields or splitting them.

Once identified and stabilized, these baskets form a choice framework. Using Bourdieu’s concept, this framework becomes a multidimensional field of attraction, repulsion, and group similarities and differences. Groups can then be characterized by various dimensions, such as ascriptive and motivational factors. To analyse blocks of homogeneous variables with ordered categories, two main strategies are used (Kim, 1975). The “ordinal” strategy uses Kendall’s or a concordance matrix for multivariate analysis, while the “parametric” strategy employs Pearson’s matrix. In the ordinal strategy, matrix cells are filled with item concordance percentages or association coefficients (sometimes Goodman and Kruskal’s Gamma coefficients). In the parametric strategy, cells contain linear association coefficients. When using concordance matrices, the cut-off level must be determined, which can be “high stake” or “low stake.” For example, with four ordered categories—“definitely,” “probably,” “unlikely,” “excluded”—the high-stake choice fills cells with the concordance percentage of fully concordant categories (“definitely”). The low-stake choice includes both fully and partially concordant categories (“definitely” and “probably”). These approaches differ in how they handle uncertainty, with the low-stake choice allowing more uncertainty.

A matrix is created from individual item intersections, with cells containing concordance percentages, association coefficients, or correlation coefficients. Depending on the content of the cells, different operations will be feasible, but the matrix will remain square with a null diagonal. Concordance or association values are typically lower in the high-stake approach compared to the low-stake one. The low-stake approach, by broadening the semantic range of choices, better reflects decision-making as a complexity-reducing process. Regardless of the chosen strategy, the matrix shows values for each variable pair (intersection row and column). In this study, both high-stake and low-stake matrices were generated using concordance percentages, Kendall’s Tau B, Gamma, Spearman’s Rank, and Pearson’s R. For analysing and graphically representing the data with progressive cut-off levels, various strategies can be integrated. Previous applications have used such matrices to create graphs via social network analysis (SNA) software (Trobia and Milia, 2011). Based on

geodesic distances, the graph concisely represents relationships and, through network analysis, identifies clusters based on reciprocal ties, as the matrix is “weighted.” This approach offers two advantages: it allows for increasing cut-off levels to dichotomize the matrix, showing tie persistence or disappearance, and provides an intuitive representation.

## 2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

We used original survey data collected between March and May 2023 in the Lazio region (N=2.860) through a typological sampling method (stratified by gender, type of school attended and geographical area).

In a first step, we distinguish post-school choices into ‘university choices’ and ‘work and training’ and observe the distributions by gender, social origin, macro track (type of school) and micro track (type of general track). In a second step, we focus on respondents who declared to continue their studies at university level (N=1953), whose fields of study were investigated using the “mapping” technique. Based on the university choices, we constructed a Kendall Matrix (concordances) and selected two cut-off levels: a high stake (full concordance of choices) and a low stake (full and partial concordance). Lastly, we adopted a configurational approach to explore, synthesise and represent the composition of choices, using the SNA (Social Network Representation) to increase the level of selectivity (high stake) of the analysis.

Tab. 1. Post-school choices by gender and family cultural capital

	GENDER		Total	Cultural Capital Index			Total
	Male	Female		Low Cultural Capital	Middle Cultural Capital	High Cultural Capital	
Work or professional training	43,5%	20,5%	32,0%	42,7%	32,4%	18,5%	31,7%
University or University and work	56,5%	79,5%	68,0%	57,3%	67,6%	81,5%	68,3%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Cross Table: Post school choice\*Gender. Valid Cases: 2838; Chi-Square: 171.350; gl 1; sign.000; Coeff.Contingency:.239. Cross Table: Post school choice\*Cultural Capital Index. Valid Cases: 2860; Chi- Square: 128.118; gl 2; sign.000; Coeff.Contingency:.4

Moving on to data analysis, starting from the setting of respondents' post-school choices included in the overall sample, we can observe (Table 1) that women pursue university studies to a greater extent than men (80% vs. 57%), and cultural capital (calculated as a linear combination of the educational qualifications and occupation levels of the students' parents) still strongly affects post-school expectations. This highlights the powerful influence of social differentiation, which not only affects academic results but also shapes students' beliefs about their prospects.

At the upper secondary level in Italy, typically at 16yo, students choose between three different schooling paths (general, technical, vocational). This choice turns out to be strongly influenced by students' social background and has a significant effect on their academic performance and future expectations. (Giancola, Salmieri, 2022a, 2022b). In fact, within the academic track, there is a further differentiation that we have referred to here as a micro-track. The data (Table 2) confirm a strong differentiating effect of the tracks, which is also clearly within the broader academic track. In this sense, the track choices once again appear to have a significant impact on students' prospects.

When analysing the subpopulation pursuing further education, the mapping technique shows a clear correlation between students' average family background and significant social variation across academic fields of study (Table 3). Likewise, as evidenced by the rate of feminization of choices, gender seems to introduce an additional level of distinction within this disparity.

To represent the mapping of university choices, we therefore used an SNA approach (employing two different clustering processes). "Architecture", "Physics-Mathematics", and "Engineering" form a distinct group (basket) in both graphs, representing the "hard sciences." Similarly, Economics, Finance, Statistics, Law, and Political Science constitute another group. The fields "Medicine," "Natural Sciences – Biology – Geology," "Healthcare Science," "Chemistry, Pharmacy," and "Agronomy – Veterinary" are recognized as a coherent cluster representing the "life sciences". In the Gamma-based graph, "Humanities and Philosophy" and "Foreign Languages/Translation" cluster apart from "Sociology/Social Work," "Education Sciences," and "Communication Sciences," unlike the other representation, all these fields of study converge into a single basket/group.

The convergence is therefore quite high, but the comparison between the two representations is more effective when using the convergence/affinity matrix based on the Gamma index. Table 4 shows the average social composition of the choice groups and their characterization in terms of gender balance (as well as the percentage of choices in each category).



Tab. 2. Post-school choices by school track

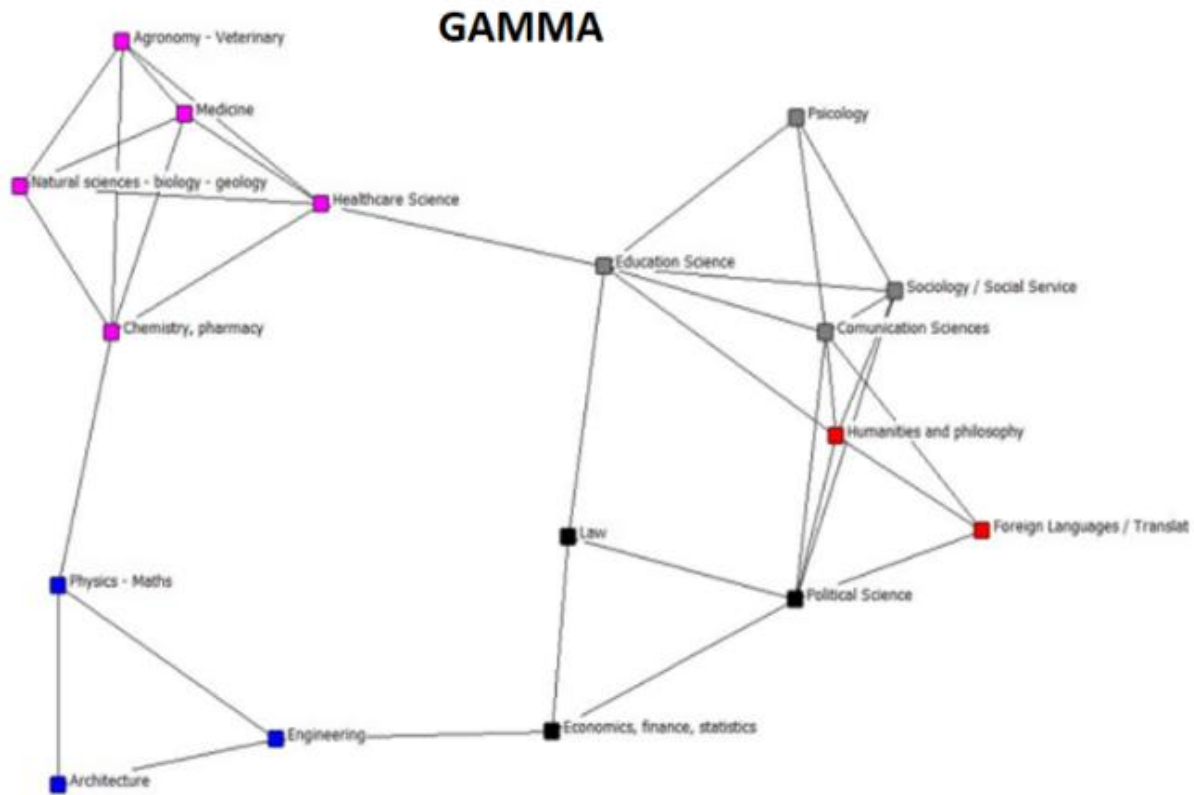
	School Track			Tot.	Micro Track					Tot.
	General track	Technical track	Vocational track		General	Scient.	Ling.	Social sc.	New school path	
Work or Professional training	11,1%	53,0%	69,7%	31,7%	6,9%	7,9%	13,1%	13,5%	18,2%	11,1%
University or University and work	88,9%	47,0%	30,3%	68,3%	93,1%	92,1%	86,9%	86,5%	81,8%	88,9%
Tot.	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Cross Table: Post school choice\*School Track. Valid Cases: 2859; Chi-Square: 762.233; gl 2; sign.000; Coeff.Contingency.207. Cross Table: Post school choice\*Micro Track. Valid Cases: 1615; Chi-Square: 29.870; gl 4; sign.000; Coeff.Contingency:.135.

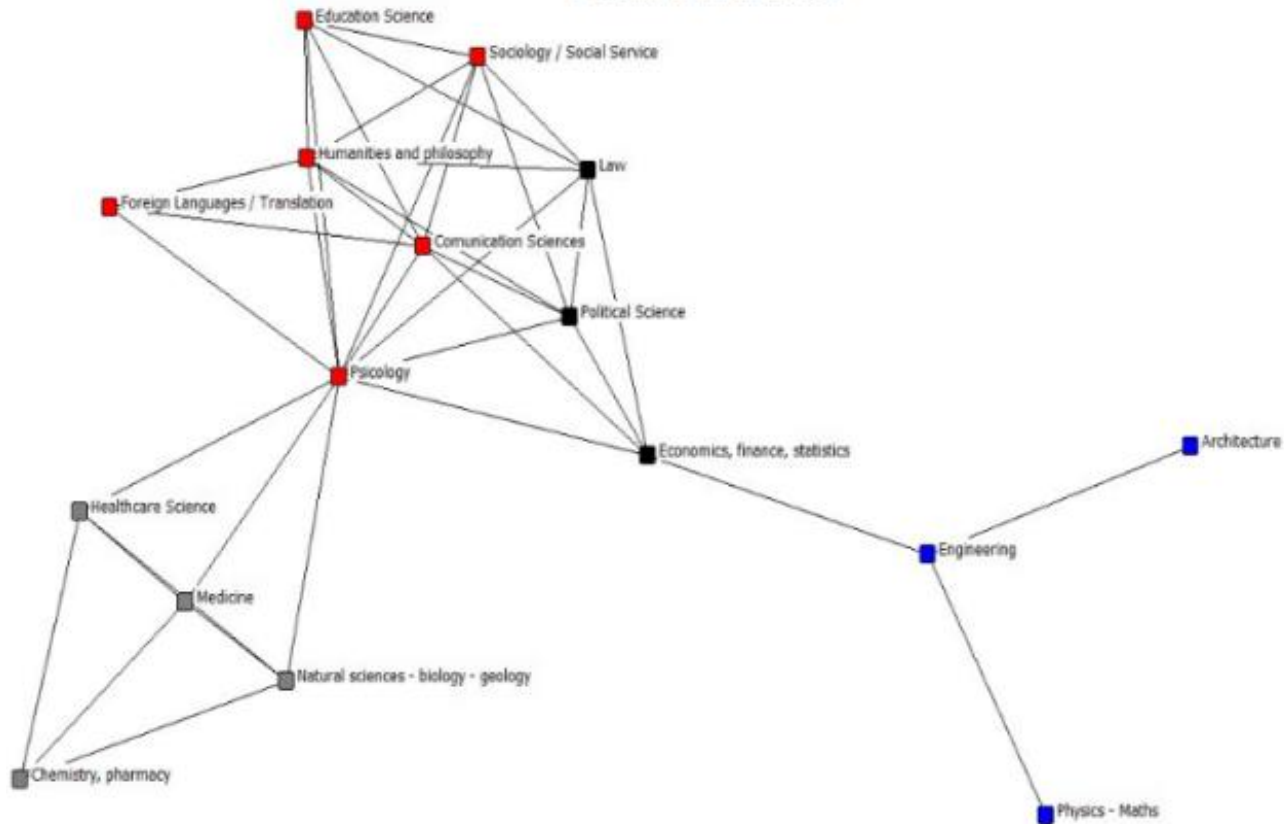
Tab. 3. Ranking of disciplinary choices by family background and feminization

	Average_bk	% tot_choices	Rate_feminization
Psicology	0,01	31,87	1,71
Economics, finance, statistics	0,12	24,84	0,51
Engineering	0,21	22,90	0,38
Humanities and philosophy	0,15	20,68	1,42
Medicine	0,16	20,17	1,50
Sociology/Social Service	0,04	19,18	1,72
Law	0,18	18,46	1,43
Natural sciences – biology – geology	0,11	18,24	0,93
Comunication Sciences	0,00	18,09	1,30
Healthcare Science	0,00	17,42	1,65
Education Science	-0,15	16,99	2,31
Foreign Languages/Translation	0,02	16,17	1,67
Chemistry, pharmacy	0,15	14,26	1,17
Political Science	0,16	14,10	0,85
Physics – Maths	0,33	13,49	0,50
Sports sciences	-0,17	12,33	0,35
Architecture	0,20	11,15	0,98
Agronomy – Veterinary	0,05	6,22	0,96

Fig. 1. Graphical representations of the combinations between choices.



# PERCENTAGE

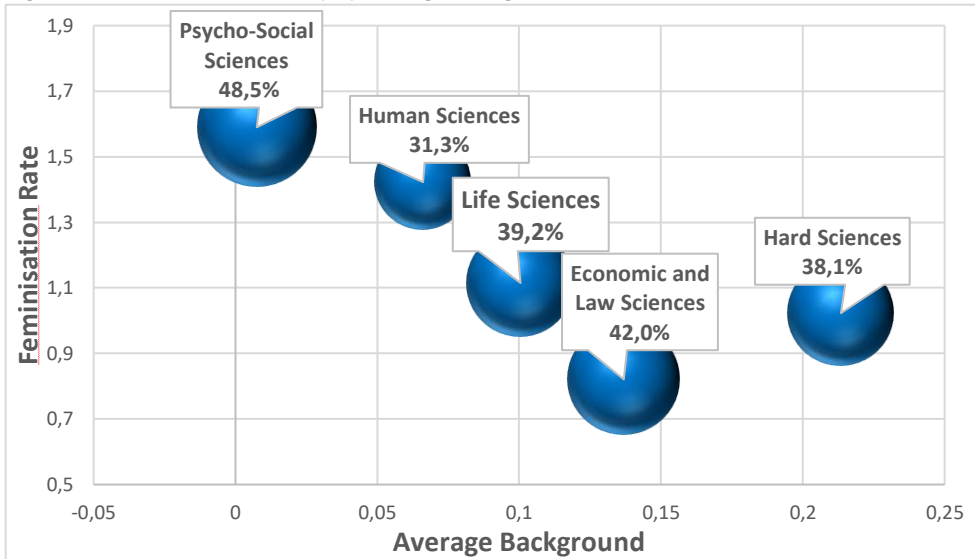


Tab. 4. Description of the choice groups, characterized by average background and feminization ratio.

	Average Background	% Tot choices	Rate feminization
Hard Sciences (mathematics, physics, architecture and engineering)	0,213	38,1%	1,023
Life Sciences (health professions, medicine, chemistry/pharmacy, natural sciences and agronomy/veterinary science);	0,101	39,2%	1,115
Human Sciences (literature and philosophy and foreign languages)	0,066	31,3%	1,422
Economic and Law Sciences (law, economics and finance and political science).	0,137	42,0%	0,821
Psycho-Social Sciences (sociology/social work; education sciences and communication sciences);	0,008	48,5%	1,590

By transforming this data into a graphical form (Fig. 2), we can observe that the psycho-social sciences show the highest female choice rate and low background. Humanities have a high female choice rate and medium background. Economic and law sciences are male dominated with a medium background, while hard sciences are characterized by high background and male preference. As in previous research, a substantial overlap in choices across various fields of study emerges at the end of upper secondary education. The mapping effectively outlines choice groups, which can be defined by background and ascriptive variables. We can also observe a strong feminization in psycho-social sciences (48.5% of choices/propensities) and humanities (31.3% of choices/propensities). There is also an increasing trend of female participation in life sciences.

Fig. 2. Choices of fields of study by average background and feminization ratio.



### 3. FINAL REMARKS

The research presented aimed to achieve a twofold aim. First, to develop an analysis that considers the stratification of ascriptive, and pathway factors related to post-graduation inclinations. Second, to interpret, through a configurational approach, how potential educational choices--reflective of different inclinations toward fields of study--overlap or diverge within the fourth- and fifth-year high school student population.

The analysis reconfirms how the inertia of ascriptive variables still plays a key role in binary transitions (e.g., whether to interrupt or continue studies). Once the decision to continue is made, it also influences the choice of different university disciplines. The analysis reconfirms how the inertia of ascriptive variables still plays a key role in binary transitions (e.g., whether to interrupt or continue studies). Once the decision to continue is made, it also influences the choice of different university disciplines. Overall, then, even in a context of expanding participation in tertiary education is to observe a systematic pattern of inequality. The use of the mapping technique at the data collection and analysis stage provides a clear trace of the decision-making process, reflecting a progressive and non-random reduction in complexity operated by individuals (Giancola et al., 2023). Analyses based on multiple associations between various choice options (or configurational approaches) show a composition of

baskets that is anything but random. Rather, they reflect a distinct internal logic, albeit sometimes nuanced. These groups, or “baskets of choice,” appear to be consistent in their inner structure, differentiated from each other and characterized by the various ascriptive and path dimensions considered in the analysis. The highlighted results offer broad insights for analysis and reflection in terms of policies to address inequalities and guide choices, which remain, today as in the past, crucial and urgent.

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# SCHOOL CHOICE AND JOB EXPECTATIONS OF ITALIAN PUPILS AFTER THE COVID19 PANDEMIC

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This study examines the relationship between school choice processes and Italian pupils' expectations in the post-pandemic educational landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified educational inequalities in Italy, where traditional factors like social origin, gender, immigration status, and disabilities interact with new health, economic, and digital elements. Using data from PISA 2022, released in December 2023, this research investigates how social background, school tracking, and the pandemic context influence students' educational and occupational expectations. The analysis employs regression models to examine how job expectations of Italian fifteen-year-old students are shaped by social origin, school choice, and track placement, while considering traditional determinants of educational inequalities. Building on previous research, this study aims to provide an updated picture of the Italian educational scenario following the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how educational pathways and social factors shape students' occupational aspirations in this transformed context.

tracking effect; educational choices; educational expectations; employment imaginaries; social inequalities.

## INTRODUCTION

The Italian educational system exhibits a late tracking mechanism (Benadusi & Giancola, 2014) whereby students make a critical educational pathway decision at age 14. This choice significantly impacts future career trajectories. The system's stratification creates substantial rigidity in inter-educational transitions (Benadusi & Giancola, 2014; Giancola & Salmieri, 2023).

Researches demonstrate a profound interconnection between social background, scholastic performance, educational tracking, and occupational expectations (Azzolini & Vergolini, 2014; Giancola & Salmieri, 2022; 2023). In

the Italian context, familial expectations and socio-economic background substantially influence early educational selection (ISTAT, 2024; Giancola & Salmieri, 2022). The secondary school selection represents a critical juncture where social and educational inequalities frequently become entrenched (Giancola & Salmieri, 2024).

The inadequacy of guidance policies, insufficiently developed to mitigate familial background influence on educational and professional choices, exacerbates inequality (Lee, 2014; Giancola & Salmieri, 2023; 2024). The most recent ISTAT report (2024) underscores the enduring impact of parental socio-economic and educational backgrounds on students' academic achievements and professional prospects, revealing persistent intergenerational inequality transfer (Pensiero et al., 2019).

Students' occupational expectations emerge through a complex, multidimensional process involving experiential and contextual factors (Neuenschwander & Hofmann, 2022). These expectations develop dynamically through interactions between educational experiences, familial expectations, peer relationships, personal interests, and individual identity trajectories (Gambetta, 1987).

Access to strategic information about educational and professional opportunities is crucial, intimately linked to the symbolic capital and social prestige associated with various occupations (Gambetta, 1987; Valdés, 2022; Jaoule-Grammare, 2024). In a socio-economic environment marked by uncertainty—particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic—these expectation-formation processes become increasingly complex (Giancola & Piriomalli, 2020), potentially intensifying structural mechanisms of social and educational inequality reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970).

This research critically examines the determinants influencing 15-year-old students' occupational perspectives through a comprehensive analysis of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 dataset<sup>1</sup>. The study seeks to interrogate the complex dynamics shaping youth trajectory development within a context of profound socio-economic transformation, exploring the intricate interplay between structural constraints and individual agency in educational decision-making.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite known cultural representation limitations in non-western contexts, PISA data effectively captures the Italian educational system's characteristics, particularly the connection between social origin's effect on track choice and subsequent learning outcomes.

## 1. SCHOOL CHOICE AND JOB EXPECTATIONS

Scholars on educational decision-making reveals a nuanced interplay of sociological determinants that transcend individual choice (Azzolini & Vergolini, 2014; Giancola & Salmieri 2023, 2024). Extending Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970) seminal theorisation, contemporary scholarship critically interrogates the structural mechanisms underpinning educational selection, demonstrating how social positioning and cultural capital fundamentally mediate academic trajectories.

Boudon's (1973) rational choice theory provides critical insights into the strategic dimensions of educational decision-making, establishing school choice as a profoundly socially embedded phenomenon. Gambetta's (1987) subsequent work elaborates this understanding by illuminating the complex mediating role of familial expectations. These expectations emerge not as neutral phenomena, but as deeply contextualised constructs intricately interwoven with social class dynamics, cultural capital, and familial aspirational networks.

School choice is a pivotal mechanism in structuring individual occupational aspirations and potential employment opportunities (Gambetta, 1987; Giancola & Salmieri, 2024). This process necessitates comprehensive analysis within a broader interpretative framework that encompasses multidimensional social representations of professional domains (Jaoule-Grammare, 2024).

Professional prestige emerges as a dynamic, contextually negotiated construct rather than a static attribute. Its configuration results from complex stratification processes mediated by historical, political, and economic contingencies (Jaoule-Grammare, 2024). Media and cultural productions play a decisive role in constructing and continuously reconfiguring professional hierarchies. This prestige dynamics operates as a sophisticated mechanism of social reproduction, actively contributing to the reinforcement of occupational stereotypes and the gendered stratification of professional domains (Jaoule-Grammare, 2024).

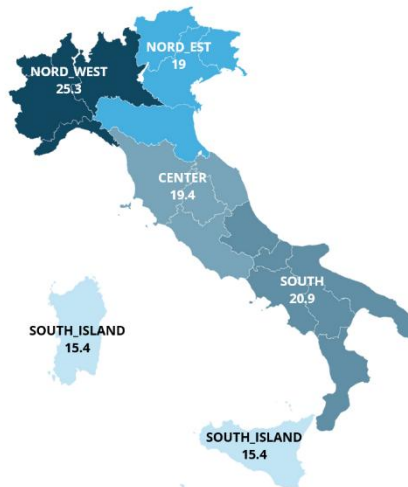
The stratification of professional prestige functions as a sophisticated symbolic mechanism through which social representations and hierarchical structures profoundly influence students' vocational expectations and potential trajectories (Giancola & Salmieri, 2024). The interplay between structural constraints and individual agency reveals the intricate ways in which social positioning fundamentally shapes educational and occupational imaginaries.

## 2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In this study, I utilized the 2022 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) data for Italy. The PISA assessment program evaluates the literacy, numeracy, and scientific competencies of 15-year-olds across more than 90 countries every three years. In the 2022 assessment, a total of 10552 students participated in Italy, which corresponds to 496263 pupils within the national context.

The analysis is organized into three distinct phases. The first phase involved data cleaning, during which I excluded participants enrolled in lower secondary schools and regional training programs. After refining the dataset, the final number of students considered for analysis amounted to 485016. The sample analysed consists of 51% girls and 49% boys. Among the students, 55.4% are enrolled in general track, 32.2% in a technical track, and 12.5% in a vocational track. Figure 1 illustrates the geographical distribution of pupils participating in the PISA assessment across five major geographical macro areas. To perform regression analysis, I developed dummy<sup>2</sup> variables that represent key demographic factors, including gender, immigration background, and geographical residence.

Fig. 1. Pupil's Distribution PISA for Italy 2022. Source: Author's elaboration of OECD PISA 2022 data.



<sup>2</sup> In regression analysis, a dummy variable (also known as indicator variable or just dummy) is one that takes a binary value (0 or 1) to indicate the absence or presence of some categorical effect that may be expected to shift the outcome.

The second phase comprised a binary logistic regression analysis focusing on the SISCO item, which pertains to respondents' expressions of having a "Clear Idea About the Future Job." This analysis aimed to identify the factors influencing the degree to which students possess clarity regarding their future vocational aspirations. In the third phase of the research, multiple linear regression models were developed employing the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) methodology, with the BSMJ index serving as the dependent variable. This analytical approach facilitated the examination of relationships between various independent variables and the BSMJ index, thereby illuminating the factors influencing the expected occupational status of Italian pupils participant in PISA2022. The BSMJ index was derived from responses to question ST329, wherein students specified their anticipated occupational roles at age 30. These qualitative responses underwent human coding in accordance with the ISCO-08 (International Standard Classification of Occupations) framework, resulting in the generation of the occupational classification index (OCOD3). Subsequently, the ISCO codes were mapped onto the International Socioeconomic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI), denoted as BSMJ. This index, provided by the OECD, serves as an indicator of students' expected occupational status, wherein higher scores correspond to elevated expectations of occupational standing.

### **3. DETERMINANTS OF STUDENTS' CAREER VISIONS AND OCCUPATIONAL EXPECTATIONS**

I decided to explore two key dimensions of students' job expectations. The focus is on whether students can articulate a clear vision of their future employment and what types of positions they envision for themselves in the job market.

Table 2 presents analyses regarding whether students have a clear idea of their future occupation at age 30, based on three progressive logistic regression models. The initial model examines gender, school address, and socio-economic background as key variables. This pivotal decision, influenced by the distinct curricular offerings, often leads students toward either extended academic pursuits or a more direct transition into employment post-secondary education.

In the first model, the findings underscore the significant effect that vocational school attendance has on students' employment expectations, enhancing their clarity regarding future job opportunities (Lee, 2014). The second model expands this analysis by integrating students' performance on reading

comprehension assessments. The final model further enriches the evaluation by including the geographical macro-area of residence, adding another layer of complexity to the investigation.

The outcomes from the third model reveal that geographical factors and the school track significantly influence students' perceptions of their professional futures. Specifically, residing in southern regions markedly increases the likelihood of having a clearer vision of one's career trajectory, with vocational school enrolment amplifying this clarity by a factor of 1.5. These findings illustrate the critical interplay between geographic context, educational choices, and the formation of employment expectations, highlighting the importance of these variables in shaping students' futures (Lee, 2014).

Tab. 2. Determinants of clear idea about the future job. Author's elaboration of OECD PISA 2022 data.

	Mod 1		Mod 2		Mod 3	
	SE	Exp(B)	SE	Exp(B)	SE	Exp(B)
Girls vs Boys	0,008	***1,03	0,008	***1,042	0,009	***1,044
Tecnical track vs General track	0,01	***0,761	0,01	***0,725	0,01	***0,791
Vocational track vs General track	0,015	***1,142	0,015	ns	0,015	***1,152
Non-Native vs native	0,014	**0,969	0,014	***0,962	0,014	***1,119
ESCS	0,005	***1,014	0,005	***1,041	0,005	***1,089
media pvalue reading			0	***0,999	0	***0,999
Nord_West vs Nord_Est					0,012	ns
Center vs Nord_Est					0,013	***1,319
South vs Nord_Est					0,014	***1,809
South_Island vs Nord_Est					0,015	***1,332
Constant	0,008	4,446	0,03	8,873	0,034	4,66

Table 3 presents analyses concerning the BJSM occupational expectation index, which indicates the professional position students envision for themselves at age 30. Model 1 presented in Table 3 indicates that the school track is the most influential variable affecting employment expectations. Notably, unlike the findings presented in Table 2, enrolment in a vocational institute is associated with a negative correlation with expected occupation (Lee, 2014). Conversely,

female students exhibit a positive correlation with higher employment expectations (Jaoule Grammare, 2024). Students from migrant backgrounds, both first and second generations, demonstrate higher employment expectations compared to their native counterparts. The ESCS socio-economic index is positively correlated with expected occupation index. As students' socio-economic status increases, there is a corresponding elevation in their career expectations (Giancola & Salmieri, 2024).

In Model 2 (Tab. 3), the inclusion of the average score in reading tests demonstrates a positive correlation with employment expectations, though it is less intense compared to the influence of school track, which remains the primary predictor of future expectations.

Furthermore, Model 3 (Tab) integrates the geographical variable, indicating that residing in the North-East of Italy correlates with higher employment expectations relative to other macro-areas in the country. Within this model, school tracking is reaffirmed as the most significant influencing factor, while enrolment in professional institutes is associated with a statistically significant negative correlation with employment expectations. Notably, both female gender and non-native status persist in showing a positive correlation with higher employment expectations.

Tab. 3 Determinants of student's expected occupational status. Authors' elaboration of OECD PISA 2022 data.

	Mod 1		Mod 2		Mod 3	
	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B
Constant	0,057	68,941	0,22	52,448	0,253	53,32
Girl vs Boy	0,064	***5,43	0,063	***5,227	0,063	***5,177
Tecnicl track vs General track	0,075	***-9,978	0,076	***-8,839	0,077	***-8,948
Vocational track	0,102	***-22,735	0,106	***-20,33	0,107	***-20,403
Non-Native vs native	0,106	***3,803	0,105	***4,03	0,108	***4,045
ESCS	0,037	***2,803	0,038	***2,181	0,039	***2,18
media pvalue reading			0	***0,032	0	***0,032
Nord_West vs Nord_est					0,094	***-0,726
Center vs Nord_est					0,1	***-1,228
South vs Nord_est					0,102	***-0,494
South_Island vs Nord_est					0,109	***-0,732

It is important to note that these regression models draw upon student perception data. Whilst such data cannot determine outcomes definitively, it illuminates key dimensions that may facilitate support for students in their educational aspirations and life trajectories.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings of data analysis underscore a persistent trend where students hailing from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds demonstrate aspirations for higher socio-economic status. This observation, while seemingly intuitive, warrants a deeper examination of its implications for the perpetuation of socio-economic and educational inequalities.

One important observation about vocational school students is that, although they have a clear vision of their careers, they often envision limited paths for their social and professional advancement. In fact, it appears to create a self-limiting effect, where the clarity of their professional goals constricts their imagination regarding personal and professional growth (Lee, 2014).

Students with first and second-generation migrant backgrounds tend to have significantly higher expectations than their native peers. Although the educational context and labour market dynamics often perpetuate structural ethnic inequalities, students in upper-secondary education already reflect the results of a complex selection process that occurs during school guidance. This selection process encourages them, at least in terms of discourse, to envision opportunities for upward social mobility through future employment prospects. attitudes towards career trajectories (Nerli Ballati & Palmiero, 2024).

Girls demonstrate higher occupational expectations, which may be attributed to different forms of gender socialisation, including family and school expectations that encourage girls to perform better in both academic and professional contexts. (Connell, 2011; Giancola, Colarusso, 2020).

The insights presented in this work should guide our ongoing research into educational, youth, and employment policies that aim to address disparities related to social backgrounds, particularly in the areas of school selection and career aspirations. The findings of this paper should help combat the information barriers that impact students' career expectations and their decisions regarding educational investments. These information barriers are systematically linked to social stratification, resulting in persistent disadvantages that correlate directly with students' socioeconomic backgrounds (Valdés, 2022). Additionally, the landscape of guidance policies in



Italy poses challenges, notably the lack of adequate national and local support to help young individuals navigate their educational and career transitions effectively.

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Stream B

# **EPISTEMOLOGIES AND DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES**

# UNSCHOOLING IN ITALY: NAVIGATING IDEALISATIONS, CONSTRAINTS, AND DE-COLONISING PROMISES

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Unschooling represents a philosophy of education that challenges conventional paradigms, advocating for learner autonomy and a departure from institutionalised schooling. This paper offers reflections informed by research insights and framed within an anthropological perspective, focusing on the unschooling experience in Italy. It explores the tensions between the idealised principles of unschooling and the realities of their implementation. Drawing on mixed-methods research, the study highlights how home-educating families navigate “pedagogic compromises” as they reconcile their aspirational visions with sociocultural and institutional constraints. Key challenges identified include the deschooling of entrenched behavioural patterns, negotiating societal integration, and meeting formal assessment requirements. Rather than interpreting these compromises as shortcomings, the paper reframes them as dynamic and generative spaces for educational transformation. The findings suggest that the potential of unschooling lies not in rigid ideological adherence, but in creative adaptations that foster personalised learning, challenge dominant epistemic frameworks, and advance more equitable educational possibilities.

Unschooling, Home education, Educational transformation, Child-led learning, Deschooling

## 1. OUR POSITIONALITY: THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL GAZE ON UNSCHOOLING

Our reflections on the phenomenon of homeschooling are framed within an anthropological perspective. Adopting an anthropological gaze on the world of

schooling and unschooling means engaging in an analytical approach rooted in a well-defined intellectual stance. This approach consists primarily in denaturalising educational representations and practices, that is not taking them for granted, obvious, necessary but subjecting them to a critical reflection. Throughout its long history, anthropology has demonstrated, through field research conducted in diverse contexts, that all educational practices—without exception—are the result of specific historical dynamics, expressing contextual visions of:

- Childhood (Who is the child? Who is the adult? What is their role on the educational scene?);
- Society (What is the task that society entrusts to “education”? What place does it assign to it?);
- Knowledge (What is to be taught? How?);
- Ethics (What is right and what is not to be taught?).

By adopting this perspective, anthropology does not judge an educational system as “good” or “bad”. Instead, it applies a critical and deconstructive lens to every form of experience that societies define as “educational”. This approach facilitates critical distancing, allowing for a nuanced examination of both schooling and unschooling as historical constructs that warrant interrogation.

Starting from this distancing and reinforced by this distancing, anthropology observes that the proposals brought by unschooling into the space of public discussion are particularly interesting because they question an entire system and an entire educational ideology (the western school system) today deeply in crisis.

We therefore believe that understanding these experiences and giving them a voice, without celebratory emphasis but with a critical gaze, can be an important moment for the construction of a generative dialogue of awareness and social transformation. Such dialogue can foster collective awareness and contribute to social transformation. Anthropology can provide an interpretive framework to listen to and understand diverse educational perspectives, which may offer innovative responses to the global educational crisis (UNESCO, 2021).

For instance, overcoming the process of “othering” alternative forms of education (as suggested by Pattison, 2018) requires acknowledging the potential of unschooling to radically deconstruct the mainstream educational system. This model raises critical questions about:

- Age-appropriate norms, which often enforce uniform and standardised learning rhythms, sidelining individual developmental trajectories.
- Power dynamics inherent in teacher-student relationships, frequently structured within hierarchical and authoritarian models.
- The symbolic violence embedded in traditional school curricula, which tends to marginalise diverse voices and perspectives.
- The role of education as a tool for assimilation into neoliberal and capitalist societal models, prioritising competition and productivity.

However, we encourage a critical reflection on unschooling while avoiding its uncritical celebration.

## **2. RESEARCH-INFORMED INSIGHTS: UNSCHOOLING BETWEEN ASPIRATIONS AND COMPROMISES**

A recent mixed-methods study (Chinazzi, 2024a; Chinazzi & Fensham-Smith, 2024) conducted within a doctoral programme spanning from 2020 to 2024, has provided insights into the Italian homeschooling and unschooling landscape. The study combined ethnographic and netnographic fieldwork (Bove & Chinazzi, 2023); semi-structured interviews and surveys with home-educating parents and other key informants.

Unschooling is often viewed as a liberating approach to education, emphasising child-led learning and the importance of nurturing a child’s natural curiosity and interests (Gray & Riley, 2013, 2015; Riley, 2020). It can be defined “as learning without a curriculum, where the child directs and facilitates the learning” (English et al., 2024, p. 144).

In Italy, despite occasional references to unschooling within the broader literature on home education, no dedicated empirical investigation has yet examined this approach in depth. Existing ministerial records (see Chinazzi & Fensham-Smith, 2024) currently treat home-based learning (“istruzione parentale”) as a monolithic category, failing to differentiate between its diverse philosophical approaches and pedagogical practices. Our research insights suggest that unschooling is embraced by a small but growing number of parents who advocate for a more personalised and flexible educational experience, free from standardised curricula and assessments. However, our research also revealed a nuanced reality, where unschooling often exists more as an aspirational ideal than a pure practice. Families frequently engage in what might be termed a “pedagogic compromise”, balancing their educational ideals with

practical considerations. Many parents reported experiencing a dissonance between their envisioned ideal model of (home-)education and the realities of their day-to-day practices. Parents engaging in home-education practices navigate between structured and unstructured approaches, creating what might be termed a hybrid educational space that responds to both ideal aspirations and contextual considerations.

Through an analysis of parent narratives, we identified different sources of “pedagogic compromises” that define the gap between ideal aspirations and practical realities:

- The deschooling challenge,
- Societal integration concerns and mainstream expectations,
- Assessment-driven adaptations
- Other contextual, pragmatic, and personal reasons-

A very common challenge intrinsic to the transition to the home-education practice, especially within unschooling approaches was the need to overcome one’s own interiorised behavioural patterns and ingrained convictions about education. In open-ended survey responses, parents reported that to “homeschool” (and particularly to “unschool” children) entails “leaving what is safe and familiar”, “deschooling ourselves as educators”, “a change of mindset”.

The deschooling process is said to be essential for parents transitioning to the unschooling approach, requiring them to move beyond the traditional teaching-learning paradigm. This process involves letting go of the conventional understanding of education as a one-way transmission of knowledge from teacher to passive learner. Instead, deschooling emphasises a more flexible, child-centred approach that recognizes the importance of self-directed learning and individual autonomy. Despite identifying as “unschoolers” or not, home educators in Italy often prefer to describe themselves as “facilitators” of their children’s learning rather than traditional “teachers”. This perspective aligns with Ivan Illich’s assertion (1971) that learning should not be a top-down process where knowledge is transmitted from an authority figure to a passive learner. Instead, Illich advocates for a more decentralised and individualised approach to education, emphasising that learning is a complex process driven by personal curiosity and exploration. However, this change of mindset is not straightforward, as the following quotes illustrate:

I've noticed it in many families, also among those who recently embraced this choice: it's instinctive to replicate what you experienced in school, like textbooks and exercises. However, if you can be open and let the child express their passions, anything is possible from that passion. (I., former home-educating mother, phone interview, 22nd April 2022)

Deschooling oneself also requires overcoming the fear of nonconformity: as many participants reported, the home-education decision may be challenging due to the prejudices of relatives, friends, and society. It requires individuals to navigate the uncertainty that arises from embracing less-travelled routes:

We must be able to inhabit a space that breaks free from conventional practices. This means embracing uncertainty. (C., home-educator, video interview, 19th October 2022)

The second source of compromise stems from home-educators' awareness of broader societal expectations and the potential challenges their children might face in conventional settings. This compromise reflects a deeper tension within the unschooling movement: the challenge of maintaining educational autonomy while preparing children for potential integration into mainstream society. Parents often find themselves balancing their critique of traditional education with pragmatic considerations about their children's future social and academic inclusion. As one mother explained:

I have always integrated a bit of everything [pedagogic approaches], so that the child – if she returned to the traditional system – would feel comfortable. (...) I am open and flexible because I realised that (...), eventually, the reality they find themselves in might be different, and they could feel uncomfortable. (...) I certainly didn't want to cause them any issue. So, I can say that I actually used a traditional method. (P., former home-educating mother, phone interview, 5th October 2022)

Another recurring type of compromise revolves around the annual assessment requirements in the Italian system. Recent legislative changes have introduced annual mandatory assessments for home-educated children, raising concerns among home educators about the implications for their pedagogical autonomy and the essence of home education. The debate surrounding annual assessments for home- and unschooled students in Italy reflects a complex intersection of educational freedom, accountability, and the evolving legislative landscape. While for some home-educators, annual assessments serve as a valuable tool for accountability, for others they conflict with the fundamental



principles of educational freedom, undermining the individualised learning experiences that home education, and particularly unschooling, is designed to promote. Critics argue that such requirements could lead to a bureaucratic oversight reminiscent of traditional schooling, which many families sought to escape by choosing home education. As one mother expressed her frustration:

These exams make no sense at all, given that the choice to home-educate, at least for me personally, is to distance my children from the whirlwind of traditional school that has only caused harm. (Home-educating mother, open-ended survey response, Autumn 2022).

For most parents, however, these intrapersonal, interpersonal and other pragmatic factors appear to intertwine dynamically over time, influencing their evolving decision-making processes as home-educators.

Some home-educating parents risk romanticising unschooling as an idealised but seemingly unattainable approach, which paradoxically reinforces traditional educational binaries. This idealisation can inadvertently frame unschooling as a purely oppositional or marginalised practice, rather than recognising its transformative potential (Romero, 2021).

Rather than viewing these compromises as failures of unschooling ideals, we propose understanding them as generative tensions that reveal both the possibilities and limitations of educational transformation within existing social structures. As one participant noted about their adaptable approach:

What I see in Italy is truly a huge variability; there are very subtle nuances even within the same group...When it comes to studying together, it often happens that we may tackle some topics together, so we blend our learning methods. (A., home-educating mother, phone interview, 22nd April 2022).

This blending of approaches suggests that the decolonising potential of unschooling might lie not in pure implementation of ideals, but in the creative adaptations and resistances that emerge through practice. The “pedagogic compromise” becomes not merely a concession to conventional education but a space for negotiating new educational possibilities within existing constraints. Rather than being seen as an isolated and fixed “alternative”, unschooling can be positioned as a dynamic philosophy that engages with ongoing discussions. This perspective encourages a re-evaluation of parents’ daily practices, inviting them to consider, as anthropologists do, that the current school model is not the only viable option.

### 3. FINAL REMARKS

Unschooling emerges as a “radical” pedagogical approach and philosophy that fundamentally challenges not only the content of traditional education but also its underlying assumptions. It fundamentally challenges conventional educational epistemologies by explicitly dismantling the binary logic that equates education exclusively with institutionalised schooling. By rejecting standardised curricula and imposed learning structures, unschooling compels a profound reconsideration of entrenched social and cultural narratives regarding learning, childhood, and knowledge production—resonating with the anthropological habitus of deconstruction.

In other words, unschooling invites a reevaluation of educational paradigms by emphasising individualised learning experiences that respect children’s autonomy and promote lifelong curiosity while simultaneously calling into question the societal norms that govern traditional education, including epistemic authorities, conventional methods and content of instruction.

The Italian unschooling experience reveals some practical challenges of implementing non-conventional educational approaches: its implementation requires navigating a delicate balance between ideals and constraints stemming from sociocultural norms and regulatory frameworks. Families reported that they navigate these compromises because it is difficult to “deschool” oneself and to confront ingrained assumptions about education. This process also involves challenging societal prejudices and opinions regarding non-traditional learning, which can be particularly daunting in a culture that largely values conventional educational pathways. Additionally, parents must prepare their children for the expectations of conventional social and academic life, including annual exams, which can create tension between the unschooling philosophy and the demands of the broader educational system.

The challenge for researchers and practitioners alike is to recognise how these compromises might strengthen, rather than weaken, unschooling’s potential for educational transformation. By acknowledging and working within these tensions, families may create educational spaces that are both responsive to individual needs and cognizant of broader social realities.

Aligning with the critical unschooling praxis proposed by Romero (2021), unschooling should be repositioned from a purely “reactive” stance to a proactive, generative educational philosophy. This perspective emphasises that unschooling is not solely driven by “push” factors—such as dissatisfaction with

traditional schooling—but also incorporates “pull” factors that embrace the intrinsic motivations and interests of learners. In this perspective, unschooling can be meaningfully conceptualised as a philosophy that challenges traditional educational paradigms while promoting a holistic approach that emphasises decolonisation, student agency, community engagement, and social justice. By moving beyond civics and citizenship, unschooling may provide a lived experience of democracy for young people (English et al., 2024). As the most “radical” branch of homeschooling, unschooling serves as a catalyst for questioning conventional practices and exploring alternative, more flexible, humane, and personalised approaches to education, potentially contributing to the discourse around equitable educational opportunities (Chinazzi, 2023; 2024b).

The unschooling pathway, as the most flexible approach within home education, is not a linear, predetermined trajectory. Intrinsically open-ended in its epistemological and ontological premises, it emerges as a fluid and dynamic threshold where families continuously negotiate and reconfigure educational boundaries striving to improve their own practice—a paradoxical “gateless gate” (Lees, 2011). This ongoing negotiation highlights the potential of unschooling to serve as a generative and thought-provoking space for educational transformation. However, to fully understand unschooling’s actual implementation and its potential impact within the Italian context, further research is essential.

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# CRITICAL UNSCHOOLING: PRACTICING UNSCHOOLING AND A CLOSER LOOK

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If we look at Italy, unschooling experiences are not very numerous, but they exist. There are some very recent publications that testify that the choice of natural learning can also be achieved in our country. On this occasion, I would like to provide some evidence of what our children have been experiencing for 9 years now. This is about taking a look at the evolution of children, now teenagers, who have been gifted this opportunity to grow through self-guided learning. Thanks to this opportunity that unschooling gave us, as parents, we were able to observe some common characteristics in both of our children. The main characteristics that emerge are: passion, perseverance, dedication and determination in achieving certain goals that everyone sets for themselves. Furthermore, learning in this way allows the notions, experiences and knowledge of certain skills to take root over time in the young person. Additionally, self-guided learning respects the physiological times of growth. We can testify that this experience of unschooler parents is a challenge to the “colonial” conception that children can only learn if they are taught, and can only grow to be fully capable adults by following the path that society has defined for them.

Critical unschooling; choice-based learning; lifelong learning; self-determination; decolonisation

## INTRODUCTION: UNSCHOOLING IN ITALY

If we consider Italy, critical unschooling experiences are not very numerous, but they exist. There are some very recent publications which open minds to this possibility of self-guided learning (Piffero, 2019; Vezzola, 2020). Writings that testify that the choice of natural learning can also be achieved in our country.

It is important to underline, as Nunzia Vezzola specified in her book *Natural learning. Homeschooling and unschooling*, as

Theoretical definitions are not sufficient in most cases to clarify how this path works and how it is implemented, at least for us adults who only know school as a way of acquiring knowledge. (p. 153)

Recently, the national association LAIF (the association for family education) carried out a study to understand the variety of learning methods that arise within a choice such as parental education. Among the various experiences there is unschooling, in all its nuances.

The study proposed a survey that took place from Tuesday 30 April to Sunday 19 May 2024. It is a “photography” of unschooling in Italy in May 2024. The results of the survey confirm the presence of unschooling experiences in our country, as well as the variety of these experiences.

The survey saw the participation of an interesting number of families and can give a good overview of the multitude of experiences in Italy. The study received 158 responses, relating to each child in parental education. Of this total, 28 children practice unschooling, equal to 17.7% of the responses (57,1% radical unschooling, 32,1% critical unschooling).

The majority of children in unschooling are in the age groups 6-10/11-13 (46.4%, 39.3% respectively). Most have never gone to school (71.4%).

Our family is part of this 17.7% and it seems important to us to give our testimony in this regard for our country.

In any case, all over the world, theories and experiences in this regard energize and encourage parents who choose to experiment with this path for the growth of their children. A path that is sometimes not easy to implement in practice in our scholastic society. But when you manage to live it, it is a fascinating experience of decolonization for parents and children because each experience is unique and inimitable as is each child, each person. Uniqueness also explained in the books of John Holt, for example *How children learn* (1982).

One of the great advantages of homeschooling or unschooling is the ability to personalize the learning experience. It allows for tailored education that meets the specific needs and interests of each individual student. Also Unschooling is the approach that emphasizes the child’s interests and passion. It allows for a more self-directed learning experience, where the child takes the lead in deciding what and how they want to learn. It promotes curiosity, exploration and independent thinking.

## **THE CHOICE OF UNSCHOOLING: A DECOLONIZING PATH FOR EDUCATION**

On this occasion, I would like to give concrete testimony of what our family, and in particular our children, have experienced and are still experiencing for the past 9 years: since we chose parental education in its unschooling form. It's not about explaining the "typical day" as families are often and trivially asked by those who are curious. It will be a close look at the evolution of children, now adolescents, who are having this opportunity for growth through critical unschooling which is leading them towards a vision of the world that is aware and freer from the influences of the colonization of education.

Like many other families in the world, our adventure did not begin with a priori prejudices against traditional school learning, but following experiences that led us to deep reflections and changes in our family life. We have 3 children who are currently: 7, 15, 17 years old. I will mainly bring here the experience lived by the eldest children which allows us to see the path with a long-term vision.

We didn't intentionally start out with unschooling. The two older children (currently 15 and 17 years old) have experienced public school (the girl for the first 3 years of primary school, the boy for 1 year). Unfortunately, they showed signs very early that they were not comfortable in that environment. Trying to better understand what was happening, we saw that their learning times and methods were not respected. As we know, everyone is different and also has different ways of learning. The emotional maturation of children itself has its own different timing from one child to another. (John Holt, "How Children Learn", 1982)

Without blaming anyone, we simply chose another way to personalize their growth path. We therefore decided to do parental education (the children were 9 and 7 years old respectively). The beginning, I'm talking about the first months, was quite influenced by the school method with a fairly classic basis, more or less following the outline of topics and disciplines by class trying to make everything more captivating and understandable for each of them. However, we soon noticed the limits of a formal modality that is still triggered from the outside, whether parent or educator. If it wasn't the right time, a topic of interest to the child, a suitable way of learning... things didn't move forward and weren't integrated or experienced with enthusiasm. We can learn about this from André Stern, who writes "Tous Enthousiastes" and shows us the enthusiasm to learn with heart.

Not even a practical workshop (creative, manual activity...) which is more playful, if it is not deeply desired by the children and is imposed, although not

purely didactic, may not be productive. Experiencing it as an imposition is not internalized as a beautiful experience. See the example of a creative workshop of decorative objects for Christmas that is offered to various children: some will be enthusiastic about it, if for others it was not of interest to them they will be bored... “Any type of teaching that has not been requested by the learner is likely to end up impeding and preventing learning.” (Holt, 1989).

By taking these first steps in parental education and being able to closely observe the dynamics that were created in the children, we noticed that there were many variables from one child to another. This pushed us to inform ourselves, to study how to best give a voice to the children themselves in order to make this journey of learning and personal growth pleasant and fruitful in such a delicate moment as childhood. We therefore decided to give more trust in our children and their innate abilities, letting their interests be the basis of their motivation and create their personal path. Daniela Lucangeli often talks in her conferences about the intrinsic motivation for learning.

As highlighted by the study carried out by LAIF, the vision that supports the choice of unschooling is mostly (60.7%) linked to the desire to offer children free, unstructured and predominantly experiential learning. 32.1% add to this the commitment to decolonizing education.

## **THE EXPERIENCE OF CRITICAL UNSCHOOLING BRINGS SEEDS OF DECOLONIZATION IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **Natural rhythms and self motivation**

Starting the unschooling experience, in our family we were able to notice how, even as young children and despite being free, the children soon followed their natural rhythms throughout the day. A sort of self-regulation was triggered. Even though they were very different, a boy and a girl, each of them in their own way, organized their days between times of rest, play, sport and commitments (deepening a passion, studying or helping with small household chores). What we have observed is that when things are not imposed (whether at an educational level or for daily activities), the need to carry out actions, research... that give satisfaction emerges spontaneously in children. It is evident that these innate needs for knowledge, for challenging oneself and for creating are already present in the person themselves from an early age.

Small and large rituals are part of everyday life, they contribute to the construction of this famous “comfort zone”, wrongly criticized. Because the child only sets out to discover the vast world and meets something new



when he or she has a home base. And it is his rhythms and rituals, as well as those of the adults around him, that offer him this space of tranquility and security, which gives him the freedom and enthusiasm to explore. The child is, by nature, a giant of potentials, and the more we trust him, the more he will be able to express them. Let's forget our expectations and our preconceived ideas, change our perspective and let ourselves be guided by the child, for more serene parenting. (Stern, 2021)

For example, our son has always set himself goals in the activities he is interested in such as playing or sports: his passion for basketball led him to train to reach a certain jumping height to be able to “dunk” at the basket or reach a high number of baskets; his passion for rallies and cars spurred him to be able to reach a certain level in a game (driving simulator). Consequently, these objectives also arrived naturally for the educational activities: reading a certain number of pages of the favorite book every evening (even though reading is a weak point), do 10 minutes of English language review on an app every day (including holidays and weekends).

Her older sister, now 17, has also developed great willpower and discipline which she is putting into practice in her favorite sport: the gym and in her studies. Every day he gets up at 6.00 a.m. to go to training, allowing herself a few days of rest a week because she wants to achieve some goals. She studies everything that she is passionate about on a daily basis and delves into topics related to the human body and weight training with the help of her father (personal trainer) and intends to take courses to become a personal trainer too. Not to mention his numerous experiments and research on cooking and nutrition.

Rewards (such as grades), competition (with peers) are not always necessary to create the desire to learn. What intrinsically drives learning are the objectives that a child or young person sets and wishes to achieve, and above all the interest in a given topic. These factors: interest, passion, motivation, objectives will lead to delving deeper into the topics without impositions. And what is learned in this way remains deeply anchored, not learned superficially for the purpose of a test.

Thus, it will be possible to notice, even in children who do not appreciate the traditional teaching method or are not inclined towards formal study (being more manual, kinesthetic...) that they will still try to improve on certain aspects that are more difficult for them, such as reading for ex., to set daily goals (read a number of pages of a book per day for example).

Even through play, you will observe a certain organization and commitment to

create increasingly complex objects (with cardboard, with wood) always with the aim of having fun and satisfaction in making something with your own hands. Being part of the world, in the family and in one's own locality, one will also be able to observe in daily activities the desire of the children to help parents and grandparents in taking care of the house, the garden, in the kitchen... This commitment results in great satisfaction and 360° learning for life.

About some difficulties: Some situations seen as problematic in a school environment can be resolved spontaneously by letting children experiment and find their own path: "Approaching child development from the perspectives of health and well-being rather than pathology or cultural standards of normalcy yields many surprises" (Luvmour, 2006).

For example:

- Development occurs in the matrix of relationship, not in the individual child.
- Many behaviors viewed as pathological are natural expressions of health, especially during critical transition years around eight, thirteen and seventeen.
- Teens yearn for guidance from trusted family members
- Most childhood dysfunction can be remedied with proper developmental nourishment (and without professional intervention)

## **THE BALANCED USE OF THE DIGITAL WORLD**

Even in the much feared digital world, with the necessary dialogue between parents and adolescent children and the explanation of the need for a balance in their use for their health, "you will be able to see in young people who are not looking for an escape from the world, because they are happy in their real world" (quote from André Stern) that the experience and listening to themselves will lead them to self-regulate. In the balance of their days, they will feel the innate need to set times and rules for themselves, favoring sports and outdoor activities in company as soon as the opportunity arises. It may therefore be useful to consider in certain circumstances that through games, learning sites or apps, children can create personal goals, challenges and stimuli that require their own self-management of the time and energy used in this field.

In our experience, our 15 year old son has always been attracted to the digital world such as videos or online games like other children. But his interests have always revolved around cars and sports, especially basketball. For cars, the fact that he was not yet old enough to drive led him to experiment with driving on a

simulator, accompanied in his passion by his father. From there, a manual project with wood was also born: the creation of the simulator itself and now, also of mechanical skills to be able to juggle when there are problems with the pedals, handbrake...

In basketball, playing a video game like NBA has allowed him to virtually identify with a player who has to overcome obstacles, challenge himself with game strategies at levels that currently would not be possible at his age in the team in our area. Furthermore, listening to the matches and requests in English improved the language itself.

However, despite this attraction for the virtual, at the first opportunity in which he can play basketball outside with one or more companions, or go to see a rally, the virtual definitely comes as second choice.

For our eldest daughter, the digital world encouraged her to write a book, because she was able to learn from various experiences and listen to videos of American and English writers. After learning the English language thanks to her great passion and through films, videos, music and novels in English, she dedicated herself for two years to planning the characters, writing the plot and the various chapters. A dedication and organization that went beyond all expectations at the age of 14-15.

Another of her passions has always been making videos and she has gone through various experiences: from publishing Barbie stories on YouTube (with related script and setting often created at home), to creating music videos on the theme of the novels she has read and currently, producing videos on the topic of bodybuilding and fitness on the execution of exercises, training methods...

For both, the digital world was a means to learn, explore, broaden horizons, experiment. But the aim is always to improve real life and not to replace it.

In the study carried out by LAIF it emerges that the objective of facilitating social relationships (friendships, volunteer activities...) is strongly felt by unschooler families (82.14%)

## **AUTONOMY IN MANAGING DAILY LIFE**

For our older children, this self-guided learning experience has concretely led to great autonomy in managing time and activities. Also in the study, maturation was evident around age 13. At a certain point we also saw the desire for more formal learning arise naturally to deepen their interests, but not necessarily with

someone who teaches. These interests, in the case of our children, range from pastry making to the English language, passing through the study of biology, the world of sport and nutrition and also history and geography, science, mechanics...

Autonomy manifested itself more and more as they grew up, living in the community environment of our own country, of our own area. Independence to carry out errands, walk or cycle, desire to push themselves to be independent (go to the library, take extracurricular courses with kids who go to school...).

In this regard, the LAIF survey highlights that 53.6% of children and young people have a lot of autonomy in everyday life in relation to their age and 35.7% indicated a little.

Listening and discussing with the family in everyday life are also very important for us. Taking the time to listen to what your children have to say, asking and then talking about it, each with their own vision, nourishes an autonomy of thought that is welcomed and shared.

We talk about the various experiences of daily life, work, current events... we look for information together to delve deeper into some topics that are important to us at that given moment. An exchange of ideas and experiences that enriches the whole family, even the youngest sister who is involved in this family experience.

Another example of autonomy is when teenagers express their opinions, not the same of the values of their parents: they need to inform of the need of their self-discovery. Autonomy means self-government. It doesn't mean isolation or separation. 85% of all teens (13-17 years: a massive longitudinal study by the National Institute of Mental Health report) value family relationships as extremely important. Also 85% state that they must learn to do things for themselves. So as parents, we can understand that our children need to do different experiences and not the same as we had done in order to grow and understand the life. (Luvmour, 2006)

## **CHARACTERISTICS THAT EMERGE FROM YOUNG PEOPLE**

The main characteristics that emerge from this learning experience are: passion, perseverance, dedication and determination in achieving certain objectives that everyone sets for themselves over time. Furthermore, learning in this way makes the notions, experiences and knowledge of skills rooted over time in the young person, not learned by heart just for the test (as happens in the school context).

## **RESPECT FOR PHYSIOLOGICAL LEARNING TIMES**

Unschooling is often unfortunately challenging to apply, appreciate and understand in our society today, precisely because today's adults are schooled children and struggle, or even fail to contemplate other possibilities for learning. Self-guided learning respects the physiological times of growth and learning. Nature teaches and we should remember this more often, despite the frenzy of current society. In fact, in nature times are often slower or, in any case, different from one plant or animal to another. Let us remember the seed under the ground that is sprouting away from everyone's eyes and it seems that nothing is growing! Sometimes, even in free learning, it seems that nothing is happening, but in reality this is not the case... with patience and trust you will see the fruits... Our family is seeing beautiful, healthy and strong seedlings grow, initially with beautiful original flowers and colorful and now, even some fruit. We are seeing the promise of mature, responsible and aware future adults being born.

Decolonization, for us, begins with these young minds who were not molded in a standard way, but who followed their hearts, their rhythms: "our inherent capacities (natural) to move through life to gain knowledge, comprehension, or mastery (learning) in recognizable and recurring patterns (rhythms)." (Luvmour, 2006).

## **CRITICAL UNSCHOOLING WAY OF DECOLONIZATION ALSO FOR PARENTS**

Why does unschooling teach adults a lot too? Because it teaches us to see our children's learning and the world with a different perspective. Natural and critical learning helps to decolonize parents themselves, driven by the wonder of their children's journey, going beyond everything that was imposed on us during our childhood. In fact, most adults have some schooling behind them and we need to open ourselves up and mentally stretch ourselves to flow with an unschooling experience. Here in this case, if parents choose free learning for their children, they will have to work on themselves and deschool themselves, decolonize themselves. It will be about cleaning up our beliefs (about success, competitiveness, diplomas, professions of value or not...), our habits (based on teaching by someone who knows more, the division into school classes, the very rhythms of school every day, all year round...) which have been consolidated over the years at an early age. A huge opportunity to discover the world of natural learning, its biological characteristics and timing and increase confidence in children.

Freeing ourselves (decolonizing) from what we were taught at school and aiming

more at developing children's well-being for their personal growth also nourishes us adults and helps us rediscover ourselves.

What holds parents back the most is comparison with others, expectations, the fear of gaps by not following a classic educational path.

In this regard, as also testified by adults, currently parents, who have lived a free learning experience (Stern, 2014), critical unschooling can offer benefits, challenges and above all a great mental elasticity and openness to different points of view.

On this topic of gaps and comparison with others, in a conference held in Belluno in June 2019, André Stern gave his point of view. When they asked him if he fears that his shortcomings (learning only from his interests) will create problems in his life, he suggests thinking about the shortcomings of those who went to school. In fact, if we think about it, many notions that have been taught without interest on the part of the child do not remain in memory.

He recalled that when we study what interests us, what we learn is forever, it is an experience that remains deep down, linked to emotions. Furthermore, to delve deeper into some attractive topics you often have to study topics that you like less or are more difficult.

I will give a practical example of our family: the passion for cooking and pastry-making encouraged our daughter to apply mathematics for quantities and their doubling, use of units of measurement, calculation of calories... even if mathematics was not her strong point.

In conclusion we can say that this experience of ours has brought and is still bringing great lessons to both adults and children.

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# FREE PLAY AND ITS BENEFITS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

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From the very earliest infancy, the human mind is designed to capture and process an incredibly large number of stimuli. It goes to show that a scientifically executed comparison and a process of understanding of all available information is perfectly natural for human infants, with a parallel increase of satisfaction, fruitfulness and spontaneity. Humans are, essentially, self-teaching mammals, driven by the instinct to make sense of the remarkable world they are surrounded by. No activity is as favourable to this end as free play. Research suggests that our species learns more, more efficiently and more creatively when subjects are not conscious to receive any external award for their effort. Better results are produced when subjects genuinely enjoy their activity. In other words, mental and physical skills are acquired most optimally when this activity is perceived as play. When applied as a method, free play gives infants and adults the tools to find a democratic way of exploring their own personality and of communicating with their surroundings, paving the way for non-totalitarian practices in everyday society.

Free Play; Critical Unschooling; Democracy

## INTRODUCTION

The human animal is currently experiencing a time of acute crisis, one that comprises almost all tangible aspects of life. As individual causes become more indiscernible, and the multitude of their effects more and more unpredictable, the age-old problem of efficient education rises, gloriously baptized anew. At the risk of stating the obvious, the pivotal role of education in any social organization cannot be denied. More frequently than not, this arduous task is assigned to overwhelmed institutions, administered by individuals whose social importance often lacks the reward it deserves. As we all know, the results are mildly catastrophic.



Standardized Western schooling is built on the alienating and monotonous cadence of modern day adult life. A typical school day sees youth segregated in classes by age, forced to apply standardized solutions to tedious and often unrealistic problems. Social interactions and play are mostly confined to recreation, an activity that by definition implies former destruction. The transmission of skills and knowledge happens in a top-down manner, without directly involving the pupils' own creativity, responsibility and problem-solving capabilities. Students are expected to merely perform pre-conceived tasks, as enforced by superior authority. The highest goal for teachers, families, and often pupils seems to be a high grade, which fosters strong competition for the highest results, therefore rarefying the practices of cooperation which are essential to the achievement of social justice. It is therefore impossible in a standard schooling environment to develop a system of solid autonomous research and decision-making.

Fortunately, schools rarely are the only moment of activity in a young person's life. Children and teens are generally sent to post-school activities, like art or music schools and sport clubs. And a lot of their 'free' time is usually absorbed by ubiquitous homework. The moments they are allowed to share with friends tend to be limited in time and possibility of movement, and the groups they form usually comprise roughly the same peers they meet in class, with very little opportunity for age-mixed communication. Furthermore, as age increases their relations tend to build more and more pressure for individuals to comply with social standards.

As with all parts of any social structure, trying to determine one single genesis is difficult and could be misleading. As a result, different studies point out different origins for our current educational system. Some scholars trace our vision of schooling back to the early 19th century, responding to the Prussian governments' need for obedient and subservient citizens. To implement this, all pupils, conveniently organized in age-segregated groups, were given simple and repetitive tasks, assignments that would ready them for military or working life without encouraging independent and possibly dangerous thoughts and actions. They were trained to perform in confined and unfavourable spaces, frequently subject to humiliation and punishment.

Other studies see the origins of our modern schooling in the late 18<sup>th</sup>-late 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial revolution. At that historic moment, the necessity of disciplined, docile and only basically educated labour presented itself as a priority. Workers had to be able to understand and solve basic tasks, which

could imply elementary reading and writing. In both these theories, the motive is very similar, and the results are pretty much the same. 'Better' education has always been the privilege of the powerful and wealthy. These social classes had to be trained for leadership, demanding social life and intricate conversations. Especially when considering the early 19th century, a wide knowledge base was necessary to make an all-important good impression in social events, securing good deals and convenient friendships. To achieve this, knowledge was often imparted privately, by well-paid teachers, until the children were old enough to be sent to the institution that would make the best impression later on. The expectations laid on children of these social classes were very similar to those laid on adults, and therefore youngsters were subject to strict discipline, both mental and physical. Their studying schedule was very demanding, with programs involving Greek, Latin and advanced mathematics. Aged-mixed and interclass play was often discouraged, since children of a certain age were expected to think and behave like their wealthy parents. Young children had abundant play time, but as soon as they passed a certain age their leisure time was progressively filled with after school activities, many of which are still frequented to this day.

It might be noticed that, while the preparation required for each social class diverged considerably, the underlying motivations and, ultimately, the applied methods to achieve all educational goals were highly similar, if not substantially the same. A pronounced resemblance with contemporary compulsory schooling might also be observed in both systems. Because of the intrinsic nature of its social role, public school needs to compromise its program between the very divergent needs of different individuals: in this process, the overall level of knowledge transmission is uniformed to a low or medium standard. This forces more advanced or talented students not to make use of the resources they possess, while other, slower or less involved pupils invariably feel discouraged and frustrated, knowing that their school grades will have an immediate and, possibly, remote impact on their life. More personalized and perhaps more tolerant, therefore possibly more effective instruction remains a privilege of the wealthy and powerful, thus implicitly extending social inequality and diminishing democratic potential. While this inequality is not as severe as it used to be in the past centuries, it still produces obvious drawbacks in everyday life. Apart from the obvious implications this has on career choice, a tangible inequality in individual acculturation and social engagement still persists. People who attended public schools or received a lower education generally seem to participate less in public life.

This is partially due to the utterly unnatural process that this type of education implies. Our minds and bodies are still largely designed for hunter-gatherer life, making some of the principles used for our ancestors applicable to this day. The human animal is born in a complex and evolving environment, one that requires rapid learning and adaptation to survive and thrive. A child's brain needs to be able to process and store an incredibly large amount of information in comparatively little time. At the risk of stating the obvious, we can conclude from this that children of any culture are naturally born curious. They want to explore and experience the world around them, gradually acquiring all the knowledge and skill they perceive grown-ups to possess.

In a natural environment, children would gather all information and skill they could possibly need in the contest of play. Studies have shown that many hunter-gatherer societies that still exist to this day leave children completely free and unobserved by an adult for large parts of the day. The result is that youths often group together to 'play' the events that fill their environment. This is by no means just for fun, even though everyone can vouch for the fun of play: by playing without any superimposed schemes and rules, children make sense of their surroundings, and they do it on their own. They acquire the muscular strength and the mental ability they would need if the situation they play was real. This is clearly exemplified by the evidence of Jewish children playing adults' everyday life (and, mostly, death) in Nazi concentration camps, instead of creating situations to temporarily alleviate the brutality they had to witness. It certainly was their instinct to make sense of things that drove them to it.

## **FREE PLAY**

Free play is children's main occupation when adults are not around. Free play can be defined as any self-initiated, voluntary and autonomously controlled activity where an individual is able to explore its surroundings and experience its reaction to it. It always involves creativity and the use of fantasy. Many studies have shown by now the benefits free play brings to the development of logical and critical thinking and to the building of linguistic, problem-solving and motor skills.

When they play without adult supervision or organization, children feel entrusted to make their own decisions and take their own risk, assuming the responsibilities of their actions. They autonomously find the place that best suits them in the society they grow in, while training their imaginative capabilities and problem-solving skills.

Older children develop a sense of responsibility while caring for younger ones in age-mixed play, while younger ones are given a chance to measure their talents with possibly more refined ones.

Most importantly for our discourse, free and unstructured play is the most democratic activity humans can engage in:

- No superimposed will must be executed, since the children are completely self-governed and can decide whether or not to engage in any activity and how to take part in it;
- Although games can be very competitive, in free play the stronger players need to exercise control over their abilities. The competitive spirit is found in the self-induced crisis of an individual's abilities, more than the contrast between contenders. This requires the training of self-discipline and patience. If one player quits, even the weakest link, the game would not be as fun, and could possibly even end. Free play must be satisfying for every participant, if it is to be continued as long as possible. This makes the game itself, not victory, the player's priority. Any triumph or defeat would immediately end the fun and therefore would not be satisfactory for anyone. That way less proficient players have the chance to slowly work on what they perceive as the weak points of their knowledge and skill without getting discouraged or injured. Significantly stronger players on their part need to develop control over their favourable abilities, in order to keep the activity going. It is a fundamentally inclusive process. Everybody can join, knowing that their weaknesses will not be used to harm them. This does not happen in any structured and competitive situation, where an individual weakness is to be exploited to benefit the strongest;
- The ends and the rules of the game are spontaneously established by the players, and more often than not there is no need to pronounce them. The participants have to find a compromise between the different needs of all people involved;
- Reconciliation stands as an essential part of free play. Disagreements and disputes are to be expected in any prolonged social assembly, and common experience proves the frequency of quarrels among children. Since they are unavoidable to a certain degree, players must learn to reconcile effectively when discord arises. The witnesses have to try and find a point of agreement, while the actors must manage and control their anger. Otherwise, the game is finished. This is not to say that free

play is the only medium to train the ability to solve discordance; but in other kinds of play, for instance football or card games, reconciliation often remains discretionary, while in natural free play it is essential to continue the game;

- Whenever a game is not satisfactory for any one player, or whenever someone quits, a new context must be created. Often debates are held to find a way of coping with the situation. In these considerations, participants must find a way to present their opinions in an inoffensive and convincing manner, trying to determine a point of union between all interests involved. It implies training one's aptitude to dialogue and negotiation skills, finding viable arguments to support a cause, and being open to compromise to reach a common goal.

These empirically observable mechanisms are nothing less than the procedures a democratic society is built upon. In addition to being the most natural learning method for any species, we can therefore define free play and the connected and necessary empowering trust older generations have to exercise in as the best training for democracy.

Through free play children, teens and adults put into practice the democratic methods that are claimed to be the foundation of our social system. Democracy is rarely applied otherwise in the same spontaneous vein and in such a complete manner. In most other forms of play with preset rules or other kinds of control exercised by third parties, like most sports with fixed teams, the goal of winning is regularly perceived as more important than the game itself, implicitly undermining the democratic process. In almost every situation where adults lead children's activities, the decision-making process and, therefore, the responsibility rely solely on the adult, causing obvious shortcomings both in democratic and in educational terms.

Ultimately, free play and its benefits tend to be completely excluded in an average grown-up life: the only social situations in which similar principles seem to be applied could be certain musical moments and determined theatrical occasions. The spirit of free play and exploration tends to be totally suppressed in working contexts and in almost every other aspect of everyday life. This should be perceived as a problem, since the stated personal and social benefits can also be applied as a whole to adult life.

## CONCLUSION

Free play is the most natural way for humans to satisfy their need to make sense of the world around them. Through it we are able to freely explore our intellectual and physical capabilities and create our own view of society. It trains us to think creatively and gives us the tools we need to find personal solutions to the problems we face. It exercises our minds to make tolerant decisions in democratic ways for universal benefit. It is one of the most natural activities that can be immediately put into practice, in almost any situation. And even though critical unschooling is the approach that makes the biggest use of the benefits of free play, its completely natural essence does not put its application in contrast with any other current educational method. Its systematic appliance trains humans to adapt tolerant and democratic mindsets and practices, allowing them to be transduced more naturally and effectively both in everyday life and in critical situations.

Free play and its consequences empower us to experience the world and our human community from different perspectives, giving us many tools to strengthen what we value most, aiding us to build a more organic and democratic society.

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# CRITICAL UNSCHOOLING: AN EDUCATIONAL CHOICE FOR SELF-DETERMINATION AND A CHALLENGE TO THE DOMINANT CONCEPT OF SUCCESS AND WELL BEING

Valeria Melloni

## INTRODUCTION

As a practitioner of unschooling, many times I find myself thinking about my school experience, how much I still feel colonized by the school setting that I underwent in the years of my childhood and adolescence. The same concern of the judgment of others, the fear of making mistakes and making a bad impression are still with me today and it is difficult for me to be able to de-schooling myself and to decolonize my person from this judgmental vision of myself.

Looking at today's school, it does not seem to have changed much compared to when I attended it: despite the exhortations of the Ministry of Education to a school that is more respectful of the uniqueness of everyone, inclusive and not standardized, we still find it rigid, judgmental, deaf and blind to the manifestations of discomfort expressed by many children and young people who attend it.

The document "Cultura scuola persona" published in 2007 by the Ministry of Education, which introduces the National Guidelines for the Curriculum, describes today's society as being marked by continuous changes and uncertainties and recognizes school and education as instruments to bring a new humanism.

This document defines first of all the centrality of people in the educational process: the didactic action must take into account the singularity and complexity of each one in all his/her aspects: "cognitive, affective, relational, physical, aesthetic, ethical, spiritual and religious"<sup>1</sup>.

From the first years of education, it is necessary that the proposed learning

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<sup>1</sup> "Cultura Scuola Persona. Verso le indicazioni nazionali per la scuola dell'infanzia e per il primo ciclo di istruzione", Ministero dell'Istruzione, Roma, 2007.



paths are in constant relationship with the needs and desires of children and pre-adolescents.

School should be a “welcoming place”, a place in which you feel good.

If we read the data of the survey conducted in Emilia Romagna in 2022, on a sample of 15,023 young people aged 11 to 19 we find out that (Adolescenti in Emilia Romagna, 2022):

- anxiety dominates in the majority of students with 77.4% of them who indicate it as a constant and continuous mood;
- boredom (55.9%), insecurity (48.9%) and sadness (33.3%) are the other feelings perceived by these students when they are at school.

School continues to be a place of discomfort, where the majority of the students lives a constant feeling of anxiety.

As we know from the evidence emerged from neuroscience studies, these feelings of anxiety and anguish certainly do not favour learning, which is instead effective in contexts where the individual is relaxed, feels safe and free to express himself without the fear of making mistakes or being judged negatively. Learning happens even if we don't feel comfortable or if we are afraid of making mistakes, but the emotion that will remain linked to that moment will be an emotion of fear, which suggests our brain to run away.

In recent years the scientific research has focused the attention on the connection between learning and the emotions that accompany it: it has been discovered that notions are fixed in the brain together with emotions and the latter, in turn, concretely affect cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, comprehension. If you learn with joy, you learn more and better. If you are supported and encouraged during learning, you will remember the positive emotion (Vita.it, 2020).

On the contrary, when we learn with fear, anxiety, anguish, an emotional short circuit is generated that hinders learning: the student freezes and is no longer able to learn.

Our brain sends a message of danger related to that situation that would push us not to perpetrate it. The brain will therefore tend to remove everything related to this state of mind, it will try to remove these emotions that don't cause well-being but alertness, including what has been learned.

Guilt and fear are the emotions that underpin our education system: all this keeps children on constant alert and produces an emotional short circuit that hinders the learning process.

Moreover, the state of alertness activates cortisol, the stress hormone: when it increases excessively it can lead to an increase in glycemic values: the result is a lowering of the immune defences and even alterations in the inflammatory response (ibid.).

All these aspects (anxiety and anguish at school, grades, no time for reflection) show that school, as it is organized in this way, is an authoritarian place of discomfort that widely contributes to undermine the foundations for a serene development of students, weakening their autonomy and self-determination, reducing the confidence in their own potential.

It is important now to ask ourselves some questions:

- What is individual well-being and how can we approach this condition in educational settings?
- What model of success and personal fulfilment is presented to young people today and how is it possible to facilitate the integral development of each person with full respect for his or her individuality?
- With respect to these issues, how does critical unschooling position itself?

## **1. UNSCHOOLING AND THE PURSUIT OF INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING**

For the WHO, psychological, physical and social well-being consists of being able to use one's emotional and cognitive abilities in response to the daily demands of life, in creating and maintaining satisfactory relationships with others, in adapting to situations of internal and external difficulty. Well-being is therefore a concept that goes beyond the presence or absence of physical or mental illness, but involves numerous individual spheres. To achieve this, the individual or group must be able to identify and realize their aspirations, meet their needs, modify or adapt to their environment.

This definition of well-being places great emphasis on the need for everyone to know themselves, to be able to understand what their potential and aspirations are in order to experience a rewarding life. How can we facilitate the process of self-knowledge and one's characteristics from childhood to then be able to create one's own path of personal growth?

Unschooling surely represents a tool for self-determination, self-knowledge and self-building, it supports the development of critical thinking and it is a challenge to the dominant model of personal success and development.

Unschooling is an alternative choice of education but it is at the same time a

lifestyle choice that normally involves the entire family: from the birth of the child, the family is oriented towards an approach based on attachment, respect for the environment and the pursuit of good nutrition with the prevalence of consumption of healthy homemade foods, reorienting the lifestyle towards a more relaxed and sustainable rhythm (Kirschner, 2008).

Families who choose unschooling as an approach to learning do so mainly to leave complete freedom to children to follow their interests and focus on what they want to learn at a given time, allowing them to abandon a topic when interest is captured by another theme. At the heart of unschooling is a deep belief in everyone's innate learning abilities and a deep respect for time and individual learning.

There are no predefined programs or paths to follow, there is no precise order in which topics or theories must be learned, there is no separation among subjects. Learning takes place through experience and daily life, offering the child materials or activities that can support the curiosity he or she manifests about a certain topic or phenomenon. For this reason, unschooling certainly has a democratic connotation with respect to knowledge, parents don't select in an authoritarian manner what is more or less important to learn.

Since unschoolers are not exposed to tests or evaluations typical of the school world, they can decide to deepen a certain topic as long as they wish, not limiting themselves to learn only what is required by the teacher to pass the tests.

This has a positive impact on the quality of learning, which usually follows a spiral trend, it involves different areas of knowledge at the same time and which is more experiential rather than theoretical: from this it emerges that unschooling is the philosophy that comes closest to the natural way of learning of children (Piffero, 2019).

## **2. THE ROLE OF FREE PLAY**

The most important tool of learning for children is free play: the important role of free play in the construction of one's identity and in the development of autonomy has been highlighted by many studies conducted by Peter Gray who has analysed the link between the decline of autonomous activities in children and the corresponding increase in psychological and mental disease in them.

Research on children has shown that parents' support in encouraging autonomous activities in their children is expressed in a greater perception of autonomy, competence and connection with society, therefore greater confidence in one's own abilities (Kirschner, 2008). Unschoolers parents tend

to facilitate self-regulation, self-understanding, and intrinsic motivation in their children because they trust their ability to learn.

Play helps children (a) developing intrinsic interests and competencies; (b) learning how to make decisions, solve problems, exert self-control, and follow rules; (c) learning to regulate their emotions; (d) making friends and learn to get along with others as equals; and (e) experiencing joy. Through all of these effects, play promotes mental health (Gray & Riley, 2015).

### **3. THE BENEFITS OF UNSCHOOLING**

The research conducted by Gray and Riley in 2013, which involved 232 families who chose unschooling, reveals numerous benefits related to this choice that involve children themselves but also the family as a whole: improved learning, better attitudes about learning, and improved psychological and social wellbeing for children; increased closeness, harmony, and freedom for the whole family. 52% of surveyed parents said children were happier, less stressed, more confident, more socially extroverted than they would have been if they had gone to school or been homeschooled. Parents pointed out that their children were used to talk with people of different ages and from different backgrounds and that they had many more opportunities for intergenerational encounters than those who attend school, who spend most of their time in classes made up of the same children of the same age (ibid.).

With regard to the benefits experienced at the family level, 57% of the interviewees remarked on the greater closeness established at the level of family relationships thanks to the choice of unschooling and an improvement in the relationship between siblings (ibid.).

Peter Gray e Gina Riley interviewed 75 adults who were unschooled up to the age of 16 (all or most of the period) and asked them to give their opinion on their experience, their social relationships and the advantages/disadvantages that this experience gave them. Most said the benefits continue into adulthood in the form of Self-Direction and/or Self-Motivation (75%), 48% noted high sense of Responsibility, 44% noted Continued Learning (sometimes expressed as continued interest in learning because of not being burned out by school), and 43% noted Self-Confidence as result of their unschooling. Some of the other advantages frequently mentioned were that unschooling allowed for a smooth transition to adulthood (33%), allowed them to avoid stress associated with school (28%), and gave them more time to spend with family (24%). Many indicated that their experiences as unschoolers gave them an advantage in their

higher education and/or career.

Some of the interviewees declare that unschooling built a foundation for questioning and challenging the mainstream aspects of society. It provided the ability to be confident in not blindly “following the crowd” and being comfortable about being oneself and/or different.

In this free and relaxed environment offered by the family context, the child has time to ask himself his own questions of meaning: who am I and what do I want to become? How may I feel part of the community?

#### **4. UNSCHOOLING AS A CHALLENGE TO THE DOMINANT MODEL OF PERSONAL SUCCESS**

Children who have the opportunity to grow and mature in the family context, children who don't lose the connection with their parents, are supported in the process of individualization and construction of their identity: they are free to express themselves and to respect their identity, they don't need to fit in someone else's standards. On the contrary, children and adolescents who attend school tend to get out from their parents' orbit, they progressively orient themselves towards peers (Neufeld & Maté, 2006). Their main worry is to conform to peers and to be accepted by friends who have the power to influence them until they modify their natural maturation process. Individuality and independence must be protected by parents until the adolescent mature his own capacity to deal with social pressures and to be able not to conform if he doesn't want to, in order to preserve his own inner nature.

The same protection system takes place among animals in nature: every mum protects her babies until she knows they will survive autonomously; they keep the attachment until it is necessary. In our society we have progressively lost this common sense, people progressively lost this capacity to be guided by instinct, in the name of work and productivity: we are pushed to return to work after very few months from the birth of our children and from the very beginning of their lives we start losing the connection with them.

The practice of unschooling is based first and foremost on family time, parents decide to tune into the needs of the family while respecting the children's time to rest, play and learn, in a logic of mutual respect and non-coercion.

The slow pace and the debates that arise spontaneously in the family encourage personal reflection on the problems that affect our society and the search for concrete but also creative and original solutions. In this context, children are encouraged to make their own original contribution to the discussion because

their opinion has the same value as adult's ones. Surely this is an important aspect that helps the child to build his own identity and to have confidence in himself, in his ability to find solutions.

Each person, in his or her diversity, can offer a valuable contribution to society, which does not necessarily have to be economically quantifiable: everyone can live within society by doing what makes him/her feeling good, without following pre-established models in the awareness that he/she is simply worth who he/she is.

## **CONCLUSION**

While contemporary society assumes an increasingly individualistic and competitive connotation, in which emphasis is placed first and foremost on the achievement of economic success at any cost – ignoring the environmental and climatic crisis as well as the psychological problems that affect more and more young people who are left alone, educated by a school system that fails in its main objective of promoting the integral development of the human person -, unschooling represents a critical stance with respect to this decay, a choice that underlines the centrality of the family as a fundamental building block of society, which supports the growth of citizens aware of the problems that affect the world, capable of thinking about creative and new solutions to problems to which today's adults have not yet given answers, people accustomed to think with their own heads in a democratic environment where everyone has the same rights, without prevarication.

For all these reasons, unschooling is definitely a step towards the decolonization of our society.

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# CRITICAL UNSCHOOLING: A CONSCIOUS PSYCHOSOCIAL STRATEGY AGAINST THE INFLUENCES OF INDIVIDUALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM AND FOR A MORE COMPASSIONATE SOCIETY

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Critical unschooling aims to counteract authoritarian power dynamics in education by promoting self-directed learning, emotional support, and fulfilling relationships. This approach represents a form of psychosocial resistance, raising awareness about alternative educational choices that are often unfamiliar or legally challenged in some countries.

critical unschooling, interpersonal neurobiology, evolutionary psychology, prosocial vs antisocial behaviour, compassionate mind

## INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, progress in peace, equality, and social justice worldwide remains minimal: our globalized culture, despite its advancements, perpetuates stress, inequality, environmental degradation, and social isolation, leading to preventable diseases and premature deaths. Education is a key agent of societal change, so it is crucial to examine its role. We approach this by integrating evolutionary psychology and interpersonal neurobiology. Evolutionary psychology views human behavior through the lens of survival and reproduction traits, while interpersonal neurobiology explores how our brains and minds are shaped by relationships and epigenetics.



## 1. THE EVOLUTIONARY MISMATCH

For 98% of human history, our ancestors lived as hunter-gatherers in small, mobile groups. These societies emphasized care and sharing over individualism and enforced norms that prevented the accumulation of excessive status or resources (Gilbert, 2020). As upright walking narrowed the birth canal right at the time when the baby's head was evolving to get bigger: vulnerable human infants are born highly under-developed and require long and intense parenting cares – what is often referred to as exo-gestation. As for any other living creature, three fundamental life tasks are essential for humans' survival: detecting and dealing with threats in order to avoid harm; seeking out resources necessary for survival and reproduction; finding opportunities to “rest and digest” and down-regulate threat and drive systems. For these tasks, human infants are dependent on the close proximity of a protective adult, so natural selection supported the development of care-asking and care-providing mechanisms: infants react to the lack of close proximity as a threat, and signal distress through protest/despair strategies; carers are led to respond to infant's cues by providing reassurance, food (frequent breastfeeding also ensure proximity!) and safety, and the satisfaction of these basic needs creates the conditions for resting. Weaker care-asking or care-offering mechanisms translated into a comparative disadvantage in terms of natural selection, leaving the offspring vulnerable to predators. These early experiences mold behavioural patterns, unconscious beliefs, learning styles, and relational dynamics: “emotional rather than intellectual interaction serves as the mind's primary architect” (Greenspan 2006, p. 5). In neurobiological terms, a high degree of responsiveness to children's signals of hunger, discomfort, fear or generic emotional distress shapes the brain's biochemical circuitry through a complex systems of reactions triggered by hormones such as oxytocin and vasopressin and through physiological changes to the autonomic nervous system and frontal cortex (Porges, 2007). The presence of supportive others suppresses threat and stress processing (Music, 2019 for reviews), reduces cortisol and creates the conditions for a healthy activity of the autonomic nervous system, resulting in long-lasting changes in neural pathways: this supports effective emotional regulation throughout adulthood and the ability to engage proactively with developmental tasks, such as investing in emotional, social and intellectual growth (Miller et al. 2010).

With the advent of agriculture around 10,000 years ago, societies shifted from immediate resource sharing to surplus storage, leading to increased competition to control this surplus. The “care and share” ethos got replaced

with “control and hold” behaviors, as elites sought to maintain power through coercion and repression (Gilbert, 2020). Neuroscientific research reveals that our social context shapes our brain function and behavior, with competitive and threatening environments fostering aggressive and selfish traits (McDade et al., 2019): neoliberal individualism, with its focus on competition and success, represents the epitome of these maladaptive traits (Becker et al., 2021). Evolutionary psychologists call this “evolutionary mismatch,” referring to the discrepancy between our current environment and the conditions our ancestors evolved under (Gluckman, 2006).

## **2. LEARNING IN HUNTER-GATHERERS SOCIETIES: OUR BIOLOGICAL NORM**

Reasonable inferences on the way how our ancestors dealt with cultural transmission can be made through the anthropological studies of hunter-gatherers communities. Across continents, their social structure share many of the same features, including their approach to knowledge sharing: typically, young humans acquire the culture they grow in through their self-directed play and exploration and the broadest possible access to adults’ activities. Children seem to be designed this way by natural selection: those who fail to acquire crucial aspects of the society they are living in are disadvantaged in regard to survival and reproduction. Human instincts have more to do with learning that with teaching (Boyette 2018), but the current educational system has at its core the assumption that teaching is the sole method of learning. In this, school is a particularly interesting example of evolutionary mismatch, and in the next sections we examine in detail the reason why.

### **2.1. Empowerment, schooling, and unschooling**

Schooling deprives children of any meaningful agency over their learning process, thus disempowering them: it reinforces a hierarchical teacher-student relationship (the dispenser versus the receiver of knowledge) which goes against our “fiercely egalitarian” evolutionary predisposition (Lee 1988). Children are naturally inclined to learn, but they resist compulsory learning methods that diminish their control: our well-being in fact relies on fulfilling psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. “Salient (...) is how the thwarting of autonomy, through either excessive control, conditional regard, or lack of empathy, disrupts development, and especially in vulnerable individuals, leads to dysregulation and ill-being. Indeed, autonomy thwarting plays an important etiological role in many forms of psychopathology” (Ryan and Deci 2016, p. 386).

Critical unschooling combines the respectful and empowering dimension of self-directed learning (which refuses teacher-centred instruction, imposed curricula, assessment measures) with a call to reimagining and transforming the relationships within family and society in a more respectful, consent-based way. In this, unschooling has a conscious and intentional decolonisation focus. The most crucial precondition at the basis of parents' choice to unschool their children is trust in the latter's ability to effectively control their learning process: this means being willing to grant children enough freedom to explore, experiment, try and make mistakes, and being available when assistance and guidance are required. Thus, trust encompasses all three psychological dimensions of self-determination: it encourages autonomy ("you can do it on your own!"), it acknowledges competence ("you have the skills to do it!") and it strengthens relatedness ("I'm here for you if you need me") (Thomas & Pattison 2008; Piffero 2019).

Unschooling parents act as mentors rather than controllers: autonomy-supportive environments enhance intrinsic motivation, thus promoting not only a more enjoyable learning process but also better psychosocial outcomes (Rinner 2022; Ryan & Deci 2016).

## **2.2. "Meritocracy", schooling, and unschooling**

Recently, Italy's Ministry of Education was renamed as Ministry of Education and Merit, thus embodying the neoliberal meritocracy narrative: success is attainable through talent and effort (van Ewijk & Slegers 2010). Critics argue that merit-based achievement can be heavily influenced by initial socio-economic inequalities, yet meritocracy itself is seldom questioned. However, meritocracy in schools creates an environment where academic success reflects personal worth, failure reflects inadequacy, and competitive attitudes are reinforced. Neoliberal meritocracy values skills primarily for economic gain, unlike in hunter-gatherers' societies where skill acquisition was valued for the contribution these can make to society.

Consequently, younger generations report higher levels of socially prescribed perfectionism (Curran and Hill, 2019): this has been positively related to a range of psychological disorders and symptoms of disorders such as social phobia, body dissatisfaction, bulimia nervosa, and suicide ideation, depression and anxiety (Limburg et al., 2017; Hewitt et al. 2017). Evolutionary biology supports this, suggesting that competitive environments trigger survival mechanisms that can become dysfunctional: cooperative behaviors are inhibited and isolation and aggression fostered (Maggi et al. 2022). Ultimately, school's explicit

function of “socializing” children translates into the adoption of practices and strategies typical of the “control and hold” mentality, a social model which has been defined as “toxic” (Mate 2023). Schooling can thus be reasonably argued to have an important role in driving antisocial behaviours.

Critical unschooling removes merit as the main criterion for achievement and by redefining personal fulfillment beyond wealth and status. Self-evaluation and self-endorsement are emphasized over external judgments, while self-improvement is encouraged. This allows children to follow the lead of their curiosity and to find their passions, even when they take them along unusual paths: research on unschooled adults indicates a diverse range of careers which have been defined as “fulfilling” and in line with ones’ aspirations, from STEM jobs to professions in creative arts (Riley & Gray 2015). Preliminary evidence suggests that self-directed learners are less likely to end up in what Graeber has called “bullshit” jobs.

#### **4. SCHOOLING, UNSCHOOLING, PEERS AND UNCONDITIONAL SUPPORT**

Neurosciences and attachment theory suggest that self-directed learning in family settings differs significantly from that in school environments (democratic schools, and free schools).

Animal behavior provides interesting insights here. In order to ensure survival, natural selection has gifted the young of most animal species with an orientation instinct: they will direct their behaviour based on the behaviour of adults. Not on any adult, though: only the adults they attach to. For example, ducklings get immediately imprinted to the first creature they see once hatched. When mother duck is not around, as Conrad Lorenz proved, even a human being can do as an example until mature independence. From this innate behaviour we can draw two conclusions: the orientation instinct is so strong that any orientation void gets fill with the closest available option; and that not all forms of orienting are equally suited to coach a young into adulthood.

When children are separated from their parents for long periods, as happens in schools, their attachment bonds weaken. This leads them to rely more on peers for emotional support, resulting in “peer orientation” (Neufeld & Maté 2014). Unfortunately, acceptance within peer groups depends on conformity, with the exclusion, marginalization, and bullying of those who don’t fit in. Only the family can provide children with the unconditional love and acceptance deeply needed not only as children but as adults too, as it grants us the safety to remain vulnerable and to experience the whole range of our emotions without

threatening the relationships with those closest to us. Not all human parents are equipped to give their children this type of unconditional loving care: more awareness should be encouraged among parents about the dynamics of attachment and the impact of early relational imprint. Even taking this into account, the accusation unschooling parents get at times, i.e. to keep their children too close to them, is completely misplaced as indeed the continuation and evolution of the attachment relationship over time, from the physical dependency of infancy to the emotional and intellectual autonomy and interconnectedness of adulthood, is a necessary condition for successful cultural transmission and for growing into caring, responsible adults.

## **CONCLUSION**

Addressing issues like poverty, disconnection, oppression, inequality, and abuse requires a systemic, psychosocial approach, involving the embedment of people in caring communities. Schools, with their inherent structure and goals, often contribute to these problems rather than solving them.

The possibilities that critical unschooling offers are generally disregarded by mainstream narratives, and in some case explicitly denied (e.g., Germany and Sweden, where it is illegal). In Italy, the requirement for annual school exams can create tension between self-directed learning and school expectations, but it can also create an opportunity for dialogue and growth, encouraging families to navigate social pressures while upholding children's autonomy. Unschooling parents are forced to reflect and de-condition from their own controlling experiences: this helps them reclaim their agency and "decolonize" their selves will provide an invaluable example for their children. Through introspection, parents can develop a "praxis of love/dialogue and action/reflection," foundational for lifelong growth (Maddox 2022).

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# BENEFITS OF AN UNSCHOOLING EXPERIENCE AND THE LACK OF UNSCHOOLING CHARACTERS IN THE ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA

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When you become part of a big system often it happens you limit yourself to follow the flow, your mind becomes lazy and you start to only do what other people ask you to do. That's why the school system should be more based on the individuality of his students and that's why my unschooling route helped me to choose my job and deal with it. We are used to think that kids (and adults too) are bored by studying and working, but I think that's totally untrue. Work is a fundamental trait of all the living beings and none of us can find happiness by doing nothing with our lives. We only have to do what we like, obviously there are always many trials and challenges, but if you are truly following your willness you'll find the way to overcome them. Unschooling allowed me to search and find my true passions and turn them into a job. A major problem with unschooling is that most people are unaware of its existence. I realised the almost total lack of unschooled characters in show business. And I want to focus on unschooler characters in history.

Unschooling; work; experience; fiction; entertainment.

The topic I am about to discuss concerns me personally, because from the fourth grade onwards, my parents took charge of my education. I can be defined for all intents and purposes as an Unschooler, since I followed studies that corresponded to my passions and interests, and not to the predetermined school program. Since reaching the age of twenty, I have reached some conclusions about my educational journey that I would now like to present to you. I will start from the beginning.

Very few people in Italy choose to take this path, so it was difficult for me and my parents, at least initially, because we definitely had few examples and methods



of comparison.

Now, having reached the “end” (if we want to call it that) of the path, I realize that I am not better than the other people, but I can say that I have, as much as possible, followed what I like to do, and that really makes me happy. I think people don’t focus enough on the concept of happiness and reason more on the level of performance. I know it could sound trite, but I think feeling happy is for all intents and purposes the most important thing in life, more important than study, career and anything else.

The shocking thing is that most people believe that if a child is not forced to study or work, she or he will never do it, but this is only because we have become accustomed to seeing reality under a tremendously distorted lens. Work and study are fundamental traits of every human being, and all children are naturally inclined to follow them if left free and equipped with the correct tools.

Unschooling is an absolutely valid educational path, and pursuing it will not lead your children to become lazy slackers.

But here we come to the second shocking thing: Actually, most Italians are completely unaware about the existence of such an educational possibility.

Many times I happened to talk about my experience, receiving multitudes of questions and bashful looks, combined with the classic phrase, “But is it legal in Italy?” Both in children and adults, in fact, complete unawareness of alternative methods of education to public schooling continues to persist.

In my opinion, this process is partly due to an almost total lack of practical examples within entertainment works.

In fact, there is a kind of vicious circle that has inevitably led to an establishment of the school as the center of teaching and education for the young characters in the stories we may read in books or see on TV.

Since school represents the educational normality for most people it is decided to continue to represent it as such within the works of entertainment and, by necessity, the status quo ends up remaining unchanged. If there are not enough examples of alternative education within movies, comics, books, or TV series, how will people accept them in their everyday lives? Certainly, characters that can almost be defined as “Unschooler Ante Litteram” have frequently appeared in stories and novels from centuries past. Without, of course, going into Renaissance, medieval or even earlier works, where the entire system of education was based on values and models so foreign to those of today that it would be pointless to set out to compare them.

Let us therefore deal with some novels, now become classics, belonging to the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. One of the earliest “Unschooler Ante Litteram” is probably Heidi, from the novel *Heidis Lehr- und Wanderjahre*, written in 1808 by the Swiss writer Johanna Spyri. Here Heidi is a perfect example of Unschooling: it is about a poor orphan who is left by her aunt Dete to the care of her paternal grandfather, who lives in a remote cabin in the Alps. Here Heidi learns the things that really interest her: how to care for goats and stay in touch with nature. However, for example, Heidi can neither read nor write, as these two activities are of no interest or use to her. This, however, runs counter to the educational conceptions of the time, so much so that Aunt Dete comes back for her, takes her to Frankfurt and forces her to follow a strict “good child” education. Heidi, however, finds herself so badly off in this condition that she is able to convince her aunt to take her back to the mountains to her grandfather.

This character certainly teaches us the importance of nature and not to reason from prejudice, as most people do toward Heidi’s grandfather. But another great lesson she brings is that: we are all different, and what may work for some individuals, may not work for others.

The truth is that Heidi is fine in the mountains. And if the mountains make her happy, there is no need for her to learn writing or counting just because other children do that. These activities will not help her stay on the mountain so, since the mountain is her goal of personal fulfillment, there is no point in pursuing them.

Another “Unschooler Ante Litteram” is Pippi Longstocking (Pippi Långstrump), based on Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren’s novel of the same name, written in 1945.

However, this character differs greatly from Heidi. Pippi is in fact a very bizarre character, belonging to a decidedly more comic and absurd novel, in stark contrast to the blunt realism of Heidi. The problem with these kinds of characters is that they offer, yes, a window into an alternative way of life, but often this way of life is closely linked to their utter strangeness. Her belonging to the category of the “out the norm ones” makes Pippi interesting to study, to admire, but only for illustrative purposes, not as an objective example of everyday life. These characters come across as the so-called: exceptions to the rule, Pippi is in fact contrasted with Tommy and Annika who, being the good children that they are, go to school.

The most paradoxical thing is that these characters are often taken as examples

of positive nonconformity by the school teachers themselves, the same ones who later disavow these behaviors in real life.

One has to wait years before overtly homeschooler or unschooler characters appear in works of fiction.

One of the earliest examples is certainly Mina, a female character who appears in the novel *Skellig*, written in nineteen ninety-eight by British writer David Almond.

Mina is the neighbor of Michael, the novel's protagonist, and is referred to as a homeschooler, despite being for all intents and purposes an unschooler. In fact, Mina doesn't go to school, her mother is in charge of her education, and she is a big fan of sculpture and birds. She does not study with a specific program or regimen, but follows her interests and passions.

David Almond liked Mina so much that the writer decided to dedicate an entire novel to her, written in the form of the girl's personal diary: *It is My Name is Mina*, published in two thousand and ten.

And Mina for me is a character of colossal importance. In fact, a reading of *Skellig* and *My Name is Mina* was one of the cathartic elements that inspired my mother to suggest that I quit school. In short; it is possible that if Mina had never been born from Almond's pen, I would never have become an unschooler. That is why it is crucial that such characters appear in works of fiction; we cannot just talk about them within essays and analyses.

One last character I would like to focus on is the even more recent and popular: Steven Universe.

Steven Universe is the protagonist of a hit animated series of the same name published in America by Cartoon Network, the first episode was released in two thousand and thirteen, and is written and directed by director Rebecca Sugar. Steven is an unschooler, born from the love of a human and an alien, he was raised in the little town of Beach City by his mother's alien companions after she died to give him life. Steven is an extremely profound character, especially considering the animated series' target audience of twelve to fifteen year-old boys. The theme of unschooling is treated gently but firmly. Steven sometimes suffers from this being different, and that is normal. When we embark on a path different from everyone else, it is normal to feel lost and scared sometimes.

But so Steven, and so all of us, has the strength to treasure his diversity and accept himself as different and unquantifiable. And that is what makes him a magnificent character within the mainstream entertainment media landscape. In short, at this time when there is a lot of talk about inclusiveness and

discrimination, let us not forget that there can be completely different life paths from one another. But let us take note of this, without feeling envy, jealousy or insecurity.

And let's make sure that there are more and more different characters for young people to take inspiration from.

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# CRITICAL UNSCHOOLING FOR A DEMOCRATIC IDEA OF CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

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Anthropologically, the idea of childhood and adolescence is culturally conditioned. There are many reasons why we can speak of a hierarchical, undemocratic idea of childhood and adolescence in contemporary Western culture. In particular the mainstream idea of childhood and adolescence is based on the dominance of adults, on compartmentalisation, control, prohibition, imposition, rewards-punishment dynamics, age-based separation and discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion of “minors” from decision-making and responsibility. Compulsory education is not only part of this mainstream idea of childhood (segregation in classes, authoritarian and taxonomical setting); it’s also organised in a way to steady it and to guarantee it for the future generations. This perception of childhood and adolescence can impossibly provide social justice or democracy. But this idea of childhood and adolescence is not the only possible one. More democratic ideas are possible. For example, critical unschooling is rooted in a more inclusive, respectful and democratic perception of childhood and adolescence. It requires a parental awareness based, among other things, on human rights education. While providing informal, self-directed and community-based, not-structured education, critical unschooling can weaken adult hegemony and power towards children and adolescents. This contribution aims to show the benefits of critical unschooling for a more democratic society.

critical unschooling ; childhood; adolescence; democracy

## INTRODUCTION

According to cultural anthropology, self-depiction of human beings depends on social adaptation, that is on the solution(s) each culture and society has found for some problems, such as:

- primary needs (food, clothing and shelter)
- social organization
- environmental issues (climate, migration, war, agricultural and economical suitability, endemic diseases)

In the same way the idea we have of childhood and adolescence is strictly linked to these cultural solutions.

So in ancient farmer societies teens were expected to perform all duties grown-ups had to exercise. The concept of adolescence did not exist.

The contemporary notion of adolescence was “invented” by Granville Stanley Hall, the first president of the American Psychological Association. It is surely not a coincidence that this invention emerged in the USA between the late 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, at a time when the social changes caused by the spread of enrolments in public high schools were increasing at a much faster pace than population (Kett, 2003). In this way the responsibilities connected to the teenage years were consequently postponed. So teens began to have time to undergo their personal psychological conflicts.

Adolescence became a field of study only after the late 1950s.

Having the need to put adults at work outside the family context, industrial and post-industrial societies must provide a good childcare system. That’s one of the most impacting reasons why there are crèches, nurseries, kindergartens and compulsory schools, where babies, children and teens must learn and experience what they nowadays could learn and experience anywhere else.

So, the real reason for school is the economical need to free parents in order to let them produce and perform.

There is no evidence that kindergartens and schools are necessary to get a good education. History, Geography, Science, Maths, Music, Arts, Philosophy, Languages, etc. are indeed subjects that anyone can learn anywhere and at any time, also thanks to new technologies, libraries, museums and thanks to the opportunity to travel. The experience of friendship and relationship to other young people doesn’t need school classes to be gained: any other place can provide it.

## **1. CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE IN TODAY'S WESTERN SOCIETIES**

### **1.1. Age-based separation, segregation and discrimination**

Separation is a keystone of our social system: children are separated from their families (not rarely already during the earliest childhood), they are sent to crèche, to kindergarten or to school. At school or kindergarten siblings are also separated from each other, depending on their age. Babies, children and teens spend their days in very limited places, where they are also separated from the world and their community or village. They are expected to stay there at least as long as their parents stay at work. If not, they must provide justification. There is a sort of (moral) obligation to stay at kindergarten/school every day and all day long except for the weekends. That's why we can talk of age-based segregation.

Children and teens are expected to listen to adults, but have not the right to be listened to. They are expected to learn the way they'll live and what they'll become. But they don't have the right to choose, organise and schedule their learning activities or processes. They are expected to learn what they are taught and the way their teachers choose for them.

Depending on their age, babies, children and teens are allowed (or not) to do certain things, like for example being part of school boards and committees where decisions about their education and their school life are made. In Italy they can only partake in them from the age of 14, that is in upper secondary school.

In Italian schools they generally can't move alone from one room to another inside the school building until the age of 19: they must be with a teacher or an adult or have their permission. They can't leave the school building without their parents or teachers. Fortunately in other Western countries it's more informal.

Most West-European and South-American languages (such as Italian, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese for example) prescribe a different translation for "you" if you talk to a child or a teen than if you talk to an adult. They also prescribe a different way to say hello or good-bye depending on age (or friendship). As a language is the expression of a culture and of a Weltanschauung (world view), it would be interesting to understand if this use might be also considered the expression of an implicit cultural and psychological age-based discrimination.

### **1.2. Undemocratic and colonialist perspective: control, prohibition, imposition, punishment-rewards dynamics and authoritarianism**

In Italy children and teens before 18 can't begin to work and aren't able to build

up their independence from their original family.

In today's Western society, a child or an adolescent is a "minor" or "non-aged", not mature enough to legally engage in an activity or to exercise some sort of rights independently. In everyday life they are often seen as inferior to adults.

They must be taught, educated and shown what is right and what is wrong.

This view is the same colonists have about colonised people, when they believe the latter must be civilised.

Children and teens are seen as immature, unpredictable, capricious, unreliable and irresponsible "minors", incapable of making important decisions. Furthermore, adolescence is often seen as the age of mood disruptions, conflicts with parents and risky behaviour.

As a consequence, adult's attitude is based on a lack of trust. All this, together with separation and discrimination, necessarily leads to external control, prohibition and imposition, to punishment-reward dynamics.

### **1.3. Adult hegemony and the role of mass education**

There is a dominant age and a dominated one, where people dream of becoming dominant. That's the reason why people rarely speak to children in the same gentle way, in the same tone, with the same flattering words, the same voice and volume they do with their principal.

This idea of childhood and adolescence is functional to neoliberalism: children must be quiet and don't make any troubles until they've grown up and become consumers and perhaps also producers.

Lack of democracy combined with discrimination and segregation, with external control, prohibition, imposition and authoritarianism are the same dynamics of colonisation and apartheid.

School has always been a main tool of imperialism, colonialism, dictatorship and other kinds of authoritarian government.

Obedience, segregation, authoritarianism, control, prohibition, imposition, punishment-reward dynamics are the "values" mass education is based on. School provides formal learning while encouraging learning by heart, plagiarism and conformism. At the same time it trains for efficiency and it rewards success. Compulsory education is adult-centred because it's organised in a way to respond to adult's necessities.

While providing standardised learning and tests, school encourages homogenisation and conformism, repetition of items instead of critical thinking.



At school the child/adolescent is treated as a passive executor of predetermined activities.

Crèches, kindergartens and schools effectively “form” young minds, in order to create the habit of adult power and obedience and to train them for the future.

So school is not only the peak of the expression of adult power. It’s also a way to steady it and guarantee this status quo for future generations.

## **2. BEYOND SCHOOLING AND THE MAINSTREAM IDEA OF CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE**

The above-mentioned idea of childhood/adolescence has obvious weak points: it divides and trains to obedience, but not to human rights; it is based on suspicion more than on trust; it develops competition, but not cooperation; it teaches to accept prohibition, control and authoritarianism and doesn’t build up responsibility and decision making. In this way it can’t provide social justice or democracy neither for present, nor for future generations.

There are other ways to provide education, also in Western contemporary societies, such as democratic schools, like Sudbury Valley School, for example.

Most of these approaches must generally gain ground outside compulsory schooling, like for example unschooling, which is a part of homeschooling.

### **2.1 Unschooling**

Unschooling is a learner-centred approach to education, where children, teens and young adults are free to learn in an informal or non-formal way, in symbiosis with their learning style and in relationship to their parents and family, in their learning and living context: unschoolers are not taught, they are free to learn in an experience-based way.

This approach is a self-learning, context-related practice: no teachers are required in this kind of self-directed and autonomous learning. Each child can build his/her own learning path depending on his/her interests, characteristics and learning style; each child has the leading role in his/her learning process (learner-led practice). This helps children and teens to learn soon to do things and make decisions without the direct help of adults, albeit help is offered when requested.

Children build their own knowledge and confidence through trial and error, since that way they are trusted to find their personal way around things that work and things that don’t.

As unschooling is related to the living context, it allows to strengthen intergenerational relationships within and outside the family.

Unschooling is able to reinvent knowledge, learning, parenting and intergenerational relationships, all at the same time.

There are different modulations of unschooling, such as radical unschooling, project-based unschooling, worldschooling and critical unschooling.

## **2.2. Critical unschooling**

Critical unschooling is a type of unschooling in which the fundamental role of education for social justice is combined with a democratic idea of childhood and adolescence.

Social justice is the fair distribution of opportunities, rights and treatment. Among its pillars there are participation, human rights, diversity and equity. That's why parents who choose critical unschooling usually value dialogue, negotiation, trust, participation in decision-making, the respect of growing and learning times and individual characteristics of their children; they don't mind standardisation or conformism.

Children and teens have an active, participative role in their families/groups; they make decisions and take responsibility for themselves and their learning process. This equalitarian and democratic view implies that they are considered capable of leading their own self-learning process, too.

Parents choosing critical unschooling want to achieve democratic education. So age-based segregation and discrimination are banned: young people can spend most of their time with their family, if they wish.

These parents' approach is consent-based and democratic: all family members are equally treated, consent building and cooperation are main goals. Authoritarianism is also generally excluded: a continuous negotiation with the particular living context takes place. External regulation is extremely reduced because parents generally rely on children's responsibility and self control: the familiar dynamics are built up on trust and relaxed relationships, which is a way to empower young people.

As dialogue is a keystone of democracy, children and teens are free to speak when they wish to, about any subjects, and experience that they are listened to. They are free to take part in adults' conversations and/or activities and be involved in important decisions. The education to negotiation and compromise, to cooperation among peers, as well as to intergenerational collaboration (with parents and other adults), are main aims and a common daily practice. In this

way young people can experience participative processes and get into the habit of them. That's why for many parents the goal is not the end point of education (graduation) but the process itself.

Therefore, instead of formal, adult-centred education (typical for schooling), critical unschooling de-constructs knowledge and learning. Knowledge doesn't need to be divided in subjects (taxonomical setting), nor organised in classes or degrees (age-based segregation): it's experience-based, transversal through subjects and age-independent.

Critical unschooling is often related to attachment parenting and provides strong intergenerational relationships instead of age-based separation. It considers them capable of leading their own learning process instead of obliging them to uncritical obedience and instead of putting them into a class where they are only allowed to follow their teachers' decisions.

Critical unschooling is based on reliance, empathy, negotiation, compromise, dialogue, absence of judgement, respect of growing times and individual characteristics, instead of external control, prohibition, imposition and rewards-punishment dynamics.

In this way, critical Unschooling can concretely contribute to social justice and democracy.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Critical unschooling is an educational opportunity for social innovation, for more democracy and social justice in everyday life. It is an opportunity for integration of young people in everyday life, as well as for reducing the reiteration of the taxonomical, prescriptive, past-oriented educational system which aims to steady the status quo.

As a challenge for the continuity of this authoritarian/undemocratic society, critical unschooling provides effective, social, and cultural learning and a democratic view of childhood and youth.

Critical unschooling is a way to make education independent from imperialism, colonisation, authoritarianism and market laws.

The parental awareness critical unschooling requires can sustain the democratisation of childhood and adolescence: human rights education happens through the experience and daily respect of them.

If unschooling is able to reinvent intergenerational relationships, critical unschooling can make them more respectful and consent-based and provide an

inner social transformation in the idea of childhood and adolescence in order to reproduce and boost cooperation, negotiation, trust and equality.

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# AGAINST SCHOOL STIGMATIZATION: SUCCESSES, CONFLICTS AND MAIN CHALLENGES OF THE EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY OF THE PISACANE SCHOOL

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This article examines the efforts of the Pisacane School in the Tor Pignatara neighborhood of Rome to combat school segregation through the creation of a self-organized educational community of practice. In a context marked by stigmatisation and the flight of families without migratory background, the community – including teachers, parents and NGOs – developed innovative educational practices and collaborative spaces. These initiatives transformed the school into a place of pedagogic innovation and inclusion, fostering links with the surrounding neighbourhood. Over a decade, these efforts increased the school's attractiveness, reversing declining enrolment and inspiring similar initiatives elsewhere in Italy. However, challenges remain, including tensions with local authorities, internal conflicts over the balance of power between stakeholders, and limited engagement from migrant families. In addition, the success of these inclusion efforts has led to the risk of school gentrification, potentially marginalising the very migrant community the school sought to serve. The Pisacane school provides an important case study of localised responses to segregation, highlighting the potential and limitations of community-led efforts to address systemic educational inequalities. It highlights the need for wider institutional learning and national policy support to understand and sustain these transformative practices.

school segregation; community of practice; learning spaces; educational community; school gentrification

## INTRODUCTION

It has now emerged from various studies (Cognetti, 2012; Pacchi and Ranci, 2017) that schools are becoming the mirror of extremely dangerous processes of social segregation. In neighbourhoods with a higher concentration of immigrants, for fear of a lower quality of learning and educational offerings, the phenomenon of *Italian flight* is becoming more widespread, i.e. the enrolment of the children of a growing number of Italian families, even far from their own homes, in schools with a lower percentage of pupils of immigrant origin. While this phenomenon reflects a strong sensitivity to the presence of migrants, it is the perverse result of the way in which in Italy school autonomy (and the abolition of catchment areas) has been implemented, which has led to growing competition between institutions. This education market which has been allowed to operate essentially without any regulation is producing serious selection processes on a national and social basis. The result is that, paradoxically, while the neighbourhoods of Italian cities “generally continue to have a relatively mixed social composition and there are few areas where there are real phenomena of concentration of residents of foreign origin, it is precisely the formation of schools that highlights a much more radical segregation dynamic” (Cognetti, 2012, p. 135).

In this article, we have decided to analyse the case study of the Pisacane school, which represents a very significant experience of school segregation and desegregation. In a context marked by stigmatisation and the flight of families without migratory background, the community – including teachers, parents and NGOs – developed innovative educational practices and collaborative spaces. These initiatives transformed the school into a place of pedagogic innovation and inclusion, fostering links with the surrounding neighbourhood. By analysing the networks of actors and groups involved, through qualitative interviews and by actively participating in meetings, co-design activities and public events, we set out to identify successes, conflicts and main challenges of this community of practice.

### 1. THE CASE STUDY: THE PISACANE SCHOOL IN TOR PIGNATTARA NEIGHBOURHOOD IN ROME

The Pisacane school is located in the Marranella area of Torpignattara, an eastern suburb of Rome that has struggled with a negative reputation since the 1970s, long before significant immigration began. Since the second half of the 1990s, this area has gradually become one of the most ethnically connoted

areas of the neighbourhood, characterised by a predominant Bangladeshi presence, to the extent that it is also referred to by the toponym *Banglatown* (Broccolini, 2010). At the same time, the Pisacane school has seen an increase in the proportion of pupils of foreign origin. As the percentage of pupils with a migrant background increased, the school was subjected to waves of moral panic and was labelled *the school of foreigners*. There was a massive exodus of families without a migrant background, which contributed to a much more radical increase in the presence of pupils without Italian citizenship. As a result, in the 2010-2011 academic year, a striking 97% of new enrolments at the Pisacane school were children with a migrant background. This statistic is particularly remarkable given that, at that period, only around 20% of the residents of the Tor Pignattara neighbourhood had foreign citizenship.

As a teacher interviewed in those years pointed out (Vereni, 2018, 75-76):

What should seem problematic about the Pisacane school is not the presence of foreigners, that is absolutely obvious, since they all live around here, so it is normal that they come here. What should make the news is that instead the Italians left, the Italians actually said at one point: “We’re not going to this school, we’d rather take the car every morning”.

This case of very strong residential segregation of pupils of immigrant origin has made it a focal point in the national debate, fuelled by right-wing politicians who have used the school’s demographics as an argument for implementing the 2010 Gelmini Circular, an Italian legislation which tried to set a ceiling of 30% for foreign<sup>1</sup> students in each class.

In response to this increasing marginalisation and stigmatisation of the school, a self-organised process of emancipation began in Pisacane in 2012. An ongoing path who have been as protagonists some headmasters, many active teachers, a parents’ association and several NGOs. A community of practice aimed to innovate educational practices, but also to create welcoming spaces that integrate local neighbourhoods into the school environment.

## **2. A SELF-ORGANIZED COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE**

The emancipatory path of the Pisacane School has been triggered mainly by the arrival of a new headteacher with a Montessori background (Annarita Marino).

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<sup>1</sup> In Italy, citizenship legislation, which is largely based on the principle of *ius sanguinis* (right of blood), has significant implications for children of migrant origin. Despite being born or raised in Italy, a significant proportion of these children are considered foreigners under the law.

The starting point was to the idea to use the school premises as a lever for change and to open the school to the neighbourhood.

The headmistress says that when she arrived in Pisacane school for the first time, she found a building that was structurally closed, introverted and not very welcoming:

The first day I entered the school I can't forget: I go in, I cross the hall and I see this long corridor, all the doors closed, you couldn't see a picture of a child hanging on the wall... in short, there was no sign of a kindergarten! So I go back and I say: "Sorry you sent me to the offices, but I'm looking for the school!" and she says: "No madam, go that's the school".

The first fundamental moment in the history of Pisacane, therefore, was to open the doors of the different classrooms in order to create more opportunities for communication and connection, between students and between classes, and, in general, to immediately convey a message of openness and exchange; the second step was to open the doors of the school to local NGOs involved in social and intercultural activities, in order to extend this commitment to exchange beyond the school walls, where educational activity is traditionally confined.

When Pisacane was attacked in the media as a 'problematic school with too many foreigners', this process was still in its infancy. After this symbolic attack, these initiatives and the first alliances between teachers increased significantly, and the contribution of parents to these activities also became more and more important. A key moment was the creation of the Pisacane Parents' Association 0-11 (now 0-99), which led to the formalisation and accentuation of the active and proactive role that some parents were beginning to play. This association will soon be given a room on the ground floor of the school, which will be the headquarters of its activities in the area for years to come. This space, thanks to its permeability to the street, and therefore the possibility of being visible in the neighbourhood, became the perfect place to host the organisational meetings between parents and teachers and those of the local inhabitants' committee (Tor Pignattara Neighbourhood Committee) and a lot of afternoon activities (such as music or Arabic courses). Many of these extra-curricular activities will then be incorporated into the formal curriculum of the school. In 2016, these activities were joined by the end of year event called *Taste the word*, organised in the school premises but open to the whole neighbourhood. As defined by one of the mothers of the Pisacane Parents' Association:



The meaning of this festival is to open the school to the neighbourhood and to let them into the school, because the neighbourhood (...) has no squares, there is only Largo Pelestrello, which is not very welcoming, it has no cultural spaces and we have always thought that the school could compensate for these deficiencies by making its courtyard a meeting place and with its activities a cultural reference point.

### **3. INTERNAL DIALECTICS AND THREE CHALLENGES**

The self-organised community of practice of the Pisacane school is certainly an experience of great interest, also because over the years it has become an instrument of high-level pedagogical action and research on diversity/mobility/migration and has fostered the creation of important local and national networks, such as the Roman network of open and participatory schools. However, we must avoid idealising this path: the Pisacane community of practice is in fact a situated and contextual field with many internal dialectics and challenges to face.

The first point to analyse is their great difficulty to dialogue and collaborate with local authorities (e.g. City Hall, Municipality). This is mainly due to a lack of territorial vision on the part of the municipality, which rarely seems interested in supporting the processes taking place at the Pisacane school. One of the main dialectics within the Pisacane School's community of practice is just related to the nature of the relationship with local institutions: some take a more oppositional stance and promote self-organisation and avoid having particular relationships with local municipality; while others call for more public intervention, e.g. to maintain certain areas of the school. This dialectic has always been present in the school and has entailed a continuous and tiring oscillation. More recently, a participatory process has been launched to create a 'Community Education Pact' between schools, NGOs and the Municipality of Rome to strengthen the network between schools and with some municipal services. A new path, not without its issues.

A second relevant challenge is related to the so-called educational monopoly of the school. In fact, the community of practice includes activist teachers who are used to sharing power and educational responsibility with NGOs and parents, as well as teachers who believe in the educational monopoly of the school and are afraid of external interference. This second group of teachers considers confrontation with parents and NGO's useful, but who insist on the absolute predominance of the educational role of the school and, in particular, of the teacher component. This position is well summed up, for example, by the words of this Pisacane teacher:

The parents' association was stimulating until it became too intrusive (...) the association can help me with many things, but it cannot get involved in didactics, it cannot get involved in the real dynamics of the school.

A third challenge is the involvement of families of migrant origin. Attempts in this direction have always been considerable. For example, in order to involve foreign parents more closely, the community of practice decided from the outset to open an Italian school for women within the school. In time, this initiative led to the creation of the Intercultural Centre for Women *Miguelim*, which still exists today and is coordinated by one of the most active NGOs in the school (Asinitas onlus). Some parents of Bangladeshi origin became first class representatives, then mediators involved in many projects. In general, however, the contribution of foreign families to this community of practice is still extremely underrepresented, so that it can be said that the transition of migrants from the role of beneficiaries to that of promoters is slow. This is also due to the fact that the need for pedagogical innovation is not a priority for many families who face daily economic, social and cultural challenges, as many families of migrant origin do.

#### **4. FROM SCHOOL SEGREGATION TO THE RISK OF SCHOOL GENTRIFICATION?**

In ten years, the number of pupils enrolled in the school has increased considerably and it has become attractive again for many Italian families, so much so that a secondary school has been opened. Thus, despite the many internal dialectics analysed above, we can say that it has been a very successful course. At the same time, however, a new and not easy challenge is looming on the horizon. Indeed, the aura of a more open and inclusive school has been created around the school and this has attracted the interest of Italian young and creative families (e.g. designers, architects, artists) who are now increasingly settling in the neighbourhood; on the contrary, the migrant component is decreasing sharply. So we are beginning to talk about the risk of a passage from school segregation to school gentrification (Pearman and Swain, 2017). This new challenge makes the story of the Pisacane School both more problematic and more interesting.

This experience mirrors that of many other similar emancipatory paths in marginalised Italian contexts. Fragmented and too isolated stories that finally need to be properly understood and supported as great opportunities for institutional learning.

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# THE DISCIPLINARY NOTES AND THE SHAPING OF STUDENT SUBJECTIVITIES

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The disciplinary note fits within the school routine of the professional technical institutes as a recurrent practice. Apparently functional to the regulation of behaviors that place themselves in implicit or explicit conflict with the educational institution, the note assumes within the circular teacher-student-institution relationship a different, transversal and a more profound meaning. Disciplinary notes in fact document the practices by which schoolwork is distorted, sabotaged, and made fundamentally ineffective (Caroselli 2022); the exercise of pedagogical authority as power (Goffman 1967); the definition of subjectivities according to precise behavioral codes that define normativity. Based on the analysis of a data set of approximately 5,000 disciplinary notes issued within a professional technical institute of Bologna from 2021 to 2023, the study aims to investigate and classify this material with the purpose of identifying and illustrating the processes of defining subjectivities within the school environment on the one hand, and the nature of conflicts and their recursiveness on the other.

school discipline, disciplinary note.

## INTRODUCTION

This study explores the intimacy of the school administration with two aims: to identify the processes through which subjectivities and roles are defined and to analyze the nature of relationships and conflicts within the school environment. The research is carried out by combining the structuralist and constructivist Bourdieusian tradition, which focuses on mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction, with an interpretive approach (Mehan, 1996). The disciplinary notes considered in this study were collected within a professional technical institute located in the metropolitan area of Bologna over the course of a two-year period (21/22 and 22/23). The institute has a student population of about

1400 students, the 20% of them are enrolled in the vocational. The school is marked by a high incidence of students with migrant backgrounds (over 32%), students who failed previous grades (33%), and students with special educational needs (19%). The presence of students with these vulnerabilities is markedly more evident in vocational classes where pupils with migrant backgrounds make up 55-58 %, students who failed in one or more grades are the 62 %, and students with special educational needs are more than 31%. These data remain stable during the two school years that are taken into consideration.

### **1. THE DISCIPLINARY NOTE AS A RECURRENT PRACTICE<sup>1</sup>**

884 out of 1471 students received at least one disciplinary note in s.y. 21/22, accounting for 60% of the student population. At vocational, the incidence of notes is significantly higher, with 75 percent of students receiving at least one note and 56 percent at technical. The following year 780 students received at least one disciplinary note, accounting for the 55% of the institute's student population. At vocational, the incidence of disciplinary notes remains significantly higher (the 76% of students gets at least one note while at the technical the 50%). In the year 21/22 the school issued 3647 disciplinary notes, in 22/23 2369. The School Principal has changed from year to year, the disciplinary policies and the institute rules accordingly. Equally the critical phase of pandemic management has ended in 2022, that had an impact on the decrease of the notes issued<sup>2</sup>. This research therefore takes its cue from the suggestions provided by more than 5,000 short texts. This total includes three types of notes: individual, collective and class notes. Individual notes are those issued to a single student, collective notes pertain to a group of students within the same class, and class notes were assigned to all the students who result present in class when an infraction occurred. 173 out of 197 faculty members, thus 87% of the faculty, administered at least one note in s.y. 21/22, 154 out of

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu & Passeron (1972) use the acronym AP to refer to pedagogical action, defining it as: "symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition, by an arbitrary power, of an arbitrary cultural order," which logically implies that "every power of symbolic violence—i.e., any power that succeeds in imposing meanings as legitimate while concealing the power relations on which its strength is based—adds its own force, that is, a specifically symbolic force, to these power relations." Symbolic violence involves a process of "incarnation of norms and cultural models and the formation of a habitus coherent with the institutional framework" (Pitzalis, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> During the Pandemic special disciplinary regulations were passed in each school, according to National Guidelines, to counteract the spread of the virus. New rules involved limitation to freedom of movement, to corporal expression, to natural behaviors like eating or drinking. These measures had a strong impact on students' life and on disciplinary records accordingly.

200, thus 77% of the faculty, administered at least one note in the following s.y.. The phenomenon of the disciplinary note thus constitutes a recurrent practice therefore a foundational experience of the school condition in this school.

## 2. WHAT A NOTE IS ABOUT

### 2.1. Public and formal acts

Notes are public acts since, while remaining “private,” they are addressed to multiple recipients; they are formal acts because in their linguistic modes of expression, construction and purpose they are inspired by codes proper to institutional and bureaucratic communication, aimed at certifying rather than describing, recording rather than expressing.

### 2.2. Explicit and implicit purposes

The primary purpose of the note is to sanction the student<sup>3</sup>; the secondary function is to produce an official version of reality<sup>4</sup>, thus certifying an action<sup>5</sup> or its denial, a behavior, attitude, intention or situation by fixing it in time.

However, notes also have implicit purposes: the teacher resorts to the note to restore his or her pedagogical authority (Thin, 2002); or he/she entrusts the note, like a diary page, with the description of a difficulty, the revelation of a judgment or hope. This element comes into contradiction with the nature of the public act, which is supposed to constitute itself as formal, certifying an objectivity, without indulging in anything subjective.

## 3. TEACHER LANGUAGE

The notes are constructed from linguistic codes borrowed from the bureaucratic language of the formal act, connoted by what Calvino defined as *antilanguage* which “emerges whenever a speaker uses his means of expression “in an impersonal and mechanical manner” (Calvino, 1965) thus using a language that De Mauro defines as *scholastic language*<sup>6</sup>: “the exaggeratedly precious and courtly expressive choices that have their humus in the school world”. The

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of “rehabilitation,” the change in the nature of the self (Goffman, 1968). The educational function of disciplinary sanctions is emphasized by school regulations. This purpose justifies the sanction not as a punitive act, but in its rehabilitative function, from a behaviorist perspective. It would be necessary to empirically demonstrate whether this assumption is valid; however, current literature systematically shows the opposite.

<sup>4</sup> One of the tasks of “those who have institutional authority with a position that allows them to give an imprimatur to specific versions of reality” (Goffman, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> “One thing is to consider the problem a crisis, and another is to consider it a diagnosis, because the diagnosis is an object, while the crisis is a subjectivity” (Basaglia, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> “Scolastichese” in Italian.

student is *learner*, the lighter *device*, the flip-flops *footwear*, the teacher is a *scribe*, or *teaching figure*, speaking is *eloquence*, vulgarities are *profanity*, note is a *measure*, fight is *scuffle*, responsibilities are *charges*, to continue is to *persist/reiterate/persever*, corridors are *transit areas*, the school is the *plexus*, and so on.

It is about the “professorial use of a professorial language” which, according to Bourdieu, (1972) constitutes “the last protection of the teacher (...) the distance created by words” apt to reinforce the fundamental distinction between oppressed and oppressors (Tsfau, 2020).

#### **4. TEACHER GAZE**

While professorial language coldly reifies and certifies the subject and his or her actions from afar, with the distance of words, the teacher’s gaze occasionally breaks into the text and lands on the subject with personal comments and judgments, drawing him or her close and covering him or her with the veil of his or her own descriptions and externalizations thereby betraying the implicit purposes of the note, which are essentially ego-referential (it is about reestablishing one’s authority and/or sublimating thoughts and frustrations in writing). These comments in the sidelines of the objective descriptions of the behaviors that gave rise to the note:

- Betray or declare the vulnerability, the thoughts, the judgments, of teachers;
- Freeze in the delivery of a categorical and definitive glance, thus in a diagnosis, labelling, the students’ subjectivities: notes like Polaroids that snapshot them in fragments of “inappropriate” actions, gestures, attitudes within the school context.

The note, marked by the finality of written words, replaces the dialogue: a process marked by the mutability of the subjects involved, who mutually influence each other in their responses, in an attempt to understand each other, mediating with the other.

#### **5. STUDENT BEHAVIORS**

Inappropriate is the adjective most frequently associated with reported behaviors. However other definitions also recur, some examples:

Unhygienic. Bad, uncivilized and unsuitable. Totally uncivilized and unacceptable for any human and social environment. Beastly. Totally unsuitable.

Improper. Inconsistent. Undisciplined. Very polemical and defiant. Hostile. Increasingly improper and unfit. Rude. Completely disrespectful. Recidivist. Rude.

Many actions fall within the orbit of what, in the school context, thus in the teachers' gaze, turns out to be inadequate. In fact, many habitual actions (such as eating, drinking, going to the bathroom, chatting, putting a jacket in a schoolbag, sleeping, being distracted, or reading a comic book) cannot be considered inadequate in themselves, but within the institution they become so. In both s.y. the majority of notes recur for infractions that concern not dangerous or universally incorrect actions for the purposes of a peaceful coexistence, but inadequate behavior. Looking at the data from s.y. 22/23 for example, it is observed that in 53% of the notes, recur infractions such as:

- going to the bathroom/asking to go to the bathroom;
- using a cell phone;
- sleeping;
- talking, laughing, joking;
- distracting oneself;
- eating or drinking;
- unauthorized movement in the classroom;
- leaving the classroom without permission.

When counting tardiness and absences as well, the 62% of the disciplinary notes involves this kind of infractions. These data confirm other similar quantitative studies<sup>7</sup> and tell us that infractions related to actions that endanger the safety of people recur in a minority of the notes. In particular, possession of weapons, drugs or alcohol recurs in 0.2 percent of them. Acts of violence recur in 1.4 percent of the notes. Infractions related to acts of aggression, anger, threats (indirect violence) recur in 2.4% of the notes.

Inadequacy returns thus as a recurring and dominant data signifying students' actions recorded in disciplinary measures. This is to be understood as the condition of a subject who is not yet sufficiently schooled: thus unable to remain motionless, dumb and concentrated for long periods of time, unable to submit to pedagogical authority in the hope of gaining benefit from it, unable to delegate to the latter the control of his autonomies for a defined number of hours each day.

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<sup>7</sup> See in the references: Apa Report, 2008; Morrison & Skiba, 2001; Chin et al. 2012; Caton, 2012; Heitzeg, 2014.



He chatters profusely. He loudly exclaims his own state of mind. He opens a discussion with his desk neighbors about his dog, which seems to come from Caserta. He communicates from a distance. He secretly eats a snack. Exits the classroom saying he is cold. He reads something else. Keeps laughing wandering. Spinning. Packs paper balls. He shows total disinterest. He twirls his hat in the air as if juggling.

Given the premises of the school condition, these actions are to be interpreted as recurrent practices through which “schoolwork is distorted, sabotaged, rendered fundamentally ineffective” (Caroselli, 2022); “geographies of freedom” (Vienne, 2008) insinuated into the interstices of the day.

## 6. INADEQUATE SUBJECTS

In the first pages of *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, Michel Foucault explains that the “political investment of the body” is about the dynamics through which power relations “in a subtly calculated, organized, technically directed way” (Foucault, 1975) exercise a “political technology of the body” (Ibidem), which in a capillary way exercise a specific subjection of the body, aimed at making it productive. The disciplinary notes are the effect and the instrument of the orthopedics of an adolescent soul that still escapes the subjugation of bodies. The wide range of resistance techniques that through the bodies, the subjectivities of students act to oppose the microphysics of school power. The revelation of bodies emerges in the notes as a disturbing invasion of an animal collective body, wildness that disrupts, escapes and destroys control, irrationality that is both negation and antithesis of schoolwork. A collective class body, a black body, a migrant body, looming and disruptive sexuality, smell, wetness, movement, noise, unmanageable dirt/color emancipating itself. The student:

Produced shouting animal noises several times. Spits. Emits air noisily and continuously from the stomach. Makes a loud, prolonged noise of air pouring out of the mouth. He burps noisily. Emits high-pitched sounds, emits immoderate and extremely harassing screams. Blews raspberries. Poses as if to “evacuate”.

The texts of the disciplinary notes thus document the structuring of colonial-like spaces and imaginaries where adolescents are depicted as *inadequate* by the fearful and disdainful gaze of those who mark the distance between culture and nature and in so doing define an inferior humanity, closer to the state of nature and therefore dangerous, unmanageable. On the other hand, however, as in “a

(class) self-fulfilling prophecy (...) the boys personify and accentuate ways of being that are antithetical to the docility demanded by the institution. Certainly, through an unconscious mechanism, they ‘decide’ to incorporate the nightmare” (Caroselli, 2022). They thus realize, as effectively written by Valerio Marchi (1994a, 2004) an “unconscious hymn to their own state of inferiority and inadequacy” whereby boys end up aligning themselves with those same stereotypes that always want them to be “too uncivilized, too rough, to become ruling class”.

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# BEYOND DEFICIT THINKING: FROM EPISTEMIC SUBJUGATION TO THE DECOLONISATION OF THOUGHT AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE CLASSROOM

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Students whose strengths differ from those valued by the curriculum and societal norms are often assessed based on perceived deficiencies according to the education system's standards, rendering their knowledge invisible. This dynamic is shaped by deficit thinking, which dominates Western school systems. This paper examines the hypothesis that the "coloniality of knowledge" (Quijano, 1992) has fostered conditions that support the persistence of deficit thinking in education. It asks: To what extent is deficit thinking linked to the coloniality of knowledge as a power structure? Through a literature review, the study argues that rationalist scientific absolutism remains the epistemological foundation of education and teacher training in Western countries. The knowledge promoted reflects a privileged (white) perspective, marginalizing 'othered' subjects and their epistemological traditions, relegating them to peripheral positions in educational spaces.

Western school systems; coloniality of power; deficit thinking theory; epistemic decolonization.

## INTRODUCTION

According to coloniality theory in the European project of world domination, a central role was given to the domination of subjectivities, culture, and knowledge. Expanding on the theories of decolonial thinkers (Quijano, 1992; Dussel, 2000; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), "epistemologies of the South" (Santos, 2014), and perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro, 2017), this contribution offers a theoretical explanation for the academic challenges faced by non-dominant students (i.e., people of color, with migrant backgrounds), in Western school system.

Students whose strengths differ from those valued by the curriculum and society are often assessed in terms of their perceived deficiencies relative to the education system's established standards (Levinson, 2011). This perspective is further shaped by a dominant discourse that portrays these students – particularly those with migrant backgrounds from the “Global South” – as lacking the ability to learn, attributing this to supposed deficiencies in motivation and language skills (Beach et al., 2019; Santagati & Bertozzi, 2023). In fact, the difficulties they encounter within the school system are often attributed to them and their families (Olivos, 2006; Bishop, 2008; Yosso, 2005), as theorized by deficit thinking (Shields et al., 2005; Valdés, 1996).

I hypothesize that the “coloniality of knowledge” (Quijano, 1992) provided fertile ground for the development and spread of deficit thinking theory in the education system (Dusi, 2023). So, a question arose: *is there a connection between the deficit thinking approach to education and the ‘coloniality of knowledge’ structure of power?* To address this question, I adopted a theoretical approach grounded in a traditional literature review<sup>1</sup> (Pope, Mays & Popay, 2007). While this type of review has its limitations, it offers the potential to generate new insights and conceptual frameworks. Within this context, it facilitated the development of an explanatory theory aimed at understanding the persistence of deficit thinking in Western school systems, where “other” students and, more importantly, their knowledge are often neither acknowledged nor valued.

## 1. DEFICIT THINKING MINDSET

Deficit thinking (DF) has been discussed using various labels, including deficit assumptions, deficit discourse, deficit framing/framework, as well as deficit ideology, deficit model, deficit paradigm, and deficit theory. Some authors have used these terms interchangeably to describe an approach that views “different” students as less intelligent or less competent (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012), while others reference deficit theory without clearly defining its meaning

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to reading the works of some of the main authors in decolonial theory, such as Mignolo, Walsh, Maldonado-Torres, de Sousa Santos, Kilomba, and Chicana feminist critical thought by Anzaldúa, as well as the perspectivist theory of anthropologist Viveiros de Castro, the fundamental works of Fanon and Césaire were examined, with some incursions into authors from critical race theory, such as Ladson Billings, D. Solórzano, and T. Yosso. The books of some Afro-descendant Italian writers, such as Scego, Hakuzwimana, Efionayi, Ben Mohamed, Djarah Kan, and Osei, were analyzed to determine whether their texts contained passages and reflections that traced the presence of deficit thinking in their school experiences.

(Sharma, 2018). DF focuses on unfavorable conditions, environmental challenges, and racial disparities that define oppressed populations as “deficient”, reflecting broader systemic oppression disguised by ideologies like meritocracy and color-blindness (Patton Davis & Museus, 2019). It is an implicit, pervasive mindset within social systems, policies, educational institutions, culture, and language, shaping cognitive structures and worldviews. DF ignores the role of domination structures that create what Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) calls the educational debt, focusing instead on individual and cultural “deficiencies.” It perpetuates power dynamics that marginalize the “other,” fostering lower expectations for students from minority groups and undermining their confidence, leading to disengagement.

## **2. EPISTEMIC SUBJUGATION**

According to the hypothesis presented here, DF is closely linked to the abyssal thinking produced by the coloniality of knowledge, which constitutes the epistemic foundation of school curricula and teacher education. The domination of culture, subjective experience, and knowledge was a key part of the European project of global domination. The “non-white” other, along with their subjectivity and knowledge, was studied, categorized, and presented to the white world through “scholarly” research – an instrument of colonization practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) – and deemed less civilized. This theory shines a light on the absolutism of Western rationalism, which casts positivist science as the sole, valid knowledge form for distinguishing “true” from “false”. Rationalist scientific absolutism remains the epistemological foundation of schooling, education, and teacher training. As a result, the knowledge offered in schools reflects a privileged and dismissive perspective towards “other” subjects and their epistemologies, relegating them to a marginal position within educational spaces. The Other, within dominant socio-cultural assumptions about intelligence, language, abilities, and knowledge, is “invented” (following Toni Morrison) as inferior, uncivilized, and lacking. This often happens unconsciously, reinforcing the divide between “us” and the Other. The analysis of the texts reveals how authors identify the perception of the Other as inferior as central to the continued subjugation of minorities. Western anthropology has been preoccupied with finding a criterion to distinguish between “us” and everything that is not us. White anthropologists, fascinated by the concept of the “savage” mind, claimed that Indigenous people possessed “primitive” intellects and were, therefore, “deficient” (Viveiros de Castro, 2017). As Anzaldúa notes, this extended to the belief that “we cannot think in the higher

mode of consciousness-rationality” (2012, p. 59). Western domination has colonized the imagination of the Other and the ways of producing knowledge, establishing a hierarchical relationship with other epistemic universes and their inhabitants, who are not recognized as rational subjects. Even today, Gloria Ladson-Billings identifies “the constant questioning of our intellect” (AERA, 2024) as one of the challenges to confront. According to this scholar of *Critical Race Theory* (CRT), students in Western school systems are oppressed by the Euro-American regime of truth (2000). Referring to the Foucauldian concept, she highlights the central role of epistemology, understood both as an expression of a specific worldview and as a system of knowledge. The domination of ways of knowing, producing knowledge, and assigning meaning was central to the colonization of the world, achieved through the subjugation of subjectivities, knowledge, and cultures. This process dismisses the epistemic capacity of certain groups (Maldonado-Torres, 2004).

Colonization, as a total social fact, tends to destroy the cultural life of the colonized people through a process of cultural obliteration and uprooting. “The loss of the past,” as Simone Weil emphasizes, coincides with “the fall into colonial servitude” (2021, p. 53), which serves to appropriate the imagination of the subjugated people through the imposition of a super-ideology. The *coloniality of power and knowledge* takes the form of *the coloniality of being* (the Self): the violation of the meaning of otherness to the point where the alter-ego becomes a sub-alter. The epistemic difference becomes one with the ontological difference.

### **3. THE DECOLONISATION OF THOUGHT AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE CLASSROOM.**

The school system was originally designed to promote education. However, schools are not merely educational spaces; they are cultural and socio-political arenas. They often replicate the ideas and practices of the dominant social group (Apple, 1993), imposing norms that reinforce existing hierarchies. As a result, students frequently report discovering their differences – and the subtractive, deficit-based value attributed to them – only upon entering scholastic environments (Dusi, 2017). “Among the Whites at school”<sup>2</sup> (Hakuzwimana, 2024), these students (and their knowledge) become invisible

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<sup>2</sup> *Among the Whites at School* (2024) is the title of a volume dedicated to the Italian school system by the writer E. Hakuzwimana, in which the invisibility of generations of students, their roots, their rights, and their future prospects is emphasized. The title plays on the similarity between the Italian words *banchi* (the desks where students sit) and *bianchi*, used to refer to the white population.

(Ellison, 2014; Anzaldúa, 2012).

The school system has always struggled to recognize us. It doesn't do it on purpose; it's simply accustomed to leaving the most disadvantaged behind. (Hakuzwimana, 2024, p. 70)

The Decolonisation of Thought and Knowledge in the Classroom starts with recognizing the dignity and value of the Other. Alongside this ethical recognition, it also addresses the cognitive-theoretical dimension, understood as a set of knowledges. Western episteme exists within a discourse that has excluded the Other, as Anzaldúa wrote, affirming that what is considered theory is often off-limits to non-Western thought. She insisted on the need to claim the space for theorizing and not allow only whites to occupy it. With her, we can say: "If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories" (1990, p. xxvi). So, by introducing alternative approaches and methodologies, we can transform *the* "theorizing space" of our school. The challenge is greater: we must distance ourselves from our own epistemic approach, which shapes our thinking. We need to move beyond it and embrace other paradigms and perspectives through which we can think, reflect, feel, and live (Walsh, 2017), without denying our own way of thinking.

This process requires a theoretical praxis that goes beyond merely changing content (as Mignolo suggests with de-occidentalization), involving a shift in the entire framework. It's about 'inventing' new rules for conversation, including the principles and assumptions behind the creation, transformation, and dissemination of knowledge. Decoloniality, as an umbrella term, is one option in the struggle to free ourselves from the negative aspects of modernity, but it is not a discipline to be taught or added to the curriculum. Instead, it is a perspective that demands a shift in viewpoint. To break free from the epistemological (and ontological) confines imposed by the coloniality of knowledge, the suggested path is one of epistemic disobedience and epistemological reconstruction. The decolonial vision presents a project of delinking (Mignolo 2007; 2018), which involves conceptual and epistemic decolonization, grounded in boundary thinking. For those of us shaped by colonial thought, an epistemic shift is necessary (Bateson 1984), one that enables us to recognize the multiplicity of epistemic orders that have been overlooked until now. This means creating a school that allows space for other perspectives, which have been oppressed or overlooked, beginning with the linguistic dimension. In doing so, we open the possibility of initiating a true dialogue with diverse epistemological traditions, fostering exchange between



different ways of thinking and naming reality. To become capable of seeing all our students and all the worlds they already inhabit.

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# BECOMING A “SPACE DEFECTOR” OR WHEN INEQUALITIES MEET SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION. THE CASE OF THE NANTES SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

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This survey of architecture graduates of Nantes School of Architecture (ENSA Nantes) from 2015 to 2018 offers an analysis of their career paths, from access to studies to professional integration, in the light of their social origins. In fact, the recruitment process for architecture schools favors the admission of students from middle and upper socio-professional categories, who seem to benefit from a combination of cultural, economic and social capital, compared to the minority of underprivileged students admitted. Once these students have successfully entered the school, what strategies do they implement to succeed? To help us understand what happens before, during and after studies in terms of reproduction and distinction, we looked at the figure of the “defector”, as a way of exploring what individuals and institutions “can” do to counter determinism. The analysis of their educational trajectories shows that these defectors are able to compensate for their socio-cultural gaps by multiplying their professional experience during their studies and by being coopted by teachers. Lastly, although the defectors succeed in finding employment in the short term, they nevertheless find themselves in a position of reproducing the canonical practice of architecture in the form of salaried employment, taking on few responsibilities.

architectural education; graduates; defector; professional integration; professional trajectory, socialisation.

## INTRODUCTION

This study follows on from a doctoral thesis on the professional socialisation of architecture students and graduates at ENSA Nantes (Horsch, 2021). While that

study focused on graduates from 2011 to 2014, this new survey, conducted among graduates from 2015 to 2018, analyses their professional integration in the light of their social origins. The way schools of architecture are recruiting students favours the admission from mainly middle and upper socio-professional categories<sup>1</sup> (SPC). Their overall capital (cultural, economic and social) seems to give them an advantage over the minority of working-class students admitted, as well as for admission to the schools as for professional integration. Thus, the quantitative analysis shows that the social inequalities taking place at admission seem to be replayed at professional integration. The system favours young architects from the so-called ‘privileged’ classes even though the school seemed to have ‘compensated’ for these inequalities in terms of academic performance of the various social categories surveyed<sup>2</sup>.

What can schools of architecture do to prevent the reproduction of these inequalities, which seem to be at stake both at admission and graduation? Is social determinism so powerful that everything is played in advance? Can schools compensate for inequalities or do they even contribute to reproduce them? What levers can be used by the institution, by those who teach and those who study to counter determinism?

To understand what happens ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ school in terms of reproduction and distinction, we looked at the figure of the ‘defector’, in order to explore what individuals and institutions ‘can’ do to counter determinism. The trajectories of the defectors are to a large extent made possible by the school as an instrument of training in knowledge and know-how specific to architects (compensation for cultural capital) and more particularly by the fact that the school offers spaces for socialisation in the worlds of architecture (compensation for social capital). This contributes to the distinction of these defectors in relation to their social group of origin. In this way, the trajectories of the defectors provide us with information about the way in which specific forms of socialisation help to counter determinism, such as the network built on the school benches or interactions with teachers or architects during internships in architectural firms.

In addition, the trajectories of graduates from so-called ‘advantaged’ categories

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the rate of students whose fathers belong to the higher socio-professional categories enrolled at ENSA Nantes in 2016 (50%) is thirty points higher than the national average (20%) (Horsch, 2021, p. 148).

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, see parallel research on the acquisition of a specific spatial capital enabling an understanding of space and its translation into architectural and urban planning projects, a capital greatly valued by the institution (Horsch and Ouvrard, 2023).

who perceive their professional integration as difficult document the way in which the institution may have displaced them. It has led them to adopt various more or less innovative and committed practices that may explain the perceived difficulty of professional integration. We temporarily refer to them as ‘downgraded’ graduates. We have identified four figures: the ‘semi career changers’, the ‘career changers’, the ‘pioneers’ and the ‘dispassionate pragmatists’. Those figures will help us to understand how these profiles of young graduates may contribute to shifting the boundaries and to renewing the practice of architecture. However, the figures presented here should not be taken to imply that they represent a majority of graduates, since most of them work as salaried architects in architectural firms.

Our methodology is based on the analysis of 122 semi-structured interviews with graduates from the classes of 2015 to 2018, conducted in March 2021 as part of the ‘Worlds of Architecture’ course<sup>3</sup>. Those interviewed had graduated three to six years earlier. A questionnaire on geographical, educational and social origins, and their way to employment completes the survey<sup>4</sup>.

The analysis of the questionnaires, by crossing the social origins of the graduates and their perception of their professional integration, shows that social inequalities are replayed during professional integration. It may be an evidence of a ‘glass ceiling’ encountered by students from working-class backgrounds (section 1). We will then briefly present the four ‘downgraded’ profiles: graduates whose two parents belong to the favoured social classes and who perceive their integration as ‘difficult’ or ‘fairly difficult’. We shall see that the apparent difficulty of professional integration may, for some, conceal realities that enable them to establish more favourable working conditions in the longer term (section 2). At last, we will analyse the trajectories *outside* the quantitative results mentioned above: the graduates whose two parents come from disadvantaged backgrounds and who perceive their integration as ‘easy’ or ‘fairly easy’. We shall see how these defectors manage to compensate for their socio-cultural gaps (section 3). The different trajectories will be represented graphically: a time scale and the various key moments on the x-axis; their social background, the perception of their professional integration and their

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<sup>3</sup> This course, co-coordinated by the authors, offers the opportunity to gain an insight into the positions and practices of architects through a collective survey of architects’ careers taken out by 3rd year bachelor’s degree students.

<sup>4</sup> Unlike the questionnaire used for the survey of previous years, mentioned above, a supplementary question has been added on a scale of perception of professional integration (easy, fairly easy, neither easy nor difficult, fairly difficult to difficult).

architectural practice, whether innovative or by reproduction, on the y-axis.

## 1. WHEN INEQUALITIES ARE REPLAYED DURING PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION

Few qualitative and quantitative surveys have been carried out to gain a better understanding of the career paths of architecture graduates and the conditions of their professional integration. In a qualitative survey carried out by Olivier Chadoin (1996), the author identified ‘ideal career paths’: the ‘traditional’ path of the male heir, with a good knowledge of the field and moving into independent practice as a *maître d’œuvre*; the ‘heterodox path of necessary diversification’, reserved for women and men with little social capital and little knowledge of the field, obliging them to diversify through additional training.

The quantitative surveys carried out each year by the Department of Culture’s Observatory of Education and Professional Integration provide information on the proportion of graduates working in the field of architecture, urban planning and built heritage<sup>5</sup>. Although the SPC of the head of the family is included in the information collected by the questionnaire sent to young graduates, it is not included in the summaries published by the Department. However, based on raw data compiled by the Department, it is possible to conclude that graduates from parents of higher social categories are more likely to succeed in completing their studies than those from working-class families<sup>6</sup>.

Previous work based on the graduates from 2011 to 2014 (Horsch, 2021, p. 469) had shown that graduates from upper classes are more geographically mobile than other social groups. They find their first job both through the labour market, of which they have mastered the codes of access, and through the relationships they have been able to forge with professionals they met during their graduate studies. They seek to reinforce their legitimacy on the labour market through specialised training and accreditation<sup>7</sup>. The vast majority of graduates from working class families are quickly integrated into the field. They focus on accreditation, but relatively few go on to specialisation courses, often offered in Parisian schools or universities, where they settle less than graduates from the

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<sup>5</sup> L’insertion professionnelle des jeunes diplômés en architecture – Enquête sur les diplômés de l’enseignement supérieur Culture (DESC). These surveys are published on the Intranet of the Department of Culture.

<sup>6</sup> We compared the distribution of the SPC of the heads of household of first year students from 2006 to 2012 with those of graduates from 2012 to 2018 (Horsch, 2021, table 210, appendix 7).

<sup>7</sup> The French architects’ accreditation, *Habilitation à la Maîtrise d’œuvre en son Nom Propre* (HMONP), is a 6th year course which can be done as an apprenticeship or based on validation of prior experience. It enables graduates to bear the title of architect and to work as an independent professional, subject to registration with the French Architects’ Association.

favoured categories. On the basis of these quantitative data, we concluded that the transition to working life was egalitarian, although many biases could blur these outcomes and research should be continued by adopting a qualitative approach.

The present survey shows clearly that inequalities are replayed when it comes to the perception of the ease or difficulty of entering the labour market, introduced to the questionnaire submitted to the classes of 2015 to 2018. In fact, while 30% of the surveyed graduates perceive their professional integration as difficult or fairly difficult, 38% of them have a working class background and 25% a favoured background (difference of 13 points). Conversely, half (51%) of the surveyed felt that they had found it easy or fairly easy to enter the labour market, although upper class graduates (63%) are much more concerned than working class graduates (40%, difference of 23 points).

Tab. 1. Difficulty/ease of professional integration perceived by graduates surveyed, according to the father's socio-professional category (%)

Socio-professional category of the father	Upper (B)	Middle	Lower (A)	Total	Difference (A-B)
Difficult, fairly difficult	25	30	38	30	+13
Neither difficult, nor easy	13	35	23	19	+10
Easy, fairly easy	63	36	40	51	-23
Total	100	100	100	100	
Number	64	17	40	121	

The differences are fairly similar for perceptions based on the mother's SPC. Working class graduates are 8 points less likely to perceive their integration as difficult or fairly difficult, and 20 points less likely to perceive it as easy or fairly easy. Graduates whose mothers belong to the middle class are the least likely to perceive their integration as difficult or fairly difficult and the most likely to perceive it as easy or fairly easy compared with other socio-professional classes. Indeed, we have shown that a great part of graduates have a father and/or mother who are secondary school teachers with a high level of cultural capital (Horsch, 2021, p. 211).



Tab. 2. Difficulty/ease of professional integration perceived by graduates surveyed, according to the mother's socio-professional category (%)

Socio-professional category of the mother	Upper (B)	Middle	Lower (A)	At home	Total	Difference (A-B)
Difficult, fairly difficult	32	19	40	33	30	+8
Neither difficult, nor easy	13	24	25	0	19	+12
Easy, fairly easy	55	56	35	67	51	-20
Total	100	100	100	100	100	
Number	38	41	32	9	120	

We should also emphasise the role of mothers in the specific cultural socialisation of children (Octobre, 2011). It requires to consider the instruction and socio-professional categories of the mothers in the same way as those of the fathers.

We should keep in mind that the assessing of the difficulty or ease of professional integration is a *perception*. It is based on the comparison of the graduates with their peers or with the social expectations that obtaining a degree in architecture implies. It would need to be objectivised by more protruding elements (salary and contractual conditions, opportunities for advancement, satisfaction with the position held, responsibilities, etc.). The trend is clear, however, and questions the role and resources available to the institution to counter these determinisms and support all students more equitably in their professional integration.

## 2. GRADUATES FROM PRIVILEGED BACKGROUNDS: DOWNGRADED OR PIONEERS?

As mentioned above, we propose to summarise the key characteristics of the different figures of graduates from the privileged classes, before taking a closer look at the 'defector' in the final chapter.

Among graduates from privileged backgrounds who perceive their integration as difficult or fairly difficult, the 'semi career changers' are the most numerous. Those graduates have turned away from the canonical practice of architecture and are moving towards salaried positions in other segments of the architectural worlds. They soon develop an interest in fields other than architectural project management, particularly urban

planning. This interest is aroused or reinforced by social sciences courses during their architectural studies. The semi career changers describe them as triggering an awareness of other possible career paths. The post-study period is marked by vacillation and a professional quest. The respondents became temporarily involved in associations, travelled or pursued other activities. Some try their hand in architectural firms or as freelance, but don't see themselves working there in the long term. Semi career changers end up enrolling in further training in a field that they appreciated at school and in which they feel they have a greater future. They see this as a 'necessary step'. They therefore apply for an additional diploma in various specialisations or advanced courses, often in the Paris region, at different stages in their career: either directly after initial training, or one or two years later. These courses are often organised on an apprenticeship basis or conclude with an internship, which of most lead to a first job, also in Paris or the Paris region.

The majority of 'career changers' come from working or intermediate classes. Here, we are considering the minority of career changers from the favoured categories who perceived their professional integration as 'difficult' or 'fairly difficult'. These are quite special cases, rather unclassifiable, and would merit analysis using a larger number of individuals. On completion of their architectural studies, some go straight on to training in a completely different sector without having attempted to work in an architectural firm. These may be graduates who wish to pursue a long-standing or nascent passion, or a vocation that has been thwarted by family pressure or self-censorship (Negroni, 2007). Other graduates retrain after a few years of professional experience. The abandonment of architectural practice is triggered by one or more bad experiences, difficult working conditions or a loss of meaning in daily practice. It is following the example of graduates of the *Grandes écoles* of management, studied by Le Gros (2020). Many retrained graduates carry the knowledge acquired during their architectural studies with them into their subsequent professional lives. What they learn in architecture school is seen as an education, not just for their future professional life, but as a solid foundation for life itself, a new relationship with the world. In hindsight, the training would ultimately be seen as an apprenticeship in overcoming difficulties. Its core activity, planning, can be applied more broadly to all life projects.

The 'dispassionate-pragmatists' build their career path without any real strategy, out of opportunity or even avoidance. They are not passionate about their studies. Their commitment to courses and internships is partial: their

student involvement is minimal and they have little experience prior to professional integration. The compulsory internship gives them the impression that there is a significant gap between what is taught at school and what they describe as the 'reality of the job' in the architectural firm. They are apprehensive about joining the workforce, and even deliberately delay it. The job search is proving difficult because these graduates have not built up a professional network. However, they do end up finding a job in an architectural firm and may accumulate a number of precarious working contracts. They feel inadequately prepared, may enjoy the work, but they are not passionate about it. In the end, it's 'just another job' that they don't necessarily plan to do for the rest of their lives. They don't follow up on current architectural events and clearly want to keep their professional and personal lives separate. Since they see themselves more as employees, they don't feel it's necessary to obtain the accreditation.

The 'pioneers' have built their careers by experimenting, both inside and outside the school. They claim a social approach of architecture in which the well-being of humans is a major concern. They turn their backs on salaried practice in architectural firms and wish to extend and apply the practices they identified during their studies as being more congruent with their convictions. They have started out working on renovation and furniture projects, as well as on small-scale community work for disadvantaged groups that do not require them to be registered with the professional association. Those practices can lead to a form of precariousness, since this commitment is often voluntary and makes them perceive professional integration as 'difficult'. This entry into the profession gives young practitioners a long-term symbolic capital: they are noticed by the professional authorities, published in specialist journals, invited to give lectures, and even to join the teaching profession. However, they are quickly confronted with the regulatory framework that governs the profession. Practising under their own name and gaining access to certain commissions requires them to abide by the rules imposed by the profession. They eventually obtain their accreditation and establish a form of multi-positionality (Chadoin, 2007; Ouvrard, 2023), evolving between several positions: self-employed or associate, community work, and teaching.

### **3. THE DEFACTORS: WHEN INEQUALITIES ARE NOT REPLAYED**

We will analyse now the trajectories that stand *outside* of the quantitative results presented above: those of graduates whose two parents come from

disadvantaged backgrounds and who perceive their integration as 'easy' or 'fairly easy'. As proof, no time elapsed between graduation and their first paid job for the majority of them.

A large majority have taken up the challenge of professional integration well before graduation. Some of them have adopted strategies, early during their studies, to increase the number of internships. Some express the need to discover 'the reality of the profession'. Others are afraid of not finding work at the end of their studies, either because of the repercussions of the economic crisis of the 2010s, or because of a lack of confidence in their abilities to be an architect. As they are obliged to earn money to finance their studies, they soon replace a 'student job' with a work placement in an architectural firm. For students from modest backgrounds, meeting professionals is a way of compensating for their socio-cultural differences and lack of network, as described by this graduate from an immigrant background:

Well, the first thing I said to myself was that I don't come from a family with architects, so I didn't know any architects, well I only knew one and that was is, and I knew that I wasn't necessarily in the best position to get a first job, and I was really aware of that, because I could see that other friends had many contacts and that things were going really well for them. And I realised this especially for my first year internship, because I really struggled to find the internship, really really struggled, until finally I had a contact and that's how I got my placement.

In the Master's programme, while some students opt for a semester-long internship, others choose to work on an apprenticeship basis, spending one or two days a week in a firm and three or four days at school. These work experiences are often described as 'a trigger', where practical experience in a firm supplements studies at school to give students a glimpse of their future profession:

Well, I was aware of it (...) that's what I said to myself, I had to... I had to get a move on before I finished my studies. Basically, my objective was to have some experience in my bag when I finish school so that I can find a job more easily and also because I was under more pressure to find a job straight after school, I just couldn't afford not to work after graduation because I didn't have any money, I was living with my parents and I didn't want to end up living with them [laughs], so that was motivating.

Those graduates have in common that they found their first job through their internships and work placements, some in the firms they worked for as

students, others through co-optation by a school teacher who also a manager of an architectural firm. 'It's all a question of networking', says one of the graduates interviewed. However, this way of finding employment is not unique to graduates from modest backgrounds. As we have shown, 23% of graduates from 2011 to 2014, across all socio-professional categories, were able to find their first job through internships and 14% through co-optation (Horsch, 2021, p. 423):

I did another part-time internship with (name of the firm), so we became quite close (...), so in that last year [of studying] architecture I spent a few months with them, I got my diploma and they took me on straight away, so I stayed with them for a few months.

At the time of the interview, the vast majority of the defectors were on permanent contracts with architectural firms – most of them in Nantes – and were carrying out the 'classic' tasks of project management: architectural design, technical drawing, construction supervision. Thus, they reproduce as employees the canonical activities of architects that some of their (project) teachers have set up as a model. It is striking that these graduates all work in firms with a certain regional or even national reputation, who have won various architectural prizes and are regularly published in specialist journals. But the responsibilities borne by young professionals in these renowned firms seem rather limited. One graduate admits to 'going round in circles', while another says she has very little design autonomy.

Our bosses, really, they're the ones who reserve themselves the design and... the architectural vision of the firm, it's them. And we're not going to copy their drawings either, but we're going to follow them, we're going to work very closely with them. And they're the ones who'll give us the guidelines, well... the main concepts, the main lines, we'll, it's almost never me or more experienced colleagues. Designing on our own... it's very, very rare.

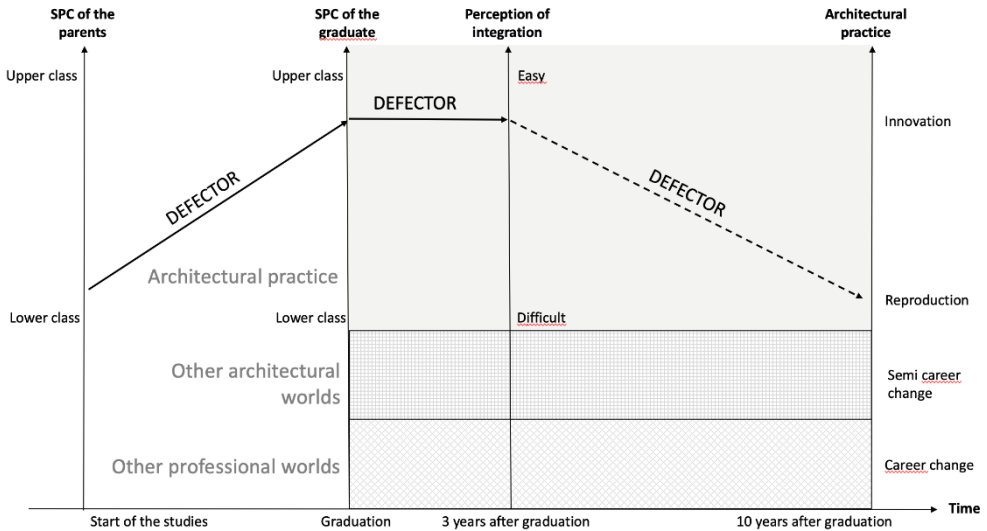
At this stage, none of the graduates had taken any specialised training – unlike graduates from higher social categories. Some have obtained their accreditation, which they see as the end point of their architectural training. But they do not have any concrete plans to set up their own firm: 'I wanted it to be over, I wanted school to be over'; others wanted to 'get rid of it'. At the time of the interview, none of the defectors were registered

architects<sup>8</sup>. Their professional projection seems rather ambiguous, even contradictory, as if they were torn between a relatively comfortable salaried employment and the ideal of a self-employed architect or partner, like many of their project teachers at school.

Virtually all of them have a positive relationship with their studies:

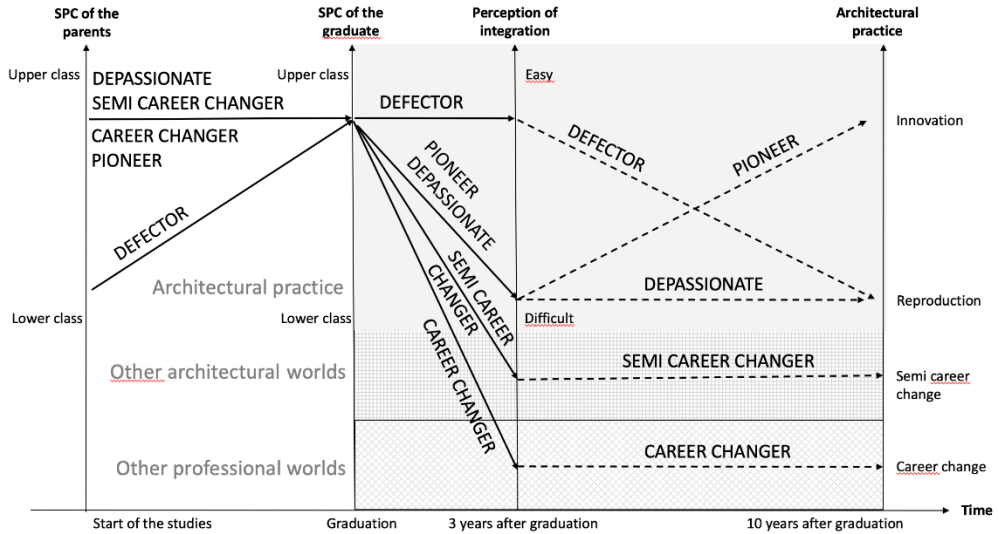
With hindsight, (...) studying is really about opening your mind and learning about architecture, and in fact all the stuff that's a bit boring, much more down-to-earth professional stuff, well, you learn it later in the firm and it works out really well.

Fig. 1. Trajectory scheme of the defectors.



<sup>8</sup> One of the graduates registered with the professional association at the beginning of 2022 (i.e. seven years after obtaining her diploma and three years after her accreditation) and is practising under her own name. However, she works in a relatively unglamorous segment: interior design and individual homes.

Fig. 2. Trajectory schemes of all figures.



## DISCUSSION

The notion of ‘downgrading’ that we introduced to describe the careers of graduates from advantaged socio-professional backgrounds who perceived their integration as ‘difficult’ needs to be weighed, as it conceals several realities. For the semi career changers, it reflects a search for professional interest in which the traditional practice of architecture is not seen as fulfilling. However, they build their career on the foundations of their initial training, while capitalising on additional specialist training that ultimately leads to a smooth transition into working life. Pioneers aspire to defend the social values and public utility of architecture by questioning the neoliberal aspects of canonical practice. Their perceived difficulties stem from their refusal to submit to the professional rules established by the profession and their choice to experiment with other ways of doing architecture. Not just anyone can be a career changer or a pioneer. The capital acquired before and during their initial training enables the former to capitalise on complementary training and the latter to act as pioneers of new practices and defenders of social, political and/or ecological values. Despite their difficulties, they have accumulated educational and symbolic capital that will stand them in good stead in the long term.

The dispassionate pragmatists reproduce or even undergo – as salaried

employees and with limited responsibility – the canonical practice of architects. Their partial commitment to their studies and to their work runs the risk of downgrading them, even though their social origins and secondary socialisation in a prestigious higher education establishment predestined them to succeed and flourish. Ultimately, school has not been a framework conducive to a stimulating and fulfilling practice for them. The teaching methods have failed to meet their expectations and they have not found their place.

Even if the defectors succeed in entering the profession in the short term, they find themselves reproducing the canonical practice of architecture as employees, taking on few responsibilities. At this stage, their way of working does not contribute to a renewal of architectural practice. Being at the start of their careers, it is interesting to question whether the initial socio-cultural gaps are likely to re-emerge in the longer term. In this respect, women are particularly affected, as once they become mothers they have to make choices between their personal and professional lives. A survey of these graduates some ten years after graduation could provide interesting insights.

This work opens up a number of paths for further investigation, one of which is a survey of women's occupational integration. A quantitative analysis of the difficulty/ease of professional integration perceived by women compared with men – which we have chosen not to address here – confirms once again what we have already noted in our previous work (Horsch, 2021): women perceive a more difficult integration than men. What are the perceived and real reasons for this? One of our hypotheses is the supposed lack of legitimacy that leads to strategies to build on educational and professional achievements.

A second path concerns 'drop-outs'. This study analysed the trajectories of graduates. But what about those who abandon their studies at a more or less advanced stage? In this respect, an investigation of the link between social origins and dropping out could enlighten the role that school and teachers play in supporting students as they move towards professional life.

It should also be noted that the work presented here has the bias of a narrative built retrospectively by the graduates. It would be interesting to adapt the survey methodology to collect what the respondents think they are doing in the course of their trajectory *in itinere* and not *a posteriori*. This could be done through a series of *recurring* semi-structured interviews, i.e. once a year during their studies and the first years of their professional integration. That will make it possible to understand how representations are shaped as individuals become socialised into their future profession and how the institution can support them,



‘displace’ or even compensate for the socio-cultural gaps that exist beforehand.

### **Acknowledgements**

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# THE OVERQUALIFICATION OF EASTERN EU MIGRANTS: A GENDERED AND SECTORAL APPROACH

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This study explores the overqualification risks among Eastern European migrants in Western Europe, emphasizing gender disparities and labor market segregation. Utilizing data from the 2018–2019 EU Labour Force Survey, it compares tertiary-educated migrants to the stayer peers in their origin countries. The findings reveal that Eastern EU migrants are more likely to be overqualified than stayers, particularly in sectors with high migrant segregation, such as manufacturing for men or private care for women, as well as transports, accommodation and food for both genders. While female migrants generally face a greater overqualification risks, the gender gap diminishes in sectors where migrants face higher segregation. Contrary to traditional tied-mover theories, Eastern European migrant women tend to act as breadwinners and first-mover, thus their risk of overqualification is similar to migrant men. The research highlights that migration rarely serves as a straightforward pathway to socio-economic mobility for Eastern European graduates, as they are frequently confined to low- and medium-qualified jobs abroad, regardless their occupational and educational credentials. This study underscores the need for nuanced approaches to migrants' integration and labor market policies, addressing structural inequalities to foster opportunities for fair occupational-matching and upward mobility for male and female Eastern Europeans.

Eastern EU migrants; overqualification; gender.

## INTRODUCTION

Migration has long been a subject of intense scholarly inquiry, with significant attention devoted to understanding how migrants compare to the populations in their destination countries. However, comparisons between migrants and their peers who remain in their origin countries (hereafter, stayers) offer a

compelling counterfactual perspective (Lucas, 2013). This approach helps to isolate the impact of migration by examining differences that arise solely from the migration process itself. This paper contributes to this discourse by focusing on Eastern European migrants and stayers, with a particular emphasis on gender differences. The books by Grabowska (2016) and Recchi (2016b) denounced that often the migrants coming from the new EU member states<sup>1</sup> (hereafter, EU13) do not find enough qualified occupations in their main destination countries, corresponding to ‘old’, Western Europe (hereafter, EU15). The present analysis explores how employment sector segregation influences the risk of overqualification for EU13 migrant male and female graduates in Western Europe (EU15).

## **1. COMPARING MIGRANTS TO STAYERS AND OVER GENDER**

Migrants are usually compared to the population of their destination country, which is considered the migrants’ natural benchmark (Kogan 2006; Reyneri and Fullin 2011; Recchi 2016). Among the reasons leading to this choice, not only is there methodological nationalism but also availability of data on migrants, given that these are usually collected by receiving rather than sending countries. Nevertheless, a proper counterfactual argument (Lucas 2013) suggests that the population of peers in the origin country (stayers) is the closest group of comparison to migrants, since they differ in the migration process only. With regards to the comparison among Eastern EU migrants and their stayer peers in EU13 countries, few and recent examples can be found (Grabowska 2016; Kahanec and Zimmermann 2016; Barbulescu et al. 2019; Montanari and Meraviglia 2024; Montanari 2024b).

Regarding gender differences, scholars found that in Western Europe migrant women are more likely to be overqualified as compared to migrant men, experiencing a ‘double penalty’ for being both female and migrant (Birgier and Cantalini 2023; Maiorino and Terzera 2024; Palencia-Esteban and del Río 2024). A complex interplay of structural factors contributes to explain gender differences across destination countries, but also the prevailing composition of migrant population matters, according to their demographic and socio-economic characteristics (Montanari 2024a), their country of origin (and

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<sup>1</sup> The so called ‘New Europe’ or EU13 comprises both EU10 countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovak Republic, and Slovenia) accessed in 2004, and EU3 countries (Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia) accessed in 2007 or 2013. Instead, the ‘Old Europe’ or EU15 includes Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

respective norms), admission class (labour migration, family reunification or asylum) and length of stay (Schultz-Nielsen 2024). As compared to male migrants, migrant women are expected to be more likely tied-movers (Ballarino and Panichella 2018), prioritizing the partner's over their own occupational career when migrating. Furthermore, they risk remaining 'trapped' in the low qualified jobs found at first entry or first search in the destination country, given the huge segregation of migrant women in certain employment sectors, such as private domestic care (Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi 2015).

## **2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

The dataset chosen for the analysis is the EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) with its waves 2018 and 2019 pooled together. The period 2018-2019 is after more than a decade since the EU Enlargements to Eastern countries came into force, and it precedes two major events which deeply altered the labour market and migrants' socio-economic conditions in Europe: the exit of the UK (a major destination country) from the European Union, and the Covid-19 disease, which suspended most of the economic activities as well as migration flows. All the 28 countries which were member states of the European Union at the time are included in the sample, where stayers in sending countries (EU13) are confronted to migrants in receiving (EU15) countries. Both migrants and stayers are identified as Eastern EU nationals born in Eastern Europe who reside either in EU13 countries (stayers) or EU15 countries (migrants).

Within the scope of this study, overqualification is operationalized by following the normative approach proposed by the OECD (2007: 156), and subsequently adopted by Eurostat (2021) with reference to graduates only. In particular, Eurostat (2021) defines overqualified individuals as those performing a medium-low qualified job while being tertiary educated. A medium-low level of qualification corresponds to values 400-900 of ISCO-08 1-digit codes (ranging from 'Clerical support workers' to 'Elementary occupations'), while a high educational level corresponds to having attained at least a tertiary degree (values 5-8 of ISCED-11 scale). Therefore, the share of overqualification is computed among a sub-group of the total population, that are the tertiary educated who are employed (as dependent employees or self-employed) at the time of the interview.

## **3. OVERQUALIFICATION RISK AND EMPLOYMENT SECTOR**

Table 1 below presents the relevant demographic and socio-economic

characteristics of the four groups of working-age (15-64) Eastern Europeans at comparison: male migrants, female migrants, male stayers and female stayers. Age is grouped into three values (aged 15-34, 35-49 and 50-64), as well as education (Up to lower secondary, Upper secondary and Tertiary) and the employment status (Employed, Unemployed and Inactive). Moreover, the share of low to medium qualified jobs (as defined above) is shown both among the total working-age employed population and the sub-population of employed graduates belonging to each comparator group. Similarly, the last two rows of Table 1 show the size of the total sample and the size of the graduates' sub-sample by gender and migrant status.

Tab. 1. Descriptive statistics. Source: EU-LFS (2018-2019).

Comparator groups	Migrants		Stayers		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Age					
15-34	42,2%	41,8%	36,8%	35,2%	36,5%
35-49	43,0%	42,2%	34,3%	33,6%	34,7%
50-64	14,8%	16,0%	28,9%	31,2%	28,8%
Educational level					
Up to low secondary	30,1%	26,8%	17,4%	17,5%	18,4%
Upper secondary	50,8%	45,9%	62,8%	54,6%	57,8%
Tertiary	19,2%	27,3%	19,8%	27,9%	23,8%
Employment status					
Employed	81,5%	63,9%	74,0%	59,9%	67,4%
Unemployed	8,6%	10,2%	4,9%	4,0%	4,9%
Inactive	9,9%	25,8%	21,1%	36,1%	27,7%
Low-med qualified jobs					
Tot employed pop	84,3%	77,6%	68,9%	57,4%	65,4%
(Graduates only)	(56,0%)	(52,9%)	(18,5%)	(18,3%)	(21,2%)
Sample size	26.558	35.170	657.231	688.465	1.407.424
Graduates sub-sample	(4.543)	(6.751)	(105.474)	(144.606)	(261.374)

Migrants emerge to be on average younger and lower educated than stayers. Moreover, considering that men are generally more active than women, a comparison within genders reveals that migrants tend to be more active (either employed or unemployed) than stayers, for both men and women. Migrants are also more likely to be employed in low- to medium-qualified jobs than stayers. For all the four comparator groups, the share of low- to medium- qualified jobs diminishes among graduates, and especially among stayers. Conversely, over a half of Eastern EU graduates who migrate to Western Europe (56% for men and 53% for women) perform a low- to medium- qualified job abroad.

Fig. 1. Share of workers by employment sector. Source: EU-LFS (2018-2019).

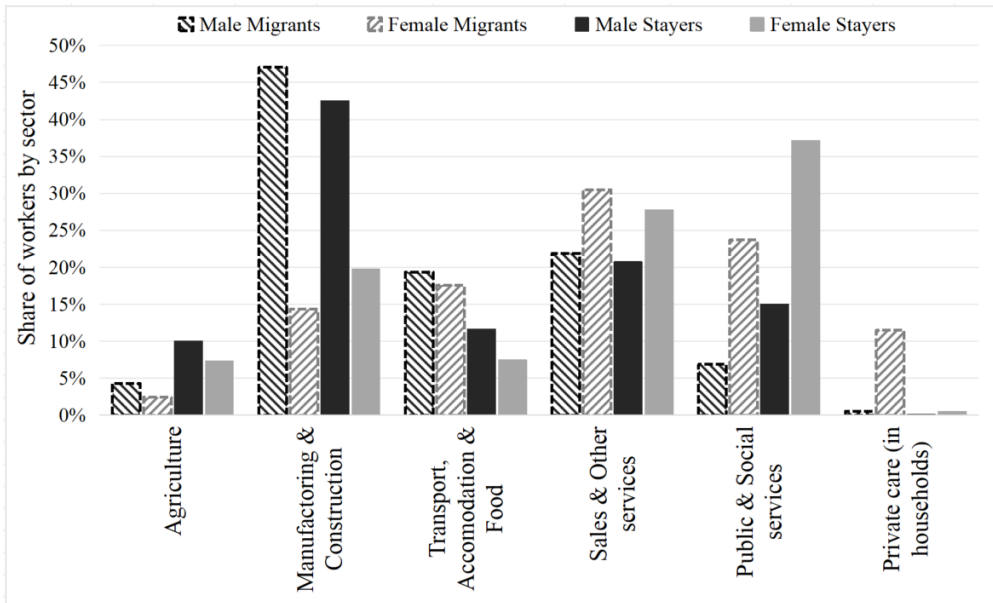


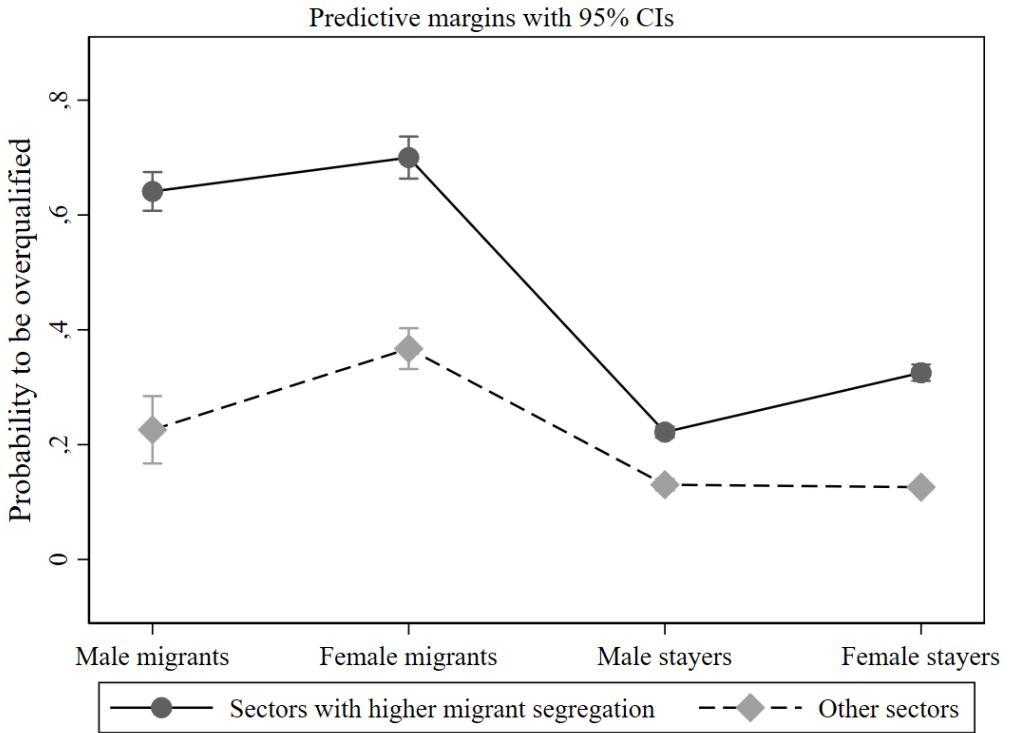
Figure 1 presents the share of workers by employment sector among each of the four comparator groups. ‘Manufacturing and constructions’ for men, ‘Private care (in households)’ for women and ‘Transport, accommodation and food’ for both genders clearly emerge as the sectors where migrants are most concentrated. On the basis of the results of Figure 1, a dummy variable is identify the ‘Sectors with higher migrant segregation’, which are diversified according to gender. This dummy informs on the type of sector and is used in the next step of the analysis.

Figure 2 shows the plot build on the margins of a logistic regression run on the selected sub-sample of employed graduates only, aiming to assess the

probability of Eastern Europeans to be overqualified. Age is included as a control variable, then each comparator group is interacted with the above mentioned dummy on the type of sector, to check whether the overqualification risk varies in sectors with higher migrant segregation. The model equation is:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Prob. } \hat{y} (\text{Overqualification}) = & \\ & \beta_1 \text{ Comparators (male migrants; female migrants; male stayers; female} \\ & \text{stayers)} \\ & + \beta_2 \text{ Age} + \beta_3 \text{ Type of sector (dummy)} \\ & + \beta_1 * \beta_3 \text{ Interaction between Comparators and Type of sector} + \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

Fig. 2. Probability of graduates to be overqualified per type of employment sector. Source: EU-LFS (2018-2019).



In the sample of Eastern EU graduates, the probability to be overqualified emerges to be significantly higher among migrants, especially for women. Even though such result holds in all types of employment sectors, the migrants-stayers' gap is much wider among the sectors with higher migrant segregation, where the gender differences also lose statistical significance. Interestingly, among both genders, the migrants' overqualification risk in other sectors is similar (overlapping confident intervals) to that of stayers in sector at high



migrant segregation (in the origin countries). This means that migrating for Eastern Europeans always brings a penalty in terms of overqualification, even though the entity of such penalty is much more relevant when the graduate is segregated into employment sectors with higher presence of migrants (not all necessarily graduated) abroad.

## **CONCLUSION**

This analysis provides an overview of the phenomenon of overqualification among Eastern Europeans (EU13), highlighting the significant disparities between migrants and their peers who stay in their countries of origin. Underscoring the complex interplay between migration, gender, and labor market dynamics, this research reveals that the risks of overqualification faced by migrants significantly differs according to the type of employment sector. Among sectors with higher migrant segregation, male and female Eastern EU migrants share the same probability to be overqualified. Such result is in line with the author's previous findings (Montanari 2024b) suggesting that, among Eastern EU migrants, women do not present a higher overqualification risk as compared to men, contrary to the expectations of both tied-movers and gender segregation theories (Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi 2015; Ballarino and Panichella 2018). Indeed, migrant women from Eastern Europe often act as 'breadwinner' and first (single) mover of their household. Nevertheless, among sectors where migrants are not highly segregated, the gender gap is visible and confirms the expected 'double penalty' for migrant women.

This study contributed to enlighten the complex relationship between migration, gender, labour market institutions and social mobility, which often result in migrant segregation into low qualified jobs and gendered access to employment opportunities (Birgier and Cantalini 2024; del Rey Poveda et al. 2024). A certain degree of overqualification attached to migration process is straightforward when, for instance, the qualifications required in some jobs are country-specific or the migration is mainly driven by reasons other than occupational achievement. Overqualification may also be a temporary, stepping-stone mechanism before migrants can access more qualified occupations in the destination country. Nevertheless, whenever migrants are systematically segregated into low qualified occupations abroad, their chances of being overqualified goes beyond the risks attached to the individual migration process. To conclude, at least in the case of Eastern Europeans towards Western Europe, migrating does not emerge to be an easy way to boost one's

own socio-economic status. Indeed, Eastern EU graduates who move abroad, especially women, have far more chances to be employed (and remain segregated) into low- to medium- qualified jobs. By drawing comparisons with stayers, this study also emphasizes the importance of understanding migration in its full context, offering a foundation for future research on the long-term implications of migration for both individuals and societies (Kyriazi and Visconti 2023).

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# NEUROMYTH AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

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The aim of the intervention is to examine the influence of gender-related stereotypes on studies of gender brain differences. After introducing three concepts considered to underlie current gender stereotypes, such as androcentrism (Perkins, 1911), gender polarisation (Bem, 1993) and biological essentialism, the phenomenon of ‘neurosexism’ (Fine, 2013), i.e. the tendency to legitimise preconceived ideas about inherent gender differences through neuroscientific research, will be presented. The reciprocal conditioning between research bias due to cultural stereotypes and the impact of scientific research in their further confirmation is thus found. Through the critical review of the literature in the field by researchers Cordelia Fine and Gina Rippon, some features will be highlighted in the structuring of the research question and the analysis of the results that could be the result of such conditioning and thus of research bias (Fine 2010; Rippon, Fine 2014; Rippon 2019). In the review, the following will emerge: the tendency to rely on gender stereotypes in formulating research hypotheses and drawing inferences; pervasive confusion related to the concept of gender, mostly treated as a natural phenomenon rather than a social construct; the frequent and fallacious overlap between biological sex and gender; the persistence of the essentialist view in research hypotheses that biological sex incisively determines the individual’s brain development; the influence of evolutionary theories on gender roles, often considered natural rather than cultural; the common classification of the sample into groups divided according to biological sex (group of XY individuals, group of XX individuals), with the aim of investigating distinct ‘female’ and ‘male’ profiles that can be considered as opposite extremes of a continuum; conclusions related to behavioural differences on numerically small samples. In opposition, it is supported a revision based on the notion that gender is multifactorial, rather than two-dimensional, and that structural and functional brain differences cannot be clearly differentiated according to the sex of the individual. Specifically, it is referred to four possible guiding principles suggested in the research for gender-related brain differences: the principle of overlap, contingency, mosaicism, and entanglement (Rippon, Fine 2014).

neurosexism, neurosciences, neuromyths, gender, stereotype

## **INTRODUCTION**

In order to understand the weight that male-centric stereotypes and models have on practices, knowledge and disciplines, it is appropriate to introduce the three concepts of androcentrism (Perkins 1911), gender polarisation (Bem 1993) and biological essentialism (Witt 1995).

The former indicates the construction of opinions, evaluations and theories on nature and society by taking into consideration only the point of view of the male subject, institutionally recognised in society as hegemonic. This entails the marginalisation and ancillary nature of everything that lies outside this perspective frame, which thus acquires specific normative and disciplinary value. 'Androcentrism' is therefore the term used to describe social practices that sacrifice the female point of view, relegating the female subject to a secondary and accessory role, or even one that deviates from the norm (Perkins 1911).

'Gender polarisation', on the other hand, refers to a sociological concept introduced in the 1980s by psychologist Sandra Bem to describe a construct that understands gender as characterised by two opposing and distinct poles (Bem 1993). Starting from the supposed differences linked to biological sex, this categorisation fixes the dualism of male/female prototypes by attributing specific characteristics to them, such as behaviour, attitudes, personality, up to attitudes, potential and desires, so as to make it atypical for individuals to stray to one side or the other: hence the concepts of femininity and masculinity, which fulfil the mistaken expectations of adherence between sex and gender. Polarisation has also contributed to the construction of so-called gender roles that, throughout human history, have entailed strict social and legal constraints for individuals.

Finally, 'biological essentialism (or determinism)' is the assumption that the biological features are predictive of behaviour (Witt 1995). The concept of biological essentialism applies to any biological characteristic, but is here framed in the context of sex-linked anatomical and functional differences only.

## **1. NEUROSEXISM AND THE REINTERPRETATION OF THE SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE ON BRAIN DIFFERENCES RELATED TO BIOLOGICAL SEX**

Scientific research on gender differences has historical roots dating back several centuries, but has acquired a more solid scientific basis and rigorous methodologies in recent decades. The introduction of advanced techniques, such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), positron emission tomography

(PET), allowed scientists to observe the brain in vivo. This has made it possible to investigate anatomical, functional and connective differences between brains in a more comprehensive manner. However, neuroscientific research, despite the efficiency of the instruments, is subject, like all human practices, to bias, which may depend on the knowledge, beliefs and interpretations of the researcher.

The essentialist thought, which envisages innate behaviours predisposed by a precise biological matrix (e.g. linked to sex or ethnicity), has influenced the phenomenon of 'neurosexism' (Fine 2010), i.e. the tendency to legitimise preconceived ideas about intrinsic differences between the sexes through neuroscientific research. Thus, there is a reciprocal conditioning between research bias due to cultural stereotypes and the impact of scientific research in its further confirmation at societal level.

A critical re-reading of the literature in the field has led researchers Cordelia Fine and Gina Rippon to highlight certain features in the structuring of the research question that could be the result of such conditioning and thus research bias (Fine 2010; Rippon, Fine 2014; Rippon 2019), as follows:

1. the tendency to use gender stereotypes in formulating research hypotheses and deriving inferences assuming that gender behaviour is innate;
2. the persistence of the essentialist belief in the research hypothesis that biological sex determines an individual's cerebral development. Many of the experiments analysed appear to have been designed by considering sexual dimorphism as the basis of behaviour and, at a later stage, the basis of gender behaviour, ruling out a priori the hypothesis that they may have a cultural basis;
3. the influence of evolutionary theories on gender roles, often regarded as natural rather than cultural (woman-caregiver/man-hunter), which have fuelled the narrative about the supposedly insuperable difference between the two profiles – male and female -, although there are findings that have been reinterpreted or refuted;
4. the hormone testosterone, usually produced in greater quantities by XY individuals, is investigated on the assumption that it determines characteristics historically associated with maleness and masculinity: aggressiveness, competitiveness and promiscuity. A review of the studies on this subject that highlights field errors or underestimates of the samples instead leads to the observation that these characteristics

are not uniquely male prerogative, and indeed vary considerably not only among humans, but among animals in general;

5. many of the experiments analysed turned out to be snapshot comparisons by taking a single moment in the much longer and more articulated brain history of each individual and basing conclusions on it. This seems to be due to a naïve conception of human behaviour as predetermined, unchangeable and independent of its adaptation to the environment;
6. the frequent categorisation of the sample into groups divided according to biological sex (group of XY individuals, group of XX individuals), with the aim of investigating distinct 'female' and 'male' profiles as opposite ends of a continuum. This kind of approach tends to consider and identify anatomical differences as the basis of male and female behaviour, not taking sufficient account of similarities (which are rarely the subject of research), and instead focusing exclusively on differences;
7. conclusions concerning behavioural differences on numerically small samples. In comparison, on the other hand, large samples show that both cognitive abilities and social behaviour do not diverge so clearly between male and female individuals.

In other words, in many experiments there is considerable confusion about the concept of gender, which is also mostly treated as a natural phenomenon rather than a social construct. Hence, the frequent and fallacious overlap between biological sex and gender, which highlights the increasingly pressing need for specific training for those investigating human behaviour. A more in-depth and contemporary knowledge of gender studies would in fact imply less susceptibility to stereotypes and dichotomic simplifications, as well as provide additional keys to interpretation that go beyond essentialist thinking applied to gender.

In opposition, it is argued a reinterpretation based on the belief that gender is a multifactorial phenomenon, rather than a two-dimensional one, and that structural and functional differences in the brain cannot be clearly divided according to the sex of the individual.

## **2. FOUR PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH ON BRAIN DIFFERENCES RELATED TO BIOLOGICAL SEX**

Specifically, there is reference to possible guiding principles suggested in the

investigation of sex-linked brain differences (Rippon, Fine 2014):

The first principle, known as ‘overlap’, demands avoiding the assumption that the anatomical configuration of the brain is necessarily predictive of a particular behaviour. Given that different neural patterns may support the same ability and predispose to similar behaviour, relying merely on anatomical observation of the brain would run the risk of overlooking its functional realities. In short, behavioural similarities can be found even in the presence of brain differences.

The second principle, called ‘mosaicism’, involves discarding the idea that there are such things as exclusively ‘male’ or ‘female’ brains. Rather, the structural and functional reality of the brain is a complex mosaic of characteristics, commonly simplistically associated with the concepts of male and female, that vary from individual to individual. Although hormones can influence behaviour, they do not rigidly determine behavioural differences between the sexes.

The third principle, known as ‘contingency’, emphasises how human behaviour emerges from a complex interaction between multiple factors at different levels that influence each other. In addition to biological factors, which in themselves vary considerably between individuals, contextual factors such as dominant cultural norms, the social system, inequalities, stereotypes experienced (Aronson, Steele 1995), social status, chosen or imposed gender roles, as well as individual factors such as well-being, education received, emotional development, interpersonal relationships, personal experiences, learned and practised skills, and the development of gender identity also play a significant role.

Finally, the principle of ‘entanglement’ states that brain predispositions can be modified, neutralised or even reversed by interaction with the environment. The influence of experience, training and context culture in brain development is mentioned (Rippon 2019). In other words, the environment can significantly influence the development of specific abilities. These assumptions undermine the belief that dimorphism is the theoretical basis required to effectively study gender behaviour.

When considering structural or functional differences in the brain determined by hormones, it is emphasised that it is important to consider that neural characteristics are not entirely characterised by biological sex and that average differences are not easily identifiable. It is therefore desirable to favour the adoption of multifactorial models that consider not only genetic factors, but also the socio-cultural context and individual experiences, in order to definitively discard the essentialist approach. Research is expanding



exponentially with a greater understanding of neuroplasticity, showing that the brain is not rigidly 'male' or 'female', but displays a continuum of characteristics influenced by genetics, hormones, experience and culture, challenging binary ideas about gender differences.

It is therefore considered likely that taking these new scientific assumptions into account will influence our practices and knowledge. It is therefore important to consider these alternative guiding principles to guide new contributions to the subject, coupled with specific training that can provide the basis for formulating hypotheses and designing experiments.

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# SCHOOL DROPOUT AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP. A SOCIAL AND SUSTAINABLE EXPERIENCE IN LOMBARDY.

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The dropout rate in Italy is very high due to endogenous and exogenous causes (ISTAT 2021). As part of a project promoted by the Regional School Office of Lombardy, which involves schools, prison institutions and universities on the topic of Education to Legality, this research looks at how, by getting different institutions involved, a school approach based on active and innovative methodologies, the formation of peer groups and the development of joint studies, it is possible to reactivate and revive the sense and pleasure of learning. The pilot project shows how Education to Legality as education to active citizenship can contribute as a possible antidote and fight against school dropout. A multidisciplinary team composed of teachers working outside and inside the prison, prison staff and researchers from the university, following the participatory mode of Research Action, worked together on a pilot project involving two classes of adult foreign students most of whom were returning to education. One class was made up of students who were detained. We'll be looking at the strengths and challenges that emerged from this educational-didactic research project.

sustainable education; school dropout; prison; action research; education to citizenship

## INTRODUCTION

We present here a pilot workshop in two high school classes, in and outside prison, as part of a project on Education to Legality (“Education to legality between schools and the services of criminal and precautionary enforcement

limiting of freedom”, 2022-2023) carried on in Lombardy (IT) as an institutional agreement including the Regional School Office, penitentiary institutions, and universities, which aims to outline guidelines and implement an action plan dedicated to education to legality between schools and penal services, that can be implemented in middle and high school.

The institutions involved in the framework agreement were USR (Regional School Office) of Lombardy, PRAP (Penitentiary Administration Department – Regional Superintendency) for Lombardy, CGM (Juvenile Justice Center) for Lombardy, UIPE (Interdistrict Office for External Penal Enforcement), UNIMIB (University of Milano-Bicocca), UNIMI (University of Milan) and UNICATT (University Cattolica del Sacro Cuore).

The general project included: 1) an in-service training course and workshop activities for school principals, teachers, prison educators; 2) a workshop on Education to Legality carried out by an Action Research group composed of schoolteachers outside and inside the prison, criminal justice professionals, and university researchers, building a co-designed path of education to legality. This project was aimed at both external students and students in prison. The project’s principal objectives were threefold: firstly, to establish novel guidelines for the Education to Legality policies of School Regional Administration; secondly, to enhance multi-professional in-service training between teachers, prison educators, school managers and penitentiary administrators on Education to Legality; and thirdly, to conduct a pilot workshop in two high school classes, in and outside prison (described in this manuscript).

## **1. REASON OF RELEVANCE: WHY AN EDUCATION TO LEGALITY FOR/AS ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP?**

As Dalla Chiesa observed

Legality has to do with a feeling that binds us to others, to values, to participation, to responsibility. It is a path and a process of change. Rules are neither prescribed nor taught; rather, they are the culmination of a deeper and broader formative process (Dalla Chiesa, Lecture, 28/02/2023).

Education to legality was not treated as a pedagogy of rules and norms. One of the strengths of our Action Research group was the broadening of the theme of legality towards active citizenship, democracy, participation.

We show how a project on Education to Legality can contribute as a possible antidote and fight against school dropout. In this pilot project of Education to

Legality (for active citizenship), good educational and teaching practices are applied tout-court. Indeed, we believe that a good way of teaching is already de facto education for citizenship and vice versa (Dewey, 1916, 1929; Meirieu, 2007; Mortari et al., 2021).

Moreover, the indications for the training/education of adult students of national and international policy and research on ways of doing school (e.g. participation, listening) are significant, precisely in relation to school dropout, with an added value for students in detention (UNESCO, Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2021).

## **2. STATE OF THE ART**

In Europe, according to the Eurydice 2017 report on Citizenship Education at School: “In democratic societies citizenship education supports students in becoming active, informed and responsible citizens” (Eurydice, 2017). However, training on citizenship education is absent in nearly half of European education systems. According to the EU funded STEP project – Pedagogy of Citizenship and Teacher Training: an Alliance between School and Territory (2015-2018): “New models of training and strengthening the professionalism of the teacher, whose citizenship skills still seem weak, need to be implemented and supported” (Zecca and Nigris, 2022). More specifically in Italy, despite a history spanning more than 40 years, Education to Legality – today topic of Civic Education – remains a discipline without a clear scientific statute and without defined methodological parameters. The fragility of the system can be attributed to several factors, including a lack of training and specific skills among teachers, a lack of clarity regarding the curriculum, and a lack of consistent engagement with the university as a central hub for reflection, research, experimentation, and teacher education (Dalla Chiesa, 2021, 2023).

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The design and methodological hypothesis of the project are based on the principles of Action Research, which is one of the methods of a participatory research strategy. As outlined by Mortari (2016), action research is a process that is conducted in the field, structured on the basis of close collaboration between researchers and professionals, and aims to facilitate positive change within the context in which it is implemented. Furthermore, all participants are co-researchers: participants with different skills and backgrounds all have equal voice in the research.

The institutions involved co-planned and negotiated the content and the development of an Education to Legality path (Elden, Levin, 1991). Each group was multidisciplinary and equal. Both the strategies and the objects of the research were co-constructed by each group, as well as the themes and the subjects to be involved.

#### **4. THE PILOT PROJECT AND THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Specifically, we report the activity carried out by the Action Research group established and coordinated by UNIMIB, Department of Human Science for Education, from March to June 2023. This group included: two researchers from UNIMIB; two teachers from the high school IIS “Paolo Frisi” (Prison Section) in the Bollate Prison, Milan; two teachers from the IIS “Paolo Frisi” (Adult Education Department), Milan; two legal-pedagogical penitentiary officials; a manager and responsible for the observation and treatment of the Lombardy PRAP (the regional superintendency of the penitentiary administration); two classes of adults from the IIS “Paolo Frisi” secondary school (Adult Education Department), one of 6 students from Bollate prison (first year of high school, average age 35) and one of 14 external students (third year of high school, aged between 20 and 40).

The research questions were twofold. The first was a general question: what is to be done? This question pertains to the development of novel educational methodologies for the teaching of legality and citizenship between educational and justice institutions.

The second question was more specific in nature and concerned the process evaluation. This question sought to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the pilot workshop on Education to Legality, both within and outside the prison system.

#### **5. THE PILOT WORKSHOP**

Our Action Research group was set up and led by UNIMIB. Two meetings were organized with all the group’ actors. The purpose of these meetings was to collaboratively develop the educational-didactic framework for the activities, to negotiate the methodologies, and to determine which students should be involved. It was agreed that the focus would be on autobiographical themes, specifically on the theme of identity, the life stories of each in the us/world relationship, to question legality, not merely as a matter of observing rules and norms, but as a form of active citizenship.

The group chose a literary text on otherness (Ghebreigziabiher, 2016): a broad theme that allowed the students to explore the legality transversally, working on common themes despite different contexts and life stories. The underlying common paradigm is that school is a dispositive where it is possible not only to learn the norms, but where students can develop critical thinking skills; confidence in justice; sense and value of belonging to a community; conscious adherence to shared values (Meirieu, 2007).

Starting from the text “L’Altro”, the didactic method was built around reading, discussion and reflective interpretation. Active methodology was developed as implementation of exercise of skills, right to speak, dialogue, participation, comparison, mutual listening, conflict education, observance of rules. It was decided to have first a meeting in Bollate prison in which the two classes would get to know each other and read the text together. Then to undertake two parallel paths, in the school inside and outside the prison. To end with a final meeting in Bollate to exchange and share reflection between the two classes. Both classes actively participated in the project, showing interest in and adherence to the theme, in which they felt deeply involved.

Tab. 1. The Pilot phases (March/June 2023).

Two meetings of the Action-Research group without students (March 2023): Path’s co-planning (9/3/23 +23/3/23)		
Joint meeting (external and internal)	First meeting of the Action-Research group with the two classes, in Bollate prison (18 April 2023)	
Separate workshop (external and internal)	External meeting Frisi (classroom work)	Bollate (classroom work)
	27/4/2023, 1 <sup>st</sup>	10/5/2023, 1 <sup>st</sup>
	11/5/2023, 2 <sup>nd</sup>	16/5/2023, 2 <sup>nd</sup>
	16/5/23, 3 <sup>rd</sup>	
Joint meeting (external and internal)	Second meeting of the Action-Research group with the two classes, in Bollate prison (23 May 2023)	
Separate meetings (external and internal)	6/6/2023, 4 <sup>th</sup>	
Focus Group	20/6/2023, 5 <sup>th</sup> (small group self-assessment)	30/5/2023, 3 <sup>rd</sup> (self-assessment)

The instruments for data collection were 12 participatory observations, 3 interviews, 2 focus groups and 12 field notes (see Tab. 1 for details). Thematic analysis was the method used for analyzing data (Lochmiller, 2021).

## **6. RESULTS**

The qualitative research yielded a number of noteworthy findings.

### **6.1 Student Voices from the Focus Groups**

- a) The issue of legality influences perceptions of transformative learning through the medium of experiential learning and indirect teaching, as exemplified by the use of autobiography and literary text. The students' words highlighted the transformative power of learning (Mezirow, 1991), as well as the strong involvement of students through participatory methodologies and through themes related to autobiography and identity (Dewey, 1916, 1929; Mortari, 2016). One student (#1) commented, "Many of us have become the other in this journey. They were other and have changed".
- b) The formation of peer groups and the development of joint study leads to students' self-perception of the value of teamwork (Wenger, 1998, 2000; Mead, 1934). Working with/in the school with two classes of students outside and inside the prison gave the possibility to create a community of peers reflecting together: the classroom as a research community (Dewey, 1916; Nussbaum, 2016). As one student (#2) articulated, "I told you in the second meeting, I felt it just like maybe we are one thing, one person, one body."
- c) The shared experience between high school students and inmates changes self-representation and the view of the other. Furthermore, both classes expressed the desire for more durable paths. As one student (#3) observed, "The look from outside changed my gaze. Those from outside see things here that we do not see, and they changed our gaze, they make us see precious things here."

### **6.2 Thematic Analysis**

The data analyzed through thematic analysis yielded the following outcomes:

- a) The potential and significance of co-design between diverse institutions. The involvement of universities was pivotal, both in terms of their researchers, who served as facilitators, and in guaranteeing the

expertise and comprehensive training on the subject of Education to Legality (Mortari, 2016; Leone, Prezza, 2021).

- b) The need for specific training of teachers, particularly in regard to the forms of active involvement of students, also to mutually restore the sense of the process that took place in the two classes. The expertise of those who led the experience in the two class groups was a very significant variable: the urgency of specific training of in-service teachers, clearly emerged.
- c) The main learning outcomes were related to critical thinking and argumentation on legality topic based on identity-alterity perspective connected to “living together” (Scriven & Paul, 1987).

## 7. FURTHER QUESTIONS, PERSPECTIVES

If legality is not just the observations of norms but skills that need to be cultivated and supported, it will have to be empowered with systematic and continuous educational actions, involving school, institutions, politics. We conclude with two open questions:

How to balance, in schools and beyond for education to legality, knowledge of democratic forms and competences on active citizenship?

The “imposed rules” paradox: school in prison promotes these same habits of coexistence in prisoners while they are living inside a coercive environment. Is it possible to develop a sense of citizenship in this context?

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# INCLUSION BEYOND THE CONFLICT: PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE EAST-JERUSALEM CONTEXT

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This contribution aims at illustrating and discussing a co-design experience concerning the development of inclusive educational frameworks within the Palestinian context. The promotion of inclusive education paradigms in contexts affected by protracted conflict is a challenging but resourceful trajectory to foster democratic processes, since education practices can promote equality and civic participation (Taddei, 2021; INEE, 2018; Taddei, 2010). As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict poses critical barriers to the achievement of inclusion in educational scenarios within the areas of East Jerusalem and West Bank (Taddei & Pacetti, 2018), the search for innovative and meaningful pedagogical strategies is an essential effort to foster democracy and limit the disruptive effects of turmoil and upheaval. In this direction, University of Macerata worked with Al-Quds University (Palestine) to co-design educational pathways that can foster the formation of teachers and students according to inclusive education paradigms in a shared pedagogical action. As a result, the promotion of democratic and inclusive processes can offer new frameworks for Palestinian schools, in the co-creation of a sustainable, contextualized and valuable perspective for education. In this sense, the concept of an inclusive school can go beyond physical, conceptual, and intercultural borders, promoting a democratic society for future generations.

inclusive education; equality; conflict-affected areas; Palestine; democracy

## INTRODUCTION

When questioning the meaning of borders, one might consider how a border has the potential to produce alterity from equity, otherness from belonging, difference from similarity (Zanini, 1997). Canevaro's logic of boundaries and

pathways (2006) puts forward the value of balancing the maintenance and the crossing of visible and invisible boundaries for inclusion and equity. The author envisions an alliance between boundaries and pathways, promoting a symbolic passage from an individual to another informed by the sensitivity of respecting human diversity. This perspective highlights how every context presents tangible and intangible elements that either obstacle or support inclusion, active participation, equity, and Quality of Life (Giaconi et al., 2022; Giaconi et al., 2020; Giaconi et al., 2019). In this sense, the establishment of boundaries and pathways influences our opportunities for wellbeing, personal development, self-determination and active participation. Therefore, the paradigm of inclusion implies a counterbalance and interplay between complementary forces, ensuring individualisation (i.e., the right to equity) and personalisation (i.e., the right to diversity), as well as supporting people in their growth towards adulthood through active participation and social inclusion opportunities (Giaconi et al., 2024; Caldin & Giaconi, 2021; Giaconi & Capellini, 2021). With reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, physical and cultural borders act as an architecture of restricting confinements that increase social injustice and alter the Palestinian community's everyday life, posing critical barriers to the achievement of inclusion in educational contexts within the areas of East Jerusalem and West Bank (Taddei & Pacetti, 2018). The dynamics of occupying powers and the limitations of freedoms draw significant concerns towards the possible creation of a democratic school. Consequently, the presented co-design experience hereby tries to address an urgent issue: the protection and promotion of inclusion and democracy in conflict-affected areas.

## **1. CHALLENGES FOR INCLUSION IN PALESTINE**

The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian crisis constitutes a dramatic scenario of hostility, disruption and violence across the Gaza Strip, Israel and the West Bank, as documented by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)<sup>1</sup>. Such a disruption of countless lives and flow of distressing images demands a profound reflection on human rights and solidarity. Although discussing themes like education or inclusion amidst such devastation and tragedy might seem out of focus, it is important to note how inclusive education can foster cultural resilience, conciliation and societal change (Taddei, 2021). In this direction, international cooperation has

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unocha.org/>.

recognised education as a vital element for emergency response, safeguarding children's wellbeing and preventing disruptions of their right to education. As situations of emergency threaten to limit children's opportunities to process and share their fears and distress (AICS & RIDS, 2015; EU, 2018), education has the potential to establish a safe space that provides continuity and stability, preserving the vision of a future through the turmoil (Taddei, 2021). Offering opportunities for the communication of ideals, hopes, and standards, education can maintain social life, constituting a means through which democratic and inclusive values can be communicated, shared and spread (Dewey, 1916). Additionally, it can also empower people to activate transformative processes, representing a means of liberation from oppression and social injustice (Freire, 1970). If the mandate of inclusive education is a complex goal based on both dismantling barriers that limit student participation and embracing diversity through accessibility, tailored approaches and empowerment (Adams, 2008), such a perspective is even more challenging in conflict zones. Indeed, the constant disruption of education often exacerbates exclusion and discrimination (Shah et al., 2020; Taddei, 2010). Still, education can represent a pathway for hope, equality, participation and democracy (Canevaro, 2006). In fragmented contexts, education remains a crucial avenue to address disparities and foster equity.

In Palestinian territories, education faces immense challenges connected to geographical division, segregation, and occupation, which undermine human rights and communities' wellbeing (Amaney, 2009). Issues connected to politicisation, distrust and discrimination, security checkpoints, underdeveloped infrastructure and complex cultural dynamics hinder educational process on different levels. Consequently, cultural and structural barriers place significant burdens on students, teachers, and educational communities. When considering refugee camps, overcrowding, damaged infrastructure and scarce resources further undermine education processes (UNRWA, 2024). Inclusion of students with disabilities in Palestine suffers a lack of service and support systems for families, as well as inaccessible learning environments (Al-Masri et al., 2023). As highlighted by Hasweh (2002), although the educational system suffers an undemocratic context, educators still have a considerable amount of freedom to implement inclusive practices.

In this challenging scenario, education practices can promote equality and civic participation (Taddei, 2021; INEE, 2018; Taddei, 2010), representing a precious resource to contrast discrimination and spread democratic principles. Given the current situation in Jerusalem, where advancing standards, best practices,

and inclusive principles are urgently required to protect the rights of children with and without disabilities (UN, 2006), our intervention seeks to address these issues through the cultivation of teachers' knowledge and competences.

## **2. THE CO-DESIGN EXPERIENCE**

This section illustrates the objectives, methods and preliminary outcomes of the co-design experience. Specifically, University of Macerata worked in collaboration with Al-Quds University (Palestine) to promote inclusion in fragmented communities of East Jerusalem, spreading inclusive education principles and practices to be embraced and applied by primary school teachers.

### **2.1. Background and objectives**

The overall objective of the co-design experience is to foster inclusion and democratic processes within primary school educational environments in East Jerusalem. To this end the research team worked on the ideation, design and development of a training programme on inclusive education for primary school teachers and educators.

### **2.2. Methods & Tools**

The co-design experience represents a case study (Thomas & Myers, 2015) involving University of Macerata and Al-Quds University. Specifically, a participatory approach (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) was adopted to design and develop a training programme on inclusive education for primary school teachers of East Jerusalem. The choice of adopting a participatory approach lies in the attempt to design and develop a contextualised educational path, co-creating knowledge that integrates deeper insights and fostering empowerment processes among the actors involved. In this sense, the involvement of Al-Quds University represents a viable trajectory to increase the social, intercultural and educational value of the training programme, guaranteeing meaningfulness, authenticity and efficacy in the Palestinian context. Specifically, researchers from University of Macerata defined the key concepts and contents to be included in the training programme. After designing and developing a first draft of the programme, consisting in 5 thematic modules, a focus group was held (Liamputtong, 2011) with Al-Quds University researchers in order to review the training material and discuss integrations and optimisations. Such an effort would ensure the programme's contextualisation and efficacy for the Palestinian context. A second focus group session was held to verify the

integrations and finalise the modules

### 2.3. Preliminary results

As a result of the co-design experience, a training programme on inclusive education composed of five training modules in English language was successfully designed and developed. The training programme was co-designed through a modular approach, ensuring that Al-Quds instructors could freely choose the order with which to work with the resources. Additionally, the modules highlight thematic interconnections, in order to promote a comprehensive view and understanding of the programme’s topics. Each training module consists of four different resources: a PowerPoint presentation combining textual information on key concepts with graphical elements or images; a voice recording illustrating its topics in deeper detail; hyperlinks to further explore the module’s topics with specific web resources; a proposal of practical activity for learners to put into practice the module’s theoretical knowledge.

Table 1 presents an example of the co-design process with reference to the module dedicated to the topic of accessibility. The column on the left presents the outline of the module draft. The central column includes the suggestions emerging from the focus group conducted with Al-Quds researchers. The column on the right shows the solutions that were implemented to integrate the given feedback.

Tab. 1. Example of co-design process.

First Draft Topics	Al-Quds Researchers’ Feedbacks	Co-designed solutions
Accessibility and usability definitions.	Need to present the multiple dimensions of accessibility.	Integration of practical examples of accessibility in everyday life.
International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO, 2001), concepts of barriers and facilitators.	Need to contextualise accessibility in the Palestinian scenario.	Integration of a “Palestinian Context” section.
Universal Design & Universal Design for Learning.	Need to present the elements that can hinder or enable accessibility to improve understanding.	Provision of resources on emergency measures to accommodate accessibility needs in Palestine through hyperlinks.

## CONCLUSIONS

The co-design experience represented by this case study offered unique insights on the solutions and strategies that can orient inclusive and democratic processes beyond context-specific differences. The results highlight how the promotion of empowerment and equity in conflict-affected areas needs to start from a shared vocabulary and understanding of core principles and values related to inclusion and democracy. Indeed, the cultural exchange at the basis of this experience suggests how reaching shared meanings and definitions is an essential step for international cooperation and promotion of communities' wellbeing, providing richer perspectives and renewing societies' commitment to cooperation for peace, equity and the protection of human rights, also through academic research. In this direction, teacher education can represent a valuable tool for societal transformation. Indeed, education, when provided equally and inclusively, can contribute to the creation of fairer societies (Taddei, 2021; INEE, 2018; Taddei, 2010). To this end, frameworks belonging to special and inclusive pedagogy can initiate virtuous processes for the achievement of democracy and equity in conflict-affected areas. Given how the developed training programme can be considered as a preliminary result of the co-design experience, further participatory research should expand qualitative analyses to develop interculturally valid frameworks of action within conflict-affected areas for quality and equitable education, beyond borders of any nature.

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Stream C

# **NEOLIBERALISM IN/AND EDUCATION**

# HEALTH PROMOTION AND CO-PLANNING OF AN AFFECTIVITY AND SEXUALITY EDUCATION LABORATORY WITH ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES, PARENTS AND SOCIAL

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This contribution aims to propose a project for the design of an education course on affectivity and sexuality for adults with intellectual disabilities. If, on the one hand, there are international guidelines that recognize sexuality as an inalienable right common to all people; on the other hand, in Italy there are few pedagogical practices inherent to the topic in question and contextual. The need emerges to build and consolidate a network of transdisciplinary professionals and educational services who experiment and disseminate good practices regarding affectivity and sexuality education projects in the field of disability. However, as often happens, targets of the projects are not included among the actors, creating top-down projects. Instead, in the socio-health district of Ventimiglia, we want to use the participatory logic of health promotion, based on agency and empowerment. Therefore, it is essential to understand the point of view of adults with intellectual disabilities, who co-participate in the construction of an affectivity and sexuality education project based on their needs. For this reason, it is necessary to actively involve other social actors: family members of adults with intellectual disabilities and social and health workers such as educators, psychologists, social workers, pedagogists and managers of educational services.

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, we aim to describe the beginning of an experiment of a workshop inherent in affectivity and sexuality education with adults with intellectual disabilities in a residential facility. This educational project was carried out

during a training internship of the master's program in "Health promotion, community development and operational networks. Planning, management, evaluation of integrated health promotion and salutogenesis actions" at the University of Cagliari; the project will last until June 2026.

Some general objectives are:

- 1) Promoting sexual health through co-design with people with disabilities with a bottom-up approach.
- 2) Promoting knowledge and skills to actors involved in Spes educational settings (Educators, Oss, people with disabilities, parents, volunteers).
- 3) Promoting a cultural change in the territory of Social and Health District 1 concerning the topic of the affective and sexual dimension of people with intellectual disabilities.
- 4) Creation of a widespread educating community: involvement of Third Sector entities and local government administrations in Social and Health District 1 and neighbouring districts.

This section aims to describe the process that is being pursued for the implementation of project work, programming and design of interventions.

The Precede-Proceed model is divided into the following phases.

### **Phase 1. Social Assessment**

- Provides for the collection of statistics and numbers on intakes at the health level of Asl 1 SSR Liguria and the Health District; Social District and Spes Auser APS.
- Identification of social actors involved: the multiprofessional team, groups of people who will cohabit in the new residential centres being renovated through NRP funds, and family caregivers.
- Validation of the Rickter Scale "DAS" (Disability Affectivity and Sexuality): this activity was shared together with a trainer from the Social Cooperative "Anziani e non solo", who is training the trainers in the use of the Rickter Scale. This tool was designed by "Rickter Scale World Limited and Rickter Scale associate companies" based in London. Therefore, every step that defined the overlay was supervised and approved by its owner. After a year of work, the Rickter Scale "DAS" was officially validated, thanks to our teamwork. The Rickter Scale is a portable whiteboard that engages and motivates individuals to take ownership of their health by exploring possibilities through structured

dialogue. The process is a combination of motivational assessment, evaluation and action planning. This captures an individual's path toward positive, user-defined outcomes. "Overlays" have been developed to allow the Rickter Scale to be used for different groups of people and health topics; for example: addictions, adult learning, education, employability, youth, disability, and mental health.

- Getting to know people with semi-structured interview and group sharing moments: both informal and formal getting to know people is intended. Informal because it is important for the operator to establish a relationship with the guests with a good level of trust: this would increase adherence to the project. Formal acquaintance through semi-structured interviews serves to assess in greater detail the homogeneity of the group with respect to the degree of disability and educational needs on the topic at hand.
- Initial involvement of residential centre guests, families, and social and health workers: The intent is to conduct educational pathways in parallel for both adults with intellectual disabilities and caregivers and social and health workers. This is motivated by the fact that it is essential, to support and reinforce the educational pathway of the former, to find space for listening and discussion with both caregivers and social-sanitary district workers. It is also essential to analyse the needs of family members of the professionals involved, to enable them to recognize in the future and accompany adults with intellectual disabilities to the discovery and awareness about their corporeity, affectivity and sexuality.

## **Phase 2. Epidemiological assessment**

The assessment will be organized through individual interviews with DAS overlay administration to have quantitative and qualitative data: the questionnaire investigates specific areas of sexuality: knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases and the reproductive system, emotions, and relationships (self-perception, perception of others about self and vice versa). This tool would make it possible to identify some topic areas that could be present in the next workshop, considering the indications found in the scientific literature. In fact, for the identification of group needs on the topic of affectivity and sexuality, the topics of interest whose values are lower could indicate a training need. Recall that people with intellectual disabilities have a higher likelihood of sexual abuse and violence than a neurotypical person; therefore, limited to the skills of

understanding and awareness, an attempt will be made to transfer necessary information useful in recognizing situations of discomfort and/or danger to them.

### **Phase 3. Ecological and educational assessment**

It includes the analysis of direct and indirect factors that influence people's environment and behavior in their affective and sexual spheres: These are called PAR (Predisposing, Reinforcing and Enabling) factors. This is possible through preliminary interventions with adults with intellectual disabilities, where some of the most important PAR factors are identified, which will help define the specific objectives of the workshop pathway.

Another methodology would be the Focus Group for caregivers and social and health workers: on the one hand, to understand what caregivers' concerns and resistances are in recognizing the sexual dimension of their children; on the other hand, to support the multidisciplinary team in accompanying facility residents to effectively express their affective and sexual needs and, where possible, accompany them to meet them, limited to the physical, cognitive and educational capacities.

### **Phase 4. Political and Health Promotion Assessment**

This phase concerns the beginning of affective and sexual education workshop with active and participatory methodologies by identifying:

Each meeting will last one and a half hours on a weekly basis. The whole course will be divided into thematic Modules. The mode will be mainly composed of playful, multimedia and participatory activities to build training/information materials (photos, videos, posters, various materials and stationery to build objects useful for conducting the workshop and explaining the topics). In addition, an initial mapping of other services (associations or social cooperative) that are conducting educational projects on the topic of sexuality and disability in the Italian regions is being initiated. The goal is to create a network of specific services on the topic to mutually exchange experiences, skills and professional practices while to co-construct scientifically valid and shared National Guidelines as a cultural basis for designing interventions for affectivity and sexuality education with adults with intellectual disabilities.

### **Phase 5. Implementation**

It is intended to share the workshop pathway with other actors/entities addressing the topic of sexuality and disability. From the perspective of health

promotion and scientific evidence, it is essential to share good practices and scientifically valid experiences to homogenize practices, which otherwise risk being self-referential, ineffective and even iatrogenic. One is aware that each context has peculiarities that influence the design of an affectivity and sexuality education pathway but sharing guidelines and recommendations as common ground from which to design could be an essential contribution for all practitioners who, in addition to passion, would act with competence.

### **Phase 6. Short Term Assessment**

At this stage, the change in PAR factors from the previous diagnosis (educational and ecological) is evaluated: short-term assessment of knowledge by means of an ex-post questionnaire being validated; also, qualitative participatory group evaluation is also important, to have subjective feedback and returns with respect to the workshop pathway carried out. It turns out to be necessary to initiate meetings with parents. Involving families allow to increase the effectiveness of interventions with adults with intellectual disabilities, if caregivers positively accept the project initiative and are willing to cooperate with the professional team. It would also open potential cultural change and vision, moving from a condition of sexuality denied or not recognized in its integrity to a vision of sexuality as a multidimensional and central aspect of every human being.

### **Phase 7. Mid-term assessment**

In this phase we are involved in assessing behavioural changes and environment:

The DAS – Disability Affectivity and Sexuality Rickter Scale will be used as instruments to assess individual attitudes toward affectivity and sexuality 3 months after the end of the workshops.

### **Phase 8. Long-term assessment**

The last phase assesses health and Quality of Life: maintenance of behavioural and environmental changes six months after the conclusion of the project. Reports from social and health workers written daily, in which incidents about critical incidents related to sexual problem behaviors are reported, will be used as tools.



## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we would like to highlight the following project progressions:

- By mid-December, a mixed group (males and females) of six people will permanently enter the newly renovated residential facility; the occasion is useful for experimenting with the co-construction of the affectivity and sexuality education workshop with a group of young people assisted by social and health workers from Spes Auser APS.
- The programming includes a period of informal acquaintance of the people in cohousing to create a climate of acclimatization and relational trust, to share the topic at hand and plan individual and group interviews and semi-structured interviews. Subsequently, a weekly schedule of one and a half hours per meeting over the year 2025 is planned for the workshop programming.
- It has just been validated by the British body, owner of the Rickter Scale, the DAS overlay to assess the affective and sexual needs of adults with intellectual disabilities from an “inclusive” perspective.
- A mapping of social and health services working in the field of intellectual disability is being carried out to validate a questionnaire (Gil-Lario, 2021) aimed at adults with mild to moderate intellectual disability and to build a network of services to share good practices that can be replicated in other Italian contexts.
- The intention is that once the project is over, the network of actors involved can continue the activities and interventions on affectivity and sexuality education with people with intellectual disabilities and with families and institutions. Therefore, specific training is planned for practitioners to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to assess and design specific group and individual educational interventions.

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# DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION? LEARNER VOICE AND ADULT EDUCATION IN IRELAND

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The following article examines the democratic potential of Learner Voice through the lens of a solitary case study: the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (NFLF) of Ireland. AONTAS (2024a), Ireland’s National Adult Learning Organisation, is responsible for the NFLF. Forum events bring together adult learners from across Ireland to ask their views on their experience of Further Education and Training (FET). The Forum aims to ensure that FET meets the needs of adult learners today and in future. The article reflects on the social justice and democracy dimensions of the NFLF. It explores the potential for Learner Voice to inform the appraisal of FET policy and practice in Ireland and highlights the practical challenges associated with nonparticipation, tokenism, and meaningful participation. The gradual emergence of Learner Councils in FET provision is a recent, hopeful development, one which underlines the latent possibility of enhanced forms of student participation in decision-making about their education and society.

learner voice; participation; democracy; further education and training; Ireland

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of rapid economic, social, and demographic change, fostering democracy and social justice in adult education is a prerequisite for adaptability, social cohesion, and human development. The following paper examines the possibility of fostering democracy and social justice in adult education through the theory and practice of Learner Voice. We examine the democratic potential of Learner Voice through the lens of a solitary case study: the National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (NFLF) of Ireland.

Emergent from the democratic and egalitarian norms of adult and community education, we argue that Learner Voice foregrounds and supports vital forms of student dialogue and recognition (See Fleming, 2021). In doing so, the paper speaks to diverse, interdisciplinary scholarship in the fields of transformative student voice (Fielding, 2010), citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969), and participatory social policy (Beresford, 2016).

The work falls into three parts. Part one outlines the origins of the NFLF and the specific roles of AONTAS, Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation, service providers, the Education and Training Boards, and associated state agencies, notably SOLAS. Part two reflects on the social justice and democracy dimensions of the NFLF, exploring the potential for Learner Voice to inform the appraisal of Further Education and Training (FET) policy and practice in Ireland. Part three highlights the practical challenges associated with nonparticipation, tokenism, and meaningful participation. By way of conclusion, we highlight the emergence of Learner Councils in FET provision as a recent, hopeful development, one which underlines a latent possibility of enhanced forms of student participation in decision-making about their education and society.

## **1. AONTAS AND THE NATIONAL FET LEARNER FORUM**

The National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (NFLF) is a Learner Voice project designed to bring together adult learners from across Ireland to ask their views on their FET experience. The purpose of the Forum is to ensure that FET meets the needs of adult learners today and continues to do so in future. AONTAS, Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation, is responsible for the NFLF (Dowdall, Sheerin, and O'Reilly, 2019). AONTAS works in partnership with 16 Education and Training Boards to host regional forum events and to document Learner Voice in both regional and national reports. Forum events bring together adult learners from across Ireland to ask their views on their FET experience.

The National FET Learner Forum was founded in 2016. The project answered the call of the 2014-2019 FET Strategy for the creation of a forum to 'systematically benchmark learner's views and satisfaction with their FET programme on an on-going basis' (AONTAS, 2024a, 16). The Forum has since grown into a series of regional and national events, regularly engaging over 1700 learner contributions in recent years. The project is one of the largest of its kind in Europe. In the 2023-2024 academic year, AONTAS partnered with the 9 Education and Training Boards to host the National FET Learner Forum (See Table 1).

Tab. 1. FET Learner Participation rates in National FET Learner Forum focus groups and surveys for different Education and Training Boards: Ireland 2023-2024. Source: AONTAS (2024)

Regional ETB	Focus Group Participants	Survey Respondents	TOTAL Contributions
City of Dublin	72	55	127
Donegal	94	219	313
Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim	80	113	193
Waterford Wexford	88	87	175
Cork	79	186	265
Louth Meath	98	147	245
Kerry	71	139	210
Cavan Monaghan	53	38	91
Tipperary	60	45	105
TOTAL	695	1029	1724

A total of 686 learners participated in 86 focus groups during the 2023-24 academic term, while 1030 learners completed an accompanying survey, supporting wider participation and offering additional insights. Learners represented a broad range of levels and courses offered by each of the participating Education and Training Boards. At each Forum, trained AONTAS facilitators supported focus group participants to reflect on their experiences in Further Education and Training. Learners discussed three primary questions: (i) “What has been working well in your course?,” (ii) “What has not been working well?,” and (iii) “How could your course experience be improved?.”

Learner Forum participants expressed differing levels of overall or net satisfaction with diverse aspects of their experience of Further Education and Training. In 2023-24, for example, Learner Forum participants expressed highest satisfaction with areas such as opportunities to participate in class as well as the guidance and advice available when first entering Further Education and Training. Learners expressed lowest satisfaction with the lack of availability of mental health supports, childcare, and public transport. AONTAS analyse the resulting data and compile a regional report for the participating regional Education and Training Board. At the conclusion of National FET Learner Forum events for the academic year, the Research Team collates all regional report findings and publishes an overarching report, ‘Learner Voices Across Ireland’ (AONTAS, 2024a).

## **2. LEARNER VOICE AND WHY IT MATTERS**

The National FET Learner Forum centres the concept and practice of “Learner Voice.” ‘Learner Voice’ seeks to empower learners by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs to develop educational experiences better suited to those individuals (Fielding, 2010). Simply stated, Learner Voice positions learners as partners in the educational process rather than the objects of policy and pedagogy (Dowdall, Sheerin, and O’Reilly, 2019). Partnership in the educational process is demanding. On the one hand, Learner Voice requires learners to play a more active role in their education. On the other, it requires established institutional and policy stakeholders to become ‘more attentive, in sustained or routine ways, to what students want to say about their experience of learning’ (David Hargreaves quoted in Walker and Logan, 2008, 2). Partnership further enjoins educational policy to support mechanisms that engage a diverse range of learners and enable a sustainable response to learner voices.

Learner Voice emerges from long-standing values of democracy, equality and empowerment in adult education and further seeks to extend those values beyond the classroom into institutional and policy-making domains (Fielding, 2010). In doing so, Learner Voice mirrors models of “bottom-up” participation in other areas of civic life, including citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, and participatory social policy (Arnstein, 1969; Beresford, 2016). Learner Voice does not position learners as service users or customers but as vital participants in co-creating lifelong learning, alongside educators, support staff, managers, and policymakers. Education is understood as a social good, not a product, and a collaborative, transformative process, not a transaction (Lynch, 2023).

The benefits of Learner Voice are many, consistent, and well-documented. For the individual, Learner Voice is not a simple or singular act but engages deeper questions of identity, agency, aspiration, and meaning making. A forum offers participants a shared space to self-actualise, to develop authentic reflection and to access new insight (McLeod, 2011). National FET Learner Forum participants consistently highlight the personal development and self-esteem associated with speaking openly about their programmes and sharing their views with others in a facilitated group discussion. Participants further highlight the benefit of the Forum as a space where they learn more about local FET provision, including previously unknown courses, supports, and progression pathways.

Most important is learners’ recognition that their ETB is listening and wants to

listen to them (Dowdall, Sheerin, and O'Reilly, 2019). While ETBs' invitation to dialogue and listening matters to all adult learners, it may be particularly important for those whose negative views on education have been constructed through long-term experience of marginalisation, silence, or indifference in mainstream provision. 'Promoting, recognising and acting on learner voice, particularly the voices of disadvantaged and marginalised students, can help to provoke the kind of social, economic and political reform that can result in a more democratic society in which social justice and equality can prevail' (Angus et al., 2013). Arguably, the Forum's greatest strength comes from its unique ability to engage the voices of learners who are not traditionally heard in alternative formal structures or representational models (Dowdall, Sheerin, and O'Reilly, 2019).

Finally, by offering adult learners an opportunity to make their recognitions and misrecognitions known, Learner Voice is a site where the personal intersects with the political (Fleming, 2021). Learners' lived experience engages questions of power and decision-making over pedagogy, policy, and resources. By sharing their experience, National FET Learner Forum participants learn about disparities in FET provision across a region as well as areas where provision may not meet learners' satisfaction. During Forum discussions, participants may come to reframe their "private troubles" as "public issues" (Mills, 1959). Equally, Forum participants learn about how to make changes to the educational process and develop capacities for communication, collaboration, and advocacy. The National FET Learner Forum invites learners to take up Learner Voice positions in their Education and Training Boards and encourages further capacity building along these lines.

### **3. PRACTICAL CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS**

Among the practical challenges faced by advocates of Learner Voice, one of the most important is the limited time available at Forum events for participating learners to gain a thorough understanding of Learner Voice and its democratic potential. The nature of the recruitment process ensure that some FET learners may arrive at their focus group with a hazy understanding of the Forum or their role within it. Equally, following the Forum, the commitment of various stakeholders to act on Learner Voice findings may be described as inconsistent. Indeed, there is no formal onus on ETBs or state agencies to action Learner Voice findings or proposals. Nor is there a clear structure for ETBs or SOLAS 'to close the feedback loop' and share ways in which Learner Voice influences



changes in policy or material improvements in practice.

Learner Forum participants consistently express a need to know what will happen to their views after the Forum. They further request stakeholders to offer ‘examples of how these sessions have contributed to changes historically’ (AONTAS, 2024a, 96). The nature of the power imbalance (Arnstein, 1969) between learner and policymaker gives rise to justifiable concerns of ‘tokenism’. The danger here is that the Forum replicates a customer satisfaction survey and reproduces an understanding of education as service provision, one which emphasises outputs over meaningful engagement and democracy (See Fitzsimons, 2017). This presents a risk to the Forum’s longevity as far as failure to act on Learner Voice is likely to lead to non-participation in future.

By way of a potential solution, the NFLF invites learners to take up Learner Voice positions in their Education and Training Boards. AONTAS advocate and support further capacity building along these lines. AONTAS support the development of Learner Voice groups as an appropriate mechanism for FET learners to help clarify, refine, and support the implementation of Learner Forum findings. In this manner, the NFLF’s regional and national reports constitute a rich resource for Learner Voice groups and class representatives, communicating the views and proposals of their peers in FET. Several ETBs with an established Learner Voice group already demonstrate a good practice approach by working in collaboration with learners to respond to learner feedback and proposals. Collaborating with Learner Voice groups to explore solutions to the issues raised in the Forum reports supports learner participation and helps close the feedback loop on the process.

The role of Learner Voice groups in both the recruitment and communication processes for Forum events could be enhanced. By actively involving Learner Voice groups in the selection of participants, the process would not only ensure that learners are better informed about the Forum’s democratic purpose and their role within it but also empower learners to take on a more central, leadership-oriented function in the learner engagement process. By ensuring that Learner Voice group representatives speak at Forum events and discuss progress on past Forum report findings, the process would further close the feedback loop and ensure greater accountability to learner participants. This shift would redistribute some power from the Education and Training Board to the Learner Voice group, fostering a more participatory, learner-driven approach. The more learners understand and feel ownership of the process and its democratic goals, the greater the likelihood of attendance, engagement, and

positive impact.

In conclusion, to borrow Arnstein's language, we view Learner Councils as a means for adult learners to climb the ladder of democratic participation. Ireland's experience of the National FET Learner Forum illustrates the potential for transformative change that arises when we listen deeply to adult learners. Across nearly a decade of forum events and surveys, AONTAS have consistently documented the views and satisfaction of FET learners, as well as their suggestions for future development. The Forum reports' findings and recommendations have the potential to inform and inspire national policy and to secure improvements for all FET learners. What happens next clearly interests and involves a diverse range of actors, including AONTAS, SOLAS, Education and Training Boards and other state agencies. Stakeholders may now choose to continue a developmental conversation with FET learners, to clarify context on learner feedback provided, and to implement solutions. AONTAS support the development of local Learner Voice groups as a vital, democratic space in which to do so.

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# ABILITATING DIGITAL LEARNING TO INNOVATE VET AND ADULT EDUCATION: FIELD PRACTICES SUPPORTING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

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The pandemic exposed gaps in integrating digital technologies into training systems, but recent years have seen policies emerge to address this challenge. The Marrakesh Framework for Action prioritizes equal access to digital learning for all, including adults. Technology is reshaping how adults learn and the skills required, with educators playing a key role in designing effective digital experiences. The *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027* highlights the need for innovation in vocational education and training (VET) providers. Similarly, the European Agenda for Adult Learning emphasizes the professionalization of educators and the adoption of innovative approaches like blended, online, and hybrid learning. While tools like DigCompEdu (2017) support digital literacy and teaching, they are insufficient for adult education and VET contexts. The Erasmus+ Agile-2-VET project builds on DigCompEdu, offering additional resources to integrate technology into training design, delivery, and evaluation. Agile-2-VET fosters collaboration among training institutions, technology providers, and education experts to create models for professional digital training. Its common Training Model equips educators, tutors, and VET staff with skills for innovative digital methodologies. Findings from the project, based on cross-country analyses in Italy, Spain, Germany, and Ireland, aim to advance digital learning in adult education and workforce development.

VET; Adult Education; Digital Learning; competences; training model.

## **1. INTRODUCTION. THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN ADULT EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING**

In the modern era, the era of the “infosphere” and of the “onlife” (Floridi, 2017) digital transformation has emerged as a pivotal driver of educational reform, particularly in fostering inclusivity, lifelong learning, and skills development. In the context of inclusivity, technology holds the potential to broaden opportunities, especially for adults who might otherwise be excluded from training initiatives. Ensuring equal access to digital learning environments for all learners, including older adults, is a cornerstone of the Marrakech Framework (UNESCO, 2022) and a critical challenge for training centres to address. For adults who are not digital natives, navigating digital learning environments presents a unique set of challenges. These extend beyond logistical concerns, such as access to broadband or IT devices, and basic digital literacy. While these foundational elements are essential to ensuring equal access, it is equally critical that online training programs for adults are designed to align with their cognitive processes, which may be influenced by the pervasive adoption of technology. AGILE2VET Erasmus+ project partners joint together following the COVID pandemic, to make sure that better alignment exists in the use of online tools and in distance education ensuring that distance training meets the specific participants’ needs and fosters meaningful skill acquisition. Digital technologies offer transformative opportunities in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, such as reaching remote populations, reducing costs, facilitating knowledge sharing, and breaking down complex training needs into accessible modules and tutorials. However, to fully harness these benefits, training initiatives must be thoughtfully planned and implemented. The rapid evolution of technological capabilities, often outpacing the professional development of trainers, necessitates careful adaptation to the abilities, digital habits, and dependencies of adult learners. Effective training design should prioritize the learners’ profiles over the subject matter alone. Trainers must possess a nuanced understanding of adult cognitive processes to select the most appropriate combination of training methods and online tools. However, given the rapid proliferation of technological tools, trainers themselves often lack the time or resources to explore all available options thoroughly and little dialogue exists with IT designers and experts. Moreover, trainers themselves are adults who require targeted support to develop their technological proficiency, integrate traditional and modern teaching methodologies, and navigate an ever-evolving educational landscape.

## 2. DIGITAL COMPETENCE

In 2018, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union adopted an update to the *recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning* originally published in 2006. The document identifies eight fundamental competences considered essential for personal development, employability, social inclusion, and active citizenship. Among these competences – Literacy; Multilingualism; Numerical, scientific and engineering skills; Digital and technology-based competences; Interpersonal skills, and the ability to adopt new competences; Active citizenship; Entrepreneurship; Cultural awareness and expression – one in particular stands out in our highly interconnected and technologically driven society: Digital Competence. This competence not only complements but amplifies the other seven, as it influences learning methodologies, professional environments, and personal interactions in a digital-enriched world (Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, 22 May 2018, ST 9009 2018 INIT).

Digital Competence (Vourkari et al, 2022) reflects a broader understanding that goes beyond mere technical skill; it includes an awareness of digital rights, the ability to think critically about online content, and the ability to collaborate effectively in digital spaces. The relevance of digital competence in today's labour market cannot be overstated. With the expansion of remote work and digital communication as staples of modern business, employers increasingly seek individuals who are not only technically proficient but also capable of adapting to new technologies and platforms. These skills encompass everything from basic digital literacy to advanced capabilities. Furthermore, digital competence also includes the ability to work collaboratively in virtual environments.

Beyond professional needs, digital competence has become a vital element of personal and civic life. The pervasive nature of social media platforms, digital news outlets, and online communities, transformed how individuals interact, obtain information, and form their own opinions. In this context, digital competence implies the ability to assess information critically, recognizing biases, identifying credible sources, avoiding misinformation and protect one's own privacy.

The EU's emphasis on Digital Competence reflects its recognition of the critical role this skill set plays in fostering an informed, adaptable, and ethically aware citizenry. Digital literacy enables citizens to engage fully in societal, political, and economic spheres, thereby promoting lifelong learning, self-improvement,

and active participation in digital society. By prioritizing digital competence within its educational and professional frameworks, the EU aims to prepare its citizens for the demands of a technologically advanced world, ensuring that they not only understand digital tools but also navigate them with responsibility and discernment.

### **3. THE PROJECT AGILE2VET**

AGILE-2VET was designed to respond to a specific need of innovating the way in which training was delivered in a very critical moment for VET system: the disruptive COVID-19 pandemic. In the training sector organisations working in this field started to question themselves on how to reach learners with their proposals in an effective manner and with high-quality approaches, changing and shifting away from the “traditional” onsite/classroom training proposals. The need to reshape training offers had to start from the conception of training offers, in their delivery and evaluation, to this extent all VET staff had to be engaged in this innovation process, involving on one side multimedia, ICT and technology experts to support this cultural change within training organisations; while on the other experts in eLearning pedagogies and methodologies to configure a new model to design and deliver training to adults. A further element considered in the drafting of the project was the need to make VET attractive again for learners, in a digital era that risks leaving behind the most vulnerable and that makes the use of training contents that are sometimes of poor quality and professional opportunities. A project centred on the proper adoption of technologies such as AGILE-2-VET can boost the VET sector by strengthening the capacity of VET providers to deliver inclusive and high-quality digital training. The main project focus has been the ability to implement online, blended and distance training and learning occasions, in collaborations with digital technology providers and experts in educational technologies and pedagogical practices. The project’s goals included: enriching the skills of VET providers, specifically trainers and tutors, with respect to remote training, through the creation of a common curriculum addressing specific skills: technical (ability to use technologies and tools, instructional design, etc.); facilitation skills (pedagogical, methodological, communicative ones); managerial (definition of times and methods, feedback and monitor learners’ path through available digital technologies).

#### **3.1 Phase 1: the analysis the model and the identification of skills**

In the initial part of the project a research action developed by the consortium

investigated the most used models and methodologies in the field of digital training, analysing them from the point of view of VET. Focus groups were then created with the target groups and stakeholders in the sector to deepen the skills needed to adopt a new approach to this type of training. The FG has been conducted in 5 countries with interesting cultural differences arising. Result 1 is a comprehensive report focused on identifying and analysing the essential tools and skills needed to develop successful holistic digital training programs in the VET sector. The study employs a triangulated methodology combining a review of existing learning models with data collected from focus groups and surveys conducted in four countries: Italy, Spain, Ireland, and Sweden. These activities yielded 76 responses, providing valuable insights into course development, learning processes, course structures, learner support, and evaluation mechanisms.

This study developed the “Agile-2-VET Holistic Digital Training Model”, a framework defining key skills required for high-quality online training. By analyzing diverse national experiences during the pandemic, the report captures best practices, innovative approaches, and lessons learned that enhance the resilience and digitization of the VET landscape. The study’s findings emphasize the importance of stakeholder contributions, and the usability of the data collected. The models and insights presented can be applied to other VET organizations, researchers, and universities aiming to advance digital transformation and develop innovative training methodologies. This report serves as both a repository of knowledge and a practical guide for fostering digital readiness and innovation in the VET sector.

### **3.2 Phase 2: Training Model Development**

Phase 2 of the Agile2VET project focused on enhancing digital competency development in response to the transformative digital environment. This phase revolved around the development of a training proposal/scheme for trainers. Starting from the results of the research, a skills framework (matrix of skills) has been structured for the different phases of the training process. This framework served as the foundation for developing a self-assessment tool aimed at evaluating current digital skills and guiding users toward deeper knowledge. It was deemed to be important that the whole training process be anticipated by a self-assessment scheme which has proven to be the most effective step for trainers: gaining consciousness of the capacities of adapting to technology and using it in different contexts and environments. The self-assessment tool features questions aligned with the training model, enabling users to identify



strengths and weaknesses across various competency areas. Upon completion, the tool generates a wheel graph, visually representing skill gaps and providing tailored resource suggestions. This user-centric approach empowers learners to make informed decisions about their learning paths while fostering continuous improvement in the digital learning environment.

Based on this matrix, an eLearning platform was built with the active contribution of all partners in the structuring and insertion of supporting teaching resources. To support skill development, the project introduced the Microlearning Toolkit, a collection of digital resources, including links to open educational resources (OERs). These resources align with the Agile2VET training model and cater to users' specific needs, addressing also different cultural contexts as microlearning tools may differ according to language. The toolkit, available in five languages—English, Italian, German, Spanish, and Swedish—enhances accessibility and usability for diverse audiences. An innovative aspect of this output is its ability to support trainers and learners across VET, higher education, and adult education. By using the Agile2VET platform and manual, trainers gain new methods for designing and delivering engaging digital training programs, while learners benefit from more attractive and effective learning experiences.

### **3.3 Phase 3: Experimentation & Manual definition**

In the last phase of the project key findings from the AGILE-2-VET emerged highlighting essential strategies for optimizing its implementation in VET and related educational contexts. These findings include: the need to address challenges in implementation, improve online participation, manage resistance, and enhance trainees' self-management skills with targeted resource guidance. The inclusion of socio-emotional and technological skills was identified as crucial for enriching the training model, alongside continuously improving platform resources based on feedback and aligning content with sector-specific labour market competencies. Flexibility and adaptability remain central, with ongoing feedback ensuring the model evolves to meet emerging needs while maintaining inclusivity and accessibility for diverse audiences. Furthermore, a process for assessing the long-term impact of courses on participants' practices has been established, fostering continuous improvement. Exploring innovative technologies to align with educational trends also emerged as a key priority for sustaining relevance.

As a concluding initiative, the project produced a comprehensive manual designed to support VET organizations in leveraging the AGILE-2-VET e-learning

platform. The manual explains the methodology and approach, presents project results, and provides practical guidance on platform use. It aims to engage VET organizations in contributing to the tool's ongoing development and offers real case scenarios to demonstrate practical applications of the AGILE-2-VET framework. Each scenario includes details on the case context, target group, competencies addressed, solutions adopted, and links to online tools for support.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

At the end of the project (July 2024) it is important to emphasise that there are still many challenges to be met in the VET field, especially with regard to the continuing education of economically and socially disadvantaged adults. In recent years, also due to the covid-19 pandemic, VET professionals have certainly improved their digital skills because adult education is increasingly linked to digital for plan, design, delivery and assessment, maintaining a Universal Design for Learning approach.

The action-research of the Agile2Vet project enabled the participants and stakeholders involved to reflect on and experiment with a new holistic approach for training processes that enables trainers to become aware of the digital competences needed to design courses, produce their own content and evaluate it. It is therefore important to continue this philosophy even now that the project has come to an end so that the project partner organisations can:

- fully adopt the existing platform and implement it in the different partner countries;
- allow the training and self-assessment scheme to be used by trainers and facilitator as a process to assess quality;
- foster project dissemination and development of the initial tools;
- continue the dialogue and experimentation with technology providers and designers;
- continue researching around the cognitive process in the era of digital transition.
- Agile2Vet's journey has just begun!

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# SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE?: A CRITICAL READING OF ADULT EDUCATION POLICIES IN THE EUROPEAN AND THE GREEK CONTEXT

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This paper argues that the European Union (EU) accreditation policies in ‘lifelong learning’, with the emphasis in skills’ development through tools such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) and the micro-credentials, stress the economic function of ‘lifelong learning’ (LLL). Through these policy tools, there is a shift in responsibility from institutions (as service providers) to the individuals, while privatisation trends put equity aims in LLL at risk. With the dominance of the aim of employability, social aims are underestimated, while adult (popular) education is marginalised. This is the situation also in Greece, where LLL in the form of ‘continuing vocational training’ has prevailed and an emphasis has been attached to the aforementioned policy tools, albeit not fully implemented.

Adult education and training policies, skills, individualisation, Europe, Greece

## INTRODUCTION

The shift in adult education policies in the EU towards serving the needs of the labour market is an established reality. With the support of research bodies (e.g. CEDEFOP), policy tools have been developed, highlighting vocational skills as the most important contribution of adult education to social well-being. This paper aims to analyse the EU accreditation policies in LLL, by approaching tools such as the EQF, the ILAs and the micro-credentials, which are strongly associated with the aim of employability. Then, the paper will discuss the transfer of these policy tools in the case of Greece.

## **ON LLL AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS FOR 'EMPLOYABILITY'**

The strategy of promoting vocational training for employability has been pursued for years with great methodical steps. The first step was the introduction of the term LLL into the terminology of adult education policy. This vague term, despite the individual clarifications given in analyses of the definition by organisations (e.g. UNESCO, OECD, the European Commission), was the first indication of the focus of adult education policies on individual responsibility (Field, 2010).

Over the last three decades, the economic function of LLL is dominant at international, EU and national levels. The emphasis is on employability and the responsibility has shifted from the state to the private sector. Individuals are encouraged to develop their skills on their own responsibility and often at their own expense, minimising both organisational and financial public costs (Prokou, 2020). The role of the state in ensuring equity has been reduced to a form of supervision towards the unspecified goal of achieving a 'learning society'. However, it has been overlooked that it is in social welfare schemes that more opportunities are given for participation in adult education and training, while structural inequalities may persist in the labour market despite people having highly developed skills (Prokou, 2018).

Indeed, the emphasis on vocational accreditation of learning means that the responsibility for learning and the integration into employment rests with the individual. In addition, the focus on certification policies for employability has led to a decline in interest in the objectives of social inclusion, active citizenship, critical thinking, and personal development (Koulaouzides, 2017). The development of competences linked to the function of democratic societies, social solidarity, tolerance, and cultural tolerance have been marginalised and with them the traditions and institutions of popular education in many countries in Europe (Koulaouzides & Romano, 2022).

The strategy of promotion of LLL for employability and individual responsibility has acquired very concrete tools for implementation.

## **EQF, ILAS AND MICRO-CREDENTIALS: THE CONTEMPORARY TOOLS FOR IMPLEMENTING NEOLIBERAL CONCEPTS OF ADULT EDUCATION**

The EQF was put in practice across Europe in 2008. Each country would reference its national qualifications (in terms of diplomas, certificates or awards) to the eight EQF levels. The descriptors covered the full range of learning outcomes, irrespective of the learning or institutional context. They

covered work and study situations, academic and vocational settings, initial and continuing education or training, i.e. all forms of learning, formal, non-formal and informal (European Commission, 2008, p. 4). Each level of the EQF was defined by a set of descriptors (for knowledge, skills, competencies), which indicated the learning outcomes relevant to qualifications (Official Journal of the European Union, 2008, pp. 5-6). A revision of the EQF in 2017 kept the core objectives of creating transparency and mutual trust in the landscape of qualifications in Europe, while member states committed themselves to further develop the EQF (Official Journal of the European Union, 2017). Overall, the EQF created a normative framework for classifying and managing the phenomenon of human learning by emphasising those skills and qualifications clearly relevant to the labour market. What was missing to complete this effort were the implementation tools.

This gap is now being filled by the European Commission's flagship initiatives to promote and implement ILAs and the recognition of micro-credentials in the member states. These two tools emerged and were presented as a panacea to address critical social issues such as unemployment and underemployment especially during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (Council of the European Union, 2022a & 2022b). The focus is in harmony with the pursuit of adaptability, employability and flexibility in the labour market, promoting a model of education that focuses on individual responsibility, vocational training, skills' upgrading and re-skilling.

In particular, an "individual learning account' is a delivery mode for individual training entitlements. It is a personal account that allows individuals to accumulate and preserve their entitlements over time, for whichever eligible training, guidance, or validation opportunity they deem most useful and whenever they want to, in line with national rules. It grants the individual full ownership of the entitlements, irrespective of the funding source" (Council of the European Union, 2022a, p. 30).

According to the Council Directive, the state, employers or even the workers themselves will be able to deposit funds in these accounts, which can be used for the acquisition of training services, counselling and certification programmes. This system drastically reduces the involvement and the responsibility of the State in the provision of free public adult education services. While it seems that such a system of individual responsibility is capable of enhancing individual adaptability and competitiveness in an increasingly fragmented labour market, in reality its implementation may lead

to the formation of new inequalities in terms of access to learning opportunities. Interestingly, OECD notes that “Individual learning schemes present attractive features.... But individual learning accounts are unlikely to be a panacea to the challenges set by the new world of work. Rather, like any other training measure, they become a Pandora’s box once one starts looking at the details” (2019, p. 7).

Especially if the system is based mainly on the financial participation of workers or employers, those who are in more economically advantaged positions or those who work in firms where employers invest in training will have more opportunities for training and skills upgrading than those who work in less advantaged or even precarious jobs and are less-skilled. Recently a comparative study of similar initiatives that examined the application of ILAs in several countries presented evidence that in countries like France, the least skilled “have not utilised this program to the same extent as those with higher skill levels” (Cummins, et al, 2022, p. 152). Also, the close link between ILAs and the exclusive service to the needs of the labour market deprives adults of their individual right to personal development (Thursfield et al, 2002, p. 44).

The micro-credentials, in which workers and the unemployed will most probably invest the resources of their ILAs, concern the learning outcomes of short, specialised training programmes focusing on specific skills or knowledge. According to Brown et al, “... there is increasing interest from industry, policymakers and educational stakeholders in the value of micro-credentials to enable learners to attain more personalised micro versions of formal/credentialed learning, which better recognise and signpost their achievements across the lifespan” (2021, p. 237). Unlike traditional degrees or vocational training certificates, micro-credentials seem to be more flexible and often digital, allowing participants to acquire them quickly and adapt them to the needs of the labour market. It is also believed that these new methods for skills development could support the recovery process from whatever happened in the labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic (CEDEFOP, 2022). Micro-credentials embody a neoliberal conception of the purpose and value of education. According to the relevant recommendation (Council of the European Union, 2022b), micro-credentials are considered to be important because workers can upgrade their skills in line with market trends. There is also evidence that the labour market recognises to some extent the value and validity of micro-credentials (Tamoliune et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, there are studies showing that many HR professionals challenge

their practical transferability (Alasmari, 2024). Micro-credentials are also seen, by researchers, as a way of manipulating curricula and teaching practices in an attempt to harmonise the work of educational institutions and especially universities with putative labour market requirements (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021).

The European Trade Union Confederation and the European Trade Union Committee for Education emphasised the dangers of integrating micro-credentials into vocational training and skills initiatives in a joint communication. They argued that the acquisition of skills in this way affects the holistic approach to education, and the quality and recognition of workers' training, as there is a risk that micro-credentials will be issued and arbitrarily placed at the same level in the EQF as full qualifications and skills acquired after participation in organised and long-term vocational and university education programmes (ETUC-ETUCE, 2020).

### **LLL AND ACCREDITATION POLICY TOOLS IN GREECE**

In Greece, within Law 3879/2010 “Development of Lifelong Learning and Other Provisions”, the indication of the focus of adult education policies on individual responsibility could be seen, through the introduction of the EQF (Prokou, 2014). The process of referencing of the Hellenic Qualifications Framework (HQF) to the EQF started after the enactment of this Law. The aim of the HQF was announced by EOPPEP (the *National Organisation for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance*) in 2013 and was planned to be done gradually. In the first phase, the objective set was the classification of qualifications within the formal educational system. At a later stage a classification system was to be developed for qualifications acquired through non-formal education and informal learning. The eight Levels of the HQF covered the entire range of qualifications, from compulsory education to higher education. By Law 4283/2014 “Establishment and organisation of the National Education Policy Council...”, a classification of the following qualifications was introduced: Vocational Training School (SEK)–Specialty Certificate – Level 3, General Upper Secondary School Certificate – Level 4, Vocational Upper Secondary School Certificate – Level 4, Vocational Upper Secondary School ‘degree’ (EPAL) – Level 4, Vocational Upper Secondary School ‘degree’ and apprenticeship class – Level 5, Vocational Training Institute (IEK) – Specialty Diploma – Level 5. The remaining three levels of the HQF corresponded to the degrees offered by higher education. In 2015, EOPPEP developed and designed



Learning Outcomes and in 2016, it established the Greek Qualifications Register. Regarding *Initial Vocational Training*, EOPPEP is responsible for the certification exam of students having completed training at Initial Vocational Training Institutions (IEK-Level 5). Upon successful exam results, IEK graduates are awarded the Vocational Training Diploma recognised both in Greece and in EU member states. Regarding *Continuing Vocational Training*, EOPPEP is responsible for the certification exam of students having completed training at Lifelong Learning Centres (KDBM). After graduating from the three-year vocational education at the Vocational Upper Secondary School (EPAL), EOPPEP is responsible for the certification exam of students who have successfully completed the fourth year named *Apprenticeship Class* (EOPPEP, 2016).

The Greek government introduced the ILAs with law 4921/2022 (Government Gazette, A, 75, 18/04/2022) titled “Jobs Again”. Individual Skills Accounts were introduced for the purpose of crediting training entitlements. During the few days of consultation on this law, initially the Small Business Institute of the Hellenic Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen, and Merchants (GSEVEE) strongly criticised this regulation. Two years have passed since the law has been passed (as a result of the EU directive), but these accounts have not been activated and the relevant skills.gov.gr platform remains inactive.

The Labour Institute of the General Confederation of Greek Workers (INE GSEE, 2022) argued that the ILA is likely to be a means of individualising the unemployment problem and fits into a broader neoliberal logic that unemployment and lack of skills are the result of inadequate preparation of the individual to enter the labour market.

The micro-credentials have not developed so far in Greece. However, there is an official public discourse, coming mainly from the Hellenic Authority for Higher Education, which promotes their introduction in the Lifelong Learning Centres (KDVM) of the Greek universities (Hellenic Authority for Higher Education, 2022).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The implementation of the EQF, the ILAs and the micro-credentials reflects the neoliberal philosophy about the individualisation of responsibility. These tools promote the idea that education is an individual investment rather than a social obligation and that the only education of value is that which serves the labour market. This can lead to increasing inequalities, as people with fewer resources,

skills and opportunities have reduced opportunities to access quality education and training. Moreover, the emphasis on adapting to labour market needs may limit critical thinking, creativity and a broader understanding of social and cultural issues. In Greece, nowadays, the vocationalisation of adult education has almost completely prevailed, also through an emphasis attached to the promotion of these policy tools (albeit not fully implemented), pulverising a long-standing tradition of popular education that operated with wide social acceptance and recognition.

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# RADICALIZATION AND POST-CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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This paper explores how the Post-Critical Pedagogy manifesto can enhance our understanding of radicalization phenomena. We examine how post-critical pedagogy might inform research approaches and methodologies that guide the prevention of violent radicalization. A key focus is how the concept of 'radicalization' is often positioned as external to educational frameworks. This framing overlooks fundamental questions about the principles underlying 'radical thought', whether education about and toward 'radical thought' exists, and most importantly, how to interpret and evaluate 'radical thought' using meaningful criteria. The post-critical perspective offers a promising avenue for re-engaging with radical thought and examining both the constructive and destructive principles that drive it. This approach views these phenomena as expressions of a world that demands more than simple 'correction', 'punishment', or exposure (as in critical pedagogy). Instead, it suggests a more nuanced understanding of radicalization within educational contexts.

Post critical pedagogy; Radicalization; Educational prevention

## INTRODUCTION

This proposal aims to discuss what contribution the Post-Critical Pedagogy manifesto can offer to the interpretation of radicalization phenomena. In particular, we will reflect on how a post-critical pedagogy can suggest the use of research languages and postures capable of orienting prevention practices of radicalization phenomena (Schmid, 2013) that lead to violence. In the manifesto of post-critical pedagogy (Hodgson, Vlieghe, Zamojski, 2020) the positions of the scholars interested in launching the post-critical challenge appear clear: transition from procedural normativeness to principled normativeness (there are principles to defend!); the affirmation of pedagogical hermeneutics (the construction of a relational space is a possibility to be built,

neither an ‘a priori’ nor a principle far from the here and now); affirmation of a pedagogy ‘beyond criticism’. In particular, the idea espoused in this proposal is to see how the construct of ‘radicalization’ (Fabbri, Melacarne, 2023; Sabic El Rayess, Marsick, 2021) is often defined as external and outside a educational framework, in this sense losing along the way a fundamental question about the principles which orient ‘radical thought’, whether there is an education to and about ‘radical thought’ but above all how to read ‘radical thought’ and with what criteria of discrimination. What seems promising to us in a post-critical perspective is the challenge of getting back in touch with radical thought, with the positivity or negativity of the principles that fuel it, considering these phenomena as expressions of a world that must not only be ‘corrected’ or ‘punished’, or which must be revealed (critical pedagogy) (Latour, 2004). According to this approach, radicalization must not be deconstructed and broken down to be evaluated and understood within standards (Caramellino, Melacarne, Ducol, 2020). The most relevant question posed by the post-critical perspective, however, is the following. Education that deals with ‘de-radicalization’ or ‘prevention’ is based on the idea that there is nothing to save in the processes that generate these phenomena. It is an education in opposition to something that must be corrected, external, to be criticized in order to ‘fight’. The post-critical perspective, paradoxically, would still invite us to take into consideration a perspective that is more open to considering what is positive about the radical process, even if only in some of its forms. A non-secondary solicitation concerns the question that post-critical pedagogy raises regarding the value of principles. It is a classic and interesting short circuit if thought about in the context of the debate on radicalization and social justice. Trust and hope in the present and in emerging phenomena push us to also open up to the study of radicalization phenomena which, although not manifesting themselves as aligned with an idea of normative or socially shared social justice, may incorporate hope of positive change. In our opinion, the post-critical perspective can help us to re-read the theories and methodologies for preventing radicalization processes within a more authentic and self-directed educational perspective.

## **1. RADICALIZATION THROUGH POST-CRITICAL LENS**

Recent developments in educational theory have introduced post-critical pedagogy as a novel approach to addressing radicalization. Moving beyond traditional dichotomies between security-focused and educational approaches, post-critical pedagogy offers new perspectives on understanding

and preventing radicalization.

In 2016, Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski revolutionized this field by introducing the fundamental principles of post-critical pedagogy. These include principle-based normativity, emphasizing fundamental principles rather than procedural standards; pedagogical hermeneutics, creating spaces for mutual understanding rather than merely interpreting others; post-critical orientation, assuming equality and transformation potential while protecting educational experiences; present-focused hope, embracing current possibilities rather than distant ideals; and love for the world, valuing education's intrinsic worth over instrumental goals.

This framework represents a significant shift from traditional critical pedagogy. It emphasizes an affirmative perspective that acknowledges the world's value while recognizing the need for change. Unlike conventional approaches that treat relationships as given, post-critical pedagogy views them as achievements requiring active construction and maintenance.

The implications for addressing radicalization are profound. Instead of attempting to deconstruct or eliminate radical thinking, post-critical pedagogy suggests holding together conflicting elements, seeking healing and potential rather than correction. This approach raises fundamental questions about respect and dialogue, particularly how conventional notions of respect might paradoxically hinder authentic communication.

The three major innovations of post-critical pedagogy offer crucial insights into the complex processes of radicalization. By recognizing radical thinking's educational potential, this approach acknowledges that radicalization often begins with legitimate questions about social justice, identity, and meaning. People may turn to radical ideologies not out of inherent destructiveness, but from a genuine desire to understand and improve their world. This perspective helps us recognize that radical thought can emerge from positive impulses like the search for truth, justice, or community, even if these impulses later become distorted.

Understanding radical thinking's educational potential reveals how the development of radical perspectives often intertwines with learning processes. Individuals might adopt radical positions through intense engagement with social issues, historical study, or philosophical questioning. Their journey toward radicalization frequently involves sophisticated meaning-making processes, critical analysis of social structures, and deep engagement with complex ideas. By acknowledging this educational dimension, we can better

understand how intelligent, thoughtful people might develop extreme positions through their pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

The promotion of dialogue without predetermined outcomes represents another crucial insight into radicalization processes. Traditional approaches often fail because they begin with fixed assumptions about what constitutes “correct” thinking. This predetermination can alienate individuals who feel their perspectives are dismissed before being truly heard. The post-critical approach suggests that authentic dialogue, where outcomes remain open and multiple viewpoints can coexist, better addresses the psychological and social dynamics that contribute to radicalization.

This emphasis on open dialogue helps us understand how the lack of spaces for authentic exchange might drive radicalization. When individuals feel their concerns or perspectives cannot be expressed within mainstream discourse, they may seek more extreme venues for expression. The post-critical approach suggests that creating spaces where different viewpoints can be explored without immediate judgment might prevent the isolation and polarization that often fuel radicalization.

The shift toward disengagement rather than complete ideological transformation offers practical insights into how radicalization operates and how it might be addressed. This approach recognizes that beliefs and behaviors, while connected, are not inseparable. Someone might hold radical views yet choose non-violent ways of expressing them. By focusing on behavioral change rather than thought reform, this perspective helps us understand how individuals might maintain strong convictions while finding more constructive ways to act on them.

This focus on disengagement also illuminates how radicalization often intensifies when individuals feel their fundamental beliefs are under attack. Attempts to forcibly change someone’s core beliefs frequently backfire, strengthening their commitment to radical positions. Understanding this dynamic helps explain why conventional deradicalization programs, which often aim at complete ideological transformation, may prove counterproductive.

Moreover, the post-critical perspective helps us understand radicalization as a complex interaction between individual agency and social context. Rather than viewing it as either purely individual choice or social determination, this approach reveals how personal experiences, social conditions, and educational opportunities intersect in the development of radical perspectives. It suggests



that addressing radicalization requires attention to both individual meaning-making processes and broader social contexts.

This framework also helps explain why some individuals become radicalized while others in similar circumstances do not. By recognizing the role of individual agency and meaning-making in radicalization processes, we can better understand how personal factors interact with social conditions to influence outcomes. This understanding suggests that prevention efforts should focus on supporting individual meaning-making processes while creating social conditions that encourage constructive rather than destructive expressions of radical thinking.

The post-critical approach thus offers a more nuanced and effective framework for understanding and addressing radicalization. It suggests that preventing violent radicalization requires not just countering extreme ideologies, but creating spaces where individuals can explore complex ideas, express strong convictions, and engage in meaningful dialogue while finding non-violent ways to pursue social change.

The practical implications of this shift are significant. Traditional approaches to deradicalization often aim at comprehensive ideological transformation, viewing radical thinking as fundamentally flawed. In contrast, post-critical pedagogy suggests examining what might be valuable in radical perspectives while working to prevent harmful manifestations.

This approach is particularly relevant in multicultural educational contexts, where fear of offense can create barriers to genuine dialogue. By redefining respect as active engagement rather than passive reverence, educators can create more authentic spaces for exchange and understanding.

The post-critical perspective suggests that preventing violent radicalization doesn't necessarily require eliminating radical thought entirely. Instead, it proposes creating educational spaces where diverse perspectives can be explored safely, and where transformation occurs through engagement rather than confrontation.

This represents a fundamental departure from traditional prevention strategies. Rather than focusing solely on security or behavioral modification, it emphasizes understanding, dialogue, and the potential for positive change within radical thinking itself. This nuanced approach may offer more effective ways of addressing radicalization while respecting individual autonomy and fostering genuine educational relationships.

The methodology's success lies in its ability to maintain the tension between

acknowledging legitimate concerns within radical thought while preventing violent expressions. By focusing on disengagement rather than deradicalization, it offers practical ways to reduce harm while respecting intellectual freedom and promoting deeper understanding.

This innovative approach opens new possibilities for addressing radicalization in educational contexts, suggesting that effective prevention might come through engagement and understanding rather than confrontation and correction. It offers a promising path forward in the complex challenge of addressing radicalization while maintaining educational integrity and respect for human dignity.

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# EXPLORING THE NORMATIVE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE “INCLUSION PARADIGM” THROUGH THE LENS OF THREE SOCIAL JUSTICE THEORIES

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This article explores the normative assumptions of Inclusive Education, which has shaped global educational policies over the past two decades. Moving beyond its neoliberal interpretation, it situates Inclusive Education within the plural evaluative frameworks of late modernity. Drawing on the theories of Rawls (redistribution), Honneth (recognition), and Sen and Nussbaum (capabilities), the study highlights their strengths and limitations in addressing educational justice. Advocating for a plural critique, it integrates these perspectives to tackle the multidimensional challenges of inclusion, offering theoretical insights and critical tools for analyzing educational policies.

Inclusive Education, Political and Social Philosophy, Post-Critical Approach

## INTRODUCTION

Over the two past decades, the semantics of inclusion have progressively colored most international declarations on education (Husson & Pérez, 2016; Norwich, 2014). Spreading quickly under the impetus of organizations such as OECD or UNESCO, and translated in many national legislations, this “Inclusive Education” paradigm represents a major normative shift in policy narrative at global scale. This shift reconfigures the frames of meaning in which educational justice issues are expressed, or the language in which actors express desirable perspectives (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to uncover the normative assumptions that underpin the IE paradigm, stepping away from an interpretation of it as simply

reflecting a neoliberal agenda (Laval et al., 2011). We have sustained elsewhere (Verhoeven & Bernal Gonzalez, 2023) that this new configuration echoes the social grammar of late/reflexive modernity (Beck & al., 1994), as well as its “new anthropology of vulnerability and capacity” (Genard, 2015). In the following lines, in line with a “postcritical turn” (Hodgson, Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2017) redefining critique beyond hermeneutics of suspicion and assuming that late modernity is defined by a plurality of evaluative frameworks, we scrutinize the IE paradigm through the lenses of three theories of social justice: redistribution, recognition and capabilities. Each approach highlights specific dimensions of educational justice, encouraging a “plural critique” of IE by combining these perspectives.

### **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION (IE), A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES**

The IE framework originates in a two-folded critique of previous educational responses to “special needs students”: the critique of social segregation and learning inequalities related to the existence of separate schools, which prompted a shift toward integrating them into mainstream schools (Thomazet, 2009); and the will to break with the prevailing ‘deficit’ model for thinking “disability”, associated with the recognition of each learner’s unique strengths and potential. Over time, the initial focus on disability has broadened to encompass a wide range of learners and needs. Inclusion has gradually moved towards a universalist perspective (Ebersold, 2017), as its goal is now to ensure that education systems enable each student to develop its own potential without being defined by its difficulties. The IE model also reflects a shift in the way of addressing inequalities, emphasizing the responsibility of educational organizations to respond to the diversity of learners, defined by medical, psychological, cognitive, or sociocultural differences.

Significant variations can be observed in the ways in which the main international organizations envision this global narrative. While UNESCO (2015) links inclusion to universal rights and cultural recognition, the OECD (2018) sees it as a lever for human capital development, and the European Union (2020) points to the fight against marginalization and exclusion.

A decade after its widespread adoption, many countries have adapted this global IE discourse to their own realities, leading to a high range of reforms and institutional arrangements. But, beyond disparities, there is a common IE “narrative”, asserting the need to guarantee that every individual, considering

their physical, cognitive, emotional, or social vulnerabilities and potentialities, has the right to benefit from the best institutional, organizational, and pedagogical conditions to maximize their potential and their personal development throughout life. IE is also about protecting students from vulnerability and exclusion, ensuring their well-being and active participation in social and economic life.

## **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION THROUGH THREE MAJOR THEORIES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE**

The “inclusive turn” in educational policies calls for new conceptual tools to capture its complex and plural normative foundations. To contribute to this task, we will draw on three major theories of social justice: John Rawls’s redistributive approach, Axel Honneth’s recognition theory, and the capability approach by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. Each offers a unique lens to understand justice claims underlying inclusive education.

### **The Redistributive Approach: Equity through Resource Distribution**

John Rawls’s theory, developed in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), seeks to define the principles required to establish a just society, with a focus on fair social cooperation. Rawls argues that justice in society is achieved when individuals have access to resources that are essential for functioning effectively in society, such as rights, freedoms, power, opportunities, income, health, and self-respect. His approach is distributive, centering on the fair allocation of these “primary goods” to ensure equality of opportunity and fair access to socioeconomic positions based on merit and talent (Arnsperger & Van Parijs, 2003; Rawls, 1971). The cornerstone of Rawls’s theory is the “difference principle” which stipulates that inequalities are acceptable only if they result in compensatory benefits for the least advantaged members of society (which challenges purely egalitarian distribution).

While Rawls did not develop an explicit theory of educational justice, his foundational principles have significantly influenced educational policies, particularly those aiming to establish *de jure* equality and equality of opportunities in education. This approach underpinned most educational reforms of the second half of the 20th century and was translated into a set of policy measures targeting equal access, equal treatment, and compensatory initiatives (Michiels, 2017; Pourtois, 2008).

Such a redistributive conception of educational justice has weakened, but not disappeared from the IE paradigm. However, it has taken on new meanings,

promoting a more differentiated and personalized understanding of educational equity (UNESCO, 2015). The Rawlsian perspective is echoed in the affirmation of a principle of *accessibility*, meaning that, beyond equal access, schools are expected to provide adjusted educational resources considering individual differences; the concept of equal treatment is also reframed into one of *equitable support tailored to individual needs*, moving beyond standardized treatment (Ebersold, 2017).

### **The Recognition Approach: Flourishing through Recognition**

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition emphasizes the social and relational dimensions of social justice, beyond the mere distribution of resources or goods. According to Honneth, recognition is central to justice, as it enables individuals to build self-respect, integrity, and a sense of personal and social value. Conversely, the lack of recognition can result in marginalization, humiliation, and exclusion, and hamper individuals' capacity to participate in social life (Honneth, 2002). Honneth identifies three essential dimensions or sources of recognition. The first one is linked to primary experiences of love and affective security in interpersonal relationships (essentially in the private sphere), as a precondition for self-confidence. The second one has to do with law, and with the respect which is conquered when someone is treated as an equal subject of rights in the public sphere; the third dimension relates to social utility in the socio-professional sphere. Altogether, these three dimensions provide a stimulating grid for interpretation of the normative principles at play within the educational sphere (Michiels, 2017).

The grammar of interpersonal recognition is increasingly evident in education, as greater attention is given to the relational conditions essential for students' self-confidence and personal growth. The IE framework promotes a new *ethical framework of interpersonal relations* within schools, highlighting emotional bonds and mutual respect. Recognizing each student's uniqueness and fostering supportive relationships are viewed as vital for developing a positive self-image, while their absence can lead to low self-esteem and hinder students' growth. Issues such as bullying, humiliation, and contempt further underscore the importance of this relational grammar. The second source of recognition, tied to equal rights, has also gained importance in education. While schools were once governed by their own rules, democratic norms and equal rights are now seen as legitimate norms and objectives. The IE framework aims to prepare students for active, responsible citizenship (OECD, 2018), encouraging them to express opinions, participate in deliberative processes,



and act autonomously. This emphasis on “school democracy” reflects the growing recognition of rights, with any denial or discrimination criticized as a failure of equality. Finally, the recognition of social utility is visible in how IE values each student’s potential contribution to society. This is evident in affirming the inherent worth of every student, fostering a sense of belonging and social value. The IE framework also promotes the equal worth of diverse educational pathways (vocational, technical, or general), emphasizing their valuable contributions to societal development.

Thus, the tridimensional grammar of recognition is clearly visible in IE semantics, through claims of relational respect, equal rights and democratic norms, and social utility.

### **The Capability Approach: Real Freedom and Empowerment**

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach (CA) offers yet another perspective on justice, centering on “real freedom”—the actual capacity of individuals to pursue lives they find meaningful. Beyond a formal notion of equality, the CA measures individuals’ real opportunities to accomplish their aspirations, recognizing that people have unique needs, backgrounds, and social contexts.

Sen’s concept of capabilities refers to individuals’ “real freedom” to achieve desirable life outcomes, focusing on what people are genuinely able to do and be. It refers not only to individual abilities but also to social, environmental or institutional “conversion factors” that either enable or restrict individuals’ ability to transform resources into meaningful achievements (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2007; Robeyns, 2006).

Several elements of the CA find an echo in the IE paradigm. The grammar of capabilities is clearly visible when it is suggested that inclusive schools should create environments that respect human diversity and provide students with adapted tools and resources to develop their potential. The CA also pays attention to the social and institutional conditions of capabilities deployment. This claim is clearly identifiable in the IE recommendations, that require school organisations to transform themselves into supportive educational environments, likely to strengthen the ability of pupils from different backgrounds to convert educational resources into effective learning and meaningful life projects. IE is also in line with the multidimensional evaluative basis proposed by the CA, which does not stick to instrumental goals (academic performance or employability) but also considers the intrinsic values of education as well as its role in personal and social development (Robeyns,

2006). Finally, the CA underscores the long-term temporal aspect of education, advocating for policies and practices that enhance students' future freedoms (in line with IE attention to future social ability to learn and participate).

### **DISCUSSION: ASSUMING THE PLURAL NORMATIVE FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE TO BUILD (POST-)CRITICAL VIEWS ON IE**

Together, the redistributive, recognition, and capability approaches offer a plural vision of justice that captures the normative complexity—and possible ambivalence—of Inclusive Education. These three theories complement one another, providing a complex framework for inclusive education that transcends a one-size-fits-all model. Redistribution ensures a foundational equality of resources, promoting equitable access to learning opportunities for all. Recognition fosters an educational climate that values each student as an individual, a subject of rights, and a contributor to society. Capabilities promote real freedom, focusing on contextual factors that empower each student to pursue personally meaningful goals.

Each approach sharpens our understanding of specific dimensions of educational justice while presenting its own blind spots and risks. The capability approach broadens educational goals beyond immediate outcomes and provides a critique of the dominant human capital model. However, its focus on personal goals and freedoms may overlook shared societal objectives and undermine the importance of equal resources and conditions. The recognition approach, by emphasizing relational and social conditions, critiques neoliberal views of individual freedom but risks sidelining standardized equality in favor of individualized treatment. The redistributive approach challenges instrumental educational models by emphasizing equity and universal access, while reminding us to consider the objective resources needed to make these rights a reality.

Ultimately, these three approaches can act as cross-critical tools, correcting each other's blind spots. For example, redistributive approaches can critique excessively subjective definitions of domination, while recognition highlights relational dimensions of justice often overlooked in redistributive models. Similarly, the capability approach's potential neglect of equal resources can be balanced by redistributive principles.

For researchers, this three-fold theoretical foundation offers a renewed critical lens for examining IE policies in their complexity. Rather than ranking these approaches or constructing a definitive evaluation framework, in line with a

“post-critical” approach, it is essential to raise practitioners’ awareness of the diversity, complementarities, and limitations of these conceptions of justice. Collaborative and reflexive spaces between researchers and practitioners could foster the elaboration of context-specific solutions to the challenges of inclusive education.

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# AN INCLUSIVE GLANCE ON LOCAL HERITAGE: FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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More than ever, schools today are called upon to fulfill their essential roles in contemporary society, equipping every child and adolescent to become an active citizen. This requires a shift in educational paradigms to address the complexities of a dynamically changing society and its relationship with knowledge. To support this transformation, innovative educational tools and strategies are necessary to renew the educational landscape (Morin, 2001).

Educational pathways, whether in formal settings or informal contexts, like cultural heritage sites, play a vital role in fostering students' inquiry skills. These empower students to engage with cultural heritage and nurture active citizenship (Alvarez Ibis et al., 2023). Heritage education serves as a "privileged tool of education, enabling people to learn about their roots and identity while respecting those of others" (Branchesi, 2006). It not only frames cultural heritage as an object of study but also as a means to explore identity and establish diverse connections. The Faro Convention reinforces this perspective (Di Capua, 2021), highlighting cultural heritage as a dynamic source that promotes the exchange of knowledge and skills across different fields, applicable at all educational levels (Art. 13). Heritage education adds a cultural and historical dimension to citizenship, creating a reciprocal process that interrogates identity and links citizens through cultural heritage (Coopland, 2009).

Furthermore, Italian law connects the education regarding its territories' cultural legacy to the enrichment of cultural heritage, defined as "the exercise of functions and regulation of activities aimed at promoting knowledge of cultural heritage and ensuring optimal conditions for its public use and enjoyment, including by people with disabilities, to promote cultural development" (D.Lgs. n.42/2004).

Heritage education supports transformative processes, positioning schools as active interpreters of society. This approach engages students not only as learners but as citizens linked to their communities and local heritage. To achieve this framework, educational strategies must be inclusive and accessible to all; students themselves should understand the importance of inclusivity in all learning environments, fostering the application of inclusive practices within and beyond school.

This paper presents an experimental case study that allowed students to experience and live local heritage through an inclusive lens, engaging them in active participation and encouraging the exchange of knowledge and skills as they explored their own cultural heritage.

This perspective aligns with the research theme rooted in the democratization processes of the second half of the 20th century in Italy, where the school institution's openness to its surrounding territory emerged as a crucial element. Central to this approach is the relationship between the school, local heritage, and community, leveraging its resources "to benefit the school in the direction of an expanded educational system" (De Bartolomeis, 1983, p. 28).

Building on these premises, this case study investigates how PCTO (Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation) projects can offer a practical framework for fostering connections between schools and their surrounding territories. Introduced in 2019 as an evolution of School-Work Alternation, PCTO projects foster interdisciplinary collaboration and key competences for lifelong learning (European Council Recommendation, 2018).

In this context, we examine a PCTO project implemented during the 2020/21 (class 3<sup>^</sup>I) and 2021/22 (class 4<sup>^</sup>I) school years at the Liceo Scientifico Internazionale with a Chinese Language option at the Convitto Nazionale "Vittorio Emanuele II" in Cagliari. Conducted in collaboration with the "Confucius Classroom" at the University of Cagliari, the project sought to connect students with their local heritage through innovative and inclusive educational practices. Initially called Kaliyali 2.0 ("Cagliari 2.0"), its first year focused on enhancing students' linguistic, cultural, and digital skills. This was achieved through the creation of a website and social media profiles designed to promote a hypothetical holiday package to Cagliari for Chinese tourists.

In its second year, the initiative was renamed Sadingdao 2.0 ("Sardinia 2.0"), reflecting its expanded scope to promote the entire island of Sardinia as a tourist destination. This iteration broadened the range of skills to be developed and involved additional partners, including the Italian Association of Museum

Educators (AIEM). The program's output, in the context of skill development and interdisciplinarity, was the collaborative creation of customized cultural itineraries in Sardinia for specific target groups of Chinese tourists.

This educational experience, which was already integrating various areas such as local tourism, professional skills, proficiency in the Chinese language, and an understanding of the Chinese tourism market, aimed to broaden its scope and offer students a fresh perspective on the accessibility to their region through inclusion. To achieve this, both visible and hidden needs that potential tourists from China might encounter when exploring the Sardinia region were identified. Thanks to the project, students actively co-designed inclusive tourist itineraries, addressing the diverse needs of their target audience, including accessibility for individuals with disabilities. These itineraries were promoted in Chinese, deepening the students' linguistic skills and their understanding of cultural diversity. This process involved expanding their vocabulary and applying it in practical contexts while exploring how cultural and geographic differences shape audience needs.

Over 36 hours of workshops, delivered both in-person and online, students worked with professionals and teachers to overcome the rigid disciplinary boundaries typical of Italian schools that have long characterized this school system (Calvani, 1986). This interdisciplinary collaboration broadened their competencies and opened pathways to future careers (Madera et al., 2023).

A workshop on inclusion introduced accessibility concepts and fostered empathy and collaboration. Although the idea stemmed from the presence of a student with a motor disability, its purpose extended to broader notions of inclusion. Drawing on heritage education's multisensory approach, this idea was emphasized by making cultural heritage accessible in both physical and digital contexts, stimulating reflection, and fostering the development of a new and deeper sensitivity.

This framework allowed students to develop practical skills, such as teamwork, organization, and management, while designing inclusive itineraries that promoted local heritage. It also strengthened their sense of regional identity, enriched by engagement with a culture as distant and different as the Chinese one, fostering the discovery of both new differences and unexpected affinities.

Participatory evaluation, using an assessment grid, assessed the linguistic accuracy, accessibility, and creativity of the itineraries. The students' presentations in Chinese, supported by photos and resources, generated significant interest among peers and colleagues, inspiring plans for similar

projects.

The experience enhanced students' maturity, group cohesion, and sensitivity to the needs of others. They recognized how simple, creative solutions can address invisible barriers and developed a broader perspective on inclusion, particularly in relation to their local heritage. This shift extended beyond the classroom, influencing their reflections on daily life and society. The project also inspired several students to pursue studies in Foreign Languages, International Studies, or Economics and Management for Art, Culture, and Communication.

In conclusion, students learned that individuals' needs—whether tourists or peers—are often not explicit but are essential. In today's fluid and diverse society (Bauman, 2000), education must address this complexity, equipping learners with the tools to foster a more inclusive and accessible world.

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# PEDAGOGIES OF SOCIAL ENQUIRY FOR DEMOCRACIES OF THE COMMONS

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In different contexts, many educational theories and practices of social emancipation, such as critical and decolonial pedagogies, eco-pedagogies, feminist and anti-racist pedagogies and, even earlier, materialist, workers' and socialist pedagogies in Europe, affirm the existence of a substantial link between the production and dissemination of knowledge, and the construction of a social, political and economic organisation in line with the project of a social and (henceforth) ecological democracy. This is why, in addition to the necessary political reflection, the project of an education and a school of the commons must not neglect the pedagogical question. This text therefore proposes: firstly, to recall the scope of the commons model; secondly, to discuss the broad outlines of an education of the commons for a democratic school revolution, in order to present in a third step some proposals for a plural set of pedagogies of the commons. The last element is a special focus about the pedagogy of social enquiry (John Dewey). In other words, the project is to finally give democracy the educational and pedagogical form that corresponds to it, as a way of life without domination or discrimination.

commons, pedagogy, social enquiry, Dewey, school

## INTRODUCTION

Pedagogy is not a set of technical resources and practices that should have the strange ability to be deployed without political implications. This is what models such as the very classic transmissive pedagogy and the new evidence-based education, among others, show: they give concrete form to powers that make knowledge a key to the consolidation of dominations based on class, gender, race and colonial history.

This has been understood, in different contexts, by many educational *praxis* of social emancipation, such as critical and decolonial pedagogies (Mohanty,

1990; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), eco-pedagogies (Gadotti, 2000; Shiva, 2022), feminist and anti-racist pedagogies (Bell Hooks, 1994; Berth, 2019) and, even earlier, materialist, workers' and socialist pedagogies in Europe (Dupeyron, 2020).

They all affirm the existence of a strong link between, on the one hand, the production and dissemination of knowledge and, on the other hand, the construction of a social, political and economic organisation in line with the project of a social and ecological democracy. It is in this sense that the Zapatista schools in Mexico (Baronnet, 2019) and the popular schools within the *Landless Workers Movement* in Brazil are unfolding, with their ups and downs.

This is why the *praxis* of the commons must not leave out the pedagogical question and must develop the project to finally provide democracy with the educational form that corresponds to it, as a way of life free from domination and discrimination.

## **1. DEMOCRATIC, ECOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, FEMINIST AND DECOLONIAL COMMONS**

We propose, firstly, to recall and to specify quickly the scope of the proposition of the commons (Dardot & Laval, 2014; De Angelis, 2022), using a three-axis model.

The first axis assumes the existence of a common set of resources [the *commonwealth*] used, or even held in common, because they are essential for solving the problems of the populations and for the exercise of collective and individual rights. The school of the commons would therefore be the social form enabling access to a common education understood as a shared resource for knowledge and individual and collective fulfilment.

The second axis consists of the concrete existence of a community of *commoners*, without social segregation and discrimination, self-managing common resources through a set of democratically shared rights and obligations.

The third axis lies in the use of a *praxis* of popular self-government (*commoning*) that guides the commons through the principles of co-activity, self-managing co-operation and shared uses.

So, “all non-hierarchical forms of human cooperation are different forms of commons.” (De Angelis, 2022, 197). By the way, the *commons* are another word for democracy as a form of life and as an instituting power.

## **2. EDUCATION FOR THE DEMOCRATIC, ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL COMMONS**

In this way, the educations for the common have three interlocking aims:

- building and maintaining together a shared life fighting against discrimination and domination;
- developing a free and enlightened *praxis* of the population;
- using collective intelligence;
- promoting an integral individuation, which is not the capitalistic individualism.

This gives us four important educational axis.

### **2.1. A common service education**

Popular educational action is an action by the population on itself, in the production of its common life, in the resolution of its collective problems, and in the pursuit of a form of life without discrimination or social injustice. This action is one of the tasks that the population must carry out itself, within the framework of a common education service organized on a self-management basis.

This is particularly the case for people who suffer discrimination and social inequality, people who, it should always be remembered, are in the majority in most societies, if only because of the prevalence of male domination, of relations of coloniality and of capitalist production relations. For these populations, the motto is: *don't liberate us, we'll take care of it!*

### **2.2. Education in minor mode**

Education must not produce completions but, on the contrary, enable beginnings. This is the opposition between the major mode of education, which chooses the future for people, and the minor mode, which prepares people to choose themselves (Ingold, 2018). Thus, the main project of the minor mode is not to predetermine the experience of the future; on the contrary, it aims above all to preserve the future of popular and individual experience.

This means that education aims to develop a plastic understanding of relationships, rather than a fixed knowledge of objects. Its heart is relationship and coexistence, not possession or domination. It is not on a Promethean mode. This is particularly important for improving relations between humans and between humans and non-humans – in the eco-pedagogies.

So, education is a mediation. The essential task of education, then, is not to

prepare the child to possess and master reality, but to bring the child into contact with it.

### **2.3. Education in line with buen-vivir**

Education is, at root, a benevolent ‘maintenance’ of the youth population, a care for its well-being – the *buen vivir* that many South American decolonial struggles claim as an alternative to the madness of capitalist extractivism and productivism, which on the contrary imply an oppressive management of bodies and of beings.

Whereas capitalist anthropology defines human beings in terms of competition and the desire to dominate, the concrete utopia of the commons values the desire to live well together. Life in common, and not universal competition, is what education must prepare for.

### **2.4. A polycritical education**

Faced with the worrying state of the world, the philosophy of education can no longer be satisfied with repeating the slogan of ‘conserving the world’, and teaching can no longer be satisfied with a concept whereby knowledge is used to insert young people ‘into the world as it is’. Similarly, to define educators as ‘representatives of a world’ is to confine them to practising – and disseminating – climatic, social and political inaction.

In this sense, as Paulo Freire writes, ‘for the true humanist or revolutionary educator, the object of action is reality, not human beings’ (Freire, 2021, 101).

In this vein, it is in the reality of the life, the concrete experience, the everyday, the close, the private, even the intimate, that the fight for equality must be developed, so that the dominated populations can take their lives back into their own hands (*‘Riprendiamoci la vita’* was the slogan of Italian feminists in the 1970s).

For these educative aims, what kind of pedagogies?

## **3. PEDAGOGIES OF THE COMMONS**

### **3.1. Critical pedagogies**

The first element of a critical pedagogy is the desire not to reduce knowledge to a knowledge of objects, but to make it part of the fundamental *project* of improving reality. In this sense, pedagogy is not a technique but a *praxis*, an activity of transforming social reality that links thinking and action (Pereira, 2018).

### 3.2. Pedagogies of resonance

The concept of resonance thus expresses the aim of a more ecological pedagogy, in the sense that it seeks neither a unilateral appropriation of things, nor an omnipotent control over them, but rather an interrelation and reciprocal tuning. One of the challenges of pedagogy, then, is to establish the capacity and sensitivity for resonance. For Hartmut Rosa (2022), ‘successful forms of presence in the world are not those that are cut off or mono-maniacally concentrated, but rather those that are connected’.

The school must form this space of resonance where pedagogy can help the emergence of a true commonality experienced in mutual resonance.

### 3.3. Pedagogies of cooperative research work

Pedagogies of cooperative research work are built on three important concepts:

- *work*: learning is a work of experience, i.e. an active investigative approach involving the most direct possible interaction with reality.
- *research*: study is a ‘biting’ activity, in the words of Bachelard’s epistemology (1971), an activity that ‘attacks’ problems. So ‘discovery is the only active way of knowing’. As a corollary, ‘making people discover is the only way to teach’. The pedagogy of the commons cannot confuse the dissemination of answers with the study of questions.
- *Cooperation*: separating students from the research community, in order to better assess them individually, is a decision that is highly inconsistent with two major principles of the commons: mutual aid as an anthropological rule and full democracy as a political choice. We have to trust in our collective intelligence, not in the artificial intelligence, to lead our societies.

### 3.4. Pedagogies of encounter

‘We have one thing in common: diversity’, says the south-african writer Mungi Ngomane, by presenting the general spirit of the *Ubuntu* philosophy (2019). In other words, I am not different from you, I am different *like you*. So the pedagogies of encounter are working against the racisms and ethno-nationalisms all around the world. Here the benchmark is not inclusion in ‘our’ world, but life in a shared world because we are humanity in its diversity, we are not only patriotic citizens or faithful believers.

### 3.5. Polycultural pedagogies

We have to anchor educational proposals in an ecology of culture, in order to

preserve the links between human cultures, their changing environment and the historical experiences that gives rise to them. This means rejecting the primacy of monocultural models (Shiva, 2022).

in the words of Édouard Glissant (2005), “la mondialité” is the opposite of the monocultural uniformity brought about by economic globalisation; rather, it crystallises as a dynamic of recognition and preservation of cultural diversity, within an ethic of polycultural encounter.

#### **4. THE PEDAGOGY OF SOCIAL ENQUIRY**

We can focus in particular on the pedagogy that John Dewey considered to be most in keeping with the democratic spirit (1995; 2011): the pedagogy of *social enquiry* (1993).

According to him, this is the only way to enable people to become a true public, capable of governing itself because it is simultaneously capable of informing and educating itself.

For example, broad climate issues can be studied on the basis of ordinary experience, following the stages of epistemic enquiry. First, be surprised and observe an unusual fact (the rarity of pollinating insects in the pedagogic vegetable garden, for example). Then question, set a problem, study, experiment, try, discuss, conclude, act, communicate, and so on.

In the sixteenth century, Montaigne already gave this wise advice: “ si j’eusse eu à dresser des enfans, je leur eusse tant mis en la bouche cette façon de respondre, enquesteuse, non resolute: qu’est-ce à dire ? “ (1992, III, 11)

#### **CONCLUSION**

In short, the anti-globalisation slogan of the 1990s (*another world is possible*) is now coming up against the urgent climatic and political issues of our time. It is no longer a question of asking whether another world is possible, but of understanding that *another world is radically necessary*. The creation of schools for the ecological and democratic commons is therefore a project that we believe to be essential. The work is ongoing, both in the field and in research into the philosophy and sociology of education (Laval & Vergne, 2021; Dupeyron, 2024).

We have done no more than provide a modest overview here.

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# INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION THROUGH TIME? A COMMONS PERSPECTIVE ON TIME

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Time is an important organizing factor in everyday life. Hence time determines e.g. in which periods of time things can or must be done, and in which stages of life or at what age one has access to certain actions or institutions. Time is therefore a powerful actor in inclusion and exclusion processes. Our article focusses on these processes in the field of social work. With reference to the theory of educational commons, we discuss time as a central organizing category for children's leisure practices and the social work practice of zoning. Using empirical material, we can show how powerful time becomes in social work practice and that it needs to be taken into account as an important actor with regard to reducing educational inequalities.

childhood and youth research; doing time; Grounded Theory Methodology; participant observation; policy of zoning

## INTRODUCTION

In this article we focus on time as an important actor in educational commons. We discuss the crucial role of time in inclusion and exclusion processes and for the concept of educational commons. In addition to theoretical considerations, we will draw on data from our completed study 'Occupying Public Urban Space with Stunt Scooters', which was situated in the non-formal educational setting of child and youth work in Germany. The article focuses on the following question: What role does time play as an active agent for inclusion and exclusion processes and for the concept of the (educational) commons?

In social work, it is primarily adults or institutions of the adult world that use time to determine when certain opportunities are (un-)available. They determine who

has access to certain areas and educational settings. Time can therefore be seen as an instrument for creating generational order (Punch, 2020). However, time is not only a powerful tool in organizing time slots. It also determines, through «duration» of membership, who can occupy a powerful position within a group. Thus, time is the result of interrelated practices (Hillebrandt, 2023). While time can generally be theorized from both an objectivist and subjectivist perspective, our practice-theoretical perspective lies in between. We conceptualize time as a result and component of practice (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002; Reckwitz, 2016). It has a temporalizing effect and produces its own temporal structures (Koch et al., 2016; Reckwitz, 2016). Koch et al. (2016) emphasize three levels of temporality of the social. (1) The temporality of social practice, because practice is always temporally structured as a sequence of events that have a past and a future, which are differentiated in the present. (2) The temporality of individual social practice, which is about the specific temporality that individual practices produce and (3) so-called “temporal practices” (Reckwitz, 2016, 123; translated by authors). Below we will discuss the specificity of time as a concrete actor in the social work practice of zoning.

## **1. SKATE PARKS – ZONING AND GOVERNANCE OF PUBLIC SPACE**

In view of limited public socio-spatial resources, skate parks are places for specific youth and children’s cultural practices. They are meeting places and offer a very specific space for certain practices. Practices such as skateboarding are characterized in their origins by the reinterpretation and appropriation of urban space. Skate parks represent a form of binding an initially spatially unbounded practice to a place. Something that Dirks et al. (2016) called zoning (29). Skate parks are therefore politically defined places (Eber et al., 2024). Children and young people use this place of enclosed youth cultural practice to conduct their own practice in a way that is characteristic for the practices such as skateboarding or stunt scooter riding. From the perspective of childhood studies, the conflicts between skaters and scooter riders that emerged on the skate park we conducted our research at can be interpreted as a side effect of the domestication of childhood (Zinnecker, 1990), which has led to the increasing displacement of children from public life. From the perspective of youth research, this can be interpreted in the context of increasingly functionalized and commercialized public spaces to which young people have less and less access (Boyd, 2014).

## **2. THE CONCEPT OF (EDUCATIONAL) COMMONS**

Based on the three-part structure of the concept of the commons, namely commons, commoning practices and commoners (Ostrom, 1990), in educational commons, education becomes a commons that is produced in a process and together with all those involved. Education is thus understood as something dynamic that takes place as a process in everyday practice. More open, egalitarian and diverse educational processes would therefore require, e.g. the involvement of a wide variety of stakeholders from different groups, such as children, parents and professionals (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019; Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis, 2020). This applies not only to everyday practice, e.g. in schools, but also to jointly developed educational content or curricula. From this perspective it's possible to ask what role time plays as an active agent for inclusion and exclusion processes and for the concept of the educational commons.

## **3. THE STUDY**

In our study, we focused on the question of how children and young people appropriate public urban spaces through the practice of stunt scooter riding and on the triggered learning processes. Stunt scooters resemble city scooters. They are designed for performing tricks and stunts on ramps. Due to their handlebars, they are easier to use than skateboards and are therefore often ridden by younger children. Stunt scooter riding is a new trend sport that has become increasingly popular in recent years. This is also true for the German city where we conducted our research. There the city skate park has become a popular spot for spending time and practicing one's own sport. The lack of space and different movement sequences resulted in an increase in conflicts at the skate park. The emerging accidents and disputes led to tensions between the "established" users (e.g. skaters) and the new group of scooter riders (Elias and Scotson, 1965/2002). Due to overcrowding, the municipal administration reacted in 2021 by excluding the scooter riders from the park. After (partially public) debates between the scenes and with city officials the following rule was imposed by the city: scooter riders were allowed to use the park two afternoons a week. However, the conflicts remained, and the separation of the scenes was thus addressed by building a new area for scooter riders. While our pre study, which took place over the summer of 2021, focused on getting to know the research field and its actors, we accompanied the planning and construction of the new scooter area in four case studies from summer 2022 to the beginning of 2023. In addition to observation protocols, the data corpus includes photos,

videos, in-field conversations, newspaper articles and documents (Jäde et al., 2024). The data was analyzed based on the method(olog)ical principles of the Grounded Theory Methodology (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

#### 4. ZONING BY TIME

In the following, we will illustrate how time can be understood as an actor in policies of zoning. Zoning as part of social work practice not only refers to a place, but also to the connection and interrelation of different policies to deal with childhood, youth and practices identified as belonging to these. With our data, we can analyze *how* zoning works on a skate park and in the situation described above. *Firstly*, zoning is a relational and political process that is initiated by policy makers and social workers. *Secondly*, the process takes place as a practice immanent in the field. Hence, a policy of zoning is part of the practice of the skate park. Thus, policies of zoning can be understood as a central phenomenon of this field, which is produced by the interplay of a wide variety of categories. Categories such as: generational order, age as a relational category and field competence in the sense of a capable human body are significant for zoning processes (Eber et al., 2023). And all these categories are aspects of temporality and time itself, which become relevant for the policies of zoning and help to produce it. The following excerpt from the material originates from a situation where four scooter riders talked to researchers, city officials and a representative of the planning company involved about the situation at the park. The scooter riders are expelled from the site by skaters or encounter other exclusionary practices that are intended to make it clear to them that they have “no business” (Ilja; 17-year-old scooter rider)<sup>1</sup> there.

That’s why I thought the signs were a bit stupid that they put them up, because that made it extremely bad with the scooters, (...) because especially for the first three months (...) we didn’t like it at all that it was the way it is now, (...) which would have been a solution if (...) they said, yes, two scooter days, (...) but skaters can go too. and we’re not allowed to go on one skater day if they’d said yes, well, only scooters and no skaters, then okay, then I would have understood but that only skaters are allowed to go every day, that was a bit discriminatory in my opinion for the sport of scooter (Ilja)

Ilja refers to signs that regulate the times when scooter riders can use the park, which the scooter riders perceive as a strong restriction or discriminatory. Aspects of time are interwoven with leisure practices and the scooter riders

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been pseudonymized.

must deal with them. They must actively deal with the fact that they are now breaking rules or evading time-structuring zoning attempts and that they are now marginalized, at least in terms of time. Because there are no explicit scooter days the park always remains a place for skaters. Time for cultural practice thus becomes a special commodity. And what's more: according to Ilja, time is distributed unfairly, which gives it the power to marginalize. For skaters, this in turn provides a legitimization for exclusionary practices, in that they refer to the signs while expelling the scooter riders or actively prevent them from riding. When the researcher asks how the conflicts could be dealt with differently, Ilja replies:

The simplest thing you can do is to make them realize that somehow we've managed (...) to make the scene bigger, firstly, abolish the signs altogether because they don't make sense any more anyway because I go there every day (...) if I can't (...) on Wednesday, then I go on Thursday (...) if I can't on Thursday, then I go on (...) Saturday Sunday, for example, we're actually there the whole time. (.) just take down the signs.

He offers two possible solutions: *Firstly*, that the scene has gotten bigger, so that it must be granted a certain amount of space solely in terms of numbers. *Secondly*, he points out that the signs are nonsensical because they don't follow them anyway. After all, scooter riders don't just ride two days a week but in their free time in general. Although the signs are explicitly named as disruptive, what is problematized about them is the zoning or even containment of the leisure practice in terms of time. Ilja explicitly states that scooter practice takes place or must take place in his free time, while pointing out that the politically scheduled times for scooter riding do not coincide with his times.

Hence time is significant in various ways: it is used by the scooter riders to prove their own affiliation to the scene, and it serves to control and organize the practices at the park. The signs become powerful, due to their practice of organizing according to time structures. They regulate access and at the same time create massive exclusions. Not only does the sign itself become an actor that shapes the situation, but it also affects temporal practices that have an organizing character. Time is therefore not just an artefact of legitimization, but a relevant relatum of the situation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Signs and time(s) become actors in the phenomenon of zoning. It's not only scooter practice and political decisions that allocate spaces to children and

young people, but also the signs and the times they call up. Hence, time is not only a measurable quantity, and not only a certain experience, but it structures itself, specifies, organizes and is the product of practice at the park (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002; Koch et al., 2016). Simultaneously, signs and time(s) give the actors at the park new possibilities for action and reference. Skaters have another reason to exclude scooter riders, which is very powerful not least because the scooter riders know that signs are there to organize what is happening. Regarding the concept of educational commons, it is essential to examine and analyze all aspects that structure and order practices that are explored – time being one of them. After all, the core of the educational commons is about confronting powerful structures and inequalities and render the latter ineffective (Cappello et al., 2024; Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis, 2020). Thus, it makes sense to focus on time as a crucial actor of inequality and power relations (Flack et al., in press). Different time-related logics of the participants take effect, which can lead to exclusion and inclusion from the park. This is why we advocate for recognizing that time practices produce inclusions and exclusions. Temporal structures regulate access to certain public places, thereby enclosing children and young people there. Simultaneously, the commons perspective offers a possibility of understanding time as a common good, that needs to be governed by adults *and* children and young people so that in the conception of educational spaces and educational commons, time does not become a factor of inequality. Instead, the emphasis should be on making time equally usable and available, and on reflecting on when time is powerfully <allocated> and becomes an instrument of authority.

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# CONDITIONS AND POTENTIALS FOR EDUCATIONAL COMMONS TO PROMOTE MORE EQUAL AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A SWEDISH CASE STUDY

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This paper presents results from a Swedish case study conducted as part of a HORIZON 2020 project (2021-2024), investigating the potential of educational commons to foster more equal and inclusive education. The study identifies three key factors for achieving this potential: (1) the image of children and teachers, (2) the educational task, and (3) the methods and theories used in educational practice. Through a critical analysis of policy documents and neoliberal governance in education, the paper examines how these factors were activated within a Playworld/Interactive Performance involving children, teachers, artists, and researchers exploring a shared question of human beings' place in nature and culture. The analysis and performance are framed by the theories of Carol Bacchi, Michel Foucault, Henri Bergson, and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). This collaborative, socio-dramatic approach positions children and teachers as contributing commoners engaged in meaning-making processes. The findings challenge current educational policies, which emphasize a deficit-oriented, compensatory logic. In contrast, the Playworld approach demonstrated that the potential for educational commons to promote inclusion lies in practices that foster imagination, play, and narrative co-construction, supported by aesthetic and sensory experiences. These methods allow both children and teachers to actively contribute to the creation of new commons.words.

early childhood commons; inclusive education; commoning research-practice; Aesthetic theories and methods; playworld/Interactive performance

For decades, proponents of the commodification of early childhood education claimed that competition, calculation, and choice would lead to forms of education of enhanced quality, equality, and inclusion. However, scholars now show that commodification has instead done the opposite, leading to increased inequality and an expansion of exclusionary practices in education (Robert-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Vandenbroeck, Lehrer, Mitchell 2023). Commodification is, in fact, experiencing its own “inflation” motivating the need to propose necessary alternatives. In this paper we present such alternatives, presenting observations from a case study of a preschool activity that hybridized imaginary play and aesthetics to explore how the values of the commons – equality, sharing, participation, togetherness, caring, and freedom – are actualized in such early childhood settings. The case study formed part of a HORIZON 2020 project – *Smooth Educational Common Spaces: Passing through enclosures and reversing inequalities* (SMOOTH).<sup>1</sup> The project, involving nine European countries, brought together a consortium of 12 partner universities and cultural institutions, together with third parties coming from preschools, schools, afterschool programs, NGO’s, museums and youth organizations, to conduct various studies to research the question if and how educational commons may function as a catalyst for more equal and inclusive education.

### **CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION POLICIES IN SWEDEN**

Our work conducting one of the early studies in the SMOOTH project – an analysis of national, regional, and local education policies in the countries participating in the project – threw into stronger relief the persistence of educational inequalities rooted in the commodification of education. Our team studied Swedish early childhood education and care documents on equality and inclusion, guided by the question: “What is the problem represented to be?” (Bacchi 1999). Using an interpretive framework based on the ideas of Michel Foucault and the policy-analyses of Carol Bacchi, we described the scientific, ontological and epistemological underpinnings of these policies, and identified the subject-positions these documents made available for the child. Our analysis revealed an ontologically informed image of children as lacking (not contributing to culture, knowledge and values), a reproductive epistemology (children should only imitate and reproduce already existing culture, knowledge and values), and a formulation of the problem as being centrally about early acquisition of the Swedish language (children can be included only when they

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<sup>1</sup> Visit the project site for more information: <https://smooth-ecs.eu>

have adapted to national, linguistically-coded definitions of culture, knowledge and values; Lecusay, Olsson, & Nilsson, under review).

The results of this policy analysis provided us with a framework that guided how we engaged with our third-party partners – a network of three preschools – in the implementation of the case study component of the SMOOTH project. In this component, the various research partners collaborated with their third-party partners to develop, implement and study activities in their respective educational settings to examine if and what role a commons perspective could play in making these settings more equal and inclusive. The results of our policy analyses contrasted sharply with the culture of the commons already in place within and between the partner preschools in the network. These preschools were firmly rooted in the scholastic gesture of the older generation creating time and place for the new generation to study and transform cultures, knowledge and values currently held as commons in society. They were skilled in methods characteristic of educational commons, methods originating from the history of pedagogy and from early childhood centres in Reggio Emilia, Italy: careful listening to children in exploratory projects where children’s perspectives are documented, analysed and valued as contributions to the commons. In essence, even before the case study and project, these preschools already viewed children as commoners, actively participating in commoning processes to create new common goods (Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020).

## **METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Given our research task of conducting a case study to explore the commons principles in ECEC, several questions emerged: How can we enter an ECEC practice that already embodies these principles? How can we introduce complexity to the reductionist ontology, epistemology, and monolingualism revealed in policies?

How can we enhance the existing commons to foster more equal and inclusive education?

To these ends we drew on the collaborative, participatory research methodology of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT; Cole 1996; Engeström, 1987/2017). A core methodological strategy adopted by CHAT scholars is that of co-creating with others the activities that produce the phenomena of interest (Cole & Engeström, 2006). It is a process of negotiation with all participants, children and adults alike, that is illustrative of the ethos of mutual appropriation that underpins CHAT research both as a research logic and ethic: A researcher

arranges to become an integral part of the activity so that she can experience what it is like to become a functional aspect of the system through the active and reflexive co-construction of the activity of interest with others. In other words, it is a process not of participant observation, but rather of observant participation (Rosero et al., 2011), where children and teachers seen as co-contributors to the research. This presented an alternative to the reductionist image of children at stake in current policies.

We also found support in the theories and methodology of Playworlds – an approach that, in contrast to the reductive epistemology of the ECEC, seeks to create contexts for children’s meaning making through joint, adult-child socio-dramatic play. Originally developed in Sweden by Gunilla Lindqvist (1995), this approach involves adults and children collaboratively creating a shared imaginary world, brought to life by the adults and children through characters, props, and plots. The narrative is selected based on topics important to the children, ranging from emotions and abstract concepts to local, practical concerns. It is the aesthetic and dramatic qualities of the Playworld activities that are understood as driving the emotional pull that draws and sustains children and adults’ joint play (Nilsson, 2009). These qualities became an important counterpoint to the monolingual logic we identified in the national ECEC policies. Furthermore, these qualities were enhanced in our case study both through our interests in Henri Bergson’s aesthetic reasoning on the relation between matter and memory (Bergson, 1896/1991), as well as through cooperation with an art/performance collaborative known for their use of extra-verbal, aesthetic performance materials and processes to promote more equal and inclusive practices. Equipped with this conceptual and methodological toolkit, we staged activities that gave children opportunities to explore the values of educational commons both through sensory-perceptive experiences and through individual and collective memories (Olsson, 2023).

### **THE CASE STUDY: CHILDREN’S IDEAS ABOUT LIFE AT THE INTERSECTION OF NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY**

Our case study began with a two-year period in which we followed exploratory projects (Olsson, 2009), pursued by the teachers and children, that focused on the themes of Plants and Robots. We drew on a theory of meaning (Deleuze, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978) as the foundation for analysing these projects, reasoning that this approach not only allowed us to authentically listen to the children but also provided a scientifically robust framework for understanding their existing

commons. Our analysis threw into relief the children's holistic and non-dualistic thinking in relation to both nature and technology. The children theorized how different elements in the life of plants collaborate to obtain food, oxygen and water as well as how, in the case of robots, cables, batteries and cogs collaborate to bring the machines to life. The children showed a sensitivity to relationships between nature and technology, comparing, for instance, human veins with the veins of the leaves of plants and to the cables inside the robot. At the same time, they expressed love and concern for both plants and robots, and seemed fascinated with the heart, both as a symbol of love and friendship and as an important biological and life-sustaining organ. Building on our analysis, we turned to the perspectives of philosopher Henri Bergson (1907/2007) and plant-neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso (2018), who emphasize a non-dualistic relationship between human intellect, other life forms, and more-than-human matter. These perspectives helped us recognize the depth of the children's contributions. Had we, as a society, adopted such a close connection with nature, we might not face the climate crisis we do today. Likewise, had we applied this critical awareness to our technological innovations, we might have addressed crucial questions about artificial intelligence much sooner.

These analyses led us to develop a shared research question for children and adults to explore in the next phase of the case study: What is human beings' place in nature and culture? Working closely with the art/performance collaborative, we carefully designed and staged a Playworld in which the children could engage with two characters inspired by their interests, HeartRob and HeartRoot. We seeded this environment with a narrative: Both characters had lost their energy and the children were recruited to assist them in restoring "the nerve center" that would help bring energy and love back to them. In line with our aesthetic methods and theories, we invited children to explore the shared research question through their sensory-perceptive experiences and individual and collective memories, developed as they played and interacted in the Playworld. Before, during, and after the Playworld events, we maintained a letter correspondence with the children, regularly sharing documentation of these experiences with them.

This approach also connected to another aspect of our study: examining children's views on key values that support educational commons—sharing, caring, and cooperating—and identifying possible influences on such prosocial behaviors. For this, we combined qualitative observations with quantitative measures of prosocial behavior and educational determinants. Correlation analysis and triangulation of data indicated a positive link between the

Playworld intervention and children's prosocial behavior, showing the many creative strategies children used for sharing, caring, and cooperation. For example, children shared their hypotheses and questions with each other, tried different ways to give the characters energy and love, asked each other for help, and invited their peers to join in the exploration. We observed no signs of exclusion; instead, the children encouraged each other, saying things like, "We need you here for more energy," "Don't be scared; try this!" and "Hold my hand and join us!"

Our findings illustrate how children actively engaged with prosocial values—sharing, caring, and cooperation—through their involvement in the Playworld. The collaborative missions allowed children to enact these values in real-time, building connections and encouraging inclusivity. As they supported each other with statements like "We need you here for more energy" and "Hold my hand and join us," they demonstrated an sense of common purpose and collective exploration. What we observed in the case study suggests that educational commons hold the potential to catalyze a more equal and inclusive form of education, provided certain key conditions are met. First, the image of children and teachers must be framed within an intergenerational search for meaning, where both groups are viewed as active contributors to the commons. Second, education should adopt an open and expansive approach to knowledge, allowing commoning processes to flourish through imagination, play, and shared narrative creation. Lastly, methods and theoretical tools in education should embrace aesthetic diversity, enabling sensory-rich experiences and enhancing individual and collective memories while fostering a shared purpose in creating new common goods.

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# CHILDREN AS CULTURAL ACTORS: PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP THROUGH HERITAGE EDUCATION

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The present paper proposes heritage education as a field of research and practice suitable for promoting children's participation and their awareness as cultural agents. In a critical approach to heritage (Harrison, 2013) and starting from the "paradigm of the intangible heritage" (Lapicciarella Zingari, 2015), this contribution presents findings of a research project aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of children's perception of heritage in relation to their neighbourhood. In line with childhood studies (Melton et al., 2014), which consider children as social actors, the project offered heritage mapping workshops based on exploring, identifying and producing knowledge about everyday urban spaces. While reflecting on children relation with heritage (Smith, 2013), the aim is to foster experiential and participatory processes of heritage education (De Nicola et al., 2022),

heritage education; childhood studies; participation; active citizenship; mapping

## INTRODUCTION

Heritage has been approached from different perspectives and aims by various disciplines, from archaeology to history of art, from architecture to geography, (Harrison, 2013). In the last 30 years, anthropology (Lapicciarella Zingari, 2015) and, more recently, education have particularly promoted attention to the intangible dimension of heritage.

At the level of the international recommendations, the need for multiple and interdisciplinary heritage education strategies to encourage the participation of the younger generation in safeguarding of heritage is emphasised by both the 2003 UNESCO Convention and the 2005 Council of Europe (known as Faro

Convention). However, there is a lack of theoretical frameworks that provide a clear overview of reflections and strategies for practice, due to the relatively recent growth of heritage education as a research field (Fontal et al., 2023). The pedagogical perspective often draws attention to the subjective dimension of heritage, stressing the centrality of the subjects and the active role of society in the interpretation of heritage (Borghi, 2023; Muscarà et al., 2024). In other words, the emphasis is on revealing the multiple meanings and values, that both children and adult attribute to natural, tangible and intangible heritage. Consequently, as Casonato & Branduini (2024) underline, heritage could be considered as a changeable values system which, in turn, would well support the purposes of participation and citizenship education (Berti & Seitz, 2024). The paper presents a reflection on children's voices and their participation in heritage safeguarding, in order to reinforce the centrality of a subject-based approach. Considering how experiences in non-formal education settings prove to be a privileged vehicle for the practice of heritage education (Borghi, 2023), the aim of the research is to comprehensively understand how children perceive, understand and represent heritage in their everyday urban environments, through neighbourhood walks and mapping,

## 1. A CRITICAL APPROACH TO HERITAGE

In a critical understanding of heritage, Smith emphasises that heritage “is not (...) what it is” (2006, p. 3), but is constructed by the values, meanings and social practices that are attributed to it and recognised as such. Yet, from a Foucauldian perspective, the author suggests that heritage can also be conceptualised as a *discourse*, with recognised specific criteria to define it. Such discourse conveys the idea of a single, fixed definition of heritage (reflecting the context), that excludes alternative interpretations of the concept (Smith, 2006, p. 4). In line with Smith, Harrison (2013) refers to an *official heritage*, recognised by various form of legislation and in accordance with established criteria, and an *unofficial heritage*, unrecognised and generally associated to an everyday dimension of “culture” (p. 18). Even so, there is a mutual influence between the *official* and *unofficial heritage*, and in what people may begin to recognise and claim as their heritage (Harrison, 2013, p. 20). This interdependence became clear with the introduction of the 2003 UNESCO Convention, and it has impacted upon the recognition and safeguarding of elements of intangible culture by local, regional and national institutions. Accordingly, heritage can be described as a “cultural and social process” (Smith, 2006): it encompasses collective, transformative and dynamic

dimensions, and is therefore “multi-vocal” (Smith, 2006, p. 12).

The present contribution adopts the perspective of intangible heritage and focuses on the *everyday heritage* (Mosler, 2019), that is, the one that belongs to an ordinary and an everyday dimension, with specific reference to the urban context. The aim is to explore meanings, values and uses attributed by different subjects to the same heritage element, and to find out how such diversity coexists as an expression of the multivocality of heritage. This means investigating the potential of heritage, and consequently heritage education, as a vehicle for democratising processes, involving a wide range of actors (Robertson, 2012, pp. 8–9).

## **2. A CRITICAL APPROACH TO HERITAGE EDUCATION**

To start from the perspective of children, in a democratic and participatory approach, means to foster an intergenerational co-construction of knowledge about heritage (Zuccoli & De Nicola, 2016). The practice of heritage education should, therefore, stimulate the production of a plurality of narratives and interpretations through collective experiences and reflections (Del Gobbo et al., 2018). Such experiences should be closely linked to children’s everyday lives and therefore to the interaction between subject and object: experiences that are anchored in something relevant in the present, in continuity and with meaning for the future (Dewey, 2014). Based on these assumptions, and referring to praxeology (Reckwitz, 2003), heritage becomes interactively produced, meaning that children’s knowledge of their social constructions of heritage is documented in social practices and can be researched by analysing them.

In this regard, the need to rethink the relationship between children and heritage, given that children are under-represented in heritage discourse (Ginzarly & Srour, 2021; Smith, 2013), finds a valuable vehicle in the perspective of Childhood Studies (Melton et al., 2014). The latter recognise children not as “merely voiceless adults in the making”, but as social actors: the way a child is, acts, moves and gives meaning to his or her own life context. New childhood studies also emphasise the relational understanding of children as social actors, i.e. the generational and power order between children and adults (Eber et al., 2016).

In the context of heritage education, children should be involved first and foremost in participation and safeguarding actions, as they are the main link between the past, present and future of heritage. Yet, in order to value children’s

voices, the living context and the specific socio-cultural relationship between children and adults needs to be addressed. Similarly, in research context, children's voices are influenced by the researcher relationship (Spyrou, 2018). Preserving the richness and complexity of children's thinking is therefore a real challenge.

### **3. EXPLORING EVERYDAY SPACES WITH CHILDREN**

With the aim of ensuring children's accessibility and participation, the research translated the concept of heritage in terms of *place* (Schofield, 2015). Looking at the relationship between children, spaces and their use (Malatesta, 2015), children are considered as social and cultural actors capable of producing and modifying their everyday places, attributing meanings and participating in social practices. Moreover, their knowledge in terms of social constructions of heritage is understood and reconstructed in relation to a social practice (Reckwitz, 2003). The exploration of everyday spaces accompanies them in a process of research, identification and meaning making of heritage present in the explored area. The research project is, therefore, based on an ethnographic and reconstructive approach (Bohnsack et al., 2010) to reconstruct children's practical knowledge of heritage through the analysis of related social practices. The research included creative mapping workshops based on tools developed in the field of New Childhood Studies (Balagopalan et al., 2023), and Children's Geography (Malatesta, 2015).

The structure of the mapping workshops is developed in three main phases, starting from an embodied and experiential dimension and leading to a moment of collective reflection, summarised below:

1. Introducing the theme through images (historical and contemporary), stories and testimonies, followed by neighbourhood walk.
2. Drawing a personal map, inserting those elements that children consider most important.
3. Creation of a collective map, followed by a group discussion.

The production of graphic representations of the area, both individually and collectively, seen as the product of children's lived experience (Malatesta, 2015, p. 64), facilitated the elaboration of the experiences lived and enabled the development of a collective reflection on heritage.

Finally, in line with the documentary method (Bohnsack et al., 2010), participant observation combined with field notes, children's drawings and group

discussion formed the data basis for triangulation and interpretive reconstructions.

#### **4. "I AM AN EXPERT OF THIS PARK"**

The empirical study is conducted in a northern Italian urban area characterised by significant internal and external migration. It is located between two neighbourhoods connected by a canal and a large park.

Understanding the children's perception of the area was the aim of the first workshop. Here a short sequence about the park:

Andrea: I live nearby

Stefano: I also live nearby

Interviewer: you too? great, so we have super-experts

Clara: I don't...

Interviewer: well, you can ask them to help you

Andrea: Sure, I am an expert on that park, because I live near and I always hang out there.

The researcher first uses the term *experts* and, while Clara takes a step back, Andrea recognises himself in this role: he emphasises that he lives nearby and he goes there regularly. The feeling of being an expert seems to be closely linked to the degree of familiarity with the space, how often it is inhabited and appropriated, becoming *places*.

From a methodological point of view, in this sequence children communicatively produce a positive horizon (to be an expert) and a negative counter-horizon. This seems to suggest that expertise can be acquired through social practices in a space and through the shaping of that space with agency.

Re-reading the short sequence from the perspective of Childhood Studies, the social practice of recognition comes into focus, as the children are addressed by the interviewer as experts. It can therefore be asked to what extent this impulse from the (adult) researcher has prompted (the child) Andrea to accept this role attribution and fill it with meaning by explaining why he feels like an expert about the place. On the other hand, this indicates that being addressed as an expert is an unexpected impulse that breaks through typical role expectations between children and adults. From this perspective, Andrea's argumentative search for an explanation can be understood as a validating such role.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, *spaces* are understood as *cultural places* and stages for heritage enactment (Smith, 2006). Exploring everyday places with children brings them closer to identifying both official and unofficial heritage. Drawing from everyday life, from close and concrete experiences, helps us to accompany children in understanding heritage, to encourage their participation, to raise their awareness of being actors and thus to stimulate the possibility of engaging in active citizenship.

In this respect, the Childhood Studies perspective, as well as Children's Geography, by considering children as social agents, invite researchers to develop strategies that not only support children in expressing their views, but also help them to create these themselves in group interview situations. This requires a high degree of sensitivity to role attributions and related behavioural expectations, e.g. not to judge or/and not to feel judged (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012, p. 131).

Finally, the active involvement of children in heritage education requires a constant questioning of heritage representations. In this regard, the adoption of an understanding of heritage as a cultural and social process emphasises its dynamic character – rather than a static one, i.e. heritage as a stasis of cultural values and meanings – and as a tool to promote cultural change (Smith, 2006, p. 4). The active participation of children in safeguarding heritage could therefore be enhanced by the further development of an interdisciplinary line of research that fruitfully integrates Childhood Studies, Heritage Education and Educational research.

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# **SOCIAL INVESTMENT STRATEGIES IN EDUCATION. AN INVESTIGATION OF ITALIAN CASE STUDIES**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the implementation of the new paradigm of social investments has redefined the relationship between the economic and social spheres and designed new ways of addressing collective problems. In this context, tasks that traditionally fell under the competences and responsibilities of the State are now shared with private organizations.

Contemporary privatization is part of a broad redesign of the public sector, involving private companies, non-profit organizations, voluntary organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social enterprises. In this scenario, reflections on the transformation of the welfare state intersect with a narrative of governance that identifies a change favored by growing neoliberal pressures. Furthermore, the social fabric, transformed as the old solidarities of class, community, family and nation have deteriorated, has produced new risks and collective needs (Giddens, 1991) imposing the neoliberal imperative to “govern through freedom” and to self-manage in different areas of daily life (Ong, 2007), such as education. The analysis of social investment strategies in the Italian education system implemented by new philanthropic organizations reveals a chaotic scenario, whose dynamics are the result of the clash between old and new political discourses that have become part of the educational debate (Grimaldi and Serpieri, 2010).

As in other European countries, in Italy the welfare state is subjected to intense pressures, connected to rapid changes in social needs, defined as “new risks”: job insecurity, obsolescence of human capital, social exclusion, difficulty in reconciling work and family responsibilities, etc. (Ferrera & Maino, 2011). With the economic recession, European welfare systems are facing an almost unprecedented reorganization effort. However, in Italy, the measures to combat poverty, before the pandemic with the Citizenship Income and then in the midst

of the health crisis with the Emergency Income, have made it possible to reduce the consequences of otherwise devastating social impacts (Ciarini & Mariano, 2020).

In recent years, Italy has also been characterized by the structuring of a significant synergy between new private actors and innovative forms of collaboration and coordination (Agostini, 2017) in the implementation of social policies. Much of the networking activity of Italian new philanthropy organizations occurs through personal relationships, in which social, corporate and political networks are intertwined. These entities address public policy problems in innovative ways, providing not only financial means, but also skills, characterizing philanthropic and civic commitments as a form of moral capital. New philanthropy organizations therefore represent “cultural heroes” (Ball & Junemann, 2012, p. 91), becoming bearers of values, methods, discourses and social commitment.

The research on which the paper is based analyzed some philanthropic organizations and their connections within Italian educational networks thanks to the information provided by their members in semi-structured interviews. The popularity of the concept of “network” is an appropriate methodological response to the change in governance and in the forms of the State. That is, the network as a tool for both research and policy representation allows for modeling research methods in relation to the shift from government to governance models (Rhodes, 1995; Ball & Youdell, 2008; Cone & Brøgger, 2020), or what is sometimes called “network governance.” This shift involves a shift away from administrative, bureaucratic, and hierarchical forms of state organization and the emergence of new self-regulatory and horizontal governance spaces called “heterarchies.”

The analysis of philanthropic networks also responds to the need for “new methods and concepts and new research sensibilities” (Ball, 2012a, p. 4) to understand “new actors, organizations, forms of participation, and relationships” engaged in shaping Italian educational policies and, more generally, in the “global expansion of neoliberal ideas” (p. 2). The “network analysis” adopted in this research is therefore appropriate both as a method for exploring educational governance and as a representation of the actual social relations and sites of activity within which government work is carried out (Ball & Thawer, 2019).

## **NEW PHILANTHROPY IN ITALY AND NEOLIBERAL REFORMS OF EDUCATION**

In Italy, the consolidation of public budgets in recent years has significantly reduced the space for investments in social services, resulting in an ever-growing gap between the provision of infrastructure and collective needs. In the context of the economic crisis, Italian foundations are increasingly promoting experimental interventions to combat poverty: in most cases, these measures are not limited to income support or the provision of material goods, but are oriented towards promoting autonomy and activating the beneficiaries of the disbursements (Agostini & Cibinel, 2017).

In particular, banking foundations have the skills, organizational structures and financial resources needed to integrate the welfare measures guaranteed by a public sector that is increasingly inadequate in responding coherently to new risks and emerging needs of society. These entities are, therefore, able to guarantee disbursements for the development of territories, offering support to non-profit organizations and public institutions in the promotion of initiatives of public utility (Bandera, 2013).

In this scenario, partnerships involving banking foundations, public, private and non-profit entities have given rise to innovative experiences to address emerging challenges at local and, in some cases, national level. Banking foundations, with the aim of connecting organizations that would not collaborate independently, see their ability to network as the lever to support social innovation, understood as actions capable of tracing new paths to address social problems (Agostini & Cibinel, 2017).

### **New philanthropic organizations**

In Italy, the new philanthropic sector is made up of a heterogeneous panorama of actors with specific characteristics, history and methods of intervention. The main actors within this panorama are the grant-making foundations, which contribute to collective well-being through the allocation of contributions (grants, scholarships, subsidies, etc.). The territorial distribution of these organizations sees a greater presence in central and northern Italy. This localization, however, does not reflect the distribution of social needs, which are distributed across the national territory in a more heterogeneous way (Italia non profit, 2021).

As stated in the Italia non profit report (2021) entitled “The state of philanthropy in Italy”, the total amount of donations in 2021 was equal to 8 billion euros. The report also highlights how the logic of collaboration between new philanthropic

organizations and beneficiaries of the donation has changed, translating the flow of donations into a concrete exchange. The new philanthropic exchange is therefore configured as a model in which organizations express network and philanthropic relationships. In this context, the dichotomy between supply and demand is overcome by a network logic, where all actors are connected to each other by co-design dynamics, shared understanding of needs and definition of actions based on common values. Non-profit organizations become partners of the public administration in the management of public resources, making the public space occupied not only by individuals but by a composite community of actors.

The development of an alternative economy with social impact is acquiring an increasingly central role in the Italian political agenda. In this redesign of the financing infrastructure for philanthropic organizations, it is necessary to consider specific tools (Chiodo & Gerli, 2017). Impact investing represents, in fact, a new approach to investment activity, which involves investments in economically sustainable companies, entities and financial instruments, capable of responding to social challenges and at the same time remunerating the invested capital. This is a new approach to investment, which can be achieved with different instruments, such as equity and investments in real assets (Fondazione Cariplo, 2022).

### **The neoliberal reforms of the Italian school**

From the point of view of social investment in education, the Italian welfare system has been characterized in recent years by cuts in public spending due to multiple causes linked to governance designs and choices, not always consistent, followed by the various governments (Ciarini & Giancola, 2016).

In the Italian education system, the State still exercises a pervasive influence on local authorities and schools through the control of human and financial resources and the use of its regulatory powers through the definition of standards and the provision of incentives. A weak school autonomy coexists with the permanence of centralized control, exercised through the introduction in the public sector of contractual logics and “performance management systems” (Hall et al., 2015).

Since the Second World War, the Italian education system has been based on the choice of bureaucracy as the main vehicle for rationalization. In this context, the State has been the main provider of mass public education, although some residual spaces have been left to private schools, in particular to Catholic schools (Grimaldi and Serpieri, 2013). Only at the end of the 1990s did political

stability, the growing crisis of welfare structures and the pressures exerted by the European political agenda on education create the conditions for a reform of the Italian school system. The reform process has gradually evolved following some characteristics such as localism and emphasis on partnerships and the role of local authorities in the governance of education (Grimaldi and Serpieri, 2010).

Since the end of the 1990s, the Italian education system has undergone a restructuring process. The milestones of this process were the introduction of school autonomy and decentralization in 1997 and the controversial establishment of a national evaluation system covering schools, staff and students. In this context, the dominance of the central bureaucracy has been accompanied by increasing forms of control and governance of education, such as “managerialism” and “social partnership”. However, “all these trajectories are today still ambiguous in their outcomes and characterized by tensions and paradoxes, originating from the clashes of neoliberal and neo-managerialist discourses and their technologies with welfarist legacies.” (Barzanò & Grimaldi, 2014, p. 26).

The strengthening of the regulatory framework has, therefore, placed the Italian school in a complex governance terrain: between the “evaluating State” (which directs policies, moves resources and governs recruitment and evaluation), the pressures of the “quasi-market” (with the entry into the decision-making arena of subjects with new roles such as users, families and other schools), and the horizontal push produced by competing schools, local associations and the local institutional system (Ciarini & Giancola, 2016).

Starting from Law No. 59 of 1997, the center-left government has shaped the educational system in three years of intense legislative activity. This has opened up new spaces of autonomy for schools. First of all, schools have acquired the right to outline the annual training offer plan, within which to plan school projects, define local curricular priorities and outline at least in part their internal organization. Secondly, schools have been strongly encouraged to build partnerships with other public and private actors, in order to pursue their educational mission. In this scenario, partnerships have been explicitly identified as a potential channel through which to obtain extra public or private resources and enrich the educational offer (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2010).

### **The role of new philanthropic organizations in the Italian education system**

“Private sector participation in public education delivery is growing internationally” (Ball & Youdell, 2008, p. 25), reflecting the ongoing formation of

heterarchies involving philanthropists, corporations, charities, banks, politicians, civil servants, national and international institutional agencies, experts, consultants, universities, academics and professional unions. In Italy, since 2008, these new “political entrepreneurs” have acquired an increasing centrality in the educational decision-making process (Barzanò and Grimaldi, 2013).

Therefore, the public space has expanded to include new philanthropic organizations, which have assumed a central role in educational decision-making. Today, in the Italian governance of education, philanthropic actors play the role of new political entrepreneurs, embodying a new set of knowledge, strategic skills and interests, acting as “networkers”, negotiators, disseminators and bearers of discourses drawn from the regimes of practices of the private sector. Private actors also employ apparently equitable discourses, such as quality, improvement, meritocracy and effectiveness, to legitimise their involvement in educational policy (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2013).

## CASE STUDIES

In order to analyze the composition of social investment strategies in the Italian education system, the research developed a methodological design that would allow us to follow the different actors that populate these strategies. Several employees of new philanthropy organizations were involved in the research: board members, presidents of organizations, heads of departments and staff. The interviews were scheduled after having identified an organization as “central” in terms of nodal density (visual interconnection of actors) within new philanthropy networks focused on education, starting from online searches and the construction of network graphs that accompanied the different phases of the study. Referring to the information available on websites, the following types of new philanthropic organizations were distinguished: foundations, associations, social enterprises, NGOs, social cooperatives, volunteer organizations, networks, and think tanks. A total of 21 people were interviewed, coming from different types of organizations, as listed in the following table.

Table 1. Interviews: list of organization types

Interviews	Typologies of organizations
1	University
5	Association

6	Foundation
1	Network
2	NGO
2	Social cooperative
1	Social enterprise
2	Think tank
1	Voluntary organization

The data analysis process produced several maps of social investment networks, each with its own characteristics, analyzed according to three topological dimensions, introduced in the table below.

Table 2. Topological dimensions of visual analysis

Dimensions	Characteristics	Visual representation
Centers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authorities of the networks having most of the connections and consequently being highly visible</li> <li>• Hub-actors around specific projects</li> <li>• Actors guaranteeing the interconnection of the network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly connecting actors occupying the centers of the network</li> <li>• Organizations surrounded by more or less interconnected actors</li> </ul>
Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nodes connecting different networks</li> <li>• Organizations which are not the most prevalent in the network</li> <li>• Actors gathering different types of activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nodes gathering actors together</li> <li>• Actors associating different “minor” clusters</li> </ul>
Margins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actors coming to stand more on their own</li> <li>• Nodes not linking actors together</li> <li>• Organizations defined by a geographic or thematic diversity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizations positioned at the margins of the graphs</li> <li>• Actors located in small isolated clusters</li> </ul>

### **Central nodes**

The educational policy networks identified in the study can be theorized as networks of organizations composed of central nodes and boundary actors. These networks are built on partnerships between organizations and are able to generate relationships between philanthropists, public authorities and businesses through funding calls, consultations, hearings, participation in working groups, etc.

Central nodes need to be seen in their socio-political context, as they are able to help “smaller” organizations overcome obstacles in obtaining funding for their initiatives, for example by supporting grant applications to the European Commission. Within the educational policy networks analyzed, central nodes were often found to generate the greatest amount of social investments through seeking partnerships, participating in virtuous initiatives, supporting projects and implementing fundraising activities.

### **Boundary Actors**

Some new philanthropic organizations within the educational policy networks examined are central to social investment processes, as they are actors that pursue their business based on specific philanthropic relationships and goals. They operate by creating bridges between different philanthropic organizations and peripheral areas of the networks, providing financial resources. The empirical analysis suggests that most new philanthropic organizations operate as boundary actors and that boundary actors are needed at different groups and levels of a network, due to their power to connect organizations and to allow smaller nodes to access funding and the policy context.

From the data collected, a variety of boundary actors emerge with different roles such as accumulators of social capital, “changemakers”, participants in an interconnected corporate elite. Therefore, these actors are found at different levels of educational social investment networks and come from different social spheres.

## **TOPOLOGICAL VISUALIZATION OF NEW PHILANTHROPIC NETWORKS**

Network ethnography, used as an analysis methodology in this study, is based on “comprehensive” interviews with members of new philanthropy organizations. This approach is based on the belief that interviewees are active producers of the social. Therefore, in the interviews the grid of questions constituted a flexible representation and a guide for the interviewer, which was



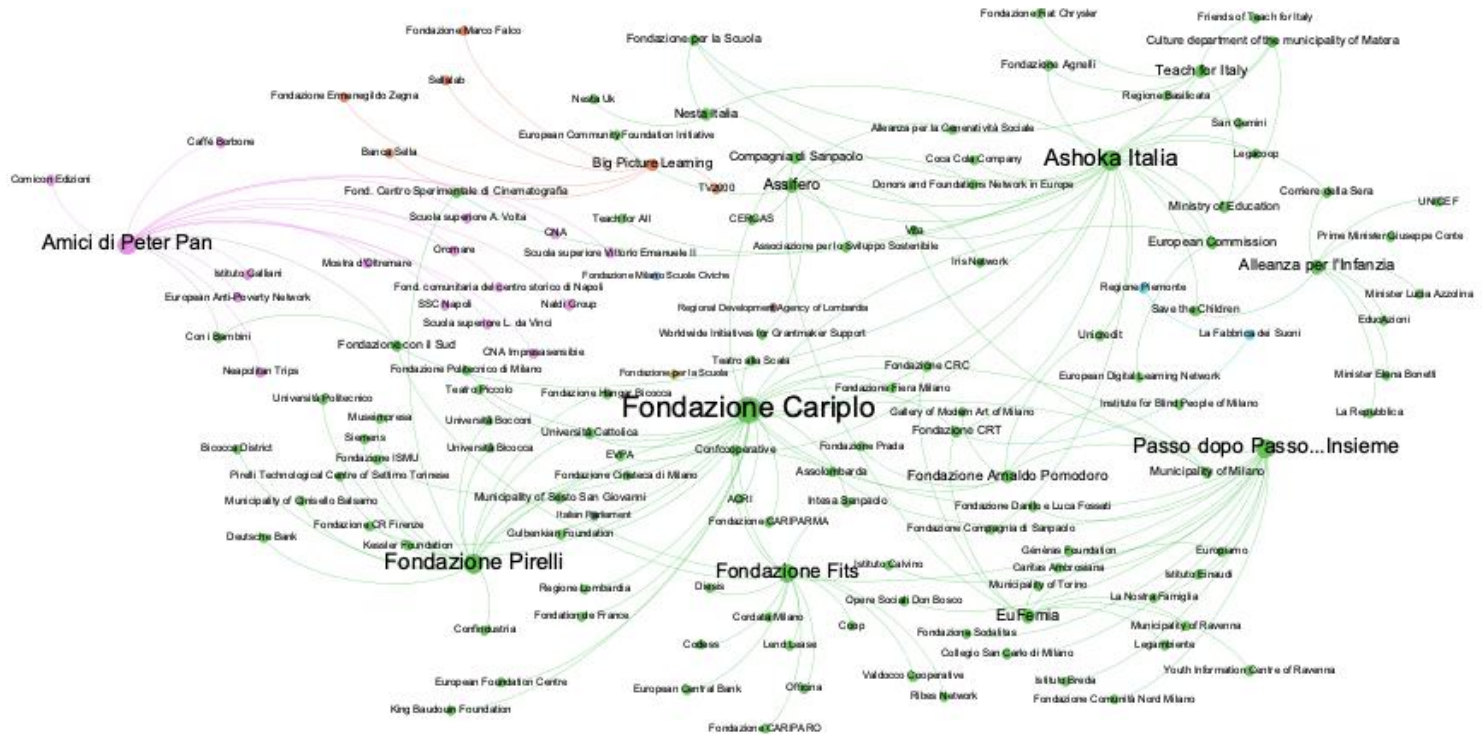
used to get people talking about an issue and obtain a richer conversational dynamic than simply answering questions. The grid of questions was also structured in such a way as to produce a positive feeling in the interviewee (de Singly, 1992), who can be more or less “involved” in the interview depending on the level of trust towards the interviewer.

The interviews were developed in order to arrive at network visualizations. The visualization phase began with the analysis of each interview transcript to identify the different relationships between the actors of new philanthropy focused on education. Then, the resulting networks were visualized through the graph manipulation software Gephi. Each graph displayed in the study is composed of nodes that connect the actors and lines that visualize the interactions between these actors. The shape of the different graphs was obtained with a “force”-based algorithm, called Force Atlas, capable of building a network based on the attraction between connected nodes and the repulsion of non-connected nodes. Furthermore, as argued by Severo and Venturini (2015), once the algorithm is launched, it modifies the arrangement of the nodes until it reaches the best balance of forces. This balance ensures that if two nodes are close in the specific graph, they are directly or indirectly connected to the same set of nodes.

The research focuses on the visual aspects of the graphs, manipulating two parameters: the size of the nodes, calculated as the number of links with other nodes, was used to classify the various actors based on their visibility in the network (the size of each node is proportional to the number of connections with other nodes); the color of the nodes was used to represent their category.

The analysis identified a network of 140 nodes and a total of 154 connections. In the network, organizations that are connected to each other are represented with the same color. The network shows a density (the number of connections of each organization with the others) of 2,216: the central cluster is composed of foundations (Fondazione Cariplo, Fondazione Pirelli, Fondazione Fits) and is surrounded by isolated actors, such as Alleanza per l’infanzia (think tank) and Big Picture Learning (social cooperative). It is also possible to identify some more or less interconnected groups, for example those involving the NGOs Ashoka Italia and Teach for Italy, connected through the Fondazione Agnelli (corporate foundation) at the top right of the graph, the association Amici di Peter Pan and the social enterprise Con i Bambini on the left in the image, and Eufemia (association), Fondazione Cariplo, Nesta Italia (foundation) and Ashoka Italia connected through the Compagnia di Sanpaolo (foundation of the Intesa Sanpaolo bank) at the top center.

Figure 1. Italian network of social investments in education



Furthermore, the relationship between the connected actors is generally mediated by banking foundations, such as Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Torino, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Cuneo, UniCredit Foundation and Compagnia di Sanpaolo. These foundations are able to connect different philanthropic organizations: Fondazione Cariplo, Fondazione Pirelli, Fondazione Fits, Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, Nesta Italia, Eufemia, La Fabbrica dei Suoni (social cooperative), Passo dopo Passo...Insieme (voluntary organization), Amici di Peter Pan (association), Ashoka Italia and Teach for Italy.

## **THE ROLE OF NEW PHILANTHROPY IN SOCIAL INVESTMENT STRATEGIES IN EDUCATION**

One way to delve into the complexity of social investment networks may be to focus on the role of nodal actors, consisting of organizations that appear in a variety of roles, moving across different sectors through their engagement in multiple positions, spanning the private, public and voluntary sectors.

Much of the networking activity of boundary actors is “invisible,” in the sense that it materializes through personal relationships, in which social, corporate and political networks intertwine. Boundary actors innovatively address public policy problems, providing not only financial means but also expertise, legitimacy and authority, making philanthropic and civic engagement a form of moral capital.

One among the interviewees could serve as example of this engagement. As mentioned by the employee of the social enterprise Con i Bambini:

We are fully owned by Fondazione con il Sud. But we are the implementing body of the Fund for the contrast of educational poverty of minors. This fund was established by ACRI, which groups together all foundations and savings banks in Italy, and by the government. We have no partners. We are a private entity that manages a fund that is made up half of public money and half of private funds. (Interview, Con i Bambini, 2021).

The social enterprise Con i Bambini crosses different bridge interests, blurring between various fields and converging in their practices. It also accumulates a significant volume of *social capital*, as explained by the respondent:

We mainly address third sector entities, but these entities cannot present themselves on their own. They must create a broad, heterogeneous, complementary, meaningful partnership, also made up of schools, institutions, local authorities, municipalities, parishes, profit organizations, trade

associations. We try to support projects that are carried out by very significant networks.

Hence, much of the networking activity of boundary spanners is “invisible”, meaning that it occurs through personal relationships, where social, business and political networks intertwine. Boundary actors will to address in innovative ways public policy problems, by providing not just financial means but also skills, legitimacy and authority, that make philanthropic and civic engagements a form of moral capital. They become contemporary “heroes”, carrying with them values, methods, discourses and commitment (Ball & Junemann, 2012, p. 91). Among the interviewees, the employee of Nesta Italia serves as an example:

Nesta Italia, as Nesta UK, deals with the expertise in the support of social innovation. And the areas we work on in Italy are basically health, ageing of the population, education, inclusion, emerging technologies, art and culture. In each one of these fields, we use the methods that are the most appropriate to solve the problems that we identify in the different contexts. (Interview, Nesta Italia, 2019).

In addition, as stated by the respondent of Ashoka Italia, this NGO aims to *change the systems* and the mindset that are behind the emergence of social problems:

These are programs, together with others that we promote, that (...) are useful to change the systems, from one side, and most of all the paradigm and mindset which are behind the emergence of social problems. This is why, a movement that says “Everyone is a changemaker” allows us to redefine the idea of success, the growth experience, a series of things like those ones. (Interview, Ashoka Italia, 2020).

The civic engagement of philanthropy towards social problems is also confirmed by the interviewee of Teach for Italy. Specifically, in the field of education, this NGO aims to ensure that:

there is an increase in the quality and level of teaching, of the profiles that choose teaching at an international level. (Interview, Teach for Italy, 2021).

New philanthropic organizations also move and operate between different but highly interrelated social fields of business, politics, philanthropy. This is confirmed by the respondent of the Nesta Italia foundation, who claims that the banking foundation Compagnia di Sanpaolo:

(...) supports the organization (...) So, we have a very good relationship with Compagnia di Sanpaolo. They facilitated Nesta's arrival in Turin and they definitely have a very important role in the foundation's activities. (...) In terms of activities, there is a lot of freedom and support. So, it's a good relationship. (Interview, Nesta Italia, 2019).

Furthermore, regarding the interconnected roles of the senior management members, the interviewee of the Fits Foundation claims:

The secretary general, in particular, has always been a social entrepreneur in life. Here, there are some collaborators who have more tools to understand whether the project actually brings something innovative or not. (Interview, Fits Foundation, 2021).

New philanthropists play multiple roles in different fields and accumulate different and significant relationships within each of them. As mentioned by the respondent of the NGO Teach for Italy:

I run the association. In essence, I created it, I founded it, I manage it. And therefore, I do medium- and long-term planning, I manage the staff who work in the organization. I deal in particular with partnerships, fundraising and institutional relations. (Interview, Teach for Italy, 2021).

Finally, the excerpts of the interviews with new philanthropic actors focused on education governance highlight the multiplicity of roles that organizations are able to play in the various social spheres of the private, corporate and public sectors.

## **FOUNDATIONAL ECONOMY: A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL INVESTMENT**

Over the past 30-40 years, the welfare state has been increasingly challenged by the reduction of public provision and the privatization of key services. At the same time, many services previously run by the state have been taken over by multinationals. As a result, in high-income countries, a network infrastructure delivers services that are called "fundamental" because they are daily necessities, consumed by the entire population and necessary for the well-being of the privileged and disadvantaged.

However, these key services need to be reoriented to deliver positive outcomes for users and to provide alternatives to state provision, especially where the state has withdrawn support or where ongoing austerity has limited the capacity of the state to act.

In this context, the “fundamental economy is about goods and services, which are necessary for as many people as possible to enjoy a decent life. Within the fundamental economy, fundamental services are universally needed and include education (Eadson et al., 2021).

Hence, the idea of having educational infrastructure to democratize education, enunciated by interviewees, fits with a broader sense of democracy that emerges through the empowerment of people. Such educational infrastructure will often need some form of external financial support to operate successfully where viable markets do not exist or to effectively shape existing markets. Supporting these structures should be a priority for funders because philanthropic activities can complement public sectors in providing accountable services, while also playing an important role in focusing on vulnerable and marginalized groups.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Although this paper explored how Italian philanthropic organizations promote social investments in education by mobilizing their resources, the most important findings concerned the democratization of education through social investments. Indeed, according to the interviews, new philanthropic organizations have engaged in education in new ways, including improving access to services, supporting students’ actions, and promoting their greater involvement in decision-making.

In addition, during the writing of the paper, it became increasingly clear that the exploration conducted refers to the fundamental questions of student participation in society and access to services. The discussion enables a new way of perceiving social investment strategies by providing a topological analysis and conceiving differently how to approach such strategies.

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# BETWEEN SPATIAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE – THE CASE OF LIFELONG LEARNING POLI- CYMAKING

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In the paper<sup>1</sup>, we focus on the spatial dichotomies of lifelong learning (LLL) policy programmes. Departing from the observation that space is both constituted and constitutive of social relations, we problematize the dynamic relation between space and education and its impact on socially inclusive and cohesive policymaking. In this regard, we understand LLL policy programmes as significant instruments for combating social inequalities and contributing to more just and democratic societies. The main research question is to understand the relationship between space and education and its impact on LLL policymaking at various governance levels. The paper is structured as follows: *First*, we frame our understanding of spaces and spatiality and embed the concept of spatial justice in education. *Second*, we present the results of a short analytical exercise on the relation between education and spaces developed in form of so-called spatial dichotomies. *Third*, we contextualise our results within various levels of LLL policymaking and offer concluding remarks on how LLL can be further theorized. Our paper explores the dynamics between various levels of policymaking and their implications for European and global education governance.

space; spatial justice; education; spatial dichotomies; lifelong learning policymaking

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<sup>1</sup> This is a shortened and adjusted version of a chapter titled *The Dynamics of Education and Space: Examining the spatial dichotomies of Lifelong Learning Policies* and submitted for the *Handbook on Geographies of Education* (forthcoming), edited by Yi'En Cheng, Peter Kraftl, Sarah Holloway & Silvie Rita Kučerová. Edward Elgar.

## INTRODUCTION

The relation between space and education has long been neglected in research. Both education research and geography have enriched each other's discipline, yet only very recently, especially since the so-called *spatial turn* (Lefebvre, 1974) in the social sciences and humanities, has education research started integrating knowledge on spaces, places, and landscapes and their impact on and interaction with learning (Freytag et al., 2022; McLeod et al., 2023). It perceives the surrounding world no longer as a mere scenery behind which social processes take place (a container of social life), but rather as a co-producer of the social life itself. In breaking down the linkage between education and geography, our focus is turned to spaces and their role in shaping the educational opportunity structures and learning pathways of young people.

From the life course perspective, the impact of space on educational pathways tends to be stronger when the duration of individual's exposure is longer (Levy, 2022). We argue that the concept of space offers a vital starting ground for a more context-sensitive and holistic approach to education, in particular in understanding lifelong learning (LLL) environments. In the context of European policymaking, LLL has emerged as a policy option to secure social cohesion and support young people in their life courses, especially after the devastating impacts of economic or social crises, like the 2008 financial crisis (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2019). Although there are indications of discrepancies between the design and the impact of LLL policies related to the effects of spaces on education (cf. Parreira do Amaral et al., 2019), these interactions remain largely unexplored, which is why we have turned our focus to the dynamic nature of relations between space and education. Against this background, we seek to examine the relation between space and education and its impact on LLL policymaking at various governance levels.

The paper is structured as follows: *First*, we frame our understanding of spaces and spatiality and embed the concept of spatial justice in education. *Second*, we explore the broader relation between space and education and develop so-called *spatial dichotomies*. *Third*, we illustrate and discuss chosen aspects of spatial dichotomies using the example of LLL policymaking. *Fourth*, we round the paper with a short conclusion.

### 1. CONCEPTUALIZING THE KEY TERMS

In this section, we briefly conceptualise our core terms – space, spatiality, Spatial Justice – before exploring the relation between space and education in

the next section.

The concept of space has been elaborated in various disciplines, most prominently in critical geography and urban studies. We borrow our understanding of space from the British geographer Doreen Massey (2005 and define space as interactive, heterogeneous, and open-ended construct of social and physical worlds, which can be modified, re-defined, contested and re-arranged in multiple, even, yet unknown ways. According to Massey's propositions, space cannot be reduced to its physical manifestation, which underlies only the laws of physics. Spaces are not mere containers of the social life, but actively influence social agents and shape their choices, possibilities, and actions.

Furthermore, spaces exercise power and are effects of power relations (Soja, 2010). This *spatiality* of places, including educational sites, demands a closer look at how spaces interact with the actions of social agents. At the *individual level*, spaces are attributed with various meanings and convey a sense of belonging, e.g., home, fatherland, the foreign. At the *social and policy level*, spaces are shaped and co-created by a vast variety of factors that decide upon the distribution of rights, resources, and opportunities, but also burdens and limitations. The role of policymaking is to assure that all citizens within a given territory or region are given the same opportunities, irrespectively of their spatial or other origin. And it is the spatially unjust distribution of rights and opportunities that has spurred the debates over spatial justice.

The concept of *Spatial Justice* is a relatively new, yet very promising theoretical perspective in the study of social change. The concept enables scrutinizing the spatial dimension of social inequalities and problematize the (un-)fair distribution of opportunities, rights and public goods. It articulates how structural forms and modes of inequality, segregation, marginalisation, and spatially based discrimination operate, create, and sustain social divisions. While focusing primarily on cities and urban/rural cleavages, the range of the concept is wider and includes diverse sites and constellations (core-periphery, lagging-thriving regions, remote-central locations) that affect life courses and educational pathways of young people.

After providing a short conceptual framing of our core terms, in the next section, we focus on the underlying relation of space and education and present a set of spatial dichotomies helpful in analysing the design and impact of LLL policies.

## 2. EXPLORING THE RELATION BETWEEN SPACE AND EDUCATION

In this section, we explore, in a broader sense, a set of dichotomies characterising the interplay between education and space.<sup>2</sup> We depart from the assumption that the nature of space is ambivalent. Spaces do not have positive or negative characteristics or impact on individual or collective actions. Instead, we consider them as constructs and construals at the same time, as determining the quality of social relations, but also as dependent on the actions of social agents. Given this dualism and the ambivalence of space, we have derived several dichotomies using selected parameters that shift our attention from one subject to another.

From the viewpoint of *power*, spaces can play an important role in empowering individual and collective subjects. Regional learning environments can foster creativity, self-realization, and ownership, but they can also work as constrains of individual or collective actions, restrict or block the access to educational offers and curtail the academic achievement. Similarly, the quality of *local/regional structures* affects the possibilities in access to education and transition from education to the labour market. Learning experiences are further part and parcel of individual and collective *meaning-making processes*, which are affected by spatially inscribed narratives and discourses and in which the actors decide about the meaning of learning and education. With regard to the *sense of security*, the spatiality of places may evoke or foster vulnerabilities. We need to be conscious about the difference between *vulnerability* as an experience of being threatened or injured and *vulnerantility* as the precondition for the possibility to get injured (Burghardt et al., 2017, p. 12). Given the latter aspect, educational sites can create vulnerant conditions for learning, such as noisy and dirty environment, the presence of heavy traffic or polluting industries, criminality, and violence, all of which produce/enhance the risk of threats. The *sense of belonging* tells us how spaces are related to the self-understanding and future imagination of individuals and collectives. Another key aspect is the perception and *sense of time*. With this category, we encompass the subject's perception of their past, present, and future. Learners, in particular, often encounter and experience various temporal structures during their educational pathways, which coincide with institutionalised time frames of social and cultural expectations of policymakers. Finally, one last parameter that we chose for the exploration of space-education interplay is *development*. By this parameter we simply mean the ability and plasticity of space to change and

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<sup>2</sup> The full list of spatial dichotomies is part of the original version of this paper.

adapt to ongoing circumstances, which enable different kinds of innovation and progress, allow successfully attracting investments, and have diverse opportunities to transfer their knowledge.

In this section, we have provided a brief analytical exercise to show how the dynamics of space and education can be conceptualized and assessed. In the next section, we illustrate the spatiality of educational landscapes by applying the analysis of spatial dichotomies to the LLL policymaking.

### **3. SPATIALITY OF LLL LANDSCAPES**

In contrast to more traditional approaches to policy analysis in the field of LLL, which are biased towards researching employability, academic credentials, and measurable outcomes of learning, we aim to highlight the significance of the dynamic, ambivalent and processual nature of LLL, as well as the multiplicity of and interplay between physical, structural, and socio-cultural dimensions of spaces (from international to regional/local levels) and diverse power actors involved in the policymaking process. Such multidimensional view enables us to approach LLL policymaking more holistically and with stronger context-sensitive focus and avoid reducing LLL to its instrumental understanding.

One example is the *sense of security*. The geographical feature of a space has a great impact on the mobility of individual subjects, its time-consumption, and financial costs. The reflection of spatial factors in LLL policy design can help avoid unnecessary labelling and stigmatisation of certain groups of population, which are more prone to vulnerable experiences (members of ethnic or religious minorities, women, disabled persons etc.), yet which might be seen as unwilling to cooperate due to their presumed *immobility*.

With respect to *local/regional structures* and their opening and closing possibilities, urban agglomerations serve as a great example. Cities are portrayed as main spaces of productivity, innovation and growth, where employability is honoured and valued as the main currency. Subsequently, many LLL policies (most notably the Youth Guarantee), profile its recipients on the basis of the operationalisation of their physical *distance* to the labour market. In urban and sub-urban sites, the flexibility to reach out to the centre and the main working and learning districts is the key to success. Since LLL policies are mainly targeted to young adults in diverse conditions of vulnerability, most of them move from deprived outskirts, where they have often amassed negative experiences of relation with the local representatives of institutions and can usually rely on limited amounts of economic, cultural, and

social capital.

In addition, young people, especially those in disadvantaged and vulnerable positions, are further confronted with *making sense* of their educational pathways, often marked with multiple breaks, dropouts, detours, and setbacks, also affected by spatially distributed educational and labour market opportunities. According to variable intersections of disadvantages affecting the youth, the journey into the LLL pathways might further discriminate those who are sufficiently equipped to support and make sense of their movement toward the centre, finding in the LLL policies opportunities for integration, from those who struggle to recognise their own goal, risk *getting lost* in a loop of movement with no clear (and often neither aspired) direction.

Embedded in structural *power* relations, the inequalities faced by young people involved in LLL programmes are not only a matter of low individual resources, as they also deal with a more general trend toward the (also physical: housing, community centres) *peripheralization* (Naumann & Fischer-Tahir, 2013) of youths in Europe and elsewhere. The research on the processes of policymaking has highlighted that the engagement of youths' organisations and voices is very weak, and often totally absent, even when the policies are explicitly designed to target them risking turning social problems into individual ones (Parreira do Amaral & Zelinka, 2019).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In our paper, we have argued that LLL policymaking needs a more profound understanding of how spaces affect and contribute to the dispersion of educational opportunities and challenges and how they co-create spatial and, thus, social injustice. We have further stressed the need to accept the complexity of relations between space and education. What the analyses and their application has demonstrated is the fact that the ambivalent, processual, and constructive nature of spaces is seldom reflected in LLL policymaking and research. The dichotomies elaborated from the dynamics of space and education offer a different perspective on how LLL—as an educational pathway and as a policy tool—can be designed, understood, and implemented on various governance levels. If we assume that LLL pathways are socially and spatially constructed landscapes, their exploration must also consider how different actors experience their crossings and trajectories and how the relations build while passing through these experiences.

Furthermore, there is no universal definition for when spatial injustice has been

done since every case is a dynamic and open-ended process. Some spaces can temporarily worsen the social situation and access to quality education, yet they are not to be blamed as the sole causes of inequality and injustice. Instead, it is necessary to acknowledge the power imbalances resulting from the uneven distribution of resources, rights, and opportunities, which are to be balanced by context and spatially sensitive policymaking.

Finally, the aim to strengthen the subjective capacity and agency of young people needs to overcome their mainstream monolithic representation as passive recipients, if they are to be empowered to build their life courses in the existing environments. This understanding is in some cases, albeit unnoticeably, reinforced by the spatial representation of young people (villagers, hinterlanders, street-children, etc.), which affects not only their self-perception and educational aspirations, but flattens them out as ‘*difficult*’, ‘*risk*’, or ‘*wicked*’ youth, thus leading to stigmatisation and ill-informed policymaking.

### **Acknowledgements**

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# GENERATIONS, EDUCATION AND COMMON VALUES: A STUDY ON FIVE ITALIAN COHORT-GENERATIONS, FROM THE RECONSTRUCTION TO GEN Z

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This study investigates the changing values across generations and the emerging configurations of values among them, with a focus on the role of education. The literature reveals a gap in the debate regarding value changes between generations (Lyons et al., 2005; 2007). To address this gap, S. H. Schwartz's theory of Basic Human Values was employed, along with data from the European Social Survey (2016-2020), extracting the Italian sample. The objective is to assess whether values serve as a useful criterion for distinguishing generations, especially those closer in time, and to contribute to filling the existing gaps. This could prove valuable for studying the behaviour, beliefs, and relationships between older and newer generations, as well as for understanding the specificities of these generations within a comparative framework.

Generations, Basic Human Values, Education

## GENERATIONS AND VALUES

In social interactions, it is crucial to examine the relationships that emerge between social groups of different ages. When these groups are united by a shared bond and perceive common experiences (i.e., a shared historical-social context), they can be identified as generations (Mannheim, 1952). Understanding generations, their cohesion, and their worldview offers a valuable framework for interpreting social reality. However, given the accelerated pace of social change, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between generations, making it more challenging to identify clear differentiating elements (Chisholm, 2023). One potential criterion for distinguishing between generations, particularly those in close succession, lies

in fundamental human values, as posited by S.H. Schwartz's theory (1992; 2012; et al. 2012), now into the European Social Survey (ESS) database. The idea for this work arises from a review of the literature and the recognition of an existing gap regarding the issue of changing values across generations (Lyons et al. 2005; 2007). This gap is even more pronounced when considering the numerous historical events of the past 20 years, including the 2008 financial crisis, the pandemic, and various national events (Sortheix et al., 2019). This study aims to achieve three aims: establish a criterion for distinguishing generations based on values; contribute to filling the gap in the literature on generational value change; examine the role of education in shaping value transformation across generations. Education can be considered a key factor in influencing generational change (Giancola & Bonanni, 2024). The hypothesis proposed here is that values may serve as a clear criterion for distinguishing generations, and that these values are, in turn, influenced by education in different ways across generations.

## **2. METHODOLOGY, DATA AND AIMS**

Data for the Italian sample (15'639 cases) from the 2016 (wave 8) to 2020 (wave 10) editions of the European Social Survey (ESS) were used. The tool of cohort-generation was employed as a proxy for generations. The cohort for the statistical necessities, while the concept of generation for interpreting the results. The cohort-generations are the Z, born between 1996 and 2008, the Y (Millennials), born between 1980 and 1995, the X, born between 1969 and 1979, the Baby Boom, born between 1949 and 1968 and the Reconstruction, born between 1927 and 1948. The analyses consist of bi- and trivariate comparisons of means, with a mention of linear regressions. It is important to note that for Generation Z and the Reconstruction generation the results may be skewed due to the limited number of cases in the categories and for the former, due to the presence of who is already student.

## **3. BASIC HUMAN VALUES**

Here, values represent a key element that articulates conscious goals, theoretically and empirically, guiding fundamental aspects of human and social nature. A value can be understood as a belief associated with desirable outcomes or modes of conduct that transcends specific situations. It functions as a guide for the selection and evaluation of behaviors, individuals, and events, and is prioritized relative to other values, thereby forming a system of value

priorities (Schwartz, 1994). These values are operationalized into 21 variables from the ESS questionnaire that comprise 10 core values. These are further synthesized into 4 “higher-order” values: Openness to change (comprising the values of Stimulation and Self-direction), conservatorism (including the values of Tradition, Conformity, and Security—referring not to political Conservatorism but rather to a spirit or instinct of conservation), Self-enhancement (encompassing the values of Power, Achievement, and Hedonism), and Self-transcendence (composed of the values of Universalism and Benevolence). These values are in a circular continuity model and are presented as opposing pairs. However, they can yield different configurations and represent distinct elements at various levels of interpretation of human nature (Schwartz et al. 2012). To derive the four higher-order values, two sets of principal component analyses were conducted. The first addressed the 21 variables from ESS (grouped according to the theoretical framework) and the second on the 10 components extracted.

### **3.1 Values and education**

To further clarify the framework connecting education and values, it is worth noting that K. Mannheim examined the relationship between education and values in the context of the transmission of democratic ideals (Casavecchia, 2017). Additionally, in educational discourse, these elements have been analyzed concerning their ideological transmission (Giancola & Salmieri, 2024). In Basic Human Values theory, a statistical association exists between universalism and participation in higher education (Schwartz, 2007; 2012). Research in Italy shows a positive correlation between educational attainment and the values of stimulation and self-direction, as well as a negative correlation with tradition and security (Schwartz et al. 2012; Capanna et al. 2005).

## **4. ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 Distinguishing generations by values**

Initially, the means of the cohort-generations on the four higher-order values were analyzed. The results indicate a significant gap between older generations (lower levels) and younger generations (higher levels) in openness to change (1.15 mean points) and self-enhancement (0.95 mean points). In self-enhancement, there is also a considerable positive difference between Generation X and Generation Y, the two cohorts that are the most challenging to distinguish (0.27 points).

A more nuanced distinction emerges in the domain of conservatorism, where

the highest values are found among older generations, with reconstruction generation scoring 0.09 and Baby Boomers scoring 0.07 points. There is a reversal of polarity between Generation X (0.04) and Generation Y (-0.06), with all differences being statistically significant, although small ( $p < 0.00$ ).

Further insights can be drawn from examining the means of the sub-values of conservatorism (Tradition, Conformity, and Security) and self-enhancement (Power, Achievement, and Hedonism). In the case of conservatorism, the value of security is highest for Generation X (0.04), compared to preceding and subsequent generations, which score -0.04 for Generation Z, 0 for Generation Y and Reconstruction generation, and -0.01 for Baby Boomers. All other values decrease over generations ( $p < 0.05$ ).

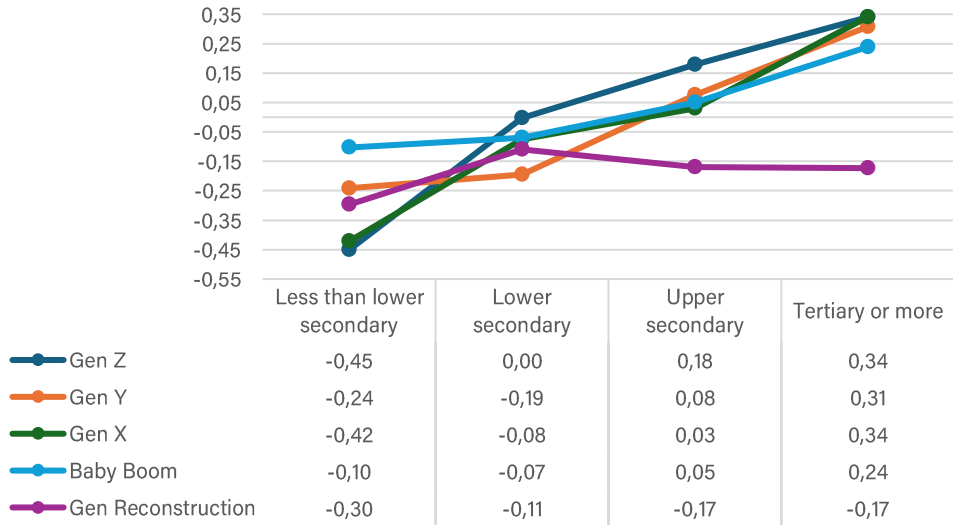
For the values of self-enhancement, the slopes of the transitions between the Economic Boom Generation and Generation X are relatively small, with mean differences of 0.12 points on Power, 0.21 points on Achievement, and 0.24 points on Hedonism. However, the slope increases significantly between Generation X and Generation Y, with mean differences of 0.17 points on Power, 0.25 points on Achievement, and 0.25 points on Hedonism. This highlights a further distinction between these close generations ( $p < 0.00$ ).

#### **4.2 Generations and education**

Introducing the level of education into the analysis, it becomes evident that all values begin with low averages and increase with higher educational attainment, except for conservatorism. Openness to change and self-enhancement exhibit more rapid growth across educational levels, showing significantly higher averages. Self-transcendence also rises, but at a slower pace ( $p < 0.00$ ).

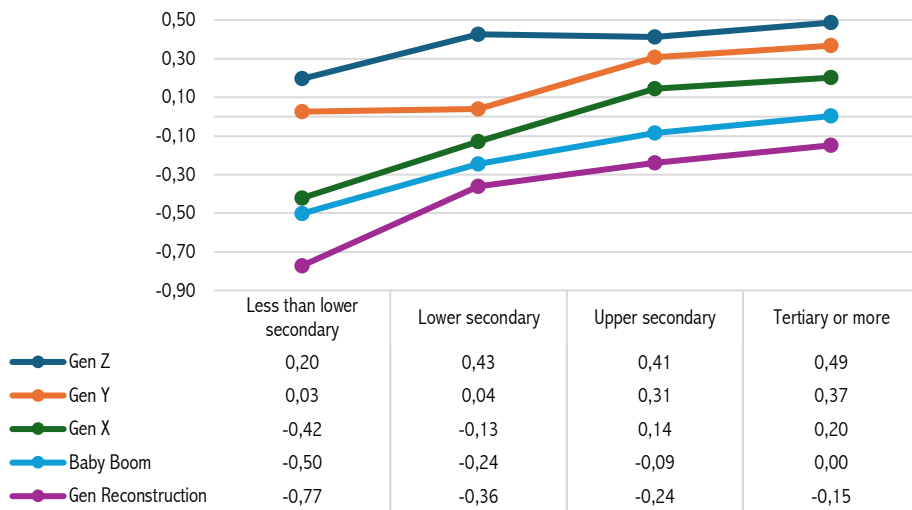
A detailed examination of the relationship between educational attainment, generation and values reveals how these differ across generations and education levels. As educational attainment increases, the level of self-transcendence generally rises across generations, with the notable exception of the Reconstruction generation. In Figure 1, younger generations display higher levels of self-transcendence. Generation X and Generation Z start with the lowest levels, while Baby Boomers begin with higher levels but exhibit the lowest average at the tertiary education level. Despite their initial positions, Generations X and Y show a similar trend and values for tertiary education, along with Generation Z, which demonstrates the highest values starting from lower secondary education ( $p < 0.00$ ).

Fig. 1. Mean on self-transcendence by educational level and cohort-generations. Source: Author elaboration.



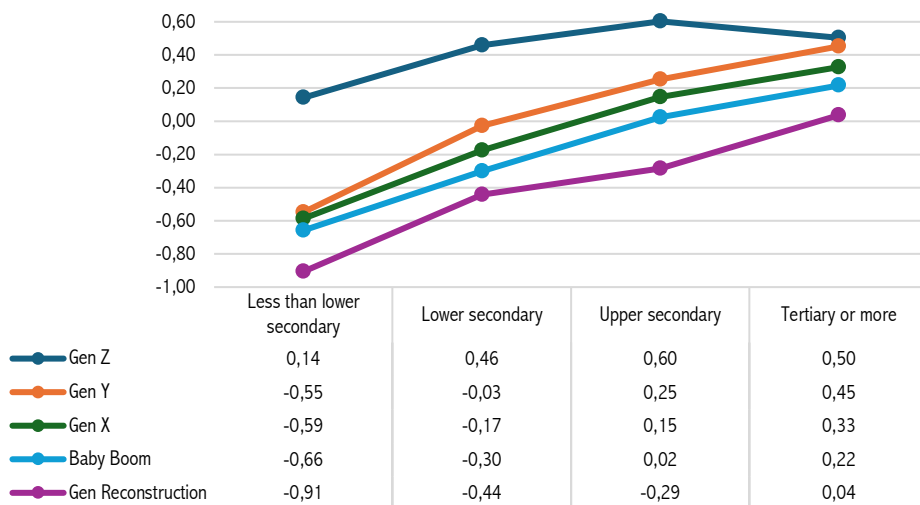
For self-enhancement (see Figure 2), the trends are more straightforward: the means increase across generations as educational attainment rises, with the trends remaining roughly parallel and displaying only minor deviations between educational levels ( $p < 0.00$ ).

Fig. 2. Mean on self-enhancement by educational level and cohort-generations. Source: Author elaboration.



The average value of openness to change rises with higher educational attainment (see Figure 3). The Reconstruction Generation exhibits the lowest value, while the Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y begin at similar levels but diverge as they attain tertiary education. In contrast, Generation Z starts with the highest overall values; however, these values decrease between upper secondary and tertiary education, potentially due to the number of cases ( $p < 0.00$ ).

Fig. 3 Mean on Openness to change by educational level and cohort-generations. Source: Author elaboration.

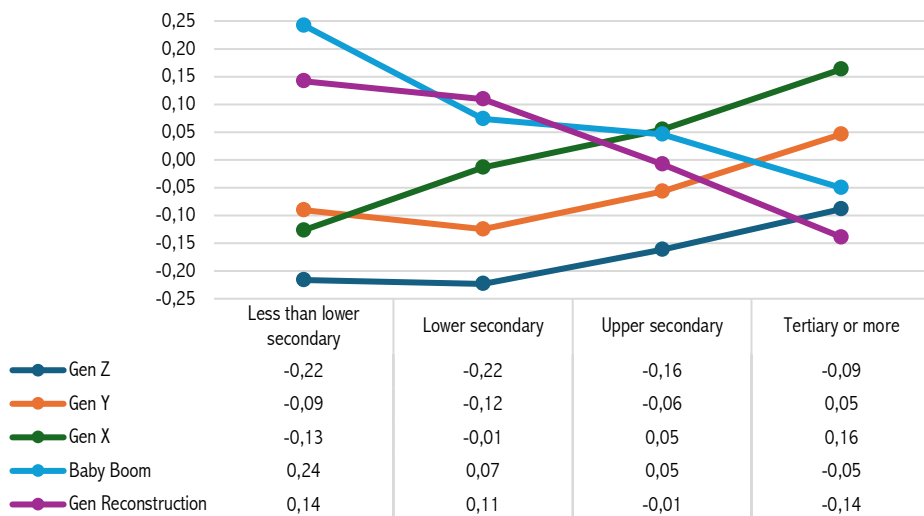


Conservatorism exhibits the most pronounced differences between generations (see Figure 4). Baby Boomers and the Reconstruction Generation show very high values at the lower secondary education level; however, they display the lowest average values at the tertiary education level and beyond.

For Generations X and Y, a notable trend emerges. They start with very low averages at the lowest educational level. Generation X's mean increases with each level of education, ultimately reaching the highest values among all generations at the tertiary level and beyond. Generation Y experiences a slight decrease at the lower secondary level, but then the average rises, making it the generation with the second-highest values, following Generation X. Generation Z also sees an increase in conservatism with higher educational attainment, although it starts from the lowest values. Despite this growth, Generation Z maintains one of the lowest overall averages (considering the sampling issues previously mentioned). The rise in conservatism among Generations X and Y

is likely linked to the living conditions shaped by the aftermath of the economic boom and the 2008 financial crisis, as these generations have experienced worse conditions than their parents or were born during a period of crisis and increasing welfare cuts ( $p < 0.00$ ).

Fig. 4 Mean on Openness to change by educational level and cohort-generations. Source: Author elaboration



This result may partially explain the resurgence of conservative political discourses. However, when considered alongside other values, the interpretation becomes more nuanced: the increase in openness to change over time and across educational levels may account for younger generations' growing sensitivity toward social rights, particularly when combined with self-transcendence. Additionally, the rise in self-enhancement reflects the logic of prevailing economic paradigm and the adaptation of new generations to it. The combined effect of these values suggests that there is likely no straightforward shift from materialist to post-materialist values (Inglehart, 2018) and a resurgence of the first (Norris, Inglehart, 2018) but maybe we are encountering new configurations or reconfigurations of values.

To estimate the impact of educational qualifications on values, four linear regression models were tested — one for each value, divided by generation, resulting in 20 linear submodels. Gender was included as a control variable. However, neither gender nor educational level consistently demonstrated significance across generations or values. Beyond this, the only clear

conclusion is that education does not play a fundamental role for every value; for example, it influences openness to change but not conservatism, with variable effects across generations. In summary, the roles of these two variables are not generalizable across generations or values. These relationships warrant further investigation, accounting for both age and cohort effects.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

We observed that generations at different ages exhibit distinct averages and configurations of values. This differentiation is particularly effective for distinguishing between generations that are closer in time, especially when considered alongside educational attainment. The element of values serves as an effective means of differentiating between generations, highlighting key differences and fulfilling one of the study's objectives.

Differences within and between generations based on educational attainment reveal additional significant distinctions in values, particularly concerning the trend of conservatism. The analyses presented primarily operate at a descriptive level. Although they remain at the trivariate level and the linear models did not yield particularly successful results, they partly confirm the hypotheses and provide an interpretation of reality that seeks to transcend a dichotomous understanding of values.

This study contributes to addressing the literature gap on generations and values by incorporating the element of education, which, through its role and expansion over time, has proven to be a valuable variable for interpreting social reality. However, the evidence presented remains relatively weak and calls for further theoretical and empirical exploration, moving beyond a purely descriptive approach. The analyses hold not only theoretical value; when read in the context of recent periods of crisis, they can provide a tool for understanding the changing values and contextualized generations. More importantly, they can contribute to social actors in guiding potential targeted interventions for populations, with attention to their generation of belonging.

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# EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION IN EUROPE: TESTING THE POST-MODERNIZATION THESIS

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In this paper, I test predictions coming from the modernization thesis by examining the relationships between social cohesion and educational attainment in Europe. Social cohesion is measured using indices of institutional trust, solidarity, and political and socio-cultural participation. I explore how education influences social cohesion and interacts with country-level characteristics, based on the assumption that the transition to modernized societies diminishes the role of economic resources in shaping lifestyles and opportunities. As a result, education is expected to play a crucial role in influencing social cohesion in these societies. Two hypotheses are tested: (1) education has a stronger impact on social cohesion in more modernized countries, and (2) education is more influential than social class in shaping social cohesion, particularly in these countries. Using multilevel models and structural equation modelling, I analyse data from the European Value Study. The results demonstrate that a higher level of education is associated mainly with greater social and political participation, and that this effect is significantly stronger in more modernized countries, partially supporting the proposed hypotheses.

social cohesion; modernization; social inequalities

## INTRODUCTION

The topic of social cohesion has been widely studied over the past two decades. A vast body of literature has addressed its definition (Aruqaj, 2023), measurement (Delhey et al., 2023; Tok et al., 2024), and its main determinants (Walle, 2022). I consider social cohesion as a multidimensional concept that can be measured using individual-level data, stating that the overall level of social cohesion emerges from attitudes and behaviours at the micro level. Regarding the determinants of social cohesion, empirical research showed that

it is negatively affected by social inequalities (Vergolini, 2011a), educational inequality (Green et al., 2006), income inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Aruqaj, 2023), poverty and economic vulnerability (Whelan and Maître, 2005; Vergolini, 2011b; Andrews et al., 2014; Goubin, 2018), and ethnic concentration (Putnam, 2007).

This paper contributes to the literature by clarifying the role of education from a comparative perspective, focusing on the interaction between macro and micro factors. Specifically, I examine how a country's level of modernization (macro) affects the relationship between education and social cohesion (micro). The paper is organized as follows: the next section reviews the main definitions and measures of social cohesion, followed by an outline of the theoretical model and research questions, which guide the choice of data, methods, and empirical analysis. The final section provides concluding remarks.

## **1. SOCIAL COHESION: DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT**

In the literature concerning social cohesion, a great emphasis has been placed on its definition and measurement. As pointed out by Vergolini (2011a) there is a distinction between two main families of definitions that have characterised the field of social cohesion since its beginning. The first considers social cohesion as a process directed toward the attainment of a particular goal: it concerns the goal of promoting equal opportunities and reducing disparities (Berger-Schmitt, 2002). In this way, there is the risk to create some confusion between the constitutive elements of social cohesion with the factor that could affect it. The second one looks at social cohesion in a static way, defining it as a state of affairs concerning the interactions among members of a society, interactions that take place in various domains of human associate life (Chan et al. 2006; Vergolini 2011a; Dickes and Valentova, 2012; Bottoni, 2018). The latter is the approach I follow since it is the more promising one to analyse social cohesion. For the measurement aspect we rely on individual data following the approach suggested by Dickes and Valentova (2012). They identify a set of indicators of social cohesion suitable for cross-countries comparisons identifying four main dimensions, measured by additive indexes that are made up by several indicators as detailed below:

- Institutional trust: confidence in national distributive system, national organisation, authority institutions and satisfaction of democracy and government.
- Solidarity: proximal and distal solidarity.

- Political participation: participation in legal and illegal political activities and political concern.
- Socio-cultural participation: participation in social, political, cultural associations as well as in youth and leisure associations.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

In this paper, I analyse a number of predictions derived from the modernization thesis, focusing on the cultural basis of social stratification. The key argument is that, in modern societies, the relevance of economic resources in defining lifestyles and life opportunities has declined (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp, 2007). In contrast, knowledge and cognitive ability have become more central in the stratification system (Bell, 1973). The research questions explore the relationship between educational attainment and social cohesion, as well as how this interacts with country-level characteristics. Previous section has highlighted that the economic sphere, measured through social class and economic conditions, shapes social cohesion. People in higher social positions are more likely to exhibit greater levels of social cohesion, as active participation in social life requires resources. This suggests that activities that foster social integration remains a costly activity, requiring time and/or money. This suggests that material resources, measured through social class, continue to shape social cohesion, with social class acting as a proxy for permanent income (Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2006).

However, this paper challenges that perspective by focusing on the cultural basis of stratification—education—rather than purely economic factors. According to modernization theory, the transition to modern societies decreases the importance of economic resources in shaping life opportunities, with education assuming a more significant role. Higher levels of education are associated with greater cognitive resources, such as knowledge and skills, which increase civic engagement and participation in social life (Almond and Verba, 1963; Green et al., 2006). Thus, education promotes social cohesion through various channels, including socialization to values and to the access of remunerative occupations.

Country characteristics play a pivotal role in this framework. Modernization, marked by rising education levels, economic growth, and a strong civil society, fosters social cohesion. It creates more integrated societies by promoting shared values, economic security, civic participation, and interdependence, enhancing trust and cooperation (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 2007; Bell, 1973). From

these arguments, I propose the following hypotheses:

- H1) Education influences social cohesion (H1a), and this effect is stronger in more modernized countries (H1b).
- H2) Education plays a more significant role than social class in shaping social cohesion, especially in more modernized countries.

### **3. DATA VARIABLES AND METHOD**

The analyses presented in the paper are based on data from the 2008-2009 wave of the European Value Study (EVS) that has been carried out on a representative sample of population aged 15+ in 47 countries. As discussed in the previous section, social cohesion is measured following the Dickes and Valentova (2013) approach, while the main independent variables are educational level and social class. Social class is measured according to the ESEC scheme (Rose and Harrison, 2010). I use as indicators of the level of modernization of a country the human development index (HDI) that is the most adequate indicator to capture aspects related to modernization (Inglehart and Baker 2000). To avoid the risk of circularity, the macro variable is measured at time t-1 (i.e., one year before the survey). The descriptive statistics for the main variables used in the analyses are reported in Table 1. To test the first hypothesis, I employ a random intercept multilevel model that is the best technique to detect the role of individual and contextual characteristics as well as their interactions.<sup>1</sup> For the second hypothesis, I need to decompose the direct and indirect effects of education and social class to understand which of the two aspects is more relevant in shaping social cohesion. To answer this research question, I rely on a multi-group structural equation model (SEM), that allows for this decomposition according to clusters of countries ranked by their level of modernisation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All the models presented in the next section control for age, sex, citizenship, civil status, employment condition, and social origins.

<sup>2</sup> Since SEM model requires continuous variables, I use the international socio-economic index (ISEI) and the years of education, instead of respectively of social class and educational level.

Tab. 1. Descriptive statistics for the main variables used in the analyses (N=23,251). Source: European Value Study (2008).

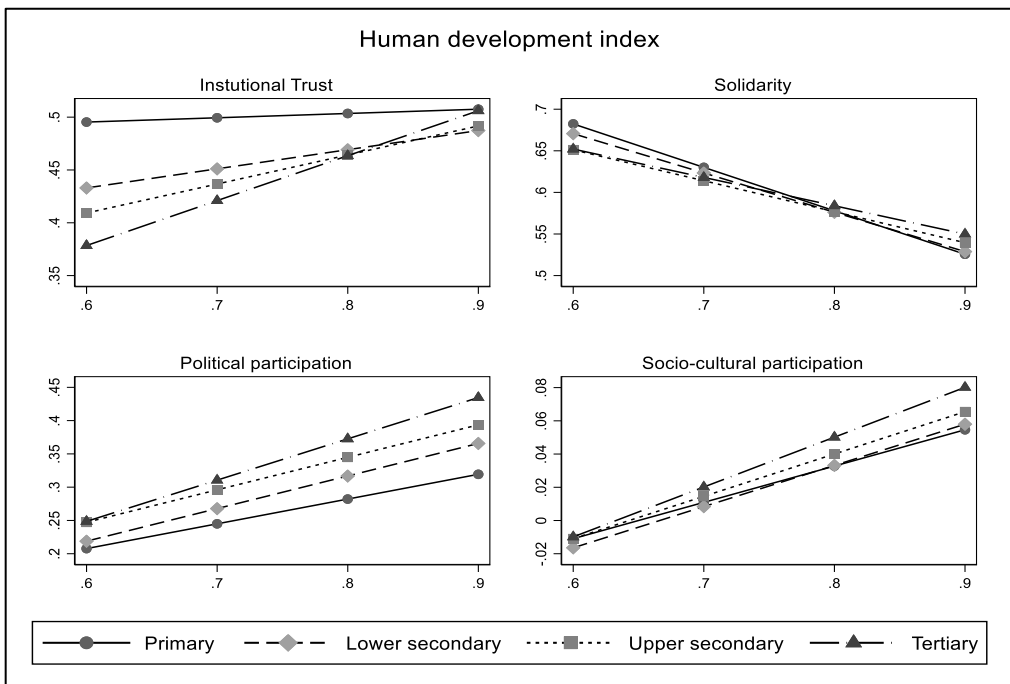
Outcome variables		
	Mean	Std. Dev.
Institutional trust	0.470	0.168
Solidarity	0.571	0.186
Political participation	0.369	0.185
Socio-cultural participation	0.053	0.096
Main independent variables		
Country level	Mean	Std. Dev.
Human development index	0.828	0.071
Individual level	Mean	Std. Dev.
Socio-economic status index	44.031	16.749
Years of education	12.408	3.658
Educational level	%	
Primary	9.7	
Lower secondary	15.5	
Upper secondary	40.0	
Tertiary	34.8	
Social class	%	
Salariat	33.5	
Intermediate	18.1	
Self-employed	8.2	
Lower white collars	11.2	
Working class	29.0	

## 4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

### 4.1. The role of modernization and education

The results reported in Figure 1 are intended to answer the first research question about the role of education and its interaction with modernization's level. Regarding political and socio-cultural participation, I find that higher levels of education generally correspond to greater involvement in social and political life (H1a), and at the same time the influence of education tends to fan out as the HDI rises (H1b). In this case both H1a and H1b are corroborated by the empirical analysis. The situation is less clear when I move to institutional trust and solidarity, which show peculiar patterns. In the first case, I show that the less educated people have a higher trust in the institution and that the differences between the levels of education disappear in countries with higher values of HDI, which is exactly the opposite of what is stated in H1.

Fig. 1. Predicted values from random intercept multilevel models for the interaction effects of human development index and educational level on the four dimensions of social cohesion (N=23,251). Source: European Value Study (2008).



This unexpected result can be explained by the fact that highly educated people in countries with a low HDI may have a better knowledge of the functioning of the institution and are able to compare the situation in their country with that in more developed countries, which may lead to lower values of institutional trust. The “fan

in configuration” can be interpreted as meaning that in countries with a high HDI, all people, regardless of their level of education, tend to have a high level of trust in institutions, as a sign of the overall good performance of institutions.

Regarding solidarity, there are practically no differences between levels of education and the relationship is negative, which also contradicts H1. One possible explanation lies in the rise of individualism in modern societies, which may become more pronounced as people become less dependent on their communities for survival. This increased focus on individual achievement may reduce the need for collective solidarity.

#### 4.2. Do cultural resources matter more than economic ones?

Table 2 shows the results from the SEM analysis intended to shed light on the second hypothesis. Overall, the effects of ISEI and education are substantially in line with H2: I find that education exerts always a greater influence than ISEI and the role of education tends to become more relevant in more modern countries. The overall picture is challenged, also in this case, by the results regarding institutional trust and solidarity. In fact, I find that the effect of education is positive only in countries with higher level of modernization and, the educational effect is always greater than the ISEI effect. Moreover, education is more relevant than ISEI in high modernized countries, while in the others the main driver of social cohesion is the economic dimension.

Tab. 2. Total effects of ISEI index and years of education on the various dimensions of social cohesion according to different levels of modernization (N=23,251). Source: European Value Study (2008).

	Institutional trust	Solidarity	Political participation	Socio-cultural participation
ISEI index				
Low modernization	0.032**	0.051***	0.047***	0.043***
Medium modernization	0.046***	0.032***	0.090***	0.088***
High modernization	0.043***	-0.006	0.080***	0.079***
Years of education				
Low modernization	-0.118***	-0.062***	0.217***	0.049***
Medium modernization	-0.060***	-0.017*	0.185***	0.126***
High modernization	0.079***	0.075***	0.221***	0.142***



## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, I tested the predictions of the modernization thesis regarding the relationship between education and social cohesion in Europe. The findings confirm that education plays a significant role in shaping social cohesion: higher levels of education are consistently linked with greater social and political participation, and this effect intensifies as countries become more modernized. However, the results are less clear for institutional trust and solidarity, where the expected relationship with education was either weak or counterintuitive. These unexpected outcomes suggest that while education is important for fostering participation, other societal factors, such as cultural shifts toward individualism in highly developed countries, may undermine solidarity.

Further research should explore the role of exogenous events, such as the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have reshaped social cohesion by influencing economic vulnerability, participation, trust, and solidarity. These crises have likely exacerbated social inequalities and altered the dynamics of social cohesion, warranting a deeper understanding of their long-term impact on education's role in modern societies.

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# UNIVERSITY STUDIES AND CHANGES IN *HABITUS*

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Pierre Bourdieu's contribution to interpreting disparities in educational opportunities was not limited to research specifically dedicated to the world of education that led to the identification of social reproduction devices within school and university institutions (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964; 1970). Some of his conceptual tools developed in the context of other research – such as 'capital,' 'field,' '*habitus*,' and 'symbolic violence' – show significant heuristic potential for understanding the social dynamics that underlie what might erroneously appear to be educational trajectories based on individual choice.

The concept of *habitus* in particular, which Bourdieu enriches with further meanings compared to that already used in philosophy and the social sciences (Sapiro, 2015), is especially useful, not only for understanding the mechanisms of social reproduction but also for identifying the margins of intervention capable of changing the destinies of disadvantaged subjects. While on the one hand, this durable system of internalized dispositions reflects the *habitus* of class or class fraction of origin (Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu, 1980), on the other, it can be modified through new processes of acculturation and socialization (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In this sense, the actions of different primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions can be decisive in promoting the development of a different *habitus* that can strengthen the original, or constitute a mediation tool between the internalized dispositions produced by a disadvantaged social class and the practices required in order to access superior social positions.

Starting from Bourdieu's reflections, some scholars who share his theoretical approach, of analytically investigating the effects produced by attending different schools and universities, have identified the active role played by what has been defined as an 'institutional *habitus*' to advance phenomena of social change and transformation. In fact, secondary education institutions promote the formation of different *habitus* based on the characteristics of each

institution, which vary according to the type of users, geographical positioning, specific organization, and available resources.

Among research highlighting the heuristic potential of the ‘institutional *habitus*’ concept in the analysis of educational processes, the investigations carried out by Patricia M. McDonough (1997) in the United States and by Diane Reay (1998) in Great Britain on the role played by secondary schools and the social class of students in their orientation towards tertiary education merit attention. More specifically, McDonough used the expression ‘organizational *habitus*’ (McDonough, 1997) to indicate the influence of each educational institution on the configuration of students’ principles, and practices. Reay, by analyzing the study and life trajectories of some young Londoners through in-depth interviews, coined the expression ‘institutional *habitus*’ (Reay, 1998), highlighting the complex stratification of experiences that led to the formation of a *habitus* significantly influenced by educational institutions. It was observed in particular that private schools attended by the middle class inculcate the idea in students that it is necessary to continue their studies at the best universities, whereas public schools offer less guidance or tend to orient working-class children toward the closest universities geographically, presupposing the impossibility that families are able to sustain the costs of sending their children to other cities. As other scholars have also highlighted (e.g. Ball et al., 2002; Lehmann, 2007; Ingram, 2009; Burke, Emmerich and Ingram, 2013; Tarabini, Curran and Fontdevila, 2017; Gerosa et al., 2019; Romito, 2021), the role of ‘institutional *habitus*’ in educational transitions can therefore be decisive in promoting access to higher education and the consequent social mobility processes of disadvantaged students.

However, acquiring a new *habitus* more suited to the field within which important stakes are being competed for in order to obtain a predominant position should not only be understood in a positive light, as it can also give rise to paradoxical or ambivalent conditions. When the ‘institutional *habitus*’ manages to deeply shape the original, changes occur in the *opus operatum* and in the *modus operandi* that weaken the bond with the disadvantaged environment of origin so much that the social agent ends up losing their primary class consciousness. On the other hand, if the primary *habitus* remains strongly rooted after acquiring a different system of internalized dispositions, a condition of “*habitus clivé*” originates (Bourdieu and Sayad, 1964; Bourdieu, 2004). Indeed, the transformed social agent experiences a painful laceration between new interests and aspirations and those of the social environment of origin, which produces an internal and external conflict with consequent sacrifices

even in terms of emotion (Lee and Kramer, 2013; Friedman, 2016).

This split *habitus* seems to be the best condition to which disadvantaged subjects can aspire, in order to maintain an organic relationship with their class of origin at least in part. Above all, it can constitute a condition that is to a certain extent privileged, promoting a form of epistemic reflexivity capable of understanding the complex experiential layers that are stratified in the *habitus* and consequently permitting an opportunity to escape social determinism.

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# UNIVERSITY STUDIES AND CHANGES IN *HABITUS*. EXPLORATORY RESEARCH ON FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

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The benefits associated with university studies consist not only in the acquisition of institutionalized cultural capital useful for finding employment but also in the acquisition of internalized dispositions that modify original categories, values, interests, and behavioral patterns with positive consequences on lifestyle, active citizenship, and the quality of cultural consumption. As part of qualitative research on first-generation students at the University of Pisa, this paper seeks to show how students from families with low educational credentials, who manage to gain access to university pathways by overcoming obstacles related to their social origin, can acquire a new *habitus* that, in some cases, contrasts with the internalized dispositions assimilated within the family or social class to which they belong. This circumstance can generate a condition of *habitus clivé* that risks undermining the social agent's identity but can also foster forms of reflexivity that are difficult to acquire for those who do not experience this form of *habitus*.

higher education; *habitus*; *habitus clivé*; first-generation students.

## INTRODUCTION

In Italy, inequalities of educational opportunities due to social origin are significant as the education system is characterized by a form of early tracking that makes it difficult for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are mainly concentrated in vocational and technical paths, to access university education and successfully continue their studies (Benadusi and Giancola, 2021). Although social origin has been found to be directly related to the likelihood of finding a job in our country regardless of the level of education attained (Ballarino and Bernardi, 2020) university education can still play a



noteworthy role in fostering a transition to superordinate social positions (ISTAT, 2023). Moreover, a university education enables the acquisition of dispositions that are internalized by positively influencing participation in political and social life, the quality of one's cultural consumption, and food choices that generally promote a healthier lifestyle and, consequently, better health (Parziale, 2019). This contribution, using data collected as part of qualitative research on first-generation students at the University of Pisa, aims to show how students from families with little institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979b), who manage to gain access to university paths after overcoming obstacles related to their social origin, tend to profoundly modify their original categories, values, interests, and behavioral patterns. This circumstance can generate a condition of *habitus clivé* (Bourdieu and Sayad, 1964; Bourdieu, 2004), that is, a split *habitus* that risks undermining the social agent's identity but can also foster forms of reflexivity that are difficult to acquire for those who have not had this type of experience.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The importance of cultural capital and the complex intertwining of this resource with other types of capital (economic, social, symbolic, etc.) was highlighted by Pierre Bourdieu. The French sociologist distinguished three forms of cultural capital: titles certified by the state which conferred relatively high symbolic value (institutionalized cultural capital), material cultural goods (objectified cultural capital), and cultural resources acquired through a process of family socialization (embodied cultural capital) (Bourdieu, 1979b). The latter form of capital constitutes a *habitus*, a system of internalized enduring dispositions acquired in one's social context of origin that may be an advantage or disadvantage depending on the field in which a social agent operates.

Research on first-generation students (e.g. Pascarella et al., 2004; O'Shea, 2016; Romito, 2021) – who are the first in their families to attend tertiary-level studies – places the role of *habitus* at the forefront. The life stories that emerge from these studies demonstrate how many of them do not possess a *habitus* appropriate to the field of university studies, inducing them to ignore symbolic codes, behavioral rules, and stakes due to a lack of family socialization to a very different type of education than secondary studies. These students thus end up orienting themselves toward less prestigious degree programs which are perceived to be more suited to their social status (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton, 2010) or that are more influenced by market devices that characterize

orientation fairs geared towards tertiary studies (De Feo and Pitzalis, 2018).

First-generation students who manage to modify their original *habitus* thanks to particularly inclusive study paths then risk experiencing an inner laceration (*habitus clivé*) due to the co-presence of conditioning rooted in the past and new dispositions acquired in the context of their university studies. This condition reverberates in relationships with their family members and peers either by producing positive effects or by generating situations of conflict with those who continue to be part of another social space (Lehmann, 2014). Attempting to overcome this cleavage that produces an ‘unhappy consciousness’ may move in the direction of giving up legitimate aspirations for social mobility or toward a detachment from one’s roots, with painful consequences on the affective level (Lee and Kramer, 2013; Friedman, 2016).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

In 2022 and 2023, exploratory research was conducted on a sample of first-generation students enrolled at the University of Pisa. Based on indications offered by the international literature analyzing such phenomena, a qualitative technique was chosen and open-ended questions were then prepared which sought to deepen the study and life trajectories of this set of university students. Interview subjects were identified using theoretical sampling based on certain properties deemed significant to the research. In particular, it was considered useful to give voice to students who had experiences of studying in different disciplinary fields (humanities vs. science) and who were nearing completion of a bachelor’s degree or at the beginning of a second-level degree program, two moments of educational transition it was hypothesized would foster a form of reflexivity about the experience that was nearly or just-completed.

Written interviews were conducted via the administration of open-ended questions on the university’s blended learning platform with students enrolled in specific study tracks where a large number of first-generation students were likely to be encountered. More specifically, questions were forwarded to those enrolled in the third year of bachelor’s degree programs in Social Service Science (SSS), Political Science and International Relations (PSR), and Political Science of Administration and Organization (PSO), taught by the Department of Political Science, and to those attending their first year of the second-level degree program in Sciences and Techniques of Preventive and Adapted Motor Activities (STA), activated at the Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine. Among the 51 students who volunteered their time to answer the first

set of questions, 35 (22 females and 13 males) were found to be first-generation students.<sup>1</sup>

The collected interviews were then subjected to content analysis to identify macro- and micro-text units endowed with particular relevance to the research. These thematic units were later compared using a ‘transversalization’ procedure in order to compare responses to the same primary questions and verify whether an adequate level of theoretical saturation had been achieved (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

### **3. EFFECTS OF UNIVERSITY STUDIES ON THE *HABITUS* AND RELATIONSHIPS OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**

Students interviewed generally acknowledged that university studies contributed not only to the growth of their cultural capital but also changed their cognitive categories and the interpretative schemes of social reality. The role played by some of the disciplines studied in the degree programs, held by the Department of Political Science in particular, in fostering such transformations and inducing new forms of reflexivity emerges in some students’ words:

I am reminded of a first-year internship experience that consisted of seminars, one of them held by the Italian Association of People with Downs Syndrome in Pisa; my beliefs about the limited possibilities of people with disabilities were demolished thanks to that experience (SSS\_03).

Studying, reading, and wanting to understand have led me to a maturation that I can see in my everyday actions, even just while watching the news on TV (SSS\_14).

The new systems of classifying reality and the values acquired during university studies seem to produce effects at the axiological level by determining a new evaluation of the social world that inspires practices different from those that the original *habitus* would have induced. These changes in *habitus* inevitably reverberate across social relations with parents who were somehow precluded from this kind of experience and can potentially generate conflictual situations and discomfort.

When I return home and there are lunches/dinners in which we meet, some topics of discussion always come up with which I don’t agree most of the

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<sup>1</sup> For privacy reasons, the students interviewed are referred to here by a numerical code and an acronym related to their course of study.

time. This is because (...) by attending the University we analyzed some of these issues and, obviously, I elaborated my opinion (SSS\_03).

I don't feel very understood because of certain ideas I have come up with over time. (...) I have more difficulties with my family in areas that might relate to what I have studied, such as, for example, deviance and crime where my view has opened up a lot, but for them, it is not understood that a prisoner can, for example, be able to study or when he gets out has earned a degree (SSS\_05).

The acquisition of new categories and value perspectives creates a distance or rupture with the home environment. Even the taste – what Bourdieu termed “a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place,’ guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which befit the occupants of that position” (Bourdieu, 1979a, Engl. Transl. 1984, 466) – is transformed through the university experience. As a consequence, the different commitments and new tastes acquired by first-generation students distance them from their former friends who have not had the opportunity to continue their studies.

Interests sometimes differ: with people who did not go to university it is difficult to talk about a book, or an author, or to organize a theater evening (SSS\_10).

Let's say that a greater distance has been created with friends who didn't continue their studies; by distance, I don't mean in the relationship with them, which remains good but simply about the different interests we've developed. (...) I can give a concrete example that I believe best represents these two aspects. Recently, together with some friends, we decided to spend a weekend in Rome. Here, our different priorities and interests meant that some of us decided to visit the city culturally (myself included) while others preferred to devote themselves purely to leisure. So yes, in this sense, a sort of unease arose between the two ‘subgroups’ (STA\_01).

University studies, on the one hand, enrich the original *habitus* while, on the other, place first-generation students in complex relational situations with significant sacrifices in terms of affection. As citizens of two distant worlds, first-generation students experience a condition of *habitus clivé* that is difficult to resolve into a univocal identity. It is precisely this hybrid position within different fields, however, that can be an advantage for those who would otherwise remain excluded from higher education.

I have a friend who, after finishing high school, immediately began working at a company as a mechanic with the idea of doing it his whole life; but after a few years, decided to resume his studies and is now studying

communication sciences. Every time we saw each other he asked me questions about how the University works, lessons, exams, etc. and he became convinced to continue his studies (STA\_06).

By maintaining an organic relationship with their environment of origin, first-generation students can thus foster the emancipation of those who would otherwise risk being ‘trapped’ in a social selection mechanism that provides no way out of their condition (Broccolichi and Cœuvrard, 1993).

## CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory research only examined a sample of first-generation students who were close to a bachelor’s degree or were already enrolled in a master’s degree program. First-generation students who dropped out early and deserve special attention in order to identify the various factors that produced such a choice, precluding the possibility of social mobility and a change in one’s lifestyle, (Romito, 2021) were excluded from the sample. Moreover, it should be emphasized that the students who offered their willingness to be interviewed were enrolled in undergraduate courses that were not particularly elite, a circumstance that may have facilitated their process of adaptation to an environment in which students from disadvantaged backgrounds generally feel like ‘fish out of water,’ to paraphrase a Bourdieu metaphor (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

The interviews collected document how the first-generation students surveyed have changed several dimensions of their *habitus* throughout their university studies. While these newly acquired internalized dispositions open perspectives and possibilities in different fields, they also make relationships with family members or their original peer group more difficult. The different layers of *habitus* produce an identity that may be split or torn apart (*habitus clivé*) which can sometimes become a real opposition to the family or social class to which they belong. In other cases, it seems possible for a virtuous circle to be established that moves from the university world toward one’s social environment of origin.

Much remains to be done in order to truly make the rights of all students effective, regardless of their social origin, to attend university and enroll in degree programs that provide access to superordinate positions in particular. These goals must be pursued without forgetting that the cultural capital acquired by first-generation students nevertheless constitutes an insufficient condition to guarantee their social mobility since it represents but one of the

resources that can help reconfigure a social stratification that continues to privilege *Les héritiers* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964).

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# TO LEAVE OR NOT TO LEAVE: EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY-STUDENT DROPOUTS IN CROATIA

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The paper examines the experiences of university dropouts in Croatia, with a focus on individual and institutional *habitus*. Theoretical background of the paper was based on Bourdieu's (1977, 1986), and Reay, David & Ball's (2001) work on inequalities, *habitus* and students' integration. Qualitative methodology was used and 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted in year 2022. with persons who dropped out of higher education in Croatia. The main research topics included the students' *habitus*, the reasons of dropping out and the role of higher education institutions. Main reasons for dropping out of studies were motivational reasons, health reasons and employment. The findings indicated weak institutional support related to the process of dropping out of studies and the absence of institutional attempts to prevent the students' drop-out. On a subsample of first-generation students, we analysed the correspondence between students' family *habitus* the new *habitus*. The findings show that students who developed a new *habitus* and felt the connection and integration with the new educational field were more inclined to return to higher education at some point in life. Policy recommendations for preventing dropout from higher education are also discussed in the light of the study findings.

higher education; *habitus*; dropping out of studies

## INTRODUCTION

The European Commission report (Quinn, 2013) highlights a significant issue within the European Union: a large number of students are leaving higher education before completing their studies. This trend poses a challenge to the



labour market, economic growth, and social justice, as it limits opportunities for social mobility and inclusion. Müller and Klein (2023) further emphasize that students from lower-education backgrounds and working-class families are more likely to drop out of university before graduation. This study focuses on the experiences of university dropouts in Croatia, aiming to explore the factors that contribute to this phenomenon. The theoretical framework for this research is based on the works of Bourdieu (1977, 1986) and Reay, David, and Ball (2001) who have extensively studied inequalities, institutional and family habitus, and the academic and social integration of students. According to Bourdieu (2011), the culture of the dominant class often shapes the higher education system, creating an environment that can be exclusive to individuals from less privileged social backgrounds. The reason for this can be traced to classed attributes of socialization that are converted into habitus, i.e. a set of dispositions which “functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (Bourdieu, 1977, 82-83). As such, it is a long-lasting way of acting and thinking that derives from socialization processes in the family. These socialization processes flow from the family members’ conditions of daily life, i.e. their class position. When people change their class position, i.e. when their “conditions of existence” change over the course of their life, they may experience a sense of self torn by loss of coherence (Friedman, 2015). This loss of coherence or habitus clivé is characterized by a mismatch between one’s original family habitus and the habitus that is required in one’s new conditions of existence, e.g. the academic field. Thus, the habitus clivé can produce in individuals feelings of insecurity and inferiority that collide with the requirements of the new social environment (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). In the context of student dropout, these disparities between primary and academic habitus increases the likelihood of self-elimination, where students from less privileged backgrounds feel a mismatch between their family habitus and the habitus of the higher education institution and the higher education field.

## **1. METHODOLOGY**

The data collection for this study was conducted between December 2021 and May 2022. During this period, 24 semi-structured interviews were carried out with individuals who had dropped out of higher education programs between 2015 and 2022 at various higher education institutions in Croatia. Out of 24 interviews, seven interviews were conducted with first-generation students. Given the challenges of accessing this hard-to-reach population, researchers

provided compensation to participants for their involvement. Invitations to participate in the study were distributed through the websites of various organizations (non-governmental organizations, higher education institutions, and similar entities) that either addressed related topics or could reach the target population. Additionally, as data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and participants were given the option to conduct the interviews either in person or online. The average duration of the interviews was approximately one hour. Following the interviews, audio recordings were transcribed and anonymized, and subsequent analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 software for qualitative data analysis. The coding process employed thematic analysis to identify patterns in participants' responses, focusing on shared experiences and the meanings they attributed to those experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Participants were given the pseudonyms before the coding to ensure anonymity. The analysis emphasized themes related to inequalities, habitus, institutional habitus, and the academic and social integration of students, particularly in terms of their experiences within higher education. The main research topics included the study experiences, linked with personal biographies of dropout students, students' habitus, the reasons of dropping out of studies and the role of higher education institutions in that process.

## **2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The aim of this study was to explore several factors associated with student dropout in higher education in Croatia. With regard to this aim the following research questions were formulated:

- What were the main reasons for dropping out of higher education studies?
- What were the experiences of first-generation students in this regard?
- Was there any institutional support related to the process of dropping out of studies?

## **3. RESULTS**

### **3.1. The reasons for dropping out of studies**

Our research identified several key reasons for dropping out of higher education, which can inform the development of educational policies aimed at preventing and reducing dropout rates. While participants mentioned a variety of factors, three primary reasons emerged as the most significant: motivational issues,

health-related concerns, and the finding of employment. Other notable factors included a lack of discipline, financial challenges, and organizational difficulties. It is important to note that these reasons were often interconnected. For example, some students cited a loss of motivation stemming from organizational challenges they faced during their studies, which ultimately contributed to their decision to drop out. One major issue discussed by participants was the impairment of mental health, often caused by stress related to academic performance, particularly from failing exams. Many participants explained how these mental health challenges led to a loss of motivation, ultimately resulting in dropping out. One participant described the experience as follows:

There was more added anxiety about what would happen if I didn't know something or how I would pass the exam or answer something wrong, and it would be so bad. And then at some point, I stopped going to the exams out of fear, because I would have a panic attack during them. (Emma)

### **3.2. Experiences of first-generation students**

The findings show that the students who developed a new *habitus* and felt the connection and integration with the new educational field were more inclined to return to higher education at some point in life and obtain a higher education degree:

If I manage to gather the strength and courage to check what my current status is and whether I could finish university, I would be happy to write a diploma again and finish it. If I don't succeed, maybe I'll enrol in another master's degree and finish it then, if I really don't have anything else to do. I don't know when I would do it, I'm a little scared because I can't stop working to study. (Anna)

For others, the contrast between students' original dispositions and interests and university field values and norms, resulted in giving up higher education altogether:

Education, as education itself, does not have that much value. Maybe again, on the other hand, when you look at it, someone might know how to do something without that college, maybe the college wouldn't teach him something if he already knows how to do it, if you understand me... I don't know how to explain it to you, somehow practice is better than the theory itself. (Mark)

At the same time, the decision to leave the studies was often preceded by feelings of frustration and stress associated with the fear of facing study obligations. Such feelings were often manifested by a lack of motivation and distancing from duties during studies, and consequently by giving up studying altogether. Furthermore, the experience of acute stress was accompanied by feelings of not being at ease in the academic environment, which resulted in looking for a way out of it, as two participants describe it:

Yes, I had a lot of big problems with motivation. Because I didn't solve it the first time, that is, the first year when I enrolled, I had three subjects left. I was quite depressed... I was terribly depressed. I just used to sleep in my room, I just needed darkness and silence. I, as I would say, closed myself off from my friends because I considered it my failure. So, yes, I lacked motivation because that first failure, I felt a lot, even though I started with great enthusiasm, with desire, motivation, with everything, that is, with enthusiasm, but I ended up like that. (Eva)

Well, at that time, because of the stress itself, so much influence on mental health, I don't know how to explain exactly, everything that was happening at that moment, somehow for my own sake it was better for me to give up than to continue to struggle with such things... (Mark)

These reported feelings of insecurity in the academic field point to a habitus *clivé* where expressions of inferiority collide with striving for knowledge:

A person also strives for that knowledge, which, as strange as it may sound, but I also have a love for learning. Really, some people don't understand that, but people simply love knowledge... (Eva)

The two sides of habitus indicate the academic experience of first-generation students as a non-linear ride in need of institutional buffers. These are clearly missing as the participants did not mention institutional support related to their withdrawal from studies, nor do they mention the institution when discussing reactions to withdrawal.

### **3.3. Lack of institutional support**

It is notable that first-generation students as well as the majority of participants reported a lack of meaningful institutional support related to their decision to drop out of studies, or they were simply unaware of any such support, if it existed. This absence of assistance stands in stark contrast to the expectations students may have for the educational system, particularly when facing challenges that could lead to withdrawal. None of the participants mentioned

receiving any institutional support when discussing their withdrawal from studies. In fact, they did not even refer to the institution itself when explaining their reasons for leaving. This suggests that, for many, the educational system failed to provide adequate resources or guidance during critical moments of difficulty. There were no proactive efforts made by the institution to retain these students or offer assistance in overcoming their challenges. Additionally, there was no subsequent outreach by the institution to understand the reasons behind their withdrawal, which could have informed future improvements or preventive measures. Furthermore, the responses suggest that students, particularly those facing significant barriers, may not know where to turn for help or feel that such support is out of reach. The lack of awareness about available resources, coupled with the absence of institutional efforts to understand and address the reasons behind dropout, highlights a significant area for improvement in higher education support systems in Croatia.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Our findings have revealed several important factors in relation to dropping out of higher education. The most significant were motivational issues, health-related concerns, and the finding of employment. Other notable factors included a lack of discipline, financial challenges, and organizational difficulties. In addition, study findings indicated that the academic experience of first-generation students was a non-linear ride in need of institutional buffers. The later should compensate for a mismatch between one's original habitus and the habitus required in the academic field, i.e. a habitus clivé. Instead of providing institutional buffers for first-generation and other less privileged students, our study indicated a significant gap in institutional support, particularly in relation to preventing students from dropping out. There is a noticeable lack of structured monitoring of student progress and retention, as well as a failure to implement proactive measures to help at-risk students stay in their studies. This is especially detrimental to vulnerable groups, who may already face additional challenges. These shortcomings align with Bourdieu and Passerons' (1990) concept of the "false meritocracy" within the educational system, where students from disadvantaged backgrounds are often overlooked. This perpetuates social inequality by reinforcing a system that privileges those from more privileged social positions, making it difficult for underrepresented students to succeed. The issue of student dropout is complex and requires coordinated efforts from multiple levels, including higher education institutions, universities, local governments, and the economic sector. Higher education

institutions play a particularly crucial role in addressing this issue, as it is not only an educational concern but also a matter of social justice. Institutions must recognize their responsibility in supporting all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, to ensure that higher education becomes a tool for social mobility and equality.

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Stream D

**POLICY AND GOVERNANCE  
IN EDUCATION**



# CONTINUING VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN ITALY, BETWEEN UNRESOLVED ISSUES AND NEW SCENARIOS

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) has become crucial for developing skills and fostering growth for adults and companies (Angotti 2023), aligned with EU policies and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). This article compiles insights from national experts and Inapp researchers from the “Adult Learning and Continuing Vocational Training” research group, presented at the Panel Session D.02, exploring key issues, innovative practices, and emerging policies shaping Italy’s CVT system. The article identifies three key phases: the paradigm of lifelong learning, specific forms and manifestations of CVT in Italy, and the methods of implementing CVT. It provides an overview of CVT dynamics, challenges, and opportunities, emphasising the importance of a lifelong learning culture and the impact of innovative policies. Despite ongoing issues with coordination, the contributions aim to shape and consolidate the CVT system in Italy.

## 1. THE PARADIGM OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Session D.02 opened with the presentation of the paper by Angotti, Campanella and Vergani (*Continuing Vocational Training in Italy: Unresolved Issues and New Scenarios*) which highlighted how adult learning has become increasingly important. This is due to societal changes like population ageing, technological advancements, the green economy transition, and the Covid-19 pandemic. These shifts necessitate continuous learning for adults to remain adaptable and resilient. Assessing Italy’s CVT system is crucial to determine its effectiveness in preparing adults for a dynamic job market. This analysis reviews relevant literature to highlight key areas for improvement in lifelong learning participation.

The first step, which serves as a starting point, identifies the paradigm of lifelong

learning and, within it, adult education in general (hence not just conventionally defined as ‘continuous’ but also as permanent, not just work-oriented but also responding to extra-professional interests) as the framework, both in its overall meaning and its function of ‘floating’ (ideally, also promoting growth and reinforcement) for continuous training. Andrea Cegolon’s essay (*Strengthening Italy’s Continuing Vocational Education and Training System through Lifelong Learning Culture*) focuses on this, emphasising the message that without adequate, particularly practised, formalised learning culture in adulthood (‘formalised’ because we are discussing intentional and conscious training interventions), continuous training struggles to be effective, it operates intermittently and ultimately remains marginal in relation to work and its changes, both on the demand and supply sides.

## **2. THE EVOLUTION OF STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES**

The second step proposed by the contributions addresses the specific forms and concrete manifestations of CVT in Italy, describing them, providing a quantitative representation, and highlighting the strengths and more or less evident criticalities (which are often more consolidated and difficult to modify). The essay by Roberto Angotti and Luca Dordit (*Key Issues for Continuing Vocational Training Policies in Italy, based on the Results of the Inapp Survey INDACO-Companies*) is related to this second step.

Giovanna Di Castro, Valentina Ferri, and Alessandra Pedone, in *Measuring Low-Skilled Adults And Training Participation In The Digital Age* focuses on the training behaviours of low-skilled adults in Italy, highlighting the multidimensional nature of skills and disparities in training access exacerbated by digitalisation. The authors propose a composite indicator for the labour market and offer policy insights to ensure fair participation.

Alessandra Pedone and Giuditta Occhiocupo, in *The Impact of Smart Working on Reskilling and Upskilling Processes in the Private and Public Sectors: a First Analysis* explore the effects of remote working in Italy, emphasising the importance of continuous training to adapt to rapid changes and innovation. It analyses its impact on training plans, skill acquisition, and reskilling and upskilling processes, discussing regulatory evolution and future scenarios.

Interprofessional Funds are the most prominent form of continuous training in Italy, especially in recent years. However, public resource-supported offerings, which were significant before the Funds’ inception, are experiencing a revival. The majority of training (about 80%) is market-driven, funded by enterprises

themselves.

Interprofessional Funds are crucial due to their bilateral and concerted approach, offering significant training opportunities. Training forms can be categorized into three types: routine training (coordinated with unions and funded by Interprofessional Funds), emergency training (addressing crises with public resources), and necessary training (urgent and strategic, funded by companies without public or union involvement).

We emphasise again that, while this form is predominant in the training landscape, we generally know little about it, and what little we do know comes from the Inapp INDACO-Companies (INDACO-Imprese) survey, now in its fourth edition (Angotti et alii 2024; Pedone et alii 2023).

Finally, the third and last step concerns the method, how continuous training is delivered. This is a central issue due to its focus on an adult population and the connection that the method (of formalised learning) has with the contexts and pathways – both professional and life-related – of employed individuals. In the Andrea Galimberti’s essay (*Lifelong Learning as a Key Factor to Reduce the Skill Gap? Reflections on Doctoral Training*), the theme runs along two axes primarily: the first, more typical, is identified with the presentation – even critical – of approaches and forms of adult learning (such as “heutagogy” and the non-conventional learning discussed by Galimberti); the second, more lateral, examines a type of learning in work contexts that does not go through formal training but rather through how the organization is structured and functions to intentionally stimulate and generate learning in its ordinary operation (the emphasis here is that, fortunately, there is more training than learning, but in the model of organizational learning, learning is desired and intentional).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Continuing vocational training (CVT) in Italy is essential for skill development and worker upskilling, aligning with European policies and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). Influenced by technological innovation (Angotti 2024), market demands, and government policies, CVT faces challenges such as equitable access, programme quality, and worker motivation. A key theme is the recognition of competencies from non-formal and informal contexts, highlighting the need for intentional competency development over institutional procedures.

Despite these challenges, investing in CVT offers numerous opportunities, including a more qualified workforce, enhanced company competitiveness, and

economic growth. Properly managed, CVT can significantly benefit both workers and companies.

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# CONTINUING VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN ITALY: UNRESOLVED ISSUES AND NEW SCENARIOS

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Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) seems to be at the core-attention of decision-makers in Italy after years. It is going through a season of transformations, also because of the launch of a set of new policy measures, most recently those included in the National New Skills Plan and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. CVT is therefore experiencing an extremely articulated situation, consisting of no less than eight national policy measures managed by different public administrations (both central and local) and many actors and stakeholders at various levels. Numbers, of participants and interventions, also show the recent increase of CVT relevance. However, a number of issues remain unresolved: the equity of access to corporate training; the North-South areas gaps in the distribution of training supply; the resistance to change and modification of organizational models and practices; the effects of pandemic on corporate training choices and strategies.

continuing vocational training; policy measures; skills.

## INTRODUCTION

The Italian Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) system has once again become a focal point for decision-makers after many years. Recent years have seen an intense development of policy measures in this sector, alongside increasingly numerous and innovative practices by various actors and stakeholders. This highlights the rapidly changing and increasingly complex environment in which training systems operate. However, this complexity does not yet seem to be fully captured by scientific research, which still predominantly focuses on the more structured and regulatory components of the broader education and training

system (known at the European level as VET, Vocational Education and Training). Alternatively, research tends to concentrate on the detailed aspects of a few individual components of the continuing training support system, without fully understanding their structural elements, internal dynamics, and their connection to economic development trends.

One of the primary factors reshaping the landscape for lifelong learning is the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which aligns with long-term global trends such as technological and digital advancements, market globalisation, and ageing populations and workforces. The disruptive potential of Industry 4.0, compared to established production models and structures, is already affecting labour markets. There is a growing demand for new professional profiles and skill clusters, even for traditional roles, to ensure high employability in these new scenarios (Cedefop, 2018; European Parliament, 2021). Recent surveys have highlighted the delays in the digital transition of Italian enterprises, especially small and medium-sized ones (European Commission, 2021).

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted education systems, posing a real challenge for the resilience and development of training systems. The pandemic has stressed the entire education chain, acting as a stress test that affected not only vocational training but also the broader education sector and spaces traditionally designated for formal and non-formal learning. However, it has also promoted new forms of learning through the extensive use of remote work. This shift has led to smart learning, where the traditional boundaries of time, space, and educational settings have become more flexible, emphasising the learner's specific and dynamic needs, rhythms, and learning pace over time.

## **1. POST-PANDEMIC CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRAINING SYSTEMS**

In the face of disruptive phenomena that challenge the effectiveness and sustainability of education policies, several critical issues persist in our country, despite ongoing improvements. Key points include:

- In 2020, the early school drop-out rate among 18-24-year-olds was 13.1%, a slight decrease from the previous year but still above the EU average of 10.1%.
- National standardised tests by Invalsi revealed an increase in the percentage of students finishing secondary education with skills below expected levels, rising from 7.5% in 2019 to 9.5% in 2021.

Disadvantaged students experienced twice the learning loss compared to their more privileged peers.

- In many regions, over half of the students failed to reach minimum proficiency in Italian and mathematics.
- In 2021, only 28.3% of 25-34-year-olds had tertiary education, the second lowest in the EU, compared to the EU average of 41.2% and the target of at least 45% by 2030.
- The adult participation rate in education and training activities for those aged 25-64 was 9.9% in 2021, aligning with the European average of 10.8% after years of stagnation. However, Italy still ranks fifteenth out of thirty countries, largely due to low levels of basic skills and qualifications among the adult population, especially in older age groups (Angotti, 2022).

In this complex scenario, where the need to mitigate the intense pressure caused by the pandemic crisis intersects with the challenges and uncertainties of the new energy crisis, training systems are undergoing a progressive redesign. This redesign aims to reconcile the evolving needs of diverse local labour markets with individual aspirations for career advancement. A key objective is to ensure equal opportunities for all by developing training programmes that create pathways for professional growth and skill updates aligned with the new demands of the business sector. Skills, particularly, play a crucial role in linking educational pathways with potential professional growth opportunities in both formal and non-formal learning contexts. Their portability (Le Boterf, 1994) makes them certifiable and valuable.

In order to understand where we stand in the evolution of the continuing training system (or, rather, systems) in Italy, it is useful to adopt an inverted approach compared to the one traditionally used in the literature (Federighi, 2006), briefly reconstructing the state of the art of the currently available offerings in the various components of the education and training system (Angotti, 2019) starting from initial training, moving through higher technical training and work-based learning, to continuing training and adult learning.

### **1.1. Current State of Initial Vocational Training and Apprenticeship Training**

In the Italian context of initial vocational training, the leFP component is well-established at the foundational level of the technical vocational training chain. According to Inapp's national monitoring, the 2019/2020 training year saw 250,194 enrollments, predominantly in accredited training centers. This period

experienced a notable decline in student numbers, consistent with recent trends affecting professional institutes. Conversely, there was a significant rise in dual mode courses, involving real work contexts or simulated enterprises. However, a substantial disparity in facilities and enrollments persists between the North and South of Italy, affecting both traditional and dual modes.

Following the completion of leFP courses, students typically progress to IFTS courses, which offer technical specialization leading to the qualification of Specialized Technician. In 2020, the IFTS segment had 2,576 enrollments across 120 courses, primarily concentrated in Central-Northern regions. At the higher end of the chain, ITS (higher technical institutes) offered 260 courses in 2020, with 6,874 students enrolled and 5,280 diplomas awarded. The recently reformed ITS Academy conducted 380 courses for over 9,000 students. Despite the comprehensive structure of the technical-professional education pathway, there are challenges in ensuring coherence among the leFP, IFTS, and ITS systems.

Apprenticeship training in Italy is predominantly represented by the professional type, leading to contractually recognized qualifications. In 2020, 92% of apprentices, totaling 116,468, were enrolled in these programs. Other types of apprenticeships are less common, with 8,823 in first-level training and only 805 in third-level training. The broader context of work-based learning highlights significant regulatory changes in extracurricular traineeships, marking a pivotal shift despite their recognition as a model in Europe. (Cedefop, & Inapp 2024).

## **1.2 Evolution of the Adult Learning and Continuing Vocational Training System**

The Continuing Training and Adult Learning systems in Italy are undergoing significant transformations due to new policy measures, particularly the National New Skills Plan and the PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan). These changes aim to support active policies during the current crisis and are developing within an increasingly complex framework. The support measures for ongoing training are multifaceted, involving traditional channels like regional interventions (ESF – European Social Fund) and those managed by social partners (Joint Interprofessional Funds for CVT, national collective bargaining). New programs also focus on enhancing business competitiveness (Training tax credit 4.0), addressing crises (FNC – New Skills Fund), and improving adult skills (GOL Programme – Workers’ Employability Guarantee).

This complex framework includes various national intervention measures managed by different administrations (Regions and Autonomous Provinces, Social Partners, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, Ministry of Economic



Development) and a diverse set of actors and stakeholders at multiple levels (national, regional, territorial, sectoral, company). The introduction of the National New Skills Plan marks a significant shift, launching a unified and integrated strategic design.

In 2021, the Unified Conference approved the National Strategic Plan for the Development of Adult Population's Skills, aiming to establish integrated territorial networks for education, training, and work services across various learning contexts (formal, non-formal, and informal). These networks aim to address significant gaps in basic skills and low qualifications among the adult population. Key elements include the Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIA) and Employment Centres, which cover functions such as reception, guidance, needs analysis, credit recognition, and skill certification (Amendola, Angotti, Di Castro, Vitali & Volpi 2023; Cedefop 2024).

## **2. FUNDING AND PARTICIPATION IN CONTINUING VOCATIONAL TRAINING**

The recent evolution of the Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) system in Italy is evident in the figures. The most widely used public funding channel is the Interprofessional Funds (Inapp, 2021). Currently, 19 active Interprofessional Funds have been joined by about 750,000 enterprises, employing over 9,830,000 workers. In 2021, these Funds received € 590 million from INPS, totaling nearly €9.5 billion since 2004. In 2020, the Funds approved over 45,000 training plans, involving about 1,281,000 workers and over 61,000 enterprises, though there was a decline due to COVID-19. (Italian Parliament 2022).

The second major funding channel is regional programming managed through ESF resources. In 2020, the Regions and Autonomous Provinces committed €122 million across 62 notices, focusing on anti-crisis actions and supporting workers' transitions.

From 2018 to 2020, the Interprofessional Joint Funds published 249 notices with a commitment of €1.318 billion, while the Regions and Autonomous Provinces published 87 notices for €320 million. In its first year, the New Skills Fund (FNC) received €778 million, involving over 6,700 enterprises and 375,000 workers, with around 47 million training hours.

## **3. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CONTINUING VOCATIONAL TRAINING**

Despite the substantial volume of activity produced, even in the area of continuing training, a low incidence of interventions was registered in the

regions of Southern Italy, particularly in the area of interprofessional funds, which reflect more the sectoral characteristics of the production system (Italian Parliament 2022).

Regarding the training supply sector, over the last 15 years we have witnessed a wide-ranging transformation in the structure of the system, driven by the entry of new operators specialised in providing services to businesses. From the third edition of the Inapp OFP survey (Vocational Training Offer in Italy) it emerges that among the organisations accredited by the Regions, 86.9% are now dedicated to Continuing and Permanent Training activities, against 58.2% who deal with Higher Education and 38.7% with Compulsory Training. In addition, 42.7% of the structures that activated new courses in 2019 operated with interprofessional Funds or with sectoral funds providing courses for the employed. In total, training facilities launched 26,925 courses, for an average of 54.4 courses per institution, amounting to 1,272,296 hours of training, an average of 47.3 per course. The total number of trainees trained was 253,585, an average of 512.3 per institution and 9.4 per course provided.

However, despite this situation, several issues remain open, alongside new challenges posed by the emergence of global transformational factors and the new opportunities presented by the implementation of the strategic plans envisaged under the PNRR.

Among the primary issues is the equity in access to corporate training for vulnerable categories (low-skilled, over-50s, residents in the South), aggravated by the difficulties that the complex and diversified system of support for continuing training encounters in promoting an extensive coverage of the workforce, at territorial and sectoral level. In fact, public funding still reaches a very limited portion of businesses, leaving most micro-enterprises without coverage. Consequently, the majority of training interventions for employees are predominantly delivered through private financing, leading to short courses that are generally catalogue-based.

Another long-standing issue is the North-South gaps in the regional distribution of quality services and opportunities, which are currently mainly concentrated in the northern regions.

There remains an underlying cultural and value-based issue concerning resistance to change and the questioning of company organisation, an issue that concerns not only micro and small enterprises (and, above all, their owners) but generally all companies that have not yet adopted a learning organisation model.

It is then necessary to consider the impact and fallout of the pandemic on company training choices, which initially triggered a significant increase in the use of distance learning (FaD – Formazione a Distanza), later made optional or ceased altogether at the end of the emergency. However, this approach largely replicated classroom teaching schemes, focusing primarily on the synchronous learner-learner methodology rather than the asynchronous one typical of e-learning. In many cases, however, as mentioned above, the introduction of remote work practices formed the basis for experimentation with different forms of remote work.

Among the new challenges to which Italian enterprises are called today are, on one hand, the redefinition of business models and the definition of a training offer more closely linked to corporate targets and strategies, and, on the other hand, the need to reduce the skills gap on the issues of digitalisation, ecological transition and internationalisation. To this end, it would be useful to intervene by employing age management tools such as, for example, intergenerational learning, to foster an internal realignment that favours the development of up-skilling and re-skilling processes within corporate contexts.

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# KEY ISSUES FOR CONTINUING VOCATIONAL TRAINING POLICIES IN ITALY, BASED ON THE RESULTS OF THE INAPP SURVEY INDACO-COMPANIES

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Although the Italian Continuing Vocational Training system (CVET) has assumed an increasingly crucial importance in the socio-economic development of the Country, it has a number of limitations and criticalities that still hold back its massive and widespread use. The paper intends to provide a transversal analysis of the CVET system, aimed at identifying a core of key issues that currently significantly limit access to training practice by a large share of potential users. For each theme dealt with, alongside an examination of the essential data of the scenario, some in-depth observations are proposed.

continuing vocational training; cvts; digital and ecological transition.

## INTRODUCTION

INDACO-Imprese (hereinafter referred to as INDACO-Companies) is the Italian survey that complements the five-yearly national Continuing Vocational Training Survey survey (hence the name INDACO-CVTS). It was jointly designed by ISFOL (now INAPP) and ISTAT and developed through methodological cooperation within the framework of a research protocol initiated in 2002. The survey is carried out under the framework of the National Statistical Plan of SISTAN (National Statistical System) at least once during each five-year period, alternating with the CVTS. The survey employs the same methodologies, classifications, and definitions used in the Eurostat CVTS and therefore also takes the name 'INDACO-CVTS', allowing for comparisons with the corresponding five-yearly surveys carried out in other European countries.

The Survey involves a sample of 20,000 Italian companies, representative by

territory, size, and sector of economic activity. In this paper, the data refers to the year 2019, with the previous edition taking place in 2019, covering the year 2018.

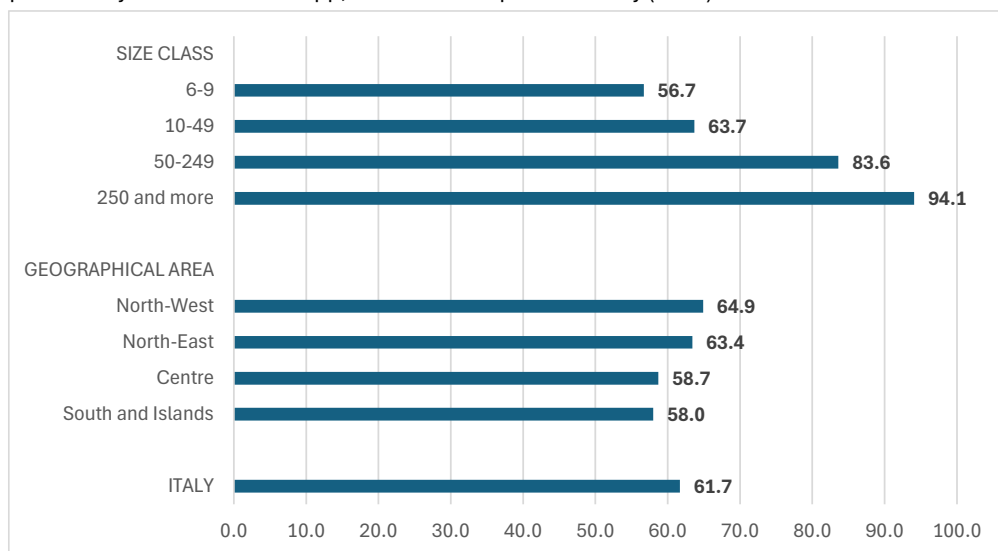
## **1. KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE CONTINUING TRAINING SYSTEM IN ITALY**

### **1.1. Gaps between Companies on a Geographical and Size Class Basis**

In 2019, nearly 62% of companies with more than five employees provided training to their employees. This investment, consistent with the trend of previous years, mainly involved companies with more than fifty employees, operating in industry and headquartered in northern regions. The propensity to implement training measures increases with the size of the company: it rises from 56.7% for companies with between six and nine employees to 94.1% for the largest companies. Regarding territorial distribution, a gap remains between different macro-areas of the country. Companies in the South and Islands have a lower rate of training participation (58%), compared to regions in the North-East and North-West, where the rate exceeds 63%. The overall rate of access to training courses, calculated on the employees of companies that have invested in training, stands at 58.3%. An analysis of company size reveals that training participation increases as the size class of employees increases, with the sole exception of small companies, which show a lower rate than micro-companies (6-9 employees: 58.7%; 10-49 employees: 52.1%; 50-249 employees: 52.6%; 250+ employees: 65.4%).

Regarding the influence of the size variable, it is not enough to reduce the relationship between the size of the company and its investment in training to a simple correlation. The reality is more complex. While there has been a significant performance, both on the part of micro-companies and – to an even greater extent – of large companies, it is precisely the SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) that show the weakest signs of vitality in terms of training. This is a cause for concern, particularly considering that one of the central issues in the medium term refers to what has been called the ecological and digital transition of the workforce. In fact, it is well known how the stimulus provided by investments for the digital and green transitions, if not accompanied by appropriate and systematic retraining measures, may entail, in the future, the risk of massive displacements from production processes – or at least forms of serious marginalisation – for the least qualified workers.

Figure 1. Companies providing training by size class and territorial breakdown –% of all enterprises: Italy 2019. Source: Inapp, INDACO-Companies Survey (2020)



## 1.2. Gender gap and age gap

Women are, on the whole, at a disadvantage when it comes to access to training courses, showing a value 2.6% lower than that of men. This lower access is confirmed across all considered company size classes, with the largest gap in companies with more than 250 employees (-6.2%). At the macro-area level, the gap between women and men is narrower in the South and Islands, while it becomes more substantial in the North-East (-3.8%). In the industrial sector, the female access rate stands at 52.7%, with a particularly significant gender gap (-6.4 percentage points).

Workers over 50 register an access rate of 53.1%, a full 7.5 percentage points lower than the under-50s class. This gap remains consistent across both size classes and territorial distribution, reaching up to 10 percentage points in the southern and island regions, as well as in companies with between 10 and 49 employees. Finally, disaggregating the data on the basis of professional qualification, a rather wide range is observed in course participation, with values decreasing from executives and middle managers (76.5%), to office workers (63.9%), blue collars and auxiliaries (52.3%) and entrepreneurs/owners/shareholders (44.7%).

The strong segmentation of the system of effective access to training within companies engaged in training activities is one of the main barriers to skill upgrading and retraining. Even when the obstacle of companies not willing to

engage in training has been overcome, there are further access limitations affecting specific profiles of employees. The groups that have higher participation in learning courses are the younger, more educated population, and those employed in qualified professions. In contrast, for the typical worker with lower educational levels, over 45 years old, and in an unqualified role, the likelihood of being involved in training activities decreases, with a multiplying effect across the three cited variables.

Tab. 1. Participants in CVT courses, by gender, age, size class and territorial breakdown –% of persons employed in all enterprises: Italy 2019. Source: Inapp, INDACO-Companies Survey (2020)

	Total	Females	Gender gap	Over 50	Age gap
<b>SIZE CLASS</b>					
6-9	51.0	48.5	-4.0	50.0	-1.5
10-49	63.2	60.2	-4.5	62.7	-0.8
50-249	82.9	79.9	-4.5	82.9	0.1
250 and more	93.9	93.5	-0.7	95.6	2.5
<b>GEOGRAPHICAL AREA</b>					
North-West	81.8	81.8	0.1	81.0	-1.0
North-East	78.1	76.8	-2.2	77.5	-0.9
Centre	73.2	69.5	-5.9	74.1	1.4
South and Islands	62.6	61.1	-2.1	66.2	5.3
<b>ITALY</b>	<b>75.7</b>	<b>74.9</b>	<b>-1.4</b>	<b>76.1</b>	<b>0.6</b>

### 1.3. Limits of Public Funding

Overall, 7.6% of training companies in 2019 received funding from external sources, primarily from the Interprofessional Joint Funds for CVT (*Fondi Paritetici Interprofessionali per la Formazione Continua*) (70.3%). Smaller shares used resources from public administrations (17.5%) and other sources (14.6%). Only a small portion of the funds provided by the Industry 4.0 National Plan (Piano Nazionale Impresa 4.0) was utilised (6.4%). This means that more than 92% of the training companies use rely solely on their own resources for training purposes. From a size perspective, the percentage of companies that received funding increases as the number of employees increases, both in relation to the Interprofessional Funds and in general. While in the former case



the difference between large and micro companies is around 35%, in the latter it is over 40%. A shift in trend is seen in the case of funding provided by public administrations, with small companies particularly relying on this (29.9%), compared to larger ones (7.3%). Far smaller, however, are the differences in the use of funds for the Industry 4.0 National Plan. At the territorial level, in the South and Islands the share of companies that have obtained funding is lower than elsewhere, particularly in the North-Eastern regions, where the value is twice as high.

Qualitative surveys carried out as part of the INDACO Companies Survey indicate that, for a significant share of companies, the lack of recourse to public funding for training purposes is due to the considerable amount of administrative work involved in the operational management of training activities. Despite the benefits brought by public resources, this would in fact entail a serious burden in terms of indirect costs (personnel, time, additional expenses, etc.). Furthermore, companies often complain about the difficulty of operating according to rigid and standardised supply models. In this regard, it should be noted that companies currently favour supply systems that are less tied to the options chosen at the planning stage and more open to the recognition of needs identified directly within the company context.

#### **1.4. Training for the Digital and Ecological Transition**

In 2019, 43.3% of companies that introduced 4.0 technologies accompanied the technological transformation process with targeted training. Geographically, the North-East and North-West recorded the highest values of training associated with adopting the 4.0 model, (48.2% and 46.8%), while the areas of the Centre and South and Islands lagged behind (38.4% and 36.4%). Stratification by size class shows that training affected about half of medium-sized and large companies, compared to significantly fewer small companies (41.7%). In the industrial sector, 46.3% of companies have carried out specific training activities following the adoption of Key Enabling Technologies (KET) 4.0, approximately 5 percentage points higher than in the services sector. Breaking down by the various types of 4.0 technologies, among companies that introduced innovations concerning advanced automation and robotics, 57.4% also implemented specific training. For all other types, the share of companies that have carried out corresponding training activities falls below 50%. In descending order: business management software (48.3%), Big Data (46%), simulation between interconnected machines 45.7%, immersive technologies (38.7%) IT security (31.3%), cloud solutions (26.9%), 3D printers (24.6%), and

the Internet of Things (22.5%).

The adaptation of staff skills to the efficient use of previously introduced green measures involves three out of ten companies (30.2%). The values tend to increase with company size: large company 61.2%, medium-sized company 43.7%, small company 27.7%. From a territorial point of view, the percentages are relatively consistent with the overall average.

A critical point to emphasise concerns findings emerging from scientific discussions about the development of the Industry 4.0 model. In fact, it is often highlighted that the transition to digital technologies, through the introduction of enabling technologies, must be preceded – if it is to be fully effective – by a reorganisation of company structures. This means that, in a 4.0 transition scenario, we are witnessing the emergence of a demand for both ultra-specialist and organisational skills, as part of a process that reshapes professional profiles increasingly defined by multi-skilling. This means that investment in new technologies alone, without by a corresponding re-skilling and up-skilling of both technical and organisational skills, may incur unforeseen critical issues. Similarly, the green transition of companies also requires special attention on the front of the adaptation of human resources to the new scenarios. This is necessary both to support the reduction of environmental impact and to foster the development of new products and services.

### **1.5. High Incidence of Compulsory Training**

In terms of the content of the courses conducted in 2019, companies showed a marked preference for a few predominant areas. Foremost among these is Environment, Health, and Safety at Work (carried out by 83.5% of the companies), which has a clear predominance. This is followed, at a gap of more than 50 percentage points, by courses on specific production and service provision techniques and technologies (32.5%) and Office work, secretarial, accounting, finance and administration (20%). Decidedly fewer companies, with percentages of less than 20%, focused on topics related to the Protection of privacy, anti-corruption, anti-money laundering, transparency, (16.6%), as well as the Development of personal skills, motivational activities, teamwork (14.1%). Even smaller percentages of companies prioritised courses in Information Technology (12.2%), Sales and Marketing Techniques (12.6%) and, to an even lesser extent, Foreign Languages, including Italian for Foreigners (5.9%).

Considering the reasons that gave rise to the training intervention, three priorities stand out in particular, in this order: compliance with specific legal

obligations (cited by 84% of training companies), the up-skilling of existing skills (66%) and re-skilling, i.e., the acquisition of new skills (52%). If, on the one hand, the relevance of the motivation represented by adherence to legal obligations confirms the fact that it is a constant feature over time of the continuous training practised in our country, on the other hand it puts the picture of the skills subject to greater training attention in a partially different light. These are predominantly technical and operational skills, often dictated by laws, standards, or regulations—whether tied to professions, sectors, processes, or products. However, when the number of training hours rather than the number of companies is used as the metric, the relative weight of mandatory courses diminishes significantly, accounting for just 32.8% of total training hours provided.

Companies that only realised courses due to legal obligations represent 37.8% of the total. Their share grows as the size profile decreases: from 42.4% of the micro enterprise, to 37.1% of the small enterprise, 23.5% of the medium-sized company and 10.9% of the large enterprise. According to the territorial breakdown, the highest values are concentrated in the North-East (40.1%) and Centre (40.2%), while they are lowest in the South and Islands (34.8%). In the comparison between macro-sectors, industry has the highest percentage share (45.9%), almost 15 points behind the tertiary sector (31.6%).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The issues touched upon so far represent several open questions in the perspective of a development of the Italian continuous training system that can be deemed both effective and inclusive, capable of accompanying an adequate upskilling and reskilling of human resources. This is particularly crucial in the face of new challenges – most notably the digital transition and the ecological transition – that the entire productive fabric of the country will increasingly need to confront. Resolving the critical issues identified calls into question further systemic aspects, first and foremost its forms of multi-actor and multi-level governance. These could be further refined in light of the need for greater integration of the devices for interpreting ongoing changes and the development of more convergent intervention strategies at the territorial level.

It will be interesting to see in the coming months whether the policy framework, currently being implemented as part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), will have begun to deliver its initial results. This will likely become evident when data from the next edition of INDACO-Companies is made

available.

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# THE IMPACT OF SMART WORKING ON RESKILLING AND UPSKILLING PROCESSES IN THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTORS IN ITALY: A FIRST ANALYSIS

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This paper delves into a comprehensive examination of the ramifications brought about by remote working, known in Italy as smart working and agile working, considering the key role of continuing training in supporting public and private organizations to adapt to the increasingly rapid changes and innovation processes. The study analyses the impacts on the development and adaptation of training plans and the overarching processes of reskilling and upskilling within the private and public sectors. The analysis is based on the results of a qualitative research project conducted by INAPP, on private and public-sector throughout the period of 2022-23. The first facet explores the intricate interplay between the demand for technology and digital skills and the training processes within the framework of the evolving remote work paradigm. The second facet takes a prospective stance, elucidating the regulatory evolution of remote working and its consequential impact on training initiatives. Shedding light on the interplay between continuing training and remote working in both private and public sectors, this paper underlines strengths observed during the research phase but also discerns critical aspects and potential future scenarios that warrant attention.

smart working; continuing training; digital skills; digital learning; innovation processes.

## INTRODUCTION

Smart working offers flexibility in both location (e.g., working from home) and time, facilitated by digital technologies. While it had gained traction in large companies (Eurofound & ILO, 2017), it remained less common in SMEs and the

public administration (PA). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of agile work across both sectors, balancing public health measures with productivity needs. This shift impacted work organization (e.g., schedules, remuneration, safety) and the delivery of continuing training, which increasingly relied on distance learning.

The pandemic underscored the need for CVET programs and lifelong learning to redesign worker and management competencies, critical for the sustainability and development of labor markets. Upskilling and reskilling, integrated into national and collective bargaining frameworks, are key strategies for organizational renewal. Agile work should be seen as both a driver of innovation and a source of complexity, central to workforce requalification and the adaptation of corporate models (Osservatorio Smart Working, 2020).

Building on these developments, the “Continuing Training and Adult Learning” research group within INAPP’s “Training Systems” Unit conducted a research project in 2022-23 titled “Analysis of the Evolution of the Impacts of Smart Working on Reskilling and Upskilling Processes.”

The research project focused on the continuing training processes related to agile working, examining the effects of smart working on the programming, management, and delivery of training interventions, as well as its impact on organizational performance and productivity. This analysis included both small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and national (ministries, research institutes) and regional public administrations.

The research project was structured in an initial desk analysis phase aimed at surveying and examining the most recent reference literature and reconstructing the theoretical framework regarding agile working (more commonly known as smart working) and its connections with the needs for continuing training, whether in person or at a distance.

Additionally, the project involved conducting interviews (30) with key informants, namely human resources and training managers in SMEs and in the PA, along with academics and subject matter experts, and other stakeholders (Social Partners, Interprofessional Funds, professional training companies, etc.) involved in the development of a national VET system which, in conjunction with regional training systems, aims to support training supply-demand processes, even in the case of resorting to agile or smart working methods.

The interviews were complemented by case studies (10) aimed at collecting information and evaluations based on a set of indicators of CVET associated with smart working, promoted by companies and Public Administrations.

In particular, attention was focused on several questions aimed at delineating: the description of smart working characteristics in companies and in the PA; the competency needs resulting from introduced technological innovations; the type of training provided (whether only that required by law or other types); the organization of training responses (through the company/PA or through providers); the quantification of training activities delivered following the introduction of smart working (increase or decrease) and the need, or lack thereof, to redesign training compared to methods used prior to the introduction of smart working; the possible implementation of career guidance and skills assessment activities (internal or external); the indication of advantages and/or challenges that training in agile working modes has posed for both organizers (methodology, tools, participant involvement) and users.

Regarding prospective aspects, efforts were made to investigate the relationship between “smart working and smart learning,” as well as any unmet or potential training needs, even in anticipation of the gradual return to in-person work following the cessation of the pandemic emergency. Finally, attempts were made to understand whether continuing training would also be necessary for updating specific skills related to agile working, and the possible methods through which such training could be delivered.

This paper presents the key findings of the research project, including an analysis of the legislative evolution of agile and remote working and their impact on the transformation of training practices and workforce development. It also explores the role of digitalisation and its implications, particularly in shaping training, skills acquisition, and reskilling/upskilling processes in the medium to long term.

## **1. TECHNOLOGIES AND DIGITAL SKILLS: IMPACT OF SMART WORKING ON TRAINING PROCESSES**

The digital transition, primarily involving the digital skills of workers and technological infrastructures, has been promoted and accelerated by the pandemic, leading to a significant increase in the adoption of remote work in all its forms (Eurofound, 2022). This transformation has occurred differently across various European countries (JRC, 2020). Digitalization has been a driving factor in integrating advanced technologies into work activities, enabling more people to perform their jobs from home or any connected location. Workers’ digital skills have become essential to face the new challenges of the modern work environment, requiring continuous adaptation and learning to fully exploit the

opportunities offered by digital technologies. In this context, policy recommendations (OECD, 2021) emphasize the importance of developing digital skills among the enabling framework conditions at national and local levels.

The research findings, presented in this paper, highlight the profound shifts in work practices and training modalities catalysed by recent global challenges, particularly those related to the digital transition.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, technological upgrades and device acquisition varied across regions and sectors in Italy, with more innovative businesses having better access, affecting the speed and success of new work models and impacting work well-being. The shift to remote work was challenging for organizations lacking cloud infrastructure and relying on VPNs. Workers without prior remote work experience faced issues with equipment and connectivity, with many receiving portable devices. Initial tools provided included videoconferencing systems, social collaboration technologies, and cloud sharing to maintain workflow and operational continuity.

During the emergency phase, businesses and public administrations quickly shifted digital skills training to remote formats, though in an unstructured manner due to time constraints. The most common approach involved webinars on various topics, including digital skills, cybersecurity, and remote team management, with a focus on moving from control to trust and goal achievement for leaders.

New training needs emerged, especially in soft skills. Onboarding for new hires was essential to help them understand agile work dynamics, while upskilling and reskilling were required for existing workers, particularly in less digitized contexts. Reskilling also focused on adapting digital skills to new requirements and software, especially where remote work led to changes in work processes, leadership, and time management.

Digital literacy needs were particularly high in public administrations and less innovative SMEs, which had not previously adopted digital platforms for work management. This gap was due to limited prior training initiatives and scarce resources. During and after the emergency, mentoring and digital skills transfer among colleagues were implemented, with some public administrations appointing digital representatives to aid the transition, often in collaboration with IT departments.



## **2. ANALYSIS OF THE REGULATORY EVOLUTION OF SMART WORKING IN ITALY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING**

In Italy, smart working (lavoro agile) was formally recognized by Law No. 81 of 22 May 2017, which set non-derogable principles for its application in subordinate employment, including, where applicable, the public sector. Prior to this law, agile work had been introduced in some companies through collective bargaining agreements.

Law No. 81/2017 defines agile work as a flexible work modality of executing subordinate employment. It requires an agreement between the parties and it's structured around phases, cycles, and objectives, with no fixed time or workplace constraints, and may involve technological tools. The law aims to enhance competitiveness and improve work-life balance.

Several key characteristics define agile work. First, it is a work execution method, not a specific contract type, maintaining flexibility. Second, it applies only to subordinate employment, excluding self-employment. Third, it sets requirements for how and where work is performed. Agile work involves both on-site and remote work, with no fixed workstation, subject to legal and collective agreement limits on working hours. This distinguishes it from telework, which requires work exclusively outside the employer's premises. A fourth characteristic is that work outside company premises requires a written agreement (fixed or indefinite, with a 30-day notice period for withdrawal), specifying rest periods and measures to disconnect from work-related technology.

Finally, the law holds the employer responsible for the safety and proper functioning of technological tools provided to workers, including protection against accidents and occupational illnesses. It also emphasizes using technology to support work-life balance, workforce participation, and lifelong learning through formal, non-formal, and informal training, alongside periodic competency certification. During the pandemic, remote work became widespread, diverging from the agile work model in Law No. 81/2017 due to legislative exceptions from March 2020 to 2022. These exceptions waived individual agreements and allowed digital fulfillment of obligations. Agile work became the primary (and sometimes only) mode, often without worker consent. These changes highlighted both strengths and weaknesses in the 2017 framework, sparking ongoing discussions about potential revisions amid rapid digitalization and the growing role of AI.

In the public sector, remote working in its emergency form became the standard

mode of work until 31 March 2021. However, the public sector more swiftly resumed in-person work as the regular mode compared to the private sector, where legislators extended derogatory provisions to facilitate agile work even after the health emergency ended. Specifically, regarding the relationship between agile work and training in the public sector, the directive issued by the Minister for Public Administration in late March 2023 emphasised the development of transversal skills in public employees to support digital, ecological, and administrative transitions. This directive outlined agile work as a tool with an innovative and professional development impact on training, highlighting its reciprocal relationship with professional development initiatives.

#### **4. AGILE WORKING, DIGITALISATION AND TRAINING: ANALYSIS AND PERSPECTIVES**

The main findings from the INAPP research project on the initial impact of smart working on training, together with an in-depth analysis of the legislative evolution of agile work and the effects of digitalisation (Angotti, R., Occhiocupo, G., Pedone, A., 2023) on the demand for skill acquisition and updating within public and private sector work, have offered valuable insights and forward-looking reflections.

Two overarching trends emerge from the research. First, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of innovative work practices, such as agile work, a trend that has continued post-pandemic and is still evolving rapidly. Second, agile work and digitalisation (including the integration of AI) have had a positive impact on work performance and on continuous training, particularly when linked to performance evaluation models and individual development plans.

The pandemic accelerated digitalization, driving the widespread use of digital learning, enhancing digital skills, and fostering a culture of innovation. This shift supported collaborative problem-solving and stakeholder networking.

Digitalizing training processes includes the use of LMS and both asynchronous and synchronous distance learning methods, enabling flexible, on-demand education that reduces costs and time.

Agile work has offered benefits such as cost savings, improved communication, better work-life balance, more time for training, environmental sustainability, and personalized training content. However, challenges during the emergency phase included employee sense of isolation, loss of informal learning

opportunities, collaboration overload, blurred work-life boundaries, and difficulties in managing remote teams. The adoption of agile work and related training adaptations revealed distinct differences between the public and private sectors. In the public sector, where agile work was minimal before the pandemic, its introduction marked a significant shift in work organization and training, focusing primarily on digital competencies and remote collaboration skills. Post-pandemic, agile work is seen more as a tool for work-life balance than for enhancing efficiency, governed by Law No. 81/2017 and sectoral agreements, limiting its use to specific days of the week.

Looking ahead, digital transformation should be viewed as an evolving process supporting organizational innovation and transitions in public and private sectors. Continuous training is strategic (Occhiocupo, 2023) for both employees and management, achieved through smart learning practices, including digital and hybrid training formats. A balance between agile and on-site work is needed, along with a connection between agile work and training that fosters the personal and professional development of employees, managers, and organizations. The rise of hybrid work highlights the need for training in cybersecurity, data protection, and health and safety, particularly for remote work.

As organizations transform, soft skills training becomes increasingly important. Leadership should prioritize innovation management and foster a culture of trust and feedback. Employees, both young and old, must be supported to develop greater autonomy, responsibility, and collaboration, creating inclusive workplaces. Developing a competence certification system is essential to enhancing employability and promoting lifelong learning.

Finally, for distance or online training, innovative design approaches are needed to overcome issues like low engagement and distractions, incorporating microlearning and focusing on engagement dynamics in training programs. Technological innovation is creating the conditions for experimenting with new training and work methods that leverage tools such as artificial intelligence and the metaverse, necessitating a strengthening of competencies to manage the digitalisation of processes and meet the demands of content design and delivery.

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# THE CURRICULUM AS A KEY LEVER FOR ACHIEVING EQUITABLE, INCLUSIVE, AND ACCESSIBLE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

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This paper explores the connection between Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and social justice, emphasizing the crucial role of curricula. Despite strong evidence of the benefits of ECCE, challenges such as inadequate investment and resource shortages continue to undermine its effectiveness. The paper examines how ECCE curricula can integrate the four key principles of social justice—equality, equity, rights, and participation—through concrete examples.

curriculum; ECCE; social justice.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent research, particularly in affective and cognitive neuroscience as well as early childhood development, has highlighted the critical importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (hereafter ECCE), especially as recognized by civil society and international organizations. These bodies emphasize the unique needs and particularities of children in this age group. Early childhood represents a pivotal period in an individual's life, with lasting impacts on both their future development and the broader society (UNESCO, 2015). Despite substantial evidence supporting the benefits of ECCE, there remains a lack of investment—both in terms of human resources and financial support—in this sector. This shortfall may undermine the quality-of-service provision and negatively affect the effectiveness of teaching (UNESCO, 2015).

This paper seeks to explore the connection between ECCE and the main theme of the conference, “Education and/or Social Justice”, illustrated by concrete examples of existing curricula. Indeed, curricula play a crucial role in

transforming ECCE systems to foster greater inclusion, equity, and accessibility. The presentation will examine various aspects of early childhood curricula through the lens of the concept of Social Justice, identifying the key characteristics necessary for effective, contextually appropriate, and sustainable implementation. This will first involve defining the key concepts and constructs central to the discussion.

## **1. PRE-CONCEPTUAL ASSUMPTIONS**

The concept of “Social justice,” as defined by Mona Khechen, is “a normative concept centered on the notion of fairness and the principles of equality, equity, rights, and participation.” It is understood through its dimensions: the redistribution of resources and the recognition of cultural differences.

“Early Childhood Care and Education” refers to children aged 0 to 8 years. One of the major challenges ECCE faces is the lack of resources (UNESCO, 2019), both financial, as the early childhood education sub-sector continues to be neglected, and human, as this field remains unattractive due to low wages and limited social recognition of early childhood professions. A lack of investment in these resources has a negative impact on the quality of educational provision.

Curriculum is understood in a broad sense as a tool for orientation, translating intentions set forth in public policies (international, regional, and national) into the education sector, but also encompassing other sectors such as health and protection. The early childhood education sub-sector is inherently multisectoral and intersectoral, and this brings us to the first challenge. Indeed, early childhood systems are complex due to their multisectoral and interdisciplinary nature, as well as the diversity of stakeholders involved (including health and protection sectors), which can impact effectiveness, understanding, consensus-building, and administrative organization.

Broadly speaking, Quality in ECCE is often seen as contrasting with Quantity. It is not merely a matter of providing early childhood services; the service must be efficient, relevant, and beneficial to both the child and society. Additionally, the concept of “educational poverty”, which stands in opposition to quality, is defined by Save the Children Italy as “the deprivation of the opportunity to learn, experience, develop, and allow skills, talents, and aspirations to flourish freely” (Save the Children, 2019).

Therefore, based on the specific challenges and characteristics highlighted— (1) the complex, interdisciplinary, and multisectoral nature of ECCE (ECCE), (2) the lack of investment and resources, and (3) the impact of quality on both

school life and the broader life of individuals and societies— this presentation will explore how the curriculum can serve as one potential pathway for transforming ECCE systems to be more inclusive, efficient, and grounded in children’s rights.

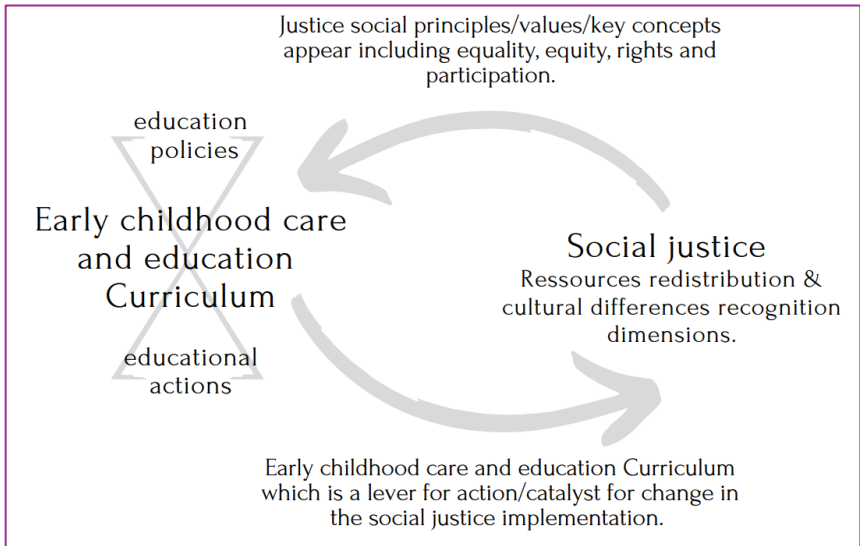
**2. EXPLORING ONE WAY FORWARD: THE CURRICULUM AND PRACTICAL CASES**

To mitigate the challenges identified, one of the most important strategies for improvement and a key lever for change is the curriculum, which functions both as a tool and a process for transformation. A curriculum designed to deliver quality early childhood education must be founded on a set of core values and priorities, as well as characterized by specific features that will be articulated through guidelines, orientations, and objectives. The selection of curriculum content is not a minor matter; it must reflect fundamental values and a clearly defined vision, ensuring that the educational experience aligns with broader societal goals and promotes the well-being of the child.

A curriculum for quality early childhood education must consider the four key principles of social justice as defined by Mona Khechen: equality, equity, rights, and participation. In this context, the following sections provide detailed explanations and examples of curricula that incorporate these principles.

The figure below illustrates the connections between the generalized and simplified ECCE Curriculum presented here, using a single term, and the concept of social justice.

Figure 1. Reciprocal links between the ECCE Curriculum and Social Justice



## 2.1. Equality

Equality<sup>1</sup> is a fundamental principle underpinning the ECCE curriculum. Several core values are central to this approach, particularly the emphasis on play-based curricula. As noted by the Special Rapporteur, “a particular mention must be made of the specific right of children to leisure, play, and recreational activities.” (OHCHR, 2022, p. 73). This highlights the importance of integrating adequate leisure and recreational activities into the curriculum to support the child’s right to play.

Furthermore, the curriculum must foster communication and creativity, allowing children to express themselves freely and develop essential social and cognitive skills. This approach aligns with contemporary values, which emphasize peace, solidarity, and respect for others, as well as a deep appreciation for nature and the environment. At the heart of this curriculum is the centrality of the child. This principle ensures that the child’s needs, interests, and rights are prioritized, creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment that supports the holistic development of all children.

## 2.2. Equity<sup>2</sup>

### 2.2.1. Inclusivity

To illustrate the principle of inclusivity, the American psychologist Howard Gardner has proposed an application of the Theory of Multiple Intelligences to education, advocating for an innovative reorganization of the school system that includes the role of the Curriculum Adviser. This individual would be responsible for aligning the educational goals with the interests of children, ensuring that the various programmes are tailored to meet diverse learning needs. Gardner’s proposal is inherently inclusive, as it recognizes and values the seven distinct types of intelligence and the diverse interests of children, integrating them into the learning process.

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<sup>1</sup> Khechen Mona (2013), definition of equality: “Fair access to goods and services is a fundamental principle of social justice” and “the notion of ‘fairness’ as related to access is often linked with the notion of ‘equality’ to imply that all people, regardless of their gender, race, age, class, language, religion and occupation, are entitled to benefit from public goods and resources. These include access to livelihood, capacities, education, information, health services, employment and job opportunities”.

<sup>2</sup> Khechen Mona (2013), definition of equity: “The principle of equity derives from the recognition that the concept of fairness as equal or uniform distribution is not always possible or implementable, particularly in view of existing injustices that have prevented or reduced the ability of certain individuals or groups to gain equal access to public goods, resources and opportunities in the first place. With this in mind, equitable treatment implies that people would get a ‘deserved’ treatment, meaning what is right for them”.



### *2.2.2 Endogeneity*

Endogeneity emphasizes the importance of recognizing, respecting, and promoting cultural diversity and the rights of minorities in educational contexts. One effective way to achieve this is by using the mother tongue as a medium for learning, incorporating cultural and artistic elements into the curriculum, and fostering an environment where all children's backgrounds are acknowledged. As articulated in the Generative Curriculum approach,

Diversity is embraced, along with a large measure of indeterminacy. Unlike most curricula, which are based on a singular construction of reestablished content and outcomes, the Generative Curriculum is a co-construction that elicits the generation of new ideas and possibilities that cannot be fully anticipated in advance (Gunilla et al., 2007).

This flexible and dynamic approach allows for the integration of diverse cultural perspectives, fostering creativity and innovation in the learning process.

Moreover, it is crucial that early childhood education systems prioritize the protection and promotion of minority languages and cultures. As stated, "The preschool should help to protect and promote the languages and cultures of the national minorities", and "Children with a mother tongue other than [the national language] should be given the opportunity to develop both the national language and their mother tongue" (Government of Sweden, 2010). This principle ensures that all children, regardless of their linguistic background, are provided with an equitable learning environment that values and nurtures their cultural identities.

### **2.3. Participation**

The concept of participation<sup>3</sup> in the development and implementation of ECCE curricula goes beyond mere consultation; it is a dynamic, ongoing process of collaboration among a wide range of stakeholders, each bringing unique perspectives and expertise.

Key stakeholders involved in this process include professionals working in schools and ECCE institutions, who offer valuable insights into the practical aspects of curriculum design, feasibility, and the identification of local needs and priorities. These professionals are instrumental in ensuring that the curriculum is grounded in real-world experience and is adaptable to the specific

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<sup>3</sup> Mona Khechen (2013), definition of participation: "Participation in the context of social justice means involving people in decisions that govern their lives".

context in which it will be implemented. In addition to educators, researchers contribute their expertise, providing evidence-based guidance on best practices and innovations in early childhood education, which helps to ensure that the curriculum is both pedagogically sound and aligned with current research.

Parents, parent associations and community play an equally critical role in the curriculum development process. Parents' perspectives are invaluable in identifying what is important for their children's development and learning, as they have a deep understanding of their children's individual needs and interests. For example, the Generative Curriculum Model was initiated in the 1980s in Canada as part of a partnership project between a *First Nations tribal council* and the *School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria*, aimed at developing a unique approach to community-based training initiatives. Furthermore, the principle of participation extends to the children themselves. It is crucial to view children as active participants in their own learning, rather than passive recipients of information. Their ideas, questions, and initiatives should be seen as central to the learning process, allowing for a co-construction of knowledge where children contribute to shaping their educational experiences. This participatory approach fosters a sense of ownership and agency, empowering children to take an active role in their learning journeys and encouraging the development of critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills.

In sum, the participatory and co-constructive model for ECCE curriculum development recognizes the importance of collaboration among all stakeholders—educators, researchers, parents, and children themselves—ensuring that the curriculum is comprehensive, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of the learners and their communities.

## 2.4. Rights

The connection between Rights<sup>4</sup>, here Human Rights, and the ECCE Curriculum is twofold. Firstly, Human Rights must be explicitly integrated into the curriculum, ensuring that they are not only a formal component of the

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<sup>4</sup> Mona Khechen (2013), definition of Rights: "Rights as a key principle of social justice can be divided into the following two sub-groups: a) legal rights, which include inherited rights, and other lawful rights such as the right to receive payment for one's jobs according to agreed terms; and (b) moral rights, which include people's basic human rights, liberties and such entitlements as the right of "giving people a say in affairs that concern them" (Smith 1994) and the right of certain groups to particular geographic territories (Lee and Smith 2005). In socially just societies, moral rights, even in the absence of legal guarantees, are protected by adequate procedures, norms, and rules, some of which are universally accepted, as is the case with human rights, for instance".

educational content but are also woven into the so-called “hidden curriculum” — which refers to the attitudes, behaviors, and values exhibited by ECCE professionals. These unspoken elements can profoundly shape children’s understanding of their rights and how they are treated, making it essential for educators to model and promote human rights in their daily interactions with children.

Secondly, the curriculum itself serves as both a guarantor and a catalyst for the respect, promotion, and realization of human rights. By embedding principles of equality, participation and inclusivity within educational practices, the curriculum becomes a key instrument in fostering a culture where Human Rights are respected and upheld. It empowers both educators and children to act in ways that protect and promote these rights, helping to create an environment conducive to the full development of the child as a rights-bearing individual.

In addition to these dimensions, a third critical aspect emerges, which forms the core of my research: the right to ECCE itself — my PhD research subject. This right is fundamental to ensuring that every child has access to high-quality early childhood education that is not only equitable but also supports the development of their full potential. The right to ECCE is intrinsically linked to the realization of other human rights, including the right to education, health, and social protection.

The interdependence between the ECCE curricula and Human Rights can also be understood through the lens of the conceptualization of a new human right — the right to ECCE. Recognizing this right can clarify and strengthen the broader understanding and realization of children’s rights, thus reinforcing the need for comprehensive frameworks that protect and promote the rights of children from the earliest stages of their development. By formally recognizing the right to ECCE, we establish a foundation upon which all other children’s rights can be more effectively realized, ultimately contributing to the achievement of social justice and equality for all.

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# NEW QUALITY ASSURANCE APPROACHES: OUTCOMES OF AN INTEGRATED PEER REVIEW EXPERIMENTATION IN ITALIAN VET SCHOOLS AND TRAINING CENTRES

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From 2019 to 2022, qualitative research about an integrated Peer Review – involving both schools belonging to the General Education system and vocational training centers operating in the Regional VET systems – was carried out by INAPP. Through this national research, innovative integrated tools were elaborated by merging the Peer Review methodology, at VET provider level, with the National Evaluation System tools. The new integrated method, based on common quality criteria and indicators, was piloted via a national network. In total 14 Peer Review visits were hosted and more than 50 Peers – many teachers and trainers – were involved in the National experimentation that included three different Italian Regions (Veneto, Lazio and Puglia). During the piloting, the overlapping and redundancy of quality assurance tools and methods, in different education and training settings, created the condition for an in-depth reflection on the role and functions of quality measures in schools and VET centers and on how all the quality measures in place can face inequities among different systems. Starting from the results of the national experimentation, this paper shows how the VET Peer Review methodology can support the development and enhancement of quality in both sectors: General Education and VET.

quality; self-assessment; peer review; education; training.

## INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance and continuous improvement of training provision have

gained increasing importance for institutions and policymakers across Europe (Visscher, 2009), as well as for Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers (Dordit, 2018). Over the past two decades, a particularly promising method for quality development and assurance in VET was the Peer Review at VET provider level — known as Peer Evaluation — which consists in an external assessment conducted by a group of experts, the Peers, who are invited to evaluate the quality of various areas and domains related to the evaluated entity, namely a VET institute or centre (Gutknecht-Gmeiner, 2008). Peers are independent experts who operate “on an equal footing” with the individuals within the context being observed and evaluated (Allulli, 2012). The VET Peer Review methodology aims at external evaluation designed to support VET schools and training organizations in their quality assurance and development initiatives, focusing on the following quality areas: 1. curriculum; 2. teaching and learning; 3. assessment; 4. learning outcomes and results; 5. social environment and accessibility; 6. management and administration; 7. institutional ethics and strategic planning; 8. infrastructure and financial resources; 9. deployment, recruitment and development of human resources; 10. working conditions for human resources; 11. external and international relations; 12. social interaction and participation; 13. gender equality; 14. quality management and evaluation (Tramontano & Allulli, 2012). Each quality area is further divided into specific criteria. In a Peer Review, at least two quality criteria for each selected quality area should be evaluated to ensure a balance between the significance of the evaluation experience and the overall efficiency of the training provision. Additional criteria can be included as needed. All criteria to be evaluated must be part of the self-assessment conducted by the institution or training centre to be evaluated, and they must be documented in a Self-Assessment Report prepared by the evaluated entity. The criteria are further detailed using quality indicators that serve to illustrate them (Tramontano & Allulli, 2012).

## **1. THE ADDED VALUE OF A PEER REVIEW AT VET PROVIDER LEVEL**

Based on a methodology elaborated and defined at European level, promoted by the EQAVET network<sup>1</sup>, the Peer Review at VET provider level is a standard

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<sup>1</sup> The European Network for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) was established in October 2005 by the European Commission following the favourable opinion of the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training. Since 2006, its members are designated by Member States, candidate countries, EFTA-EEA countries and the European Social Partners’ organisations, in accordance with an explicit procedure defined by the

procedure which includes four main phases that can be described as follows:

- preparatory phase: during this phase, the institution or training centre prepares a Self-Assessment Report. The Peers are recruited and trained. The evaluated institution and the Peers plan the dates and schedule for the Peer Review visit and define the Peer Review Agenda;
- central phase called “Peer Visit”: this phase is the core moment of the Peer Review process. Peers visit the institution or training centre, evaluating based on established quality areas, criteria, and indicators. At the end of the Peer Visit, Peers provide initial oral feedback to the evaluated entity;
- feedback phase: after the Peer Visit, Peers draft a Peer Report, which is reviewed and commented on by the institution or training centre. The final Peer Review Report is then prepared.
- final phase called “From Plan to Action”: in this phase, the results and recommendations from the Peer Review are translated into actionable improvement plans, implemented by the evaluated entity.

Through the phases of the Peer Review, the evaluated VET school or vocational training centre can gain numerous benefits and initiate a continuous quality improvement approach. Specifically, the institution or organization can receive critical yet collegial feedback from field experts on the quality of its training provision, assess and enhance the quality of its education and training services, reflect on its strengths, shortcomings, and weaknesses, benchmark against best practices shared by Peers, engage in mutual learning processes with Peers and build networks with other schools and VET providers.

Peer Review at VET provider level has been voluntarily adopted across Europe. It serves both as a formative tool for individuals and as an improvement mechanism for organizations, fostering the development of quality assurance across all areas and levels.

## **2. THE EXPERIMENTATION OF AN INTEGRATED PEER REVIEW BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTRES IN ITALY**

INAPP conducted an experimentation between September 2019 and May 2022, delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was based on the integration of the VET Peer Review method and tools for Initial Vocational Education and

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European Commission. Further information is available at: EQAVET – European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training – European Commission.

Training – IVET – (Tramontano & Allulli, 2012) with those used by the National Evaluation System for education, established with the Presidential Decree No. 80/2013.

The foundation of this integration lies in the need to share and, where possible, harmonize and make equally effective the quality assurance practices and systems used in technical and professional secondary schools – which are part of the General Education system – with those adopted by regional VET providers. While schools nationwide uniformly apply the National Evaluation System procedures and tools, regional VET providers operate under a regional governance system that allows for experimenting with and adopting additional quality assurance methods.

### **2.1 The main objectives and goal of the integrated Peer Review experimentation**

Starting in 2019 and building on prior national experimentation actions on the VET Peer Review methodology, INAPP launched a pilot project. The first step of this pilot project included the establishment of a national network, used to test a new Peer Review model used for IVET, aimed at integrating self-assessment carried out by training centres with evaluations conducted by schools (Freddano & Pastore, 2018). Among the main objectives and goal of the piloting are included the following:

- facilitating collaboration, dialogue, and integration between the education and vocational training systems in Italy, involving distinct organizations that serve similar target groups in terms of age and education/training needs, fostering mutual growth;
- verifying the applicability of the Peer Review method for IVET in a “mixed” public-private context;
- creating and expanding a national Peer Review network among schools and vocational training centres.

### **2.2 The conceptual framework and methodology adopted for the integrated Peer Review**

Beyond creating the national network for Peer Review implementation, one particularly challenging and complex task was integrating the quality areas of the Peer Review methodology for IVET with the rubrics of the Self-Assessment Report — known as RAV (*Rapporto di Autovalutazione*) — of the National Evaluation System. This integration aimed to maintain the RAV rubric structure to facilitate its adoption and dissemination in schools involved in the



experimentation. More in detail, the process followed these methodological steps:

- adapting the existing assessment tools based on the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) quality cycle and quality assurance processes used in VET. The assessment tools identified through the experiences of the two evaluation systems — schools and vocational training centres — were integrated. The initial revision of existing tools laid the foundation for further “desk” revisions. Following the principle of continuous improvement, these tools’ relevance and effectiveness for integration into VET evaluation systems were monitored during pilot Peer Reviews and underwent further revisions post-experimentation;
- enhancing the framework of indicators used for the RAV, leveraging the specific features of the VET Peer Review methodology, which requests and analyses both quantitative and, more importantly, qualitative evidence, emphasizing input from all stakeholders (teachers/trainers, students, administrative staff and so on);
- emphasizing the educational value of the Peer Review quality areas. The variety of indicators provided for each quality area dimension serves as an effective learning tool for all professionals involved in quality assurance processes.

New indicators were proposed alongside a range of possible additional informational sources to account for the Peer Review evaluation methodology’s implementation methods.

### **2.3 The main activities and the data collection procedure carried out for the experimentation**

A prerequisite for the national integrated experimentation, enabling INAPP to compare the two systems — school education and vocational training — was the revision of VET Peer Review tools. To ensure effective implementation of the VET Peer Review methodology and to avoid duplication or redundancies with other existing evaluation instruments, such as ISO quality certification systems, the tools were reviewed, integrated and modified to align them with tools used by schools and vocational training centres. The methodological approach adopted for the national experimentation was based on the following actions:

- identifying major areas of consistency and overlap between the dimensions of the National Evaluation System and the quality areas of the Peer Review for IVET;

- analysing quality indicators and descriptors provided for each RAV area (Poliandri, Freddano & Molinari, 2019) and comparing them with the criteria and indicators offered by the VET Peer Review methodology;
- selecting quantitative and qualitative indicators from the Peer Review methodology to enrich the National Evaluation System. These additions supported self-assessment and enhanced evaluation efforts through the increased descriptive capacity of the quality areas;
- allocating relevant indicators from Peer Review quality areas not yet integrated into the dimensions of the National Evaluation System, aligning them with provided descriptors.

The analysis of different, even similar, quality assurance tools, produced a correlation matrix linking the RAV rubrics' descriptive indicators with those of the VET Peer Review methodology. Given the mandatory nature of the National Evaluation System for education, the new quality areas developed for the experimentation were limited to the first four areas of the VET Peer Review method (Tramontano & Allulli, 2012) and adopted the three-dimensional model (context, outcomes and process) already in use in schools.

### **3. THE RESULTS OF THE INTEGRATED PEER REVIEW EXPERIMENTATION AT NATIONAL LEVEL**

As part of the integration process between the National Evaluation System methods and tools and those used in VET Peer Review, a new set of instruments was created.

Following the development of the new integrated self-assessment tools — such as quality area grids, indicators for integrated Peer Review, self-assessment reports, and improvement plans — specific training was provided to teachers and trainers participating in the experimentation.

The national experimentation reached the main objectives and goals set by INAPP, undertaking and achieving the following activities:

- development of new self-assessment tools, including quality area grids, indicators for integrated Peer Review, self-assessment reports, and improvement plans;
- training of over 50 teachers and trainers on the integrated Peer Review methodology and the use of new integrated self-assessment tools.

Through numerous Peer Review visits, with teachers and trainers trained as Peers participating, the new integrated self-assessment tools were tested. From

the distinct methodologies — Peer Review for Initial Vocational Training and Self-Assessment in the National Evaluation System — the integrated Peer Review procedure was refined and formalized, avoiding unnecessary overlaps, which would be counterproductive and demotivating for participants, preventing excessive procedural complexity, which, if not based on a synthesis of the two methods, could add the Peer Review’s obligations to the National Evaluation System’s requirements, preserving the VET Peer Review methodology’s effectiveness in quality evaluation, which had proven to be successful and well-received in prior experimentations across VET in Italy and abroad.

The national network involved 14 different institutions, including schools and vocational training centres, which hosted 14 external evaluations — Peer Review visits — across three Italian regions: Veneto, Lazio and Puglia. These Peer Reviews followed an external evaluation process structured in four phases, as established by the VET Peer Review methodology.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

INAPP’s national Peer Review experimentation highlighted the opportunities and strengths of the European methodology, tested at schools and training institutions level (Evangelista & Fonzo, 2023). The methodology’s key strengths, directly experienced and confirmed by the Peers, included a collegial approach, cost-effectiveness approach, immediate feedback with meaningful and actionable data, diverse perspectives and broadened organizational horizons. These aspects represent the distinctive value of the Peer Review method. Moreover, the Peer Reviews conducted during the piloting of integrated self-assessment tools successfully brought together actors operating within different regulatory and institutional contexts — mainly from education and vocational training. These actors, despite differences, spoke the same “language” and shared a common understanding framework. This allowed for genuine dialogue not only between institutions, as is typical in Peer Reviews, but also between systems that enriched each other, fostering a reciprocal exchange between public and private sectors, and between general education and vocational training (Marcuccio, 2023).

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# BEYOND EXPECTATIONS: HOW MUCH DOES THE STRUCTURE OF EUROPEAN EDUCATION SYSTEMS AFFECTS STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE?

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Educational systems at the upper secondary level in European countries are highly differentiated. It is therefore reasonable to consider that the varying internal organization of these systems has national-level effects on both equity and proficiency, elements that directly affect students. In our work, using an approach aimed at observing the underlying social mechanisms (Coleman's boat), we aim to examine the action/interaction between micro and macro phenomena. This will be conducted on a sample of 32 countries described in the Eurydice 2023 report. Building on the work of Benadusi and Giancola (2014), we have recreated a differentiation index to achieve this objective and observe changes over time in educational systems. The ultimate goal of the study was to determine whether the structure of educational systems contributes to the creation of students who exceed performance expectations, specifically if these are related to the presence of students performing better or worse than predicted by their socio-economic and cultural status, i.e., deviant students (Bonanni & Moreschini, 2024).

Educational systems; Performance; Deviant cases; Selectivity; Structural effects.

## INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL MECHANISMS UNDER EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

The European education system, during the reform processes of the 1990s, advocated for the standardization of educational pathways and qualifications (Novoa & Dejong-Lambert, 2003). Perhaps the most differentiated level is upper secondary education, where each country provides an autonomous policies strategy (Volante et al., 2022). The result of it is the fragmentation in the

horizontal structure in the educational systems and between them, resulting in varying levels of selectivity towards students (Benadusi & Giancola, 2014). Differences in the structure of educational systems can, in turn, impact individual factors at the school and/or post-school level and affect the level of inequalities within a country. Early tracking practices, for example, enhance the influence of social backgrounds on educational future choices (Duru-Bellat & Suchaut, 2005). This is also reflected in varying levels of segregation between schools, which, as we shall see, results in a trade-off between efficiency and equity (Sciffer et al., 2022) Given the framework for studying educational systems and their impact—which are a macro aspect—on individual aspects—which are a micro aspect—it is useful to adopt an approach that seeks to integrate macro and micro levels and attempts to observe the micro-macro and macro-macro interaction, such as the Coleman boat model (Coleman, 1994). In this study, we believe that the structure of educational systems impacts on elements that create different educational contexts, specifically on inequalities within these contexts, as well as on performance and its dispersion, both at the individual level and at the school level. This initial macro-micro interaction is followed by individual choices and behaviors influenced by others through social interaction. These, in turn, can have an impact at the macro level, in our case, the distribution of educational credentials. In the Coleman boat model, the macro-macro link can be observed indirectly through micro-interactions. Here the macro-macro link represents the relation between the structure of educational systems and aggregate levels of segregation, concentrating disadvantaged students in underprivileged schools, and perpetuating educational inequalities and divergent life outcomes (Dämmrich & Triventi, 2018).

Aware of the dependency of performances on individual socio-economic status (SES) and accounting for the structure of the educational system, the work aims to study the ability of national school systems to ‘produce’ students who perform better and worse than what would be expected of them based on their social background.

## **1. METHODS AND DATA**

For the analysis we use a dataset that include 32 countries detailed in the Eurydice report (2023), “The Structure of European Education System” (Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland,

Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Türkiye). We added students' level aggregated data from OECD PISA 2012 and 2022 dataset, and country level data from "OECD Education at a Glance" (OECD, 2023a) and "Eurostat" datasets. Furthermore, other measures on the structure of educational systems are taken from the work of Benadusi and Giancola (2014). The second objective of our study is to update the results of this work after a decade. From this data, an index of educational system differentiation for the year 2024 was calculated (and recalculated for 2014 for comparison purposes), following the criteria described in the aforementioned article. Alongside this, several measures of equity and proficiency were used. Among the former, we include the dispersion of mathematics performance, measures of school segregation (Math Score Variance Between and Within School), and a measure of primary effects (calculated as the betas of the correlation between performance to PISA test in math and socio-economic and cultural status of the individuals, i.e. ESCS, in each country, Boudon, 1974; This predictor is considered the best of the performance by the OECD, 2023b). Regarding the latter, the mathematics score (the PISA test topic) obtained by students in the PISA tests and the percentage of adults achieving tertiary education were used. Finally, a proxy measure of educational opportunities was included, represented by what are called deviant cases (Bonanni & Moreschini, 2024). In detail, these are students from low social backgrounds (ESCS, 1st quartile), performing above or below their predicted performance on tests by status, and students of high social status (ESCS, 3rd quartile), performing above or below their predicted performance even by status.

## **2. DIFFERENTIATION INDEX**

The differentiation index derived from Benadusi and Giancola (2014) is the result of a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) based on the structure type of the educational system (Single Structure – Differentiated – Common Core), the number of tracks, the age of first track selection, and the percentage of repeat students. This index has been normalized between 0 and 1, where 0 represents no selectivity, corresponding to comprehensive systems, while 1 represents maximum selectivity, typical of so-called selective systems. In this paper, after a decade from the first new countries enter (Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania and Serbia) with very low levels of selectivity. Reporting the initial findings after ten years: Continental-Saxon countries remain the most selective, Scandinavian the most comprehensive, central Mediterranean and Eastern

countries bridge between these two poles. Changes in the index score between 2014 and 2024 allow us to illustrate the directions taken by educational policies over the last 10 years. Considering the entry of new countries, which alters the scale of the index. Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Iceland, and Norway remain stable in their levels of differentiation (for the sake of brevity, we refer to the summary categories mentioned earlier). France, Ireland, Portugal, Switzerland (which in 2014 had a highly selective system), Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, on the other hand, are moving toward greater comprehensiveness. Finland and the Netherlands are moving toward greater selectivity: the former starting from very low levels of differentiation, and the latter from already high levels.

### **3. ANALYSIS**

To observe what the theory highlights (the effects of structure on micro phenomena and, in turn, the effect of the latter on other macro social facts and the relationship between macro-level phenomena with one another, and between micro-level phenomena among themselves in turn), correlations were performed between the mentioned variables and the structure/differentiation index (Pearson's R were reported, for all correlations *p. value* < 0.05, other non-significative correlation were indicated in the text).

#### **3.1. From structures to contexts**

Firstly, we can observe that, while positive in sign, the recorded correlation between math performance ( $R = 0.301$ ) and education structure is not significant. Secondly, observing the equity measures, primary effects ( $R = 0.61$ ), performance dispersion ( $R = 0.52$ ) and performance (Between school  $R = 0.641$ ; Within school  $R = -0.446$ ) and socio-economic (Between school ESCS dispersion  $R = 0.481$ ) segregation are all positively correlated with the structural index.

By examining the relationships, following a chronological order of impacts throughout students' lives, we can assert that higher differentiation, and thus more selective systems, is associated with a greater impact of primary effects, meaning that family background has a stronger influence on performance. This represents a form of inequality inherited from the family, and in more selective systems, the school seems to fail in its role as an equalizer of inequalities. Observing performance dispersion, we also find that higher levels of differentiation correspond to less uniform performance. This result suggests that more selective systems are less effective at pushing all students to the



same level. The underlying reason for the last interpreted relationship is strongly related to a systemic effect. Delving into the relationship between the differentiation index and the segregation of ESCS among schools (standard deviation of the country's ESCS), it is observed that higher levels of differentiation correspond to greater segregation. In other words, school segregation also has social foundations, not just performance-related reasons. Schools enroll students of similar social backgrounds, thereby choosing not to bring everyone together. If we observe performance segregation between schools, which also underlies status segregation, in selective systems, the dispersion of performance between schools is more pronounced. Recalling the previous relationship, students in selective systems are not all at the same level because the school in which they are enrolled also dictates their average performance. This is also observable in the relationship between the structure and the variance of performance within the same school. This relationship demonstrates that selective systems tend to differentiate schools internally by performance, which does not occur in comprehensive systems where performance polarization is high. In the latter, there will be schools that are very homogeneous regarding high and low levels of proficiency.

### **3.2. A chained effect**

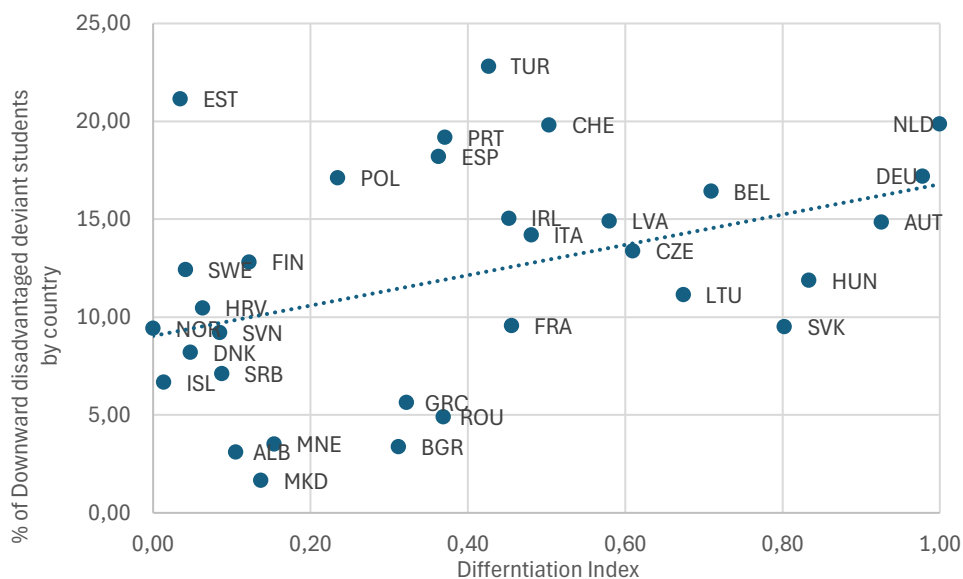
In line with the Coleman boat approach, we attempted to observe a correlation that explains and confirms the existence of a micro-macro connection, not an effect, but an association. Linked to the last correlation observed in the previous paragraph, between internal school segregation and differentiation, we considered that this might be related to the distribution of educational credentials among the population, specifically the percentage of adults that attain tertiary education by country. Chained to the previous correlation, higher within-school performance variance is related to a higher percentage of adults with tertiary education ( $R = 0.61$ ). This partially states that policy choices oriented toward comprehensiveness, while appearing to not pay off in short term performances instead pay off in the long run: when the system holds all together, students with lower performances perceive to be fit for tertiary education. Certainly, this series of associations will need to be further explored in future studies.

### **3.3. Structure and behaviors**

In the last part of our analysis, we argue that differences in structure affect the ability to deviate from educational trajectories determined by social origin. We

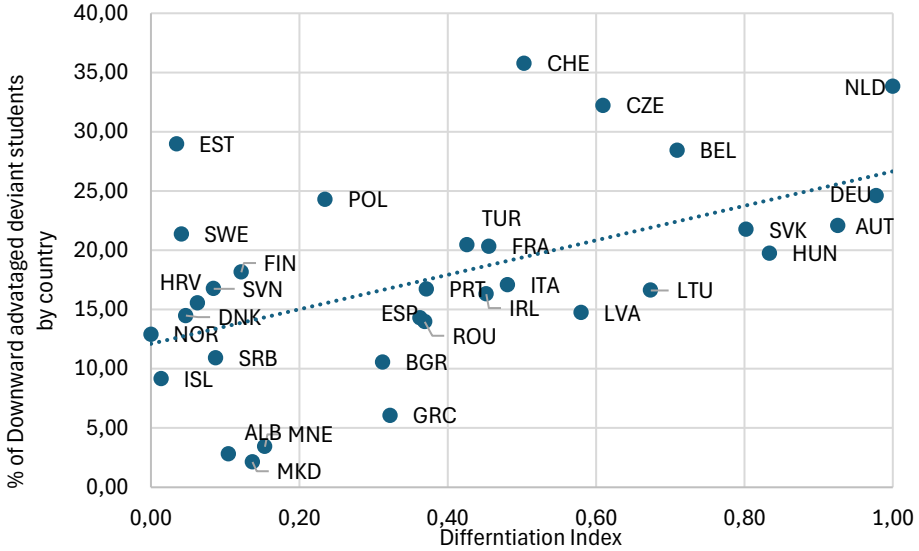
define who perform in ways not adherent to their social status, or in other terms, deviate from the performance predicted by social origins, a deviant student (from deviant cases). Here we took the residuals from the linear regression relating test performances in math on PISA test to socio-economic status and categorized the distribution into ‘expected’ and ‘below’ and ‘above expectations’<sup>1</sup>. We then took our sample of students in each country and categorized them into quartiles based on the ESCS index. We computed, for each country, the percentage of students in the first quartile performing above and below expectations and the percentage of students in the third quartile performing below or above expectations. In this way, we can observe how structure affects students’ behaviors as expressed by their performances and distinguish between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

Figure 1. Association between differentiation index and percentage of downward disadvantaged deviant students. Source: Authors elaboration.



<sup>1</sup> The linear model was performed on the whole sample, and not dividing by country

Figure 2. Association between differentiation index and percentage of downward advantaged deviant students. Source: Authors elaboration.



Firstly, we can observe that relating the two portions of socially disadvantaged (see figure 1) and advantaged (see figure 2) students who perform below what is expected with the structural index shows that in more selective systems, students are more likely to perform below what is predicted by their social status, regardless of their social origin ( $p$  values < 0.05). Here we observe the upward disadvantaged and advantaged deviant students.

Figure 3. Association between differentiation index and percentage of upward advantaged deviant students. Source: Authors elaboration.

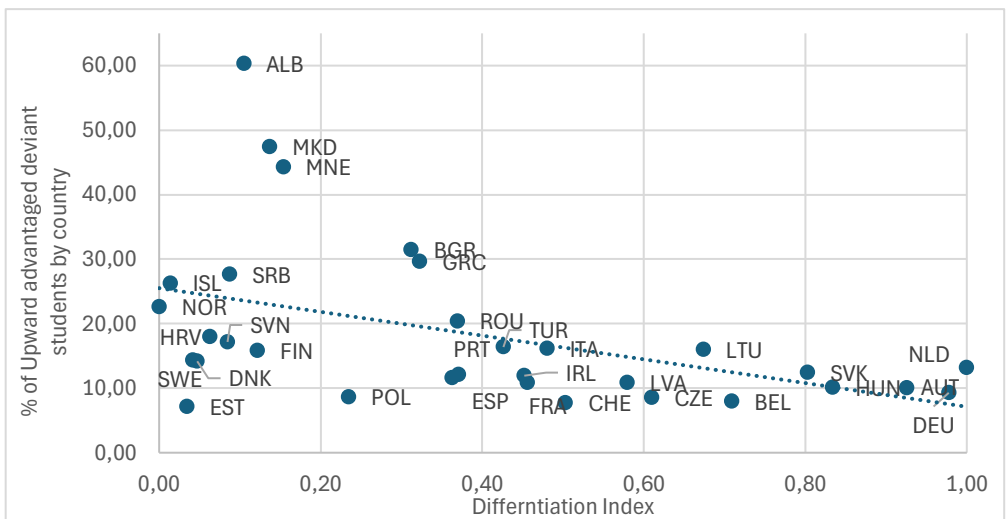
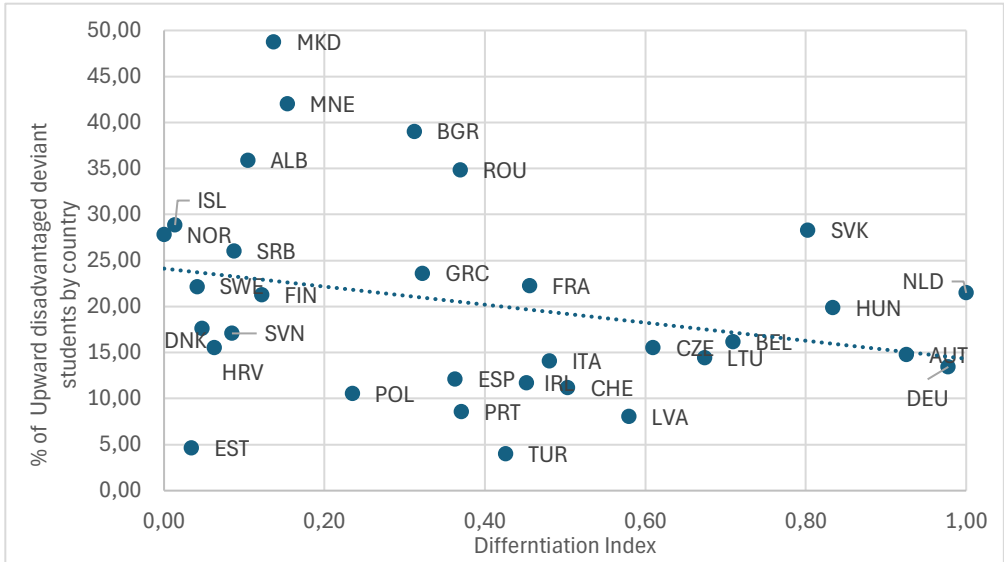


Figure 4. Association between differentiation index and percentage of upward disadvantaged deviant students. Source: Authors elaboration.



#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Ten years after the initial analysis of Benadusi and Giancola (2014), it is evident that most systems, though not all, are moving toward greater comprehensiveness. Moreover, we have seen how policy choices are related to overall educational outcomes in terms of equity and proficiency. We observed in particular that selective systems tend to trade equity for proficiency, maintaining, compared to the other systems considered in the sample, higher levels of educational inequalities. The less selective systems create educational environments that appear to favor long-term returns as observed in the relation between the differentiation index and the percentage of adults attaining tertiary education. We think that this result is due to the more favorable conditions created by comprehensive systems. Moreover, the comprehensive systems seem to help students perform above what is expected based on their social background and protect them from underperforming relative to expectations. This seems to not occur in selective systems, which give the impression of being more addicted to suppress the opportunities to perform beyond what is predicted by status.

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# PATHWAYS FOR TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCIES AND ORIENTATION (PCTO) AS A DEVICE FOR DEVELOPING PERSONAL RESOURCES AND CONTRASTING SCHOOLISTIC DISPERSION

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PCTOs (Pathways for Transversal Competencies and Orientation) are a strategic initiative in the Italian education system designed to foster the holistic development of upper secondary school students and support their educational and career choices. This PRIN 2022-funded project aims to analyze PCTOs' characteristics and evaluate their impact on personal resources, student dispersion, and orientation outcomes. The research is structured into three studies. The first examines the inclusion and objectives of PCTOs within the Three-Year Training Offer Plans (PTOF) of 200 schools, assessing adherence to ministerial standards through document analysis. The second involves five case studies in Lazio, Lombardy, and Emilia-Romagna, gathering data from institutions, teachers, and students to explore factors influencing PCTO planning and outcomes. The third study surveys first-year university students to assess the long-term impact of PCTOs on career decisions and well-being. The project will culminate in an open-access digital platform to help schools self-evaluate and enhance their PCTOs. By integrating theoretical, educational, and technological insights, the project seeks to inform educational policies, improve practices, and foster collaboration within the academic community.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Italian education system is undergoing significant transformation to address challenges such as high dropout rates, territorial disparities, and the need for a workforce equipped with interdisciplinary and practical skills. In response, Pathways for Transversal Competencies and Orientation (PCTO) have emerged as a cornerstone of educational reform. These pathways aim to develop students' transversal competencies, preparing them for complex global challenges while fostering autonomy in their educational and career decisions.

Since their redefinition in the 2019 Budget Law, PCTOs have been mandatory in upper secondary education and integrated into the Three-Year Training Offer Plans (PTOF) of each institution. However, the implementation and effectiveness of PCTOs vary significantly across regions and schools, reflecting systemic disparities.

Moreover, while studies on PCTOs, especially those on larger samples, seem to privilege highlighting governance models, criticalities, and success factors (Giancola & Salmieri, 2021), surveys aimed at giving voice to students' experiences and detecting the effects of such pathways on their resources, levels of well-being, and, ultimately, on their educational and professional choices seem rare.

This paper investigates these dynamics through a research project funded by PRIN 2022, which explores the characteristics and impact of PCTOs in fostering personal resources, reducing student dispersion, and supporting informed decision-making in education and careers.

## **2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The project, still ongoing, aims to provide a multi-dimensional analysis of PCTOs. It adopts a mixed-methods approach and it's structured into three interconnected studies, each addressing distinct but complementary aspects of these pathways.

### **2.1. Study 1: Document Analysis**

The first study investigates how PCTOs are conceptualized and implemented within the Three-Year Training Offer Plans (PTOF) of 200 schools, selected to represent diverse geographical and institutional contexts. Using thematic and lexicometric analyses (Bianquin et al., 2018; Bolasco, 2021), this phase examines the alignment of PCTOs with ministerial guidelines and identifies variations in their objectives, content, organization, and evaluation mechanisms.

### **2.2. Study 2: Multiple Case Studies**

The second study explores the lived experiences of PCTO stakeholders through five case studies conducted in Lazio, Lombardy, and Emilia-Romagna. Employing the Training Research methodology (Asquini, 2018), data collection spans multiple levels, including institutional practices, teacher perspectives, and student experiences. This comprehensive approach aims to identify both enabling and inhibiting factors in the design and implementation of PCTOs, while assessing their impact on students' educational trajectories and career choices.

A key objective of this study is to contextualize the role of PCTOs in cultivating personal resources and competencies, as well as in guiding students' decision-making at the conclusion of secondary education. Adopting a participatory framework, this study positions students as key informants, enabling them to provide valuable feedback on their PCTO experiences (Pastori, Pagani & Sarcinelli, 2020).

The insights gathered through student surveys and focus group interviews serve as a foundation for engaging teachers in each school in a collaborative Training Research process. This iterative dialogue between students and educators aims to refine PCTO practices, fostering an environment of shared responsibility and continuous improvement.

### **2.3. Study 3: Retrospective Survey**

The third phase consists of a retrospective survey targeting first-year university students to assess the long-term impact of PCTOs on career choices and individual well-being. This phase offers insights into the role of PCTOs during key transition periods, providing a broader understanding of their effectiveness in shaping students' educational and professional trajectories.



## **2.4. Digital Platform**

A key outcome of this research is the development of an open-access digital platform designed to support schools in self-evaluating and enhancing their PCTOs. This platform will provide tools for benchmarking practices, sharing best practices, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. By addressing gaps in implementation and standardization, the platform aims to reduce disparities and ensure that all students benefit from high-quality educational pathways.

## **3. EXPECTED IMPACTS**

This project promises significant contributions across theoretical, pedagogical, and technological domains, leveraging an extensive dataset and comprehensive analyses derived from its diverse research methodologies. By offering a detailed examination of PCTO practices, it adopts an integrated approach that highlights the diversity of implementations and educational strategies across institutions.

The use of a “multi-level” methodology provides a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play, directly engaging institutions, teachers, and students to evaluate the tangible effects of PCTOs on students’ life trajectories. The active involvement of students and teachers, a hallmark of the Training Research methodology, ensures a participatory process that facilitates in-depth data collection while identifying critical barriers and enablers in the design and implementation of PCTOs.

A key innovation lies in the project’s focus on the long-term impacts of PCTOs. The retrospective survey offers a unique longitudinal perspective on how these pathways influence students’ career decisions and life trajectories, generating insights rarely captured in existing research.

Furthermore, the development of an open-access digital platform marks a significant advance in applied outcomes. This platform not only disseminates the project’s findings but also provides schools with a practical tool for self-assessment and improvement. By fostering continuous evaluation and iterative enhancements, it supports the sustained development of effective and equitable educational practices.

In conclusion, this project bridges theoretical insights and practical applications, translating research findings into actionable tools that can inform educational policies and advance school practices. By doing so, it seeks to elevate the quality and equity of student learning experiences, ensuring that the

educational system effectively meets the needs of a diverse and evolving society.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: Paragraph 1 was written by Elisa Truffelli; Paragraph 2 was written by Valentina Pagani; Paragraph 3 was written by Irene Stanzone. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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# EVIDENCE, MYTHS AND TEACHING PRACTICES: THE CASE OF TEACHING READING IN ITALIAN SCHOOLS

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Academic studies reveal growing convergence and intersections across various fields (evidence-based pedagogy, cognitive research, learning design, brain science). Regarding brain science and learning, reading instruction has emerged as a crucial focus area. This study shares experimental findings, supported by neuroscientific evidence, highlighting the notable benefits for phonetically consistent languages like Italian when teaching reading through a systematic, explicit, phono-syllabic approach introduced gradually. The research concludes by strongly advocating adherence to this proven framework for reading instruction whilst warning against “innovative” teaching methods found in schools that prove less effective or potentially detrimental, contradicting these vital insights from educational research.

education; reading education; alphabetical and phono-syllabic methods

## INTRODUCTION

Educational research has experienced remarkable growth in recent decades, driven by evidence-based education (Hargreaves, 1996; Davies, 1999; Coe, 1999; Hattie, 2009; Education Endowment Foundation, 2021), which strives to determine “what works in which contexts” and compile research findings (best evidence synthesis, systematic reviews, meta-analysis). Notably, this evolution has enabled integration with previously separate research domains, including classroom teacher observations (Rosenshine, 2010), instructional design

(Gagné & Briggs, 1974; Merrill, 2002), and cognitive psychology (Chandler & Sweller, 1991; Clark, Nguyen, & Sweller, 2006).

Within cognitive sciences, cognitive neuroscience now plays an expanding role, enhanced by brain imaging technologies (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). Neuroscientific research in education focuses on engaging teachers actively, converting evidence into practical teaching methods (Goswami, 2006; Geake, 2009; Sabitzer, 2010; Churches et al., 2020), whilst avoiding oversimplification and neuromyths (Geake, 2008; Howard-Jones, 2014; Kim & Sankey, 2017). Valuable insights emerge particularly in areas such as attention challenges (Posner, 2004; Amso & Sherif, 2015), literacy (Dehaene, 2009; Fisher, Bernstein, & Immordino-Yang, 2007; Goswami, 2012), numeracy (Dehaene, 1997; Singer, 2007; Izard, Dehaene-Lambertz, & Dehaene, 2008), and emotional aspects (Panksepp, 1998; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Immordino-Yang, 2017).

In contemporary neuroscience, Stanislas Dehaene's work stands prominent, advocating for neuro-psycho-pedagogy, a unified and cumulative science where teacher autonomy remains preserved (Dehaene, 2009, p. 381). His research encompasses both learning principle identification and specific subjects like mathematics and reading instruction.

## **2. HOW TO TEACH READING**

According to the UNESCO Conference of 1951, reading methods are categorised into three distinct groups: a) synthetic methods; b) analytical methods; c) analytical-synthetic methods.

The synthetic and analytical methodologies rest on fundamentally opposing principles. Synthetic or alphabetical approaches maintain that spoken language and reading develop along separate paths: whilst oral communication is an innate ability, written language represents an artificial construct, a secondary system that must be acquired through deliberate cognitive effort. Conversely, global methods assert that acquiring speech and literacy skills are parallel processes within natural linguistic development.

This debate has gradually subsided over time; scholars now acknowledge that historical ideological biases influenced this discourse, particularly regarding the global method. By the 1990s, Liberman and Liberman (1990) had effectively demonstrated the global method's limitations. Extensive research, primarily in English-speaking regions, has established phonological awareness as the crucial skill in reading acquisition, though variations exist across different

orthographic systems (Kamirloff-Smith, 1986; Morais, 1989; Goswami, Gombert, & Barrera, 1998; Carretti & Zamperlin, 2010).

Neuroscientific advances, enhanced by brain imaging technology, have provided additional insights. Dehaene (2009) offered conclusive evidence, definitively resolving the methodological debate. “We must acknowledge certain conclusive findings. Current evidence confirms that global or ideo-visual methods are ineffective; children from all social backgrounds benefit from explicit, early instruction in letter-sound correspondence. Continuing to debate this point under the guise of experimentation or teaching freedom would be irresponsible” (Dehaene, 2009, p. 381). In this context, the Italian language offers significant advantages (Ziegler, Stone, & Jacobs, 1997).

### **3. THE RESEARCH DESIGN**

Despite compelling evidence suggesting the need to abandon global or ideo-visual methods, researchers determined that additional investigation was necessary to thoroughly assess the viability and advantages of implementing a systematic phono-syllabic approach. The Alphabet140 programme emerged from years of practical materials and experiences developed in Italy by Luciana Ventriglia (2016). Its design phase occurred in 2019-20, followed by testing in the subsequent year.

Educators are reminded to maintain a playful, enthusiastic and humorous approach throughout the programme. Teachers should demonstrate enthusiasm when pronouncing sounds, including challenging ones, using deliberate emphasis and exaggerated gestures. They engage students by intentionally making mistakes and encouraging corrections.

The study employed a quasi-experimental approach, featuring experimental and control groups arranged in clusters (school classes), though not randomly selected. The project involved seven universities (Aquila, Basilicata, Calabria, Roma Tre, Salerno, Torino, and Udine), with each institution nominating a school for potential collaboration. Participating schools were asked to designate minimum one experimental and one control class, excluding notably disparate classes. For control group (CG) selection, teaching methodology was assessed through textbook analysis, confirming no instances of systematic phono-syllabic approaches. The final participation included twenty-three schools across seven regions, comprising 30 classes with 467 children in the experimental group (EG), and 21 classes totalling 325 children in the CG. The study excluded students with documented intellectual disabilities, those with

significant language barriers due to non-Italian speaking backgrounds, and children who could already read. The experimental groups received the complete Alphabet140 programme resources.

### **3.1. Assessment**

The pre- and the post- tests were applied in October and May. At the beginning, two tests were used:

- Visual recognition of letters (Battery PRCR-2, Cornoldi, Miato, Molin, & Poli, 2009);
- Phonological awareness (Miranda & Montesano, 2021).

At the end, three tests were used:

- Recognition of non-words (Lexical Decision-DLC of Caldarola, Perini, & Cornoldi, 2012);
- Dictation of words with increasing phonological complexity (Stella & Apolito, 2004);
- Phonological awareness (Miranda & Montesano, 2021).

At the beginning, in October, teachers from both test and control groups completed an initial survey to gather classroom insights; in April, educators from the test group responded to a Final Survey evaluating methodology effectiveness and programme adaptability.

## **EXAMINATION OF THE FINDINGS**

Prior to assessing the potential impact of the educational intervention, it was crucial to confirm that both groups' pre-test scores were comparable. CG showed higher scores in both assessments, this variance lacked statistical significance ( $p > .05$ ). The standardised mean differences fall below 0.25 SD, meeting What Works Clearinghouse (2020)<sup>1</sup> criteria, thus indicating the groups were statistically equivalent (see Tab. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/referenceresources/WWC-Standards-Handbook-v4-1-508.pdf>.

Tab. 1. Results obtained by the Experimental and Control Group at the pre-test.

	N		Experimental Group (EG)	Control Group (CG)	t	p	Standardized average differences
	EG	CG	M (DS)	M (DS)			
MeTaFono IN	394	244	11.24 (5.30)	11.97 (5.02)	-1,752	.080	0.14
Visual recognition of letters	407	287	9.98 (2.95)	10.05 (2.82)	-.304	.761	0.02

To evaluate the outcome at the end of the school year, the scores obtained by the EG and the CG in the exit tests were compared (see Tab. 2).

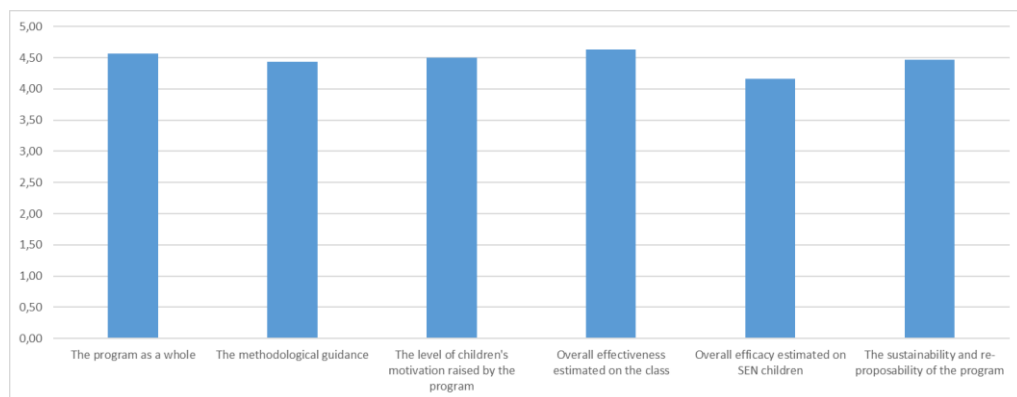
Tab. 2. Results obtained by the Experimental and Control Group at the post-test.

	N		Experimental Group (EG)	Control Group (CG)	t	p	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	EG	CG	M (DS)	M (DS)			
MeTaFono OUT	446	255	10.52 (2.11)	10.13 (2.25)	2.251	.025	0.18
Recognition of non-words	432	286	13.12 (5.53)	12.40 (5.19)	1,771	.077	0.13
Dictation of words	432	286	17.22 (4.16)	15.17 (5.57)	5.291	.000	0.43

EG performs significantly better than CG in the phonological awareness test (10.52 vs 10.13,  $p = .025$ ; ES  $d = 0.18$ ). Also, with regard to the recognition of non-words, a better performance is observed in the EG, even if not reaching statistical significance (Tot. correct score 13.12 vs 12.40,  $p = .077$  ES  $d = 0.13$ ). Significantly more consistent differences emerge between the two groups in the dictation writing test (17.22 vs 15.17,  $p = .000$ ; with an ES  $d = 0.43$ ). Applying the parameters provided by the Education Endowment Foundation (Higgins et al., 2016, p. 5) the first two values translated into time correspond to 2 months of advantage while the third value to 5 months.

At the end of the experiment, to obtain further information on how their experience was lived by teachers and by children, a questionnaire including a rating scales (1–5) and open questions was addressed and completed by experimental teachers. Teachers were asked to evaluate the programme as a whole, its methodological guidance, its sustainability and replicability, the level of motivation and its effectiveness exercised on the classroom and on children with special needs (Fig. 1) and, more specifically, the phono-syllabic method and its other main features: progressiveness, division in units, phonological modelling, assessment unit by unit. As can be seen, the teacher satisfaction is generally very high, mostly with average values > 4.5.

Fig. 1. Teachers' evaluation of the quality of the programme.



## CONCLUSIONS

This research has highlighted a crucial intersection between education and neuroscience, demonstrating significant pedagogical and societal implications whilst paving the way for an emerging interdisciplinary science of teaching and learning. Neuroscientific research, particularly Dehaene's investigations, has made a substantial contribution to the longstanding debate on reading instruction methodologies, definitively establishing the necessity for all children to receive alphabetical instruction.

This study provided additional experimental validation in Italian, a highly phonetically transparent language. The large-scale national experiment demonstrated that a progressive, structured and explicit phono-syllabic teaching methodology, implemented over approximately 140 hours across 7-8 months in primary education, yields considerable advantages in phonological awareness, word/non-word discrimination, and particularly in dictation exercises. The Experimental Group (EG) students achieved superior outcomes



with Effect Sizes ranging from 0.2 to 0.43, representing an advancement of between 2 to 5 months compared to their peers.

The programme received overwhelmingly positive feedback from participating teachers, with ratings consistently exceeding 4.5 (on a 1-5 scale) regarding the programme's effectiveness, pupil engagement, methodology and systematic approach. These results strongly support the sustainability and transferability of this teaching method. These findings align with both international evidence and other Italian studies employing syllabic-phonetic approaches (Padovani et al., 2018), as well as those incorporating phonological workshops into existing curricula throughout the academic year (Franceschi, Savelli, & Stella, 2011).

There exists no rational basis, beyond purely commercial interests, for supporting these creative teaching methods and associated materials. These approaches, lacking scientific foundation, continue to proliferate within educational settings, exerting a detrimental influence on classroom practices. This persistence of scientifically unsupported methodologies raises serious concerns about the quality and effectiveness of reading instruction in our schools.

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# PROVING IMPACT IN COMPLEX PROGRAMS. CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSEQUENCES FOR PRACTICE USING THE EXAMPLE OF THE FEDERAL PROGRAM “LIVE DEMOCRACY!”

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## INTRODUCTION

In this article I will discuss the challenges and opportunities of evaluating the impact of complex programs. Which programs are these? Since 1992, the German government, especially the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), has funded measures to prevent right-wing extremism and promote democratic thinking. The programs are specifically designed to strengthen civil society. They were developed both as a lesson from the historical National Socialism and as a consequence of the resurgence of right-wing extremist attacks in the 1990s. The programs have names like “Diversity Does Good,” “Promoting Tolerance – Strengthening Competence,” or “Initiative to Strengthen Democracy.” The German Youth Institute has evaluated these programs since 2001.

## 1. THE EVALUATION OF “LIVE DEMOCRACY!”

Currently, the German Youth Institute is evaluating the second phase of the “Live Democracy!” program (2020-2024), which intends to promote democracy, foster diversity, and prevent extremism (BMFSFJ 2024). The program aims to:

- Raise awareness of democratic rights through education on principles like equality, the rule of law, human rights protection, and political participation.
- Develop solutions for living free of discrimination, recognizing and valuing diversity.
- Prevent anti-democratic and extremist attitudes, including right-wing, Islamist, and left-wing extremism.

The program operates at municipal, state, and national levels. “Partnerships for Democracy” enable local areas to develop their own strategies. “Federal State Democracy Centres” coordinate measures within each state, connecting stakeholders and providing counseling services. “Competence Centres and Networks” advance expertise and professional standards, while pilot projects develop innovative approaches for broader educational practice.

The “overall evaluation”<sup>1</sup> addresses questions spanning all program areas, considering the program’s multicentric and multi-level nature. Proving impact (understood as change and stabilization processes that can be attributed with a certain probability to specific measures) is challenging due to the complex political debate about evidence and effectiveness (Nehlsen et al. 2020). We use diverse methods, including quantitative and qualitative instruments, to assess the program’s effectiveness.

## **2. REGIONAL STUDIES**

### **2.1. Overview**

In the following, I will illustrate our approach and the challenges of impact assessment using a specific study we conducted. In our regional comparative studies (Author group 2023, König/Stärck/Zierold in press), we focused on two main questions:

- How does the program contribute to stimulating and strengthening civic engagement?
- What effects does the interaction of various program-funded actors on-site produce?

Quantitative surveys alone were insufficient, because the results were too abstract, so we conducted additional regional studies at the level of districts and municipalities. Regarding the investigation of collaboration, we paid particular attention to the interaction between civil society and state actors on-site. From our own evaluation practice and the scientific literature (e.g., Grande/Grande/Hahn 2021), we know that the relationship between state and (civil) society is not without tension.

What did we specifically do in the regional studies? In nine selected regions, we empirically demonstrated the effects of the practical implementation of the program “Live Democracy!” with regard to its three core goals (promoting democracy, fostering diversity, and preventing extremism). We conducted 62

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<sup>1</sup> This is the area in which I work.

guideline-based individual and group interviews and evaluated them using content analysis, the documentary method, and incorporating quantitative data (see Flick 2013). Additionally, we carried out social network analyses in several of the regions examined. To capture outcomes “ex post” as effects in complex environments, we utilized “outcome harvesting” (Wilson-Grau 2018). “Outcome harvesting” helped identifying key mechanisms behind observed changes. I will illustrate this concretely by examining two regions from the study, which I will briefly contrast.

## **2.2 Portrait of Sophiacity**

Sophiacity is a large city with a heterogeneous social structure, where different social classes are unequally distributed across the districts. Almost half of the residents have a migration background, and the unemployment rate is around seven percent, which is above the state average. The strongest factions in the city council are the Green Party, the Socialdemocratic Party, and the Christian Democrats, while the right-wing populists AfD narrowly missed ten percent in the last local election.

In Sophiacity, diversity management is particularly central. Additionally, promoting democracy and preventing right-wing and Islamist extremism play important roles, with Islamophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism also being significant issues.

For many years, state and civil society actors have been using funding from federal programs. Since 2009, the city has benefited from model project funding, and local democracy work is supported by a “Local Action Plan” as well as the “Partnerships for Democracy” (PfD). A department in the city administration plays a central role. The “Sophiacity Declaration for Diversity” has been signed by over 350 institutions, clubs, and organizations. The city’s PfD and alliance coordinators act as supporters and intermediaries to the numerous civil society actors, promoting cooperation in the city by sharing information and resources.

An important form of cooperation in Sophiacity are so-called thematic partnerships. These partnerships bring together actors who have not previously cooperated, as the approval of funding is tied to the condition of establishing new cooperative relationships. This results in sustainable working alliances and innovative ideas. Some actors used the funding to develop concepts for follow-up projects, which are then proposed to other funders for support. Here, the federal program acts as a kind of “start-up financing,” with the previous funding serving as a “seal of approval.”

In the interviews, the participants described a network of actors with no single dominant figure. They emphasized that many actors are considered important, which is reflected in the way they conceptualized the network. The actors are organized in concentric circles, indicating a range of significance without placing any one actor at the center.

### **2.3. Portrait of Jennifertown**

I will now turn to the description of the second region. Jennifertown is also a large city with a heterogeneous social situation. Both the unemployment rate and the proportion of people receiving social security benefits are significantly above the national and state averages. Almost 40 percent of the population have a migration background. The dominant parties are the Socialdemocratic Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Green Party, while far-right parties have won a few seats in the parliament.

In the interviews, right-wing extremism is identified as the most pressing issue to be addressed. City actors from the administration and politics have taken up this issue after it was addressed by the voluntary civil society for years. Since 2007, there has been a municipal action plan to strengthen democracy and prevent right-wing extremism, and for more than ten years, there has also been funding from federal programs for the “Partnerships for Democracy” (PfD).

A municipal coordination office and a voluntary special representative of the mayor are responsible for implementing the action plan. But the cooperation between various civil society actors and municipal offices is characterized by parallel structures and inconsistencies. Volunteers criticize the dominant role of the administration and the strict guidelines for addressing the issues, which leads to frustration. Volunteers feel partly restricted and demotivated in their ability to act due to the administrative requirements.

The central role of administrative actors in addressing the issues is evident from the structure of the network in the Jennifertown region, with these actors occupying a prominent position. Additionally, the numerous civil society actors and networks active in Jennifertown are clearly highlighted.

### **2.4. Comparison**

What does the comparison of the regions show? Sophiacity and Jennifertown are both large cities with high unemployment rates, heterogeneous social structures, numerous civil society actors and a significant role in the federal program.

Sophiacity focuses on fostering diversity, while Jennifertown places more



emphasis on the prevention of right-wing extremism. The administration in Sophiacity acts supportively and mediating, promoting cooperation on an equal footing, leading to broader and more effective participation of civil society. In contrast, in Jennifertown, the administration dominates coordination, causing frustration and demotivation among volunteer actors.

In Sophiacity, there are no dominant actors. In Jennifertown, there is more tension among the actors, with the administration taking a more hierarchical role.

In summary, Sophiacity demonstrates how a supportive and mediating administration can promote civil society participation, while Jennifertown could benefit from a less hierarchical, more participatory approach to strengthen the motivation and capacity of civil society actors.

### **3. DISCUSSION**

Overall, our regional studies have shown that it is fundamentally possible to plausibilize the effects of the federal program “Live Democracy!” through case studies. Using Sophiacity as an example, we were able to trace how the program helps establish new cooperative relationships through targeted guidance via funding.

However, based on our study design, we could not make comprehensive statements about the specific effects of these new cooperation arrangements. Further investigations would be necessary to derive detailed impact pathways. Nevertheless, we received indications that the appreciation of work results by key actors in the city motivates the involved actors.

Regarding the activation of civil society, a central concern of “Live Democracy!”, we were able to reconstruct a specific impact pathway (thematic partnerships). A comparison of the regions showed that the nature of governance and action coordination between the executive and civil society is crucial for how strongly people engage voluntarily.

The examination of Jennifertown highlighted that the effects of the program are not one-dimensional. While the program funding contributes to addressing relevant issues, hierarchical governance can inhibit the activation of civil society. This interplay is moderated by the attitudes of the actors towards each other and their material resources.

Our studies show that extensive resources are needed to conduct impact-oriented analyses in a complex program like “Live Democracy!”. Despite the

effort, regional case studies are an adequate method to investigate and plausibilize effects.

Additionally, comprehensive quantitative studies comparing regions with and without federal program funding could verify the results from the case studies. Other investigations by us (online surveys and surveys of actors external to the program) have provided findings that support the results of the regional studies. In summary, comparative case studies at the municipal level not only reveal specific effects at the regional level and insights into corresponding causal relationships but also, in conjunction with other data, enable generalizations regarding the federal program as a whole.

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# SYSTEMATIC REVIEW: QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS AND EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES IN GUIDANCE

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Starting from an in-depth analysis of the most widespread definitions of guidance – used in Europe and other geographical contexts – provided in different educational and training settings, an extensive body of research evidence was carried out that endeavours to demonstrate how to analyse and to report on the impact of guidance interventions and how to deal and to focus on evidence-base for guidance policies and systems developments (ELGPN, 2015). Based on the already explored domains of guidance, a literature review was carried out with the aim to get informed about new designs and developments of evidence and quality of career and guidance-related interventions. The work was situated within the devolved theories about quality assurance (Plant, 2004; 2012) and indicators (Hooley, 2014) for effective career guidance provision. The study focused primarily, though not exclusively, upon research findings from career and guidance-related interventions aimed at identifying, gathering and analysing quality assurance mechanisms and evaluation procedures of different guidance services. Accordingly, the paper will focus on the lessons learned from the research findings designed to inform and consolidate professionals' understanding and articulation of what constitutes effective guidance-related interventions, as well as identifying gaps in the evidence-base for measuring and assessing their impact.

guidance; evidence; quality; evaluation; lifelong learning.

## INTRODUCTION

The European Councils' Resolutions on Lifelong Guidance (2004; 2008) outlined key concepts such as "career guidance" and "career management skills," and emphasized the importance of "quality" and "quality assurance" in guidance services to ensure their efficiency. The 2008 Resolution specifically focused on "priority area 3: develop quality assurance in guidance provision,"

aiming to enhance the quality of career guidance services. It suggested improving career information and advice, tailoring services to individuals' needs, and creating tools to better match job supply and demand. The Resolution urged Member States to invest in high-quality guidance services, with a focus on enhancing the professional profiles of guidance practitioners through education and training, measuring the effectiveness of services, and establishing quality standards for guidance services that emphasize outcomes for beneficiaries and their methods.

In the last decades, despite some progresses were made in improving guidance services (Cedefop, 2011), further efforts are required. The development of high-quality guidance services is a shared goal among Member States. To achieve progress in this area, Member States should consider several actions, tailored to their specific contexts:

- improving the quality and objectivity of career information and advice, ensuring it aligns with users' expectations and the realities of the labour market;
- tailoring information, advice, and support to meet the needs of different users;
- developing tools for forecasting jobs and skills, leveraging both national and European resources, particularly those from Cedefop, ETF and other European institutions;
- relating information on training opportunities and labour market dynamics to local contexts;
- enhancing the professional profile and standards of guidance practitioners through initial education and continuous training, focusing on their competencies in providing information, counseling, and support to better meet citizens' and policymakers' needs;
- measuring the effectiveness of guidance services by gathering reliable data, which includes users' perceptions and the benefits they gain in the medium term.
- developing quality standards for guidance services that not only define the service offered but also focus on both the goals and results for the beneficiaries, as well as the methods and processes involved.

## **1. QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EVIDENCE IN CAREER GUIDANCE**

Literature highlights the growing emphasis on quality assurance in career

guidance over recent decades. Quality assurance in lifelong guidance has been recognized as a priority in numerous policy documents (EU Council, 2004; 2008), as investments in guidance systems and services contribute significantly to the development and progress of individuals, communities, and societies (ELGPN, 2015). Consequently, guidelines and standards for career guidance services serve as a foundation for their organization and improvement. To ensure the quality of these services, it is essential that they meet specific quality criteria or standards.

Regarding quality criteria, indicators and standards in career guidance, the ELGPN glossary (2015) provides the following definitions:

- quality criteria are “independent standards for measuring the quality of guidance provision or services” which means that “quality criteria are the indicators used to show that a guidance service or guidance activity meets quality standards”;
- quality indicators are “formally recognised figure(s) or ratio(s) used as yardsticks to judge and assess quality performance”. In other words, “quality indicators are statistical measures that give an indication of output quality. However, some quality indicators can also give an indication of process quality”;
- quality standards are “technical specifications which are measurable and have been drawn up by consensus and approved by an organisation with recognised and relevant expertise at regional, national or international levels. The purpose of quality standards is optimisation of input and/or output of guidance”. The standard(s) that an organisation sets for all of its key business operations and that help clarify what an organisation expects of its employees in delivering these operations or a client can expect when using the service”.

Quality standards in career guidance can be understood as a defined set of rules, processes, practices, and related methods for measuring quality. Unlike guidelines, which are simply recommendations allowing for more flexibility in implementation, quality standards are prescriptive in nature. In other words, while guidelines offer suggestions and flexibility in application, standards set clear requirements that must be met to ensure quality (Sultana, 2012; 2018).

## **2. MECHANISMS AND APPROACHES TO QUALITY AND EVIDENCE ACROSS EUROPE**

In Europe, national and international bodies—such as ministries, agencies, and

governments—have played a key role in shaping the development of standards and quality assurance mechanisms within career guidance policies, systems, and services (ELGPN, 2015a; 2015b; 2016). European research has also highlighted the importance of quality assurance for career guidance services (Cedefop, 2011; ELGPN, 2015).

The influence of New Public Management (NPM) ideology has led to the introduction of quality assurance frameworks across all public services, including career guidance (Sultana, 2012). This trend is tied to the “value for money” philosophy, which emphasizes monitoring and evaluating public spending on guidance services and other public sectors, such as education and employment (Borbély-Pecze & Watts, 2011). Quality assurance is thus essential for ensuring both service effectiveness and the responsible use of public funds (Hooley & Rice, 2018).

A review of lifelong guidance systems across Europe reveals significant variation, with notable differences between countries. However, there is a growing investment in quality assurance measures at the national, regional, and local levels. Career guidance providers across Europe implement various quality assurance mechanisms—such as accreditations, licenses, standards, and labels—often tailored to specific sectors, including education, training, and employment.

In compulsory education, career guidance is usually delivered by schools or guidance centers, with its quality evaluated within national education frameworks, often overseen by education inspectorates (e.g., Belgium-Flanders). Here, career guidance is assessed as part of a broader inspection process, with inspectors typically including not only education officials but also service users.

Public employment services in countries such as Austria, Germany, and Italy have developed national minimum standards for career guidance, which apply to both service providers and the professionals delivering the guidance (Bulgaria). These standards are based on clearly defined quality criteria and performance indicators, with the European competence framework often serving as a reference point for guidance professionals.

In addition to their formal education qualifications, career guidance professionals generally undergo further training to maintain high standards of service delivery (e.g., France). Practitioners, whether in public or private centers, are required to possess a wide range of multidisciplinary skills (Denmark, Italy, Malta), with continuous professional development being a

common requirement.

While not all European countries have an official professional profile for guidance practitioners, there is significant investment in ensuring a professional workforce in career guidance. In some countries, certification processes for guidance professionals are an important step toward establishing a formal professional identity (Greece).

European and national competence frameworks have been developed to guide both the initial and ongoing training of career guidance professionals. These frameworks ensure alignment with both career development and continuous professional growth. In some cases, certification processes also recognize competencies, even for those without formal qualifications (e.g., diplomas or degrees).

At the national level, quality standards for career guidance services and providers are typically established to assess both the services and the staff, guiding staff training (e.g., Finland, Italy, United Kingdom – England). In some cases, regional or local authorities set their own standards, though these are usually applicable only within their jurisdiction (e.g., Finland).

In addition to formal mechanisms, career guidance associations and networks—both transnational and national—play a crucial role in promoting quality assurance. These associations foster professional learning communities, encourage best practices, and support ethical standards. While not always legally required, these practices are widely adopted by guidance professionals in their daily work. In Ireland and Germany, national forums have been established to develop quality assurance frameworks, offering guidelines for maintaining high standards across the country.

A common feature across European career guidance providers is the adoption of self-assessment procedures (e.g., Bulgaria, Italy), which may or may not be part of an accreditation process. Self-assessment allows providers to evaluate their activities internally using their own procedures. This internal evaluation is often supplemented by external assessments by professional evaluators or inspectors, offering a more comprehensive approach to quality assurance.

To measure the effectiveness of services, many European countries regularly use user satisfaction surveys (e.g., Denmark, Estonia, Finland). These surveys gather feedback from a variety of users, including students in upper secondary education, vocational training, and adults outside of formal education or employment.

In conclusion, an analysis of European career guidance systems and the quality



assurance measures in place reveals diverse approaches and tools for ensuring service quality. Despite this diversity, national authorities and service providers must develop mechanisms to continuously monitor guidance needs, resources, and service quality. Evidence suggests that while numerous quality assurance tools are in use, few comprehensive systems exist that integrate administrative, practitioner, and user-centered approaches to ensure quality across all aspects of career guidance services.

Furthermore, the current state of knowledge indicates that the most prevalent approach in Europe for assuring quality in career guidance is the administrative-centered model. This model, often combined with a top-down approach, is especially common in countries where decentralization has led to differing standards of service delivery across regions. National policy frameworks—such as guidelines, standards, and targets—are used to ensure more consistent and equitable service provision.

Ultimately, the adoption of quality management frameworks and the professionalization of guidance practitioners are central to the evolution of career guidance services. This process has not only established formal standards and qualifications but has also empowered practitioners to develop a distinct occupational identity, which contributes to the overall quality and impact of career guidance services.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Key findings, from systematic review and comparative desk research carried out by the authors, highlight the limited implementation of comprehensive quality assurance frameworks for career guidance. Despite some progress, few European countries have established robust systems for evaluating career guidance, with many services still in an early phase of development. The fragmented nature of career guidance provision makes it challenging to implement unified quality assurance policies, and quality measures are often more focused on education and related sectors rather than career guidance specifically.

A central issue identified is the lack of integrated and systematic monitoring of career guidance policies, systems, and services. While some frameworks exist, they are mostly theoretical and not widely applied. Furthermore, career guidance is often provided by diverse actors (e.g., education, training, employment sectors), which complicates the definition of universal quality indicators and evaluation models.

The study also points out that current quality assurance practices are often limited, fragmented, and lack a focus on continuous improvement. They typically address quality as an administrative task rather than as an ongoing process aimed at social change. The research suggests that quality assurance in career guidance should be more provider-centered and better integrated across sectors.

Additionally, the study stresses the need for harmonized national quality assurance frameworks, supported by centralized coordination mechanisms, to ensure consistency in monitoring and evaluating guidance services. This should include clear guidelines for data collection, analysis, and quality assessment. Finally, the study highlights the importance of adopting a multidimensional and human-centered approach to quality, which goes beyond quantitative measures to include qualitative analysis and focus on user-centered outcomes. In conclusion, there is a need for more comprehensive, coordinated, and effective quality assurance systems in career guidance across Europe. These systems should be institutionally supported, with clear principles and standardized data gathering and analysis procedures to ensure continuous improvement and effectiveness.

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# SCHOOL COMMUNITIES AND EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION: REFLECTIONS, EXPERIENCES, PERSPECTIVES

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The contribution aims to return the perspective of school communities – principals, teachers, students, families, and educational staff – in relation to the reflection made on the issues of instructional design and assessment from an educational perspective. In particular, it is intended to reflect on design and assessment practices that can support students' awareness of the pathways that involve them. This intentionality involves reflection on emerging needs within the school and perceived crises in the spaces of relationships between various actors, starting with social actors' perceptions of their own roles. How to construct useful in-itinere feedback to guide learning, that is, characterized by timeliness, clarity and participation, coherence and future orientation? How do we propose activities that do not fuel a climate of competition among students? We draw attention to emerging obstacles and difficulties, but also to innovative experiences in design, relational, instructional and evaluative choices, with reference also to self- and peer-assessment experiences.

formative assessment; teacher voice; school community.

## INTRODUCTION

The underlying theme of the research questions was that of different perceptions of the idea of evaluation among teachers in relation to their belonging to different evaluation cultures. This theme was accompanied by that of training, as a frequent topic of discussion that as conductors of training research we experienced was often that of the construction of tools deemed most effective for the sustainability of the process (such as observational grids, examples of Feedback, curriculum reviews, and so on).

The perceived crisis that prompted our research question, i.e., what were the main concerns of teachers and what was the perception of the meaning of evaluation, led us to hypothesize that research participants had a different conception of grading regardless of the change imposed by legislation and that this could further complicate training practice, in a framework in which the demand for training, as other research has also revealed, revealed a profound disorientation of teachers. Therefore, we want to highlight the impact that the research activity carried out so far in training has had on design, teaching and evaluation choices, including in the continuity between primary and secondary schools albeit in the different contexts of schools located in various areas of the Lazio region.

Our research questions were: What are the relationships between the functions attributed to assessment and the teaching strategies used by teachers?; What are the major obstacles to the structural use of formative assessment in elementary school?; What intervention strategies, from the perspective of initial teacher training, enable the development of methodological skills necessary for the employment of formative assessment as a teaching strategy?; What are the relationships between the functions attributed to assessment and the instructional strategies employed by teachers?

## **1. METHOD: DESIGN, PROCEDURE, PARTICIPANTS, INSTRUMENTS AND GATHERED DATA**

The research-training was carried out through the following steps:

- the administration of a questionnaire for teachers, aimed at conducting a survey of attitudes toward the reform;
- a training aimed at teachers on issues of formative assessment;
- the conduct of focus groups to explore perceptions of change and to deepen training.

Teachers participated in the planned activities on a voluntary basis.

For the purpose of organizing and guiding the focus groups, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered on teachers' views toward the shift from grades to judgments. The analysis of the results of the questionnaire (administered online to a non-probabilistic sample of 780 elementary school teachers) revealed that expressing a clear aversion to descriptive judgment (considered too complex to process and not very useful when compared to numerical grading) was a group of teachers who, prior to the normative change, did not

employ analytical and descriptive feedback during ongoing assessment. On the other hand, the group of teachers in favor of the new assessment is composed of teachers who already before the abandonment of numerical grading used descriptive feedback more frequently than the rest of the sample with respect to the activities carried out in itinere. In addition to revealing different positionings with respect to the effectiveness and sustainability of descriptive assessment, the questionnaire revealed difficulties in communicating with families and, almost unanimously, problems with the use of the electronic register (Corsini, 2022).

At the end of the training, teachers were invited to take part in focus groups lasting about an hour, aimed at: – identify emerging issues on the part of teachers in implementing the transition from grades to ratings;

- accompany reflection on assessment practices already implemented or in fase of planning, exploring aspects that are still less clear, both in relation to normative indications and the underlying pedagogical assumptions;
- support organizational, teaching and related choices in communication with pupils and families;
- to understand in a more articulate way what was found through the questionnaires, particularly on elements such as descriptive feedback in itinere and the use of the electronic register;
- understand what strategies teachers were putting in place to solve problems as they arose.

Training groups based on emerging problems among teachers on issues related to formative assessment were also conducted. These were the explicit goals that emerged from the research training:

1. explicit goals in terms of growth and development of teaching professionalism and documentation of results with analysis of spillovers in terms of change
2. creation of a group composed of researcher and teachers who, in the specificity of roles, choose objectives and methodological choices;
3. centering on the specifics of contexts through an analysis of the constraints and resources present;
4. continuous discussion on the documentation of results and processes;
5. focus on the effective spillover of outcomes in the school, from the perspective of learning and professional development. The intervention

is based on a sequential mixed method that involves, in the first-cycle institutions of the ARETE network: – the administration of a structured questionnaire on formative assessment (09/22); – the conduct of focus groups on a sample of participating teachers, with guiding questions constructed from the analyses of the results collected with the questionnaire (10/22).

## **2. ANALYSIS**

### **2.1. Questionnaire**

The analysis of the questionnaire responses revealed that the greatest resistance to change came from a group of teachers who believed more than the rest of the sample that the new assessment was less precise than the previous one, that it gave excessive space to assessment over teaching, made teaching cumbersome, and confused teachers, families, students, negatively affecting their learning and motivation to learn, and penalizing excellence.

Compared to the rest of the sample, this group of teachers rarely tended to provide analytical and descriptive feedback during in-progress assessments even before the ministerial ordinance.

During the focus groups, we frequently associated the same teachers with the categories “requests for clarification on the functioning of the dimensions present in the guidelines” and “expression of difficulties in formulating judgments,” and these aspects indeed guided the open training space at the end of each focus group in all the meetings.

Both in the questionnaire and in the category associations conducted on the transcripts of 15 out of 20 focus groups, the group of teachers who expressed the most support for the new assessment highlighted its positive effects on inclusive processes, learning, classroom climate, and communication with families. These teachers stated, both in the questionnaire and in the emerging category associations in the focus group, that they believe in the value of descriptive feedback, used instead of grades within the framework of using assessment as a means of regulating learning with an intentionally careful approach not to generate competitive dynamics. The idea of school that characterizes these teachers refers to cooperative, active, inclusive, and community pedagogical models.

### **2.2. Focus Group**

In total, 20 focus groups involving 219 teachers were conducted. Given the

formative slant of the focus groups, it was decided to distinguish-re two phases for each meeting.

After a brief presentation of the activity, in which the teachers were made aware of the aims and objectives of the meeting, we proceeded to request permission to record and to do an initial round of presentation, accompanied by free reflections on this track:

- From the analysis of your responses to the questionnaire, some aspects of particular complexity emerge from which we propose to start. What do you think of the shift from grades to judgments? Do you think it is useful? What kind of difficulties are you currently experiencing?

This first question was, in our opinion, useful to make a survey of the issues perceived as most “urgent” by teachers.

In the continuation of the reflection, we explored the areas highlighted below in italics through the following questions:

- One of the most complex aspects seems to be that related to the definition of “dimension” and the construction of levels. What is your opinion on this?
- What difficulties are you experiencing in using the electronic register as a tool for communication with families?
- Another aspect that seems to need attention is related to ongoing assessment. What is your experience in this regard?
- Planning, as a moment connected to the evaluative moment, has necessitated revision, either at the individual or team level. Can you recount your experience and any difficulties that arose?
- In the webinar accompanying the transition from grades to judgments, new practices for collecting documentation were proposed, for example, that of evidence collection and the use of a logbook. Did you find these proposals workable?
- In the collegial dimension, did you encounter difficulties in linking goals?

### **3. WHAT EMERGES FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS AND R-F TRAINING RESEARCH?**

- Operational difficulties due to the timing of the ordinance and lack of experimentation
- Electronic Registry
- Awareness of the need for training



- Clash of different cultures of assessment
- Difficulties in sharing evaluative vocabulary among teachers
- Need to open primary secondary spaces
- Need to expand training not so much of ordinance issues but on the deep sense of educational culture, otherwise risk of uncritical “transfer” from one model to another (analogy with L.517/77).

These categories of intervention introduced us to the issue of constructing levels as a “trace” of grades. Some teachers reported evaluating their students with levels by adapting each one to a numerical grade. The final training intervention addressed these concerns by redirecting them to propose working in the future on developing judgments expressed in understandable language. Significant differences between numerical and descriptive evaluations were explored with the teachers. In particular, regarding feedback, the possibility of finding an agreement among colleagues from the same institution on which references and criteria to consider during student feedback was suggested. It would also be appropriate to share these criteria with the student, making the feedback more precise and detailed, allowing the student to better understand the dimensions on which they are evaluated. Feedback should always include comments on what works and what doesn’t, paying particular attention to the mental process and strategies the student uses in solving a specific problem.

Gathering the points of reflection that emerged at the end of the focus groups, a primary point is the need to involve the rest of the staff, both teaching and non-teaching, in the formative practices. In the comprehensive schools, in recent months, even secondary school teachers have participated in reflections on the need to prioritize descriptive evaluation. Starting in early September 2023, around 40 secondary school teachers from the same network, also involved by school principals, participated in support training on educational evaluation, focused on workshop meetings and accompanied practices. This ongoing experience is interesting because it once again seems to anticipate the need to work on shared cultures and practices among teacher networks. It highlights the interest in descriptive evaluation at a time when the ministry politically proposes synthetic judgments. The use of descriptive evaluation represents the crucial point of this transition. The interest expressed in the focus groups by these teachers (to be detailed later) to continue the experience of self-training on descriptive evaluation, as a network of teachers from different schools, even in a self-managed way, contrasts with the tendency to use levels as if they were grades in itinere. This tendency was clearly revealed in the quantitative survey

(Corsini, 2022) and confirmed in the focus groups. It indicates a reluctance to conceive of evaluation as a teaching strategy centered on providing analytical descriptive feedback tied to performance. This inclination to dissolve feedback into grades (whether numerical or otherwise), replacing the knowledge generated by the evaluative process with an ordinal synthesis that places students within a hierarchical scale, represents the greatest obstacle to establishing a pedagogically grounded evaluation.

On the other hand, if it is true that changes without experimentation are blind and experimentation without changes is empty, the establishment of a scientifically defensible evaluation culture can only be achieved through the dialectical exchange between educational research and schools. This is the only way to test the ability of pedagogical knowledge to propose possible solutions to the problems emerging in educational practice.

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# FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES TO “LEAVE NO STUDENT BEHIND”: AN EXPERIMENT TO ENHANCE TEXT COMPREHENSION ABILITIES IN THE LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL

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The effects of using formative assessment (FA) in schools to sustain students' learning have been widely deepened in international literature. In Italy, recent school regulations encouraged teachers to use FA in classrooms, but little experimental research has been carried out to investigate the potential of FA for improving students' achievements. The paper describes an experiment to study the effects of FA practices on students' text comprehension abilities. The participants were 34 students from first-year classes of a middle school who were randomly assigned to the experimental (EG) and control group (CG). In the former, the experimenter developed 15 FA activities related to text comprehension, while in the latter, students joined the same number of teaching activities. The same test was used to measure students' abilities at the experiment's beginning and end, and the post-pretest difference between the two groups was calculated. Findings didn't show significant differences, but students from EG with more difficulties in the comprehension task at the beginning revealed a higher increase than those from the CG. Results of the focus group with students from EG add insights to value this result.

formative assessment practices; text comprehension skills; secondary school; experimental design

## INTRODUCTION

In Italy, being born in the southern part of the peninsula and/or living in a disadvantaged context strongly affects the opportunity to achieve academic success and, in doing so, to acquire essential skills. Data from OECD-PISA 2022 (OECD, 2023) have shown that such characteristics can influence students'

performance in math, science, and reading tests. These differences can also be exacerbated by the passage from primary to secondary school, as national data from INVALSI (2023) have revealed.

In the international debate, several factors have been investigated for their capacity to improve teaching quality and equity of instruction. One of the most highlighted is formative assessment (FA). In fact, not only have metanalyses revealed the positive effects of FA on students' achievements (Hattie, 2009), but several experimental studies have also emphasized its potential for improving students' skills, bringing interesting *evidence*<sup>1</sup> to the debate.

In Italy, FA has received great attention from experts in assessment studies since 1970 (Vertecchi, 1976). In addition, some of the most essential guidelines for schools encourage teachers to use FA practices in the classrooms. However, the lack of experimental research on how to create conditions to implement those practices in classrooms and on the effects of this implementation on student achievement represents a gap in the educational debate that can boost the confusion on what FA is and how to use it successfully to help each student's learning process.

Therefore, the paper outlines the assumptions and results of an experimental study aimed at exploring the effects of using FA practices in lower secondary schools to improve student's reading comprehension skills and reduce achievement gaps.

## **1. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS: SOME INSIGHTS ON THE DEBATE**

Formative assessment could be defined as a process that occurs during the development of a didactic unit by which teachers gather evidence on students' learning to adjust teaching-learning activities. Its connection with the improvement of the students' learning goes back to the origins of the debate on the topic. After Bloom's theories on the Mastery Learning program, of which formative assessment and feedback were two essential components (Bloom, 1971), Black and Wiliam (1998a) developed a literature review and a metaanalysis of 250 studies focusing on the linkage between FA and learning gains, which included also research derived from Bloom's program. The two scholars claim that using FA could substantially increase students'

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<sup>1</sup> We must be very careful when we use the term "evidence", since educational contexts are systems characterized by the interaction of different factors. Therefore, it seems unbearable to claim of having strong evidence of the impact of a method.

achievement by providing an *effect size* value between 0.4 and 0.7 (1998b). Later, Bennett (2011) criticized some of their methodological choices, and highlighted the lack of a “theory of action” of FA.

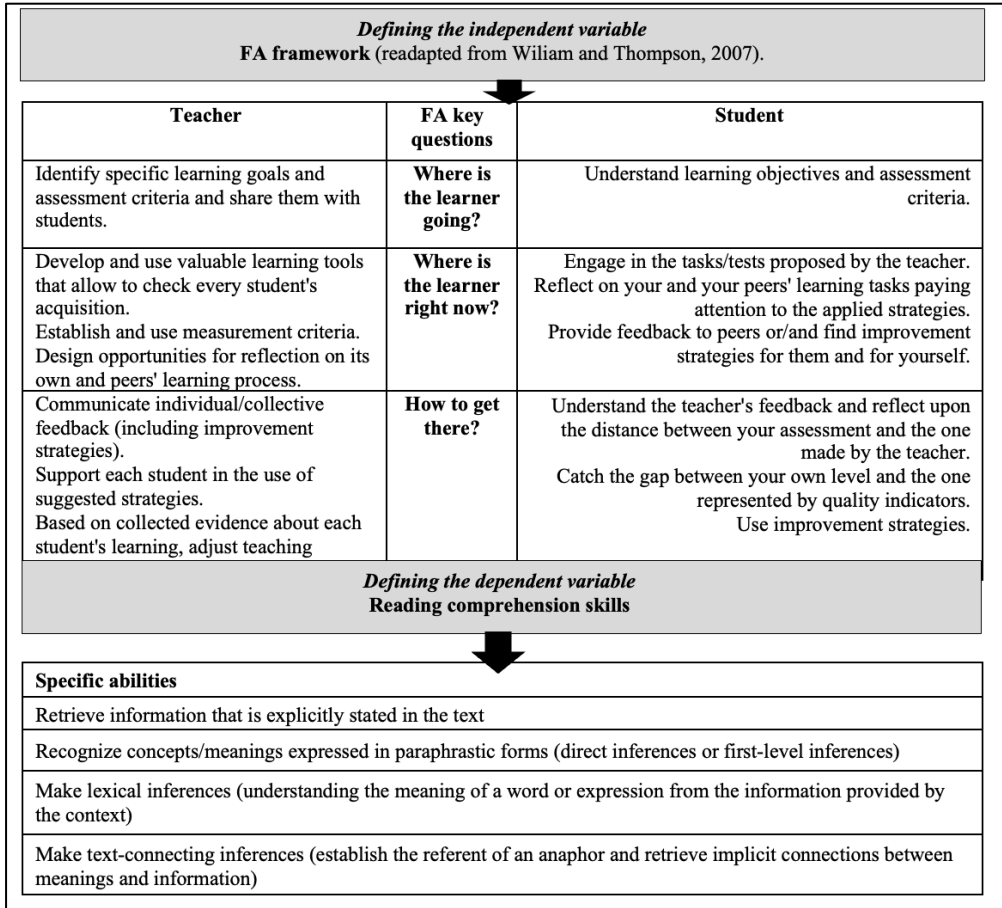
Since the beginning of the twentieth century, several empirical studies on the topic have been carried out all over the world. Among them, some were domain-specific, such as the ones related to math, literacy and arts (Lee et al., 2020) and others weren't related to a particular subject (Kingston & Nash, 2011). Although the findings showed a positive trend for FA practices' effectiveness in raising students' learning results, a large variability has been found. According to this situation, it seems reasonable to affirm that the international debate on FA effectiveness presents some open questions regarding the subject issue, the definition and framework of FA, and how the context could affect its implementation in the classrooms.

In Italy, the discourse on FA developed thanks to the contribution of authors such as Vertecchi (1976) and Calonghi (1983) and recently has been enriched by suggestions from scholars such as Vannini (2022) and Corsini (2023). Still, interesting empirical studies (Bevilacqua, 2023; Scierri, 2023) have also been carried out. However, there is a lack of data retrieved from experimental studies in secondary schools to sustain a profound reflection of schools and policymakers on the requirements to implement FA in classrooms successfully.

## **2. HYPOTHESIS AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

The overall hypothesis of the study claimed that FA practices could improve lower secondary school students' text comprehension skills (and reduce the gap between achievements), so an experimental design has been planned to explore this hypothesis. The construct of the independent variable (FA) has been developed (Fig. 1) adapting the one provided by Wiliam and Thompson (2007). Then, 80 indicators corresponding to FA strategies have been developed, and 15 FA activities on text comprehension have been planned. Likewise, the construct for defining what abilities comprise the skill of comprehending a text has been elaborated (Fig. 1). In this respect, the choice was to focus on the inference process, due to its crucial role in understanding a text that has been claimed in studies such as the one of Cain and Oakhill (1999).

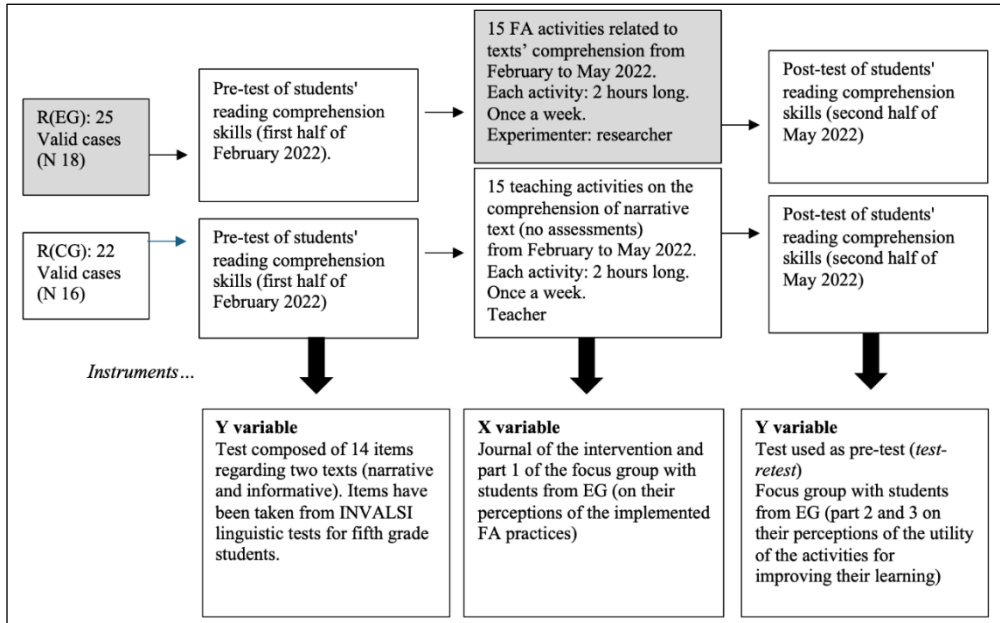
Fig. 1. The frameworks of FA practices and reading comprehension skills



### 2.1. The experimental design

Participants were 47 students from two first-year classes of a lower secondary school in the northern part of Italy (Emilia-Romagna). They were randomly assigned to the experimental or the control group, and the design followed the classical experimental path (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Diagram of the experimental design



- Pre-test (T1): measurement of the students' texts' (narrative and informative) comprehension skills at the beginning of the study.
- Intervention: students belonging to the experimental group (EG) joined 15 FA activities related to the texts' comprehension carried out by the experimenter (the researcher) for four months, once a week (each activity lasts two hours), while students from the control group (CG) took part to the same number of teaching activities on texts' comprehension, without assessment moments.
- Post-test (T2): measurement of the students' texts' comprehension skills using the same test employed in the T1 phase, at the end of the intervention.
- Analysis of the difference between the groups: the difference between the two groups in the post-test – pre-test difference has been computed with a specific focus on students who had more difficulties at the beginning of the study.
- Three specific assumptions have been made, starting from the main hypothesis (Fig. 3). In this contribution, only the first two will be focused.

Fig. 3. The specific hypotheses of the research

<b>Statistical significance</b>	<p>H<sub>0</sub>: There are no significant differences between the post-test – pre-test <math>\Delta</math> values of the two groups.</p>	<p>H<sub>1</sub>: The difference between the post-test – pre-test <math>\Delta</math> values of the two groups is positive for EG students.</p>
	<p>H<sub>0</sub>: There are no significant differences between the post-test – pre-test <math>\Delta</math> values of students with the lowest scores in the pre-test of the two groups</p>	<p>H<sub>1</sub>: The difference between the post-test – pre-test <math>\Delta</math> values of students with the lowest scores in the pre-test of two groups is positive for EG students.</p>
<b>Practical significance</b>	<p>FA activities don't have a practical significance.</p>	<p>FA activities have a practical significance.</p>

The research has been approved by the Ethic Committee of the University of Bologna and data have been collected anonymously. Teachers and students knew the domain of the project (texts' comprehension), but they didn't know all the details of the intervention to avoid participants' reactivity.

## 2.2. The intervention

The intervention could be divided into three parts: the presentation of the entire set of FA activities, which were divided in "cycles", their development, and the conclusion. Every "cycle", or every set of FA activities related to a specific learning objective<sup>2</sup>, was composed of the following strategies.

1. *Sharing learning objectives and assessment criteria with students.* Examples of texts (often read aloud and supported by images and/or videos) accompanied by questions were used. The students were invited to answer and think of which ability was needed to find a response, in order to present the learning objective. Instead, the discussion on assessment criteria was implemented by using exemplars and rubrics.
2. *Eliciting evidence of each student's learning.* The FA tasks were mainly composed of multiple-choice questions related to narrative and informative texts. In addition, they also contained semi-structured questions to understand students' reasoning and use it to structure appropriate feedback. Texts have been selected from the literature and INVALSI tests of previous years.

<sup>2</sup> Totally five cycles were realized corresponding to the five abilities included in the text comprehension framework)



3. *Providing students with formative feedback.* The researcher used three symbols inside the feedback to represent the concepts of strengths (a star), weaknesses (a cloud), and improvement' strategies (a balloon) and provided it to students. During the individual feedback moments, the researcher read the comments with each student eliciting reflections and deepening the strategies student had used to tackle the task. Then, the researcher monitored the student's understanding of the feedback received. Otherwise, during the collective feedback, the errors' analysis was carried out, which was followed by a reflection on the improvement strategies.
4. *Using suggestions and strategies for improvement.* After giving the feedback, the researcher asked the students to answer again to the questions they had responded incorrectly using provided suggestions.

### **2.3. Instruments and analysis**

Two types of instruments have been employed for different purposes.

- Reading comprehension test (pre-test and post-test): for collecting data on the skills included in the framework of the dependent variable, a test has been developed using items and texts from INVALSI reading comprehension tasks of previous years<sup>3</sup>. The test was composed of 14 questions (most of them of multiple-choice type), and they referred to a narrative (9) and an informative text (5).
- Focus group (at the end of the intervention): a protocol for the focus group was developed to collect information on how EG students perceived FA practices.
- Journal: the researcher kept a research journal on the developed FA activities to document the intervention.

Data from the reading comprehension test were analysed using SPSS software. Since the number of students per group was lower than 20, the Mann-Whitney U non-parametric test was used to see if the post-pre-test difference between the groups was significantly affected by the participation in FA activities. The same procedure was followed considering only data from students who struggled more in the pre-test.

Students with mild or severe disabilities were excluded from quantitative data analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> Items and texts from INVALSI test of the 2013–2014 year for fifth grade pupils.

### 3. RESULTS

Valid cases were 34: 18 students for the EG and 16 students for the CG. Descriptive analyses revealed that the average of both groups in the reading comprehension test increased between T1 and T2. Indeed, at the beginning of the study, EG students had an average score of 10,44 (maximum score: 14) and it rose to 11,72 points at the end of the intervention (+ 1,28). Students from the CG showed an average of 10,25 in T1 and 11,25 in T2 showing a growth of 1 point. However, standard deviation declined in the EG between T1 (3,03) and T2 (2,05) more than in the CG (T1 Sd: 2,27, T2 Sd: 1,84). These data suggest there are no large differences between the two groups increase from pre-test to post-test: indeed, not surprisingly, the Mann-Whitney U test has revealed that the difference between the two groups post-test – pre-test  $\Delta$  values was not significant (Mann-Whitney U: 127,5; p-value > 0,05). Nevertheless, students from EG showed an increased homogeneity of achieved scores compared to peers from CG. To deepen this last result, students were divided into three groups based on the score they achieved in the pre-test (lower, in line, and upper the group’s average). Data revealed that the highest growth in the post-test was the one of the students in the lowest score range in the pre-test. Then, the same operations were repeated with students of the CG to compare the gain of the students with more difficulties in the pre-test of the two groups.

Tab. 1. Each group’s divisions with improvement averages between T1 and T2

Groups	Groups’ division (based on the pre-test average of each group)	N	Improvement average (T2-T1)
EG	Students below the average	6	3
	Average students	5	0,8
	Students over the average	7	0,1
CG	Students below the average	6	1,8
	Average students	5	0,8
	Students over the average	5	0,2

Results show a larger increase of EG students with more difficulties in the pre-test (+3 points) compared to the same CG students (+1,83 points), although the Mann-Whitney U test confirmed that this difference was not statistically significant either.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Findings indicated that differences between the two groups were very slight (on average, EG students increase by +0,28 points if compared to CG peers), and that was corroborated by the negative statistical significance test. These results could be easily explained by thinking of the limits of the research designs (low number of valid cases, FA was not embedded in a teaching unit, no structured control over the control condition...) and the fact that several students from EG at the beginning of the experiment already mastered texts' comprehension skills, as the analyses of the focus group confirmed. However, the study offers different suggestions. First, the variability between students' results decreased more in EG, and students who have taken advantage of this decline were the ones who struggled more in the pre-test. This result converges with what has been stated on the effectiveness of FA for sustaining the learning of students with more difficulties. Second, the study offers a "framework for action": in this study FA has declined in specific strategies and practices thought to be implemented in Italian schools, and it could offer a reference for building new experimental designs on the topic.

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# FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN PRESCHOOL FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Teachers have to face many challenges in different instructional environments and composition of classes in preschool requires an inclusive design that considers the specificities of “each and every one”, as in Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Evaluation plays a key role, and students need to improve their self-assessment and reflection. To grow better capacity for self-regulation, learners need to learn how to control emotions and reactivity, seeing as how individuals differ considerably in their capability and propensity for metacognition (CAST, 2024). The evaluation process “activates the actions to do, regulates those done, promotes the critical assessment of those carried out” (MIUR, 2012, p. 19) accompanying the teaching/learning process from beginning to end. The reflections briefly described represent the framework of an empirical research started in a preschool situated in Campania. Through a design framework based on a narrative background represented by the story of Frida, children will have the opportunity to approach a theme of particular interest for the current historical period and, at the same time, reach the educational goals set in the design phase.

equity; quality; teaching/learning process; preschool; formative assessment

## INTRODUCTION

Teachers have to face many challenges in different instructional environments and composition of classes in preschool requires an inclusive design that considers the specificities of “each and every one”, as in Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn (CAST, 2024). As known, the framework includes three principles, each of which

contains checkpoints that precisely drive learners' ability to access, build and internalize the information they are learning. Evaluation plays a key role, and students need to improve their *self-assessment* and *reflection*. To develop better capacity for self-regulation, learners need to learn how to control emotions and reactivity, seeing as how individuals differ considerably in their capability and propensity for metacognition (CAST, 2024). The evaluation process “activates the actions to do, regulates those done, promotes the critical assessment of those carried out” (MIUR, 2012, p. 19) accompanying the teaching/learning process from beginning to end. The evaluation promotes equity: this concept calls for an education for everyone, aimed at enhancing the differences, merits and potential of each student. Fair educational systems guarantee that “all young people are able to develop their talents and realize their full potential, regardless of their background” (Eurydice, 2021, p. 11). *Formative assessment* (Black et al., 2003; Earl, 2003) is a useful tool to identify the abilities of the individual, understand the differences and grasp the motivations of those who learn, to make the most appropriate educational choices based on the specificities of each (Iannotta, 2023). The reflections briefly described represent the framework of empirical research started in a preschool situated in Campania. The school is in a varied context, in which the upgrading of infrastructure by institutions, in recent years has allowed the school system to grow. The preschool welcomes children from different social backgrounds and teachers need to adopt, as usual, an inclusive design to meet the needs of each child. In addition, in relation to the need to be shared, at all school levels, the common values of the Member States of the European Union – including freedom, democracy, equality, respect for human rights, equality between women and men (Treaty on European Union, 2012) and on International Women's Day – the narrative background is represented by the story of Frida. Through this design framework, children will have the opportunity to approach a theme of particular interest for the current historical period and, at the same time, reach the educational goals set in the design phase.

## **1. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND INCLUSION: A POSSIBLE COMBINATION**

Assessment for learning refers to a process of obtaining feedback *in itinere*. Feedback can be understood as information on the overall progress of the learning paths activated with the aim of providing information that allows an adaptation of teaching to individual differences (Allal, Cardinet & Perrenoud, 1979). In fact, the evaluation carried out during the implementation of the educational activity can lead to the elaboration of positive judgements,

problematic judgments, negative judgements. Based on this feedback, it is necessary to direct teachers' decisions towards a confirmation of the adopted working lines and/or towards the identification of specific interventions to improve the didactic proposal. The teacher can use formative assessment to find out what students know and can do, as well as identify, in-process, misconceptions or gaps that could negatively affect the success of the learning process.

Formative assessment works implicitly and explicitly to construct learning. It is also a tool for the learning of pupils and for promoting their potential, motivation, attitudes and abilities. The ability of teachers to evaluate themselves, to reflect on their own work, to question their choices, to change teaching strategies in line with the real needs of pupils. Assessment for learning, therefore, aims to improve both learning outcomes and processes (*regulatory assessment*). Drawing on Ausubel (1968) and Rogers (1973), Falcinelli describes how formative assessment manages to take over a multiplicity of elements concerning the learning process: cognitive, emotional and affective aspects, the way pupils relate to each other and to teachers. The formative evaluation has the task of observing these learning processes and following the psycho-pedagogical and didactic debate on the construct of competence. It is also responsible for observing, monitoring and evaluating the learning process as a process of competence development.

### **1.1. Evaluating to preserve equity**

Evaluating allows to assign value to facts, procedures and events, in relation to the purposes that those who evaluate intend to pursue (Tammaro, 2018). Evaluation, characterized as a process of complex nature, activates the actions to be undertaken, regulates those initiated, promotes critical balance over those carried out in time (MIUR, 2012). This makes it easy to understand how the assessment follows the whole teaching/learning process. It allows the improvement of educational processes and the promotion of a fair and quality education, central aspects of current national and international policies. The concept of equity gives a sense of learning for all and for each and is closely linked to evaluation as a process that describes, measures, judges 'transformations' towards an end considered 'good' or 'better' (Galliani, 2015). Promoting equity allows us to work for education for all and for each, aimed at the exploitation of differences, merit and potential of every student, from the very first years of formal education. Equity is diversification and requires teaching that considers the characteristics of each student, offering stimuli not

attributable to undifferentiated and standardized patterns. An approach with these characteristics allows the recognition and exploitation of each person's potential, while respecting individual learning times and styles to guarantee everyone the right to a quality education (Besozzi, 2009). The principles of personalization are therefore recalled, according to which each pupil will reach specific personal goals, valuing differences and ensuring that they do not change into inequalities (Bonazza, 2014). The school, therefore, adopts the idea of heterogeneity and, consequently, also the evaluation carries forward the principles of inclusion through the valorization of peculiarities, the ability and attitudes of individuals in that they are based on the idea that learning does not originate from a single form of intelligence. In fact, the subjects in training do not resort to a single cognitive style but to a multi-process one (Gardner, 1989; Bruner, 1988; Fodor, 1988).

### **1.2. Evaluating to preserve quality**

In our reflection on the formative value of evaluation, we should focus on the practices and tools used for surveys to define the concept of quality to be sought at the design stage (Notti, 2017). The concept of quality, which is neutral, must be adapted to the strategic and competitive objectives of education systems, in the light of standards negotiated in national and international contexts. Structural and organic interventions (such as regulatory ones) are necessary to achieve the objectives. Actions aimed at innovation of teaching techniques and teaching methodologies are also needed, aiming to define a school able to understand the expectations and needs of stakeholders. Real training opportunities are feasible through the flexibility and personalization of teaching-learning paths, using human and professional skills qualified and appropriate to the purpose. Building a school that guarantees the right and duty to education for all is a complex undertaking involving many dimensions of the institution. Reference is made to the study plan, the training offer, the approaches and teaching models which are able to provide answers suited to an increasingly diverse and demanding target group.

### **1.3. Evaluating to promote learning**

Evaluation plays an essential role in verifying the impact and repercussions of design on the educational and training reality of pupils, up to considering the extent to which learning is conditioned and/or modified by the choices made. Evaluation is a fundamental institutional task in the education system, which monitors, regulates and improves the educational proposal designed and



delivered. The task of school assessment does not end with the verification, measurement and evaluation of learning from students. These actions only reflect a small part of the evaluation interests which, however, extend to several levels (from the micro context of the individual classroom to the whole architecture of the education and training system, on a national and international scale). In the different ways of *assessment of learning*, *assessment for learning* and *assessment as learning*, the evaluation accompanies the entire teaching-learning process, returning relevant and meaningful information to the various stakeholders involved.

## **2. OBSERVATIONAL RESEARCH**

### **2.1. The context: kindergarten**

The pre-school, in our country, still lives from the low consideration with respect to the subsequent school orders, although it plays a role of extreme importance in the integral and harmonious development of the child. The kindergarten provides the basis for the effective promotion of logical-communicative skills and active citizenship, before the structured interventions of primary school. Recent studies in the field of neuroscience on cerebral plasticity and cognitive functioning, testify that significant experiences from early childhood leave indelible traces able to condition future action (Siegel, 2017). The phenomenon known as neuroplasticity is the property that allows the brain to modify its structure and functioning in response to mental activities and experiences (Doidge, 2015). In the educational field, providing learning stimuli to children in the 3-6 range can trigger changes in neural structure: neuroplasticity is the basis of learning and determines retention, representation and processing of new information. The nursery school is the first context of the child's effective integration into the education system. Although the objective is not to organize and teach early knowledge content but rather amplify the experiences of the little ones through the encounter with images and words, mediated by the teacher.

### **2.2. The case study**

In this contribution is presented the synthesis of an observational research carried out at the end of last winter in a kindergarten in the province of Avellino. The aim was to investigate whether and how evaluation with an eminently formative value was integrated into educational practices. This methodological option allowed to observe the teachers' behaviour, without changing the natural course of activities, with the intention of suggesting possible different strategies

if there were conditions and/or need. The context is that of a suburban school complex with a population of about 120 children, divided into 6 sections. Our reference section is a homogeneous 4-year section, predominantly male, in which there are 3 children with disabilities and/or difficulties. In addition to the two regular teachers, there are rotating teachers, two support teachers and the teacher engaged on empowerment. Teachers usually carry out training evaluation activities, aimed at monitoring the progress of the proposed educational and symbolic activities.

Teachers prefer a design for integrative background, which is often applied in the kindergarten (and/or educational contexts where there is the presence of children with special educational needs). The teaching action takes place in a context or “background” that can make learning meaningful for the individual. It is of fundamental importance the construction by the teacher of the conditions necessary to create the background: in most cases, it is represented by a particular environment, a narrative plot or context (Zanelli, 1986). The background promotes integration between affective and cognitive moment, motivating children to learn, and encourages the structuring of contexts that facilitate the progressive reorganization of the ‘conceptual frameworks’ of children. Indirectly, promoting different mediations facilitates the development of cooperative relational modes. In this case, the background is the “forest” and, in particular, the “wood of mimosa trees”, which lends itself to provide a framework for the stories of women and their rights. The whole month of February and the principles of March are dedicated to enriching narratives and each activity is followed by observations (structured through checklists), aimed at reinforcing positive behaviours and correcting those incorrect.

The teachers also produce a rich documentation of all activities carried out by and with children, accompanied by individual evaluation notes. The evaluation, assumed with an eminently formative function, has allowed the structuring and restructuring of the different activities foreseen in the background, bringing the sensitivity of children to a particularly important theme in the horizon of contemporary sense, or the recognition of gender rights.

## **CONCLUSION**

The challenges facing schools today are many: there is a need for cultural awareness of the theme of differences in school and society. The construction of inclusion, in fact, is not limited to students with disabilities or difficulties, but focuses on the ability of schools to accommodate a variety of exigence

(Demeris, Childs & Jordan, 2007).

It is therefore necessary to value each student and implement appropriate interventions so that individual differences do not turn into inequalities. In this perspective, evaluation, especially in its sense of formative assessment, is an effective tool in the hands of the teacher who, through continuous feedback, has the possibility of adapting and readapting its teaching activities on the go to better meet the needs actually identified in the classroom context.

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# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PCTO ON SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION IN ITALY: THE POINT OF VIEW OF EXTERNAL TUTORS

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The article examines the effectiveness of the PCTO program in facilitating school-to-work transition in Italy, by focusing on empirical data from a longitudinal survey administered to tutors from the host organisations. The analysis highlights the encouraging number of collaborations following the realisation of PCTO, even though with significant regional disparities. Therefore, the article suggests some policy revision.

school-to-work transition; PCTO effectiveness; South-North divide

## INTRODUCTION

Our contribution addresses the effectiveness of the school to work alternance (SWA) policy on school-to work-transition (SWT) in Italy. The academic debate presents ambivalent findings regarding the impact of these work-based learning (WBL) experiences on SWT. While the “Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e l’Orientamento” (PCTO) programs offer valuable opportunities for many students, their effectiveness is tempered by regional disparities, the quality of placements, and the fragmented nature of Italy’s labour market, highlighting the need for structural reforms and more targeted interventions.

Considering the point of view of external tutors from the host organisations, this paper aims to analyse the effectiveness of PCTO by exploring post program collaborations. We adopted a mixed methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews (N. 27) with a longitudinal e-mail survey (2021-2022) to host organisation tutors, selected from a representative sample of 78 Italian

schools.

The empirical material we refer to comes from the survey. A first wave considered 367 projects involving third-year students and the second considered 776 projects realised by the same students during their fourth year of school. The survey involved 356 external tutors (130 in the first wave and 226 in the second one), coming from different host organisations: 65% from enterprise, 10% from university or other educational institutions and 25% from public authority or association. In terms of size, they were classified as micro (up to 9 employees, 42%), small (10 to 49 employees, 33%), medium (50 to 249 employees, 9%) and large organisations (more than 249 employees, 16%).

## **1. THE ROLE OF PCTOS IN THE SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION IN ITALY**

In Italy, young people are particularly vulnerable during the school-to-work transition phase and face significant obstacles when entering the labour market<sup>1</sup>. This vulnerability stems from structural features typical of the SWT regime in Southern European countries, characterised by a highly segmented and deregulated labour market (Bertolini et al., 2024), a welfare state with minimal investment in active labour market policies for young people (Pastore and Zimmermann, 2019; Cefalo and Kazepov, 2020), and a traditionally rigid and sequential educational system. Indeed, the Italian education system is historically sequential, thus WBL experiences are typically postponed until after high school (Pastore, 2015). This weakens the connection between education and the labour market, leading to prolonged transitions and skill mismatches (Pompei and Selezneva, 2017). In contrast, the European Continental SWT regime employs a dual system that integrates school-based learning with WBL (Eichhorst et al., 2015; Bonnal et al., 2002).

Law 53/2003 and Decree 77/2005 established the Italian SWA program, which became mandatory for all high school students. In 2019, SWA was replaced by PCTO, which significantly reduced the required hours of work-based learning experiences. This shift also marked a change in objectives. While SWA emphasized strengthening connections between schools and the labour market, PCTO focuses more on developing soft skills and providing orientation activities, in line with the recommendations of the (European Commission, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> This is reflected, for example, in the youth unemployment rate (18%, 7 points above the EU average), the number of NEETs in the country (19.8%, compared with 11.7% in the EU27) and the early school leaving rate, which is the third highest in the euro area at 11.5% (ISTAT, 2023).

The overall impact of SWA on the school-to-work and tertiary education transition remains debated. For lyceum students, these training experiences seem to have a positive influence on their career orientation, increasing the probability of continuing their studies (Bernardi et al., 2024). Different results are observed when looking at students enrolled in vocational and technical schools. These experiences play a crucial role in developing both soft and technical skills, thereby facilitating the transition to the labour market (Giubileo and Scarano, 2018; Giancola and Salmieri, 2021). Furthermore, these learning pathways have been noted for improving access to formal employment networks, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, some studies also highlight significant limitations (Teselli, 2018), as not all schools are adequately prepared to offer innovative educational experiences (Nicoli and Salatin, 2018). Moreover, despite their potential, SWA have shown uneven results across the country (Pinna and Pitzalis, 2024), with more limited success in southern Italy. The lack of robust industrial infrastructure in the south has resulted in fewer quality on the job experiences, which hinders the effectiveness of work-based learning (Unioncamere and ANPAL, 2019). Additionally, the prevalence of small, family-owned businesses involved in these initiatives, which are often unable to provide comprehensive training opportunities, exacerbates the challenges in these regions (Arlotti et al., 2016). This programme has been criticised for not fully addressing the mismatch between education and the labour market. In some cases, SWA is seen as a mere extension of schooling rather than a means of preparing students for real-world employment (Bertoni et al., 2021).

These ambivalent findings mainly focus on the earlier version of the program. Since the introduction of PCTO in 2019, there is still limited evidence regarding their effectiveness. This article aims to address this gap by analysing the impact of the PCTO on SWT.

## **2. ARE PCTOS EFFECTIVE?**

Although the objectives of PCTO include enhancing students' technical and transversal skills and guiding them in their future academic and career choices, we have decided to use post-PCTO work collaborations as the main indicator of the policy effectiveness. By focusing on further collaborations with the host organisation, we can better assess how effectively PCTO prepares students for the labour market, enabling them to secure internships, apprenticeships, or employment opportunities that are directly influenced by their participation in

the program.

The data presented in Table 1 highlight macro-regional differences in opportunities for continued collaboration between students and organisations across Italy. Overall, 39% of respondents affirmed successful collaborations, with the North-East reporting the highest rate at 49%, followed by the North-West (47%), Centre (38%), and South-Islands (24%). Interestingly, barriers to further collaboration vary by geographic area. In the South-Islands, a significant proportion (29%) attributed the lack of collaboration to a recent hiring freeze within host organisations, indicating potential regional economic disparities impacting recruitment. Conversely, a larger percentage in the Centre (36%) and South-Islands (31%) reported structural or procedural constraints. Furthermore, “lack of suitable individuals” as a reason was most cited in the North-East (20%) and North-West (16%), but this was less of a barrier compared to structural or economic constraints. This suggests that while some regions may have established procedures for integrating students into organisations, organisational readiness and regional hiring trends heavily influence collaboration continuity.

Table 1. Further working collaborations with students by geographic areas (%)

	North-West	North-East	Centre	South-Islands	Total
Yes	47	49	38	24	39
No, because we did not meet suitable people	16	20	10	16	16
No, because the host organisation has not recruited in the last period	16	16	16	29	20
No, because the process does not allow it	20	14	36	31	24

In order to provide substantiation for the aforementioned points, Table 2 presents the distribution of different types of host organisations (Enterprises, Universities, and Public authorities/associations) across the four geographical areas in Italy. The table indicates a decreasing presence of enterprises – the only ones able to offer post-PCTO collaborations – from the North-East (81%) and North-West (72%) down to the Centre (59%) and the South-Islands (48%). This



suggests a strong business concentration in northern Italy, with a notable decline in enterprise presence as we move southward, likely reflecting broader economic disparities across geographic areas. On the other side, Universities are less prominent in the North-East (1%) and North-West (7%), with higher representation as hosting structures in the Centre (15%) and South-Islands (17%). This distribution may suggest that educational institutions are more integral to central and southern macro-areas, potentially serving as hubs of development in areas with fewer enterprises. Lastly, the share of public authorities and associations progressively increases from the North-West (21%) and North-East (18%) to the Centre (26%) and reaches the highest proportion in the South-Islands (35%). This trend may indicate a stronger role of public and associative bodies in southern Italy, possibly as a response to lower enterprise density. Consistent with expectations, when considering the type of school, the percentage of host organisations that initiate further collaborations increases to 51% for vocational schools and 41% for technical schools. This suggests that PCTOs have a measurable positive impact on school-to-work transition.

Table 2. Type of host organisations by geographic area (%)

	North-West	North-East	Centre	South-Islands
Enterprises	72	81	59	48
Universities	7	1	15	17
Public authorities/associations	21	18	26	35

Small organisations report a significantly higher rate of collaborations following the implementation of PCTOs (56%) compared to micro (32%) and medium-large organisations (30%). The latter group asserts that the process does not allow for collaborations (53%). It is important to note that 75% of large organisations engage with students from lyceums, for whom the PCTOs focus on university orientation rather than recruitment. In contrast, nearly half of the micro-organisations (42%) collaborate with students from vocational schools, who are more likely to enter the labour market after graduation. However, 29% of micro-organisations do not pursue further collaborations with students, due to the lack of hiring in the recent period, thus highlighting the structural weaknesses of smaller enterprises in Italy, further exacerbated by the COVID-

19 pandemic. The weaknesses of the Italian industrial structure must once again be considered when assessing the effectiveness of policies. For micro-enterprises, the availability of financial and organisational resources is a critical concern. Additionally, some external tutors argue that the economic incentives provided to companies are inadequate in relation to the resources invested and the responsibilities undertaken to implement PCTOs.

### **3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The characteristics of the Italian labour market make PCTOs an instrument that is as necessary as it is fragile. Indeed, small and medium-sized enterprises (most of our sample and of the Italian production system), which have difficulty finding qualified young people, are the ones that would benefit most from effective work-based experiences. However, it is precisely these companies that often lack the financial and human capital needed to guarantee quality training pathways.

Our research reveals some partly unexpected results. Despite the limitations of the instrument, we can highlight its effectiveness, which is represented by a relatively high percentage of “further collaborations” between the host organisation and the students involved in PCTOs. Nevertheless, the data reflect notable regional differences in Italy’s economic structure, highlighting a north-south economic divide where the density of enterprise decreases, and the role of the public sector and academia increases from north to south. This uneven distribution of opportunities across the country reflects broader regional inequalities in the labour market, which remain a significant barrier to the success of these programs (Arlotti et al., 2016).

However, to ensure that positive experiences do not remain isolated, some important changes to the instrument would be needed. Firstly, it could be useful to introduce incentives for companies, especially small ones, to encourage their participation. Incentives could also support the creation of training courses for external tutors (81% of external tutors stated that they had not received any training on the educational value of PCTOs). Secondly, we believe it is important to promote greater synergy between the various actors involved, for example by strengthening cooperation at the planning stage and promoting a dialogue that enables host organisations to better understand the needs of pupils and schools to keep up with the emerging demands of the labour market. Finally, greater involvement of local associations and institutions could encourage the creation of partnerships and projects more directly linked to the characteristics

and potential of different territories, regions and cities, thus helping to overcome the north-south divide.

Overall, to effectively facilitate the school-to-work transition, PCTO policies must be situated within a framework of comprehensive structural reforms that address the traditional weaknesses of the Italian economic and educational systems. In the absence of such reforms, the efficacy of targeted initiatives remains limited, especially in southern Italy, where enduring regional disparities in infrastructure and labour market opportunities perpetuate structural inequities.

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# THE (RE)PRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES THROUGH THE LENS OF PCTOS: MICRO-MACRO MECHANISMS FOR PROJECT ADHESION AND EVALUATION OF EXPERIENCE

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The aim of the Italian government policy Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTOs) is to enrich the educational process of upper-secondary school students. Participating in PCTOs can help students develop an awareness of their skills, especially in view of their future paths and educational and/or professional scenarios. Projects should foster co-planning, student self-orientation and take into account the needs of the schools' socio-economic fabric. For this study, the team designed an integrated multi-stakeholder matrix that compiles and intersects data from three surveys – aimed at students (4.045), project tutors (264) and headmasters (73) (2021/2022 school year) – and a content analysis as a study of the projects uploaded onto a platform by a sampling of Italian schools (251 projects from 78 schools).

Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTOs), Multilevel and multistakeholder model of analysis, Italian upper secondary schools, Reproduction of social inequalities

## INTRODUCTION

The 2019 Budget Law (art. 1, section 785, law 30 December 2018, n. 145) defines PCTOs as “a didactic methodology integrating classroom learning, whereby curricular knowledge and skills are passed on to students, creating

educational experiences that help them better understand how the work world operates. Students can also acquire transversal competences (soft skills), i.e. skills applicable in various settings that are in high demand from young people in the workplace”. PCTOs are part of the transition from upper-secondary to post-secondary education or the job market and may be defined as tools to bring out or consolidate student aspirations, interests, study orientation and professional vocation (Fasanella *et. al.*, 2024). PCTO projects are designed with three main dimensions: curriculum, experience and orientation.<sup>1</sup> Orientation activities help students identify their aptitudes and align their skills with job market demands or choose a post-secondary course of study. They also include educational and vocational orientation. One important way PCTOs provide vocational orientation is through collaboration with host institutions and organizations,<sup>2</sup> weaving a local network of schools and businesses so students can acquire hands-on skills directly from the workplace, ensuring a perfect match between skills required and skills offered.

Considering the new law implementation, this paper investigates the role of PCTOs as orientation tools. The research question can be defined as follows: What impact do PCTOs have on students’ educational careers? The following section will present the research design and additional details.

### **PCTO ANALYSIS: RESEARCH DESIGN NOTES**

Our results are based on empirical data from a Research Project of National Relevance entitled “*Evaluating the School-Work Alternance: a longitudinal study in Italian upper secondary schools*”, focusing on PCTOs and carried out from 2019 to 2024 by the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (INVALSI) and the University of Genoa, Milano-Bicocca and Sapienza University of Rome.

PCTOs are a measure introduced by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit to provide youth with opportunities to identify/valorize their interests, aspirations, talents and socio-emotional resources. They are meant to enrich the school curriculum of third, fourth and fifth year upper-secondary-school students by stimulating learning and strengthening the key organizational-planning skills students need to transition into the job market or post-secondary

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<sup>1</sup> These three dimensions are defined as strategies to avoid skill mismatch (Giannoni *et. al.*, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Host structures are defined as businesses, associations, chambers of commerce, public and private entities, museums and other institutes operating in the area of cultural heritage and activities.

education.

This evaluative study has a complex mixed-method research design. In order to comprehend the measure's impact on students' educational career, a broad empirical base was built for the 2021-2022 academic year which the research team analyzed from a micro and macro perspective, performing a multilevel, multistakeholder analysis to account for the different methods of governance and policy implementation. The integrated data matrix includes archived and interconnected data from three surveys with questionnaires and a textual content analysis of the projects carried out in the schools sampled. The data in the dataset refer respectively to: 4,045 students, 264 project tutors, 73 headmasters, 251 projects (carried out by 78 participating schools, compared to the 100 originally sampled). This stratified proportional sampling uses a matrix of general information compiled for the 2018-2019 school year by the INVALSI Statistics Service from 4,161 institutes (excluding state-recognized private schools, prison and hospital school complexes, boarding schools, etc.). The 100 schools previously identified, like the 78 that actually participated in the study, reflect the national school population distribution on a smaller scale and were identified by combining the geographic variable, organized into five areas and school specialization, divided into lyceums, technical schools and vocational schools.

Therefore, the final, integrated, multilevel, multistakeholder matrix has four different units of analysis (students, tutors, headmasters, PCTOs) originally from four different matrixes. In order to integrate them, we had to relabel the cases in each matrix to avoid overlap and identify any variables that could link and perfectly align the data. To build the integrated matrix, we used three different linking variables: project (students-projects), tutor ID (students-tutors) and finally the institute's data processing code (students-headmasters).<sup>3</sup>

## **SCHOOL GOVERNANCE AND STUDENT SELF-ORIENTATION**

In addition to projects characterization, which is presented elsewhere for space reasons, the three tables below show the indices constructed relate to the section of PCTO policy on the importance of co-planning with students and self-orientation as some of the building blocks of good planning (PCTO Guidelines, p. 20). The variable 'contribution to school governance' reflects the various stakeholders' degree of involvement in the projects. Table 1 shows how

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<sup>3</sup> Due to space limits, the full process of aligning and integrating the various matrixes will be explained in future works currently being prepared.



survey participants were asked to what degree different school stakeholders contributed to project development on a scale of 0 (no contribution) to 5 (maximum contribution). The mean values show the low involvement of the scientific committee, teaching staff and school committee compared to the high involvement of school tutors and headmasters. This data was used to build an index using two-step principal component analysis (PCA).

Tab. 1. Variables in the index: 'stakeholder involvement' in project development (N=4.045)

How much do these stakeholders contribute to project development	Headmasters	Teaching staff	Class committee	Scientific committee
Mean	3,22	2,33	2,91	1,92
Standard deviation	1,54	1,42	1,41	1,69
Interval	5	5	5	5

Then, we built two indexes: one of students who 'autonomously joined/participated in PCTOs', used in the models (see below); the other of students who were 'persuaded to join/participate in PCTOs'. The indexes reflect the degree of student agreement on a scale of 0 to 10 with specific items, theoretically attributable to the two concepts of theoretical interest given in table 2. Regarding students' autonomous participation, the mean values clearly show that many students choose self-proposed PCTOs. However, overall, with only a slight deviation, students base their choices on the advice of their school tutor.

Tab. 2 Variables in the index of students who 'autonomously joined/participated in PCTOs' and those who were 'persuaded to join/participate in PCTOs' (N=4.045).

Autonomously joined/participated in PCTOs					Persuaded to join/participate in PCTOs			
You participate in a PCTO because:	You know the host organization	You read comments on social media	You self-propose it	Follow your tutor's advice	Your school has offered the project for many years	You follow your classmate's advice	You follow your friends' advice	
Mean	5,70	4,16	6,33	6,67	6,21	5,23	5,30	
Standard deviation	2,51	2,69	2,82	2,13	2,35	2,44	2,53	
Interval	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	

## **PCTO PARTICIPATION AND SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS**

The foregoing demonstrates how PCTOs seem to play a crucial role in orienting students' post-secondary-school choices, a topic that has been the object of many theoretical (Giancola & Salmieri, 2024) and empirical (Parziale, 2016) studies, both in terms of whether students continue studying or not and what they study. In this case, PCTO activities should impact expectations as to whether students will continue to study post-diploma by directing and orienting their choices and supporting them on a cognitive, informational and motivation level (Giancola & Piromalli, 2024). Likewise, when it comes to academic performance and their inclinations and choices, a seemingly unchanging pattern (Giancola & Salmieri, 2022) indicates that there are strong elements of inertia linked to students' socio-economic background (Triventi, 2014) and the "chain reaction" connecting students' socio-economic background and their chosen upper-secondary-school study path. In order to estimate whether and to what extent PCTOs can curb the reproduction of educational inequalities, we opted to use a set of three logistic regression models where the result (the dichotomous dependent variable) is whether they continue studying post-diploma or not (at least as an overtly expressed prospect in this survey).

The first model only includes individual variables, plus one higher-level variable: geographic area. The higher level in model 2 is this geographic area, with one new grouping variable: educational path (an essential factor of stratification in the Italian and international education system with considerable impact on performance and inequality, (Benadusi & Giancola, 2014), followed by the individual variables. Finally, the third model again has geographic area as the high level variable, followed by educational path plus an intermediate level consisting in the PCTO project (which groups students into subgroups) and by the contribution of school governance, and finally, the individual variables. Therefore, the differences in the coefficients generated by adding project-level variables represent, albeit partially, the moderating effect of the projects.

Moving on to our analysis, we can see how, in terms of whether or not students go on to post-secondary school study, the first model shows the significant impact of family cultural capital and the substantial, yet contained, impact of social class. This forces us to carefully reflect on the production and reproduction of unequal opportunity, consolidates evidence already available and shows how the structure upon which educational expectations are socially built is essentially maintained over time (Argentin & Pavolini, 2020). One positive contribution comes from academic performance whereas one negative effect

derives from students having to repeat a school year on their educational path. Finally, as for geographic area, with 'central' Italy taken as the reference category, students from south Italy seem more likely to continue their studies, unlike students from regions in north Italy – perhaps because there are more job opportunities in these areas (Ballarino *et. al.*, 2014). As a final note, we would like to mention that the variables used in this model correctly predict that students are geared to continue their studies post-diploma (expressed as educational expectations in 67.2% of the cases).

In model 2 (predictive ability 74.7%) the highest level variable is geographic area, which still has a significant impact and far lower regressor power. Below this is educational path, which has considerable impact. In terms of the lyceum attended, vocational schools appear to very negatively impact whether students continue on to university. The same is true for technical schools, although to a lesser extent. The impact of social class is mostly absorbed by educational path. Family cultural capital still positively impacts students' likelihood of continuing their studies, along with academic performance, while educational path irregularity loses significance. Overall, adding educational path as the second-level variable lowers the weight of the individual variables without having any significant impact on the explanatory structure previously observed.

The third and last model includes the variables characterizing the PCTO the student surveyed took part in (Fasanella *et. al.*, 2024). One of the first variables is the digitalization level of the project participated in (Fasanella *et. al.*, 2021). Digitalization is especially relevant given the huge pre- and post-pandemic investments in it (Giancola *et. al.*, 2019; Parziale, 2023). Next, a set of variables is used that derive from the construction of a project typology (Fasanella *et. al.*, 2021), made up of four dummies (plus one reference category) that refer to this typology. It is important to note here as well that project type is associated as much with geographic area as with students' educational path. Then a variable was used relating to project governance that is a synthesis of the participation of all the school stakeholders in project development. All the project variables are second-level variables (hence, higher than the individual level). Finally, the last variable added (this time individual) is student autonomy in their project choice.

This model offers interesting insight into the impact of the type of PCTO students take part in. What we mainly see is the weakening of the explanatory power of many individual variables with respect to the dependent variable. In terms of social class, the dummy variable of belonging to the highest social class still has

a statistically significant impact compared to other modalities which, albeit to a lesser extent, are in any case an expression of the social reproduction process observed in previous models. The same may be said for cultural capital, the impact of which varies depending on whether family cultural capital is high or average to low. Instead, academic performance continues to have a marked (positive) power, while again educational path irregularity loses significance.

As for the type of PCTO students participated in, whether or not students chose autonomously has a positive effect on the likelihood of them continuing their studies. There are various ways of interpreting this. For example, one could say that choosing autonomously is a clear sign of motivation and self-direction in terms of students' school path with a ripple effect on their future prospects. In terms of the set of project content variables, we see both positive and negative effects. Legal-regulatory PCTOs and vocational PCTOs are associated with the choice not to continue studying, whereas artistic-social PCTOs (the most common project types in Italian lyceums) positively impact students' future study prospects. School governance of projects has no effect (coefficients Beta and Exp(B) are both almost zero, hence not significant). This does not mean that this variable is irrelevant to the implementation of PCTO policy (it may be hypothetically linked to organizational dynamics), but it certainly does not influence students' future choices.

Tab. 3 – Model 3

Model 3	B	S.E.	Sign.	Exp(B)
South	0,003	0,115	0,040	1,003
North (ref. cat. center)	-0,137	0,115	0,023	0,872
Vocational	-2,078	0,132	0,000	0,125
Technical (ref. cat. Lyceum)	-1,708	0,100	0,000	0,181
Advanced digital skills projects	0,124	0,116	0,033	1,198
Contribution of school governance	-0,042	0,046	0,365	0,959
Legal-regulatory projects	-0,376	0,104	0,000	0,687
Vocational projects	-0,162	0,138	0,024	0,851
Artistic-social projects	0,030	0,151	0,043	1,030
Simulation-managerial projects (ref. cat. critical-thinking projects)	-0,173	0,163	0,288	0,841
Autonomous joining/participation in PCTO	0,029	0,042	0,048	1,030

Middle- Upper-bourgeoisie	0,002	0,158	0,050	1,020
Middle class (ref. cat. working class)	-0,003	0,103	0,977	0,997
Autonomous lower-middle class (cat. ref. working class)	-0,050	0,130	0,700	0,951
High family cultural capital	0,127	0,112	0,026	1,135
Medium family cultural capital (cat. ref. low cultural capital)	-0,081	0,104	0,434	0,922
School performance	0,623	0,049	0,000	1,865
Being held back a year (cat. ref. regular path)	-0,184	0,124	0,136	0,832
Constant	1,553	0,130	0,000	4,726

A variable that does appear to have a positive and decidedly relevant impact is advanced digital content. These projects can be positively associated with the likelihood of post-diploma study. If we go up another level, educational path has the exact same effect as previous illustrated. So, again vocational and, to a lesser but still significant and relevant degree, technical schools have a decidedly negative effect on study continuation. Finally, the impact of geographic area is unvaried. The differences between southern and northern regions is slight, though the impact is greater for the north, even considering, as aforementioned, the area's production structure and the professional opportunities offered, which may represent an alternative to post-secondary-school study.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the PCTO design clearly reflects the geographic organization of the Italian economy and, even more, the hierarchical-social differences between upper-secondary school paths. At same time, project diversification fails to compensate for the strong impact different educational paths have on student orientation, confirming that aptitude is mainly shaped by the family environment, and hence by parents' social condition. The data seem to show that the dimension of theoretical interest in PCTO policy is secondary to the considerable weight of the 'tracking' system (Azzolini & Vergolini, 2014; Panichella & Triventi, 2014), still the basis upon which social inequality is clearly built in students' choice of educational path (then of individual schools, Giancola & Salmieri, 2023), impacting academic outcomes, student motivation and future prospects. Hence, this policy, which comes into play once choices

are made and is connected, at least in terms of the projects offered, to the different geographic areas and types of schools, can only have a very marginal impact on changing students' educational destinies.

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## **DUAL PATHWAYS WITHIN THE TECHNICAL PROFESSIONAL TRAINING SYSTEM: AN EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL POLICY.**

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The initiatives for reforming and strengthening of vocational pathways have been characterised by initiatives relating to apprenticeships, the pilot of the dual system, and the restructuring of vocational education pathways. These initiatives were allocated funding in accordance with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Substantial funding was allocated to the dual system initiative, as well as the process, still in the approval phase, of reforming technical education, which would see the establishment of the technical and vocational pathways. The dual model is consistent with policies aimed at facilitating the transition from the world of school to the world of work.

dual system, vocational training, work-based learning

The regulatory changes implemented in recent years, within the Italian education and training system, and more specifically those that apply to vocational training, have on the one hand increased the appeal of vocational pathways, thus resulting in an increased percentage of young people with skills and degrees that are more in line with the needs of businesses in the regions, and on the other hand, have had the effect of reducing both the occurrence of skill gaps and issues in relation to skill shortages.

To address the low levels of employment particularly within the 15-24 age group, some reforms of the education system were introduced in Italy at the start 2014. These reforms sought to build on the experiences of those countries, such as Germany, that have effectively reduced youth unemployment. A factor that was noted from a review of other countries' education systems was a "dual" approach within the education and school system, based on a focus on industry/work experience gained through apprenticeships. The dual system is



founded on a model of worked-based learning, where the theoretical knowledge and practical skills, acquired in traditional off-the-job training, is applied rigorously within real work settings.

Recently, the attention of institutional and regional stakeholders (regional administrators, entrepreneurs, young learners in the right to work) has focused on this learning model, since it has proven effective in developing industry and work relevant competencies young people and reducing the mismatch between skills acquired in vocational training programs and the skills required by the labour market. Consequently, this has facilitated the transition of young people from the world of school to the world of work, leading to a reduction in the time required by a student to make that transition. This model of vocational education and training, which has been an integral part of the Italian educational system for almost 20 years, has been most effective in enabling students to complete vocational education pathways, which lead to recognised qualifications, occupational outcomes, and greatly improved work-readiness.

The “dual” model was introduced in Italy in 2015, immediately following labour market reforms (Jobs act), and as result of the already mentioned reforms of the school system (L. 107/2015). With the agreement approved at the state-regions conference of 24/09/2015, the first phase of pilots was conducted and overseen by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies. In this initial trial phase, 200 accredited training institutes (CFP), located throughout the country, were involved. Subsequently, the model was finalised by establishing stipulated protocols between the Ministry and the regional administrations. These protocols aimed to facilitate the implementation and startup of vocational training programs adapted to the specific needs of each region. The autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano, which have for some times have integrated the application of a rigorous school-to-work component with their vocational training programs, did not join the ministerial trials.

The two-year trial phase, and the subsequent implementation phase, which has been supported by ongoing funding since 2018, have made it possible to expand the target cohort for vocational pathways, leading to the acquisition of qualifications in dual mode, to include not only students pursuing vocational education and training pathways (in paths from the first to the fourth year), but also to include young people need by offering structured vocational education and training pathways, thus engaging with all vocational training pathways

(IeFP, IFTS and ITS<sup>4</sup>).

The model is founded on a collaboration between training institutions and businesses in the area, in order to enable school-aged young people complete their compulsory phase of secondary schooling by pursuing a vocational pathway education and training pathway and develop more of the skills necessary to facilitate the transition from the world of training to the labour market. Within the dual system, there are two different options in which this model can be implemented, with the possibility of both options being offered within the same pathway, but still with a minimum number of 400 hours per year, within a total number of hours of classroom training ranging from 990 and 1,200 per year (depending on the regions):

- simulated training enterprise;
- enhanced school-work based learning.

The dual system also makes it possible to attain a qualification, diploma or certification in higher education (IFTS) through a first-level apprenticeship (or training/dual apprenticeship). It is the preferred pathway for entering the labour market for young people, as it allows them, on the one hand, to obtain a qualification and, on the other hand, to gain first-hand industry experience as part of the work contract.

From sy 2016-17, the year when pilots of the dual system were launched, to sy 2021-22, the number of learners involved in vocational training courses overall<sup>5</sup> almost tripled, from 20,425 enrolments in sy 2016-17 to 56,263 in sy 2021-22. Further, enrolments have consolidated in the dual system, within IVET, exceeding the 50.000 student enrolment threshold. It may also be concluded that the prospect of the new funding provided through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) funds, may trigger additional increases in Regional Administrations' investment in the dual system.

The growth in participation rates in the four-year pathways of Vocational education and training (thus excluding IFTS, modular and neet youth pathways), recorded in the previous 5 years, is shown in fig. 3 below, which represents the growth trends from sy 2016-17, the year the pilots began, to sy 2021-22.

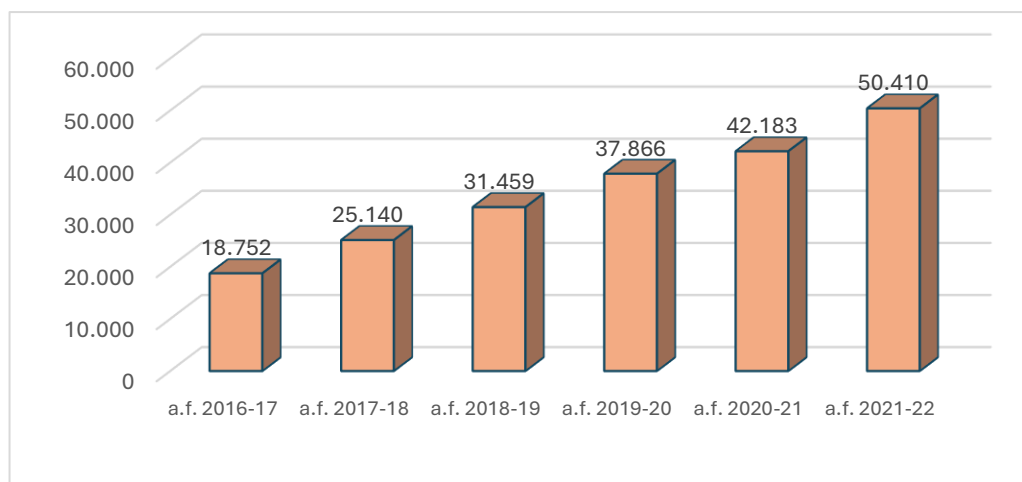
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<sup>4</sup> Higher Technical Education (ITS), on the other hand, provides high-tech post-diploma pathways leading to a higher technical qualification. They are carried out in collaboration with companies, universities, research centres and local authorities to develop new skills in technological areas considered strategic for the country's economic development and competitiveness.

<sup>5</sup> Total means the number of participants from the entire vocational training system involved in the application of the dual system (IeFP, IFTS, NEET and modular pathways).

Initially, these pathways were implemented in 15 regions and the percentage of participants stood at 13.4 percent compared to those in the entire Vocational education and training system. In addition, those enrolled in the 4th year of the dual system accounted for 54.3 percent of total enrolments. Currently enrolments have grown significantly, with the number of learners spread over almost the entire country: dual system enrolments now account for almost 26 percent of all participants in the Vocational education and training system. Most significant is the increase in the 4th year training pathway for graduation, with participation rates reaching 82 percent of those enrolled in IVET.

Fig. 1. Progression of the number of enrolments in the dual system in Vocational education and training along 2016-17/2021-22. Source: Inapp.

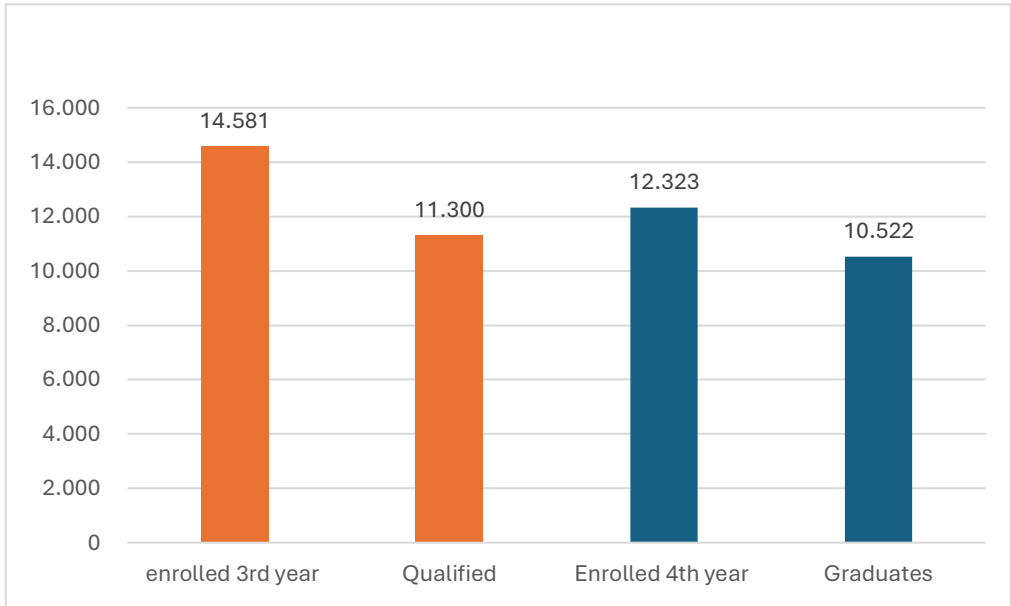


The distribution by geographic areas sees the northwest accounting for more than half of the total enrolments; the gap with other geographic areas is still wide, with the islands and the northeast not exceeding 20 percent of the national total, while the central and the south regions are below 10 percent.

The low percentage of enrolments in the south is mainly due to the lack of pathway offerings in some regions; these regional disparities can be attributed to structural problems within the southern regions and relate mainly to a discontinuation of their training pathways, as well as to the different dynamism of their local enterprises. In fact, weakness in the labour market often correlate to less vocational training qualification pathways offered in these regions. The lack of commitment of regional administrations in the south-central regions will have to be addressed, where weakness in the local labour market impacts negatively on attracting investment, leading to a progressive slowdown in

economic development. First of all, to address these issues there will need to be the introduction of training pathways that are able to respond efficiently and effectively to the skills needs of businesses in the regions. With funding being available under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), combined with national funding on the dual system, presents a valuable opportunity to take the necessary action to implement change. It's important note the educational success rate, for students enrolled in dual system pathways. At the national level, 77.5 percent of students enrolled in the third year attain their qualification and 85.4 percent of students enrolled in the fourth year complete their course and graduate. In almost all the regions of the central-north the success rate is above 85 percent, while other regions experience lower success rates. Where there are lower success rates reported, it is often due to factors that are yet to be resolved, such as the time required to conduct final exams, and the end date of the exams.

Fig. 2. Educational outcomes of students enrolled in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years (2021-22) of the dual system. Source: Inapp.



When analysing the ages of the learners, the percentage of 16-year-old graduates is still slightly lower than that of those who are at least 17 years old. Learners aged 14 and older, who finish the standard three-year pathway without interruptions, account for 47.9 percent of the total graduates, while those who graduate at age 17 or older represent 52.1 percent. The percentage share of 16-

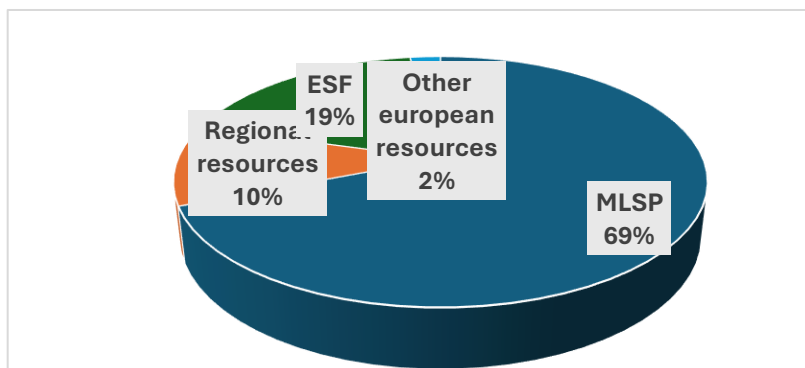
year-old graduates is 60.5 percent, while 39.5 percent of older learners graduate.

With respect to vocational occupations, the qualified as a ‘health care worker’ represent the highest number of graduates, more than 28 percent of the graduates of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year program. This is followed by ‘food service worker’ and ‘motor vehicle repair worker’, which account for 14 percent and 11 percent of total graduates, respectively.

This year the most represented occupations among graduates are the hairstyling technician (14.3 percent of the total), followed by the beauty treatment technician (13.5 percent), while the kitchen technician drops to 11.2 percent.

This data have led the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy to allocate consolidated annual funding, enabling regions to continue current pathways programs, and facilitate continuing growth in the range of pathways programs offered, thus engaging an increasing number of learners. The total financial resources committed to the development of dual system pathways in Italy totalled 219,528,762 euros, more than 150 million of which were financed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies.

Fig. 3. Distribution of financial resources and source (%). Source: Inapp.



As part of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) development plan, adopted by the EU to support member states in planning the reforms and investments needed to overcome the social hardships and economic lags caused by the economic slowdown first, and the pandemic later, an unprecedented financial instrument has been put in place with the specific goal of “making European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of changes driven by addressing in the world’s environment and

advances in digital technologies.” Such is the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), which through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), with a six-year duration (2021-2026), and the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU) Package, with a shorter duration (2021-2022), is a powerful financial policy tool to support the reforms needed to revitalize our economy.

Each member state was required to develop a national plan, through which they would establish the level of investment and the reforms required to achieve its objectives, thus ensuring the commitment of the required resources. The regulation governing the operation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) stipulates that the elements contained in the Recovery Plans must aim to strengthen potential growth and economic, social and institutional resilience of the member state, contribute to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and support initiatives aimed at addressing in the world’s environmental issues and managing transition because of advances in digital technologies.

In this context, one of the flagship initiatives promoted by the EU Commission is specifically targeted at raising the skill levels of the population (upskilling and reskilling), for which Italy has proposed the following:

- the Guarantee for Workers’ Employability (GOL) reform program, an initiative that is the lynchpin of policies directed at labour reform efforts
- the dual system investment (SD) program, which aims to promote the acquisition of new skills by young people, facilitating synergy between the education and training system and the demands and needs of the labour market, through the strengthening of school-work based learning pathway programs and the uptake of apprenticeships.

In conclusion, it is now clear that the training paths, aimed at qualifying young people who need to meet their compulsory education requirements, enable the achievement of two objectives. Firstly, that of equipping the learner with basic and transferable skills necessary for their participation in the social and political life of the community in which they live and, secondly, to qualify them through the development of technical-professional (and other) skills required by the labour market, to enhance their employability.

The dual system is an effective strategy that facilitates the transition to work, as it is being driven by the training needs of young people and the demand for professionals from businesses.

The dual system pathways programs, within IVET system, offered through accredited centres, have experienced strong growth, acknowledging that the innovation introduced with the 2016 pilot is designed not so much as a school-work based learning model, which was in fact already very common prior to the pilots beginning, but in an expansion of this model, both in terms of numbers of courses offered and volume of hours allocated per year. In addition, the resources earmarked for the dual system have made it possible to better structure courses and increase the number of fourth-year courses where students graduate with a vocational diploma, even in those regions where they were not previously available, improving completion rates for vocational education and training in Italy.

The dual system training model has experienced steady growth in the participation of students in vocational education and training, reaching 22 percent out of all students enrolled in the IVET system, and 34 percent out of all students enrolled at Vocational Training Centers. This data is of significant value in that it demonstrates, in real terms, the interest of young people and their families, in this type of training. This positive attitude is also reflected by increased interest from businesses, which see in the dual system an additional opportunity to raise awareness of their skills needs for improving productivity, ensuring that vocational outcomes for, and work readiness of, graduating students reflect these skills needs, and thus significantly reducing the time required for students to transition from school to work.

There, however, remain high risks of the efficacy in the uptake of the dual system in the different regions, both from the point of view of programs implemented and student participation, and from that of the quality of pathways and school-work based programs offered. While there will continue to be significant regional disparities, in recent years we are seeing the implementation of vocational pathways in southern regions, with participation rates in the coming years dependent of program continuity, required to demonstrate that they are indicative of a school-work based training system.

The hope is that the initiative envisaged in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) for the development of the dual system will be seized as an opportunity to tackle many of the critical issues that have so far limited its spread, promoting this system throughout the country, and focusing on raising the quality of learning in all areas of the country.

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# SCUOLA DIFFUSA (WIDESPREAD SCHOOL) IN REGGIO EMILIA AND ITS EFFECT ON TEACHING METHODOLOGIES AND CLASSROOMS RELATIONS

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This ongoing research focuses on whether this exposure to informal and non-formal education changes teachers' teaching and assessment methodologies and improves the quality of relations within the classrooms. The analysis is based on data from focus groups and a survey, with primary and lower secondary school teachers. The survey investigates self-efficacy and agency. These teachers have confirmed experiencing lasting changes after WS. Preliminary results show that changes in teaching and assessment methodologies occur when teachers: share the design and responsibility of WS; could witness educators' actions and co-conduct the activities. WS has also a positive effect on classroom relations, both among students and with the teachers.

Education Outside the Classroom; community education pacts; teaching methodology; assessment; inclusion

## INTRODUCTION

UNESCO report (2021) suggests reforming education by promoting it as a common good, shared by society. The challenge is defining educational spaces with these characteristics and fostering positive societal engagement. In Reggio Emilia the schools, the Municipality and the city have been in dialogue for the past 75 years to share children's education responsibility. Their common action has revolved around reflecting on space, content and time, designing a 0-99 community educational project and creating contexts able to make childhood culture visible, to give value to differences and promote the right of children to experience cultural and institutional places. Within this framework operates OE,

educational Service of the Municipality. OE educational philosophy, inspired by Vygotsky and Dewey, is based on a specific image of the learner, i.e. a citizen, a subject with rights, with high potentialities for development and ready to build relationships and learn. Learners are social and active agents: students construct knowledge and meaning through active experience with the world around them, where environment, cultures, and community have a decisive role. Knowledge is interwoven with reality in a *complexus* (Morin, 1999), which implies interdisciplinary, multidimensional and ecological thinking (idem; Bateson, 1971). An ecosystemic approach to knowledge refers to interconnections among educational contexts and considers processes dynamically, acknowledging different ways of researching, learning, and communicating (Gardner, 1983; Gallese, Sinigaglia, 2011). The 6-14 educational system provided by OE a public project based on a strong alliance between adults (policy makers, school managers, teachers, educators, pedagogical coordinators) grounds the socio-educational ecosystemic. The “Pact for Education and Knowledge”, signed by the Municipality and the Comprehensive Institutes of Reggio Emilia, sets the political, educational and cultural framework to the collaboration. The Pact considers education as a common good allowing for participative processes that open schools to the territory (Paterlini, 2023).

During the pandemic the Municipality, the schools and the city joined forces and signed “Community education pacts” to guarantee every child the same access to education, by multiplying and spreading throughout the city the educational contexts (Campanini, 2024). Cultural and working spaces became learning environments for prolonged time (weeks, months, a year) to foster innovative learning experiences, participation and shared culture for students and their families (Cannella et al, 2023).

Through the years the whole city has become a suitable and appropriate place of learning. Key aspect is the co-designing process that involves OE educators, teachers and non-teacher educators from the hosting sites. This process has helped define curricular, cross-curricular and multi-disciplinary areas related to the places. Theaters, museums, exhibitions, ateliers, farms host week-long experiences of 100 classes with their teachers and OE educators each year.

The gains for students in these settings have been investigated. Whether this exposure to informal and non-formal education changes teachers’ teaching and assessment methodology has not been so widely researched. To explore the global potential gains and analyse the possibility of expanding this educational

proposal to the European context, Reggio Emilia Municipality and some of its partners were granted funding for a 3-year European ERASMUS+ project “Widespread School: innovating teaching approaches outside the classroom”. The partners worked on a common theoretical framework and understanding of EOtC, through field and desk research and developed a common definition of the experience.

Widespread Education (WE) is a pedagogical approach that engages primary and secondary schools developing curricular objectives in cooperation with other organizations and actors outside the school across time (minimum 5 days) on contextualized, real, and authentic problems that matters to students and communities by co-researching, co-designing and co-teaching, bridging formal, non-formal and informal agents and connecting learning experiences in and out of school (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2024)

This definition has guided our research on teachers’ professional growth and inspired the designing of tools for teachers and policymakers to implement WE experiences in other contexts.

## **1. RESEARCH DESIGN**

The gains of WE in terms of students’ engagement, participation and inclusion have emerged in previous studies, and so have teachers’ renewed understanding of active teaching methodologies and research-based learning (Mangione et al, 2021; Cannella et al, 2023; Bertolini et al, 2024; Landi, 2022).

This paper presents data from 2 focus groups, with primary and lower secondary school teachers, around the following research questions:

- What does change during WE experiences in terms of teaching and assessment methodology and relationships?
- How can these changes be maintained once the class is back in school?

Teachers’ background information was collected through a survey that investigates:

- professional satisfaction – 11 items on a 1-4 Likert scale (Talis, 2018);
- self-efficacy – 12 items on a 1-9 self-anchoring scale, 3 groups with 4 items for teaching strategies, 4 for class management and 4 for engagement (Tschannen-Moran et al, 2001);
- agency – 24 items on a 1-7 self-anchoring scale, 4 groups with 6 items for Iterational (professional and personal competences), Projective on self and on students (short/long term goals), Practical-evaluative (the

working environment with its potential and constraints) (Leijen et alii, 2024)

- teaching methodologies, through 4 open-ended questions, coded on 2 scales, i.e. on the horizontal axis from learning as transmitted to learning as constructed by learner and on the vertical axis from learning as individual endeavor to learning as socially construct (Landi et al, 2023).

Researchers conducted 2 focus groups in April-May 2024, one with 8 primary school teachers and the other with 4 lower secondary school teachers. The questions are presented in tab.1.

Tab. 1. Questions for the Focus Group

Let's get to know each other better. We ask you to introduce yourselves and go back in your memory to your experiences in WE to briefly tell how they unfolded.
What has changed in your teaching and assessment strategies since the experience of WE? What has fostered this change?
Have you noticed different relational dynamics developing during the week? What conditions were conducive to these developments? Could you describe the characteristics of these new relationships?
Has your relationship with the students changed during the experience of WE? In which ways?
In case you have noticed positive relational dynamics during WE week, under what conditions could they be maintained at school after the experience?
In your opinion, what aspects/dimensions of learning are most enhanced by WE?

The focus groups were transcribed and coded using a thematic analysis approach, both theory driven and grounded theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic coding particularly referred to theory on teaching methodologies and assessment (Nigris et al., 2019; Gardner, 2012).

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. Survey

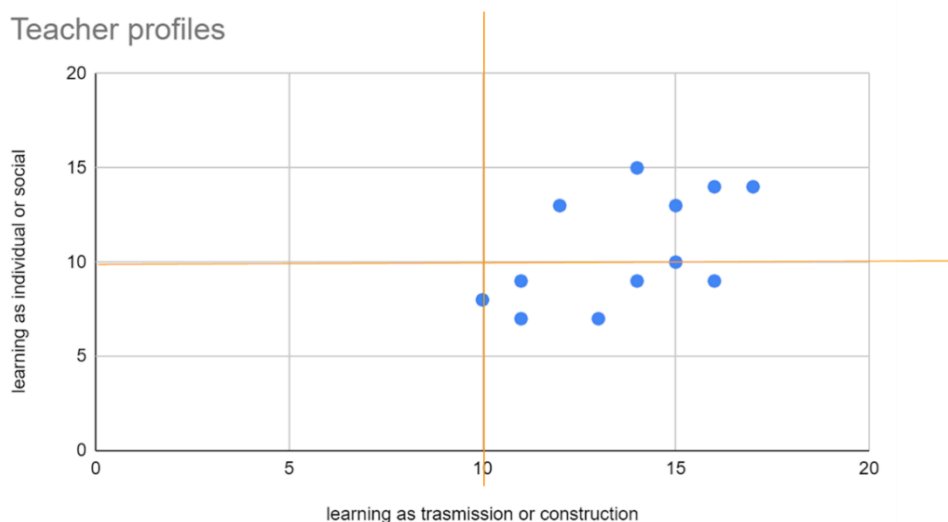
12 female teachers participated in the survey and focus groups. They are experienced teachers, with an average of 23 years on the job, and highly educated, 7 have a master degree. 83% have collaborated with Officina Educativa since 2010, all of them participated in the WE experience "Scuola Diffusa" at least once. They are generally satisfied with their job and do not

regret the decision to become a teacher (Talis, 2018).

Respondents feel their self-efficacy, especially on teaching strategies (combined mean of all 4 items= 31,3), while they feel more insecure on the ability to engage students (combined mean of all 4 items= 29,2). The personal history and professional development (iterational component, combined mean of all 6 items= 33,3) has the strongest influence on teachers' agency, while the short/long term professional development goals (Projective on self) have the lowest influence.

From the coding of the open-ended questions, it emerges that they see learning not as transmitted but as constructed by learners, as emerges from Fig. 1 plotting on the horizontal axis with all teachers' scores higher than 10. As for the other dimension, half of them see learning as a social construction and half as an individual construction.

Fig. 1 Teachers profile emerging from open-ended questions



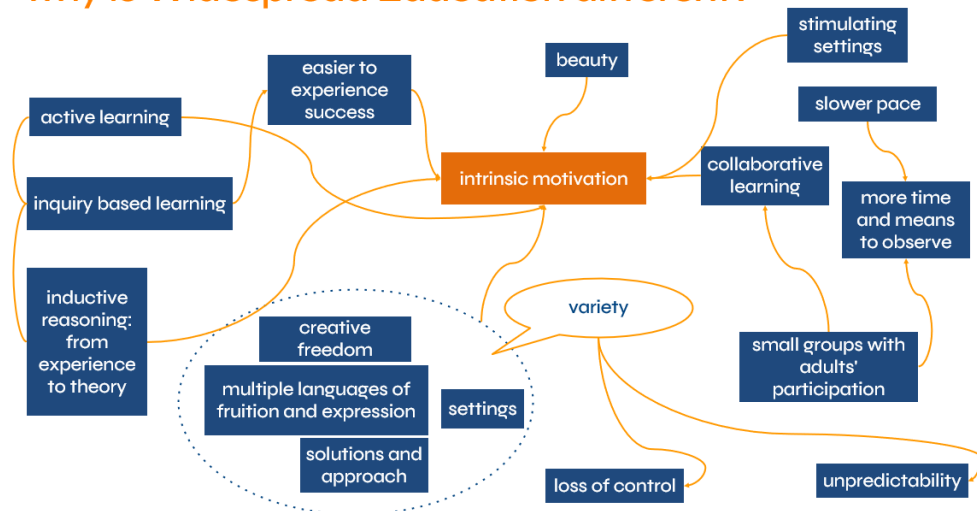
## 2.2. Focus Group

All teachers share a common, coherent vision of WE as summarized in Fig. 2. All elements recognized in a WE experience, i.e. active learning, creativity, aesthetic pleasure, collaborative setting, dynamism, concur in supporting intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation seems to be the key element to create a positive, learning-intense, inclusive, productive learning environment. Motivation and active participation are supported by the lack of testing, in the words of a secondary school teacher "they know they are being observed but

with eyes that aim to valorize them”. This lack of traditional assessment causes a lack of fear and inhibition. Students feel spontaneous, free to ask and state when they do not understand. Teachers recognize that this is unusual in classroom settings.

Fig. 2. emerging codes from focus groups’ analysis

## why is Widespread Education different?



Their activity is spurred, as a primary school teacher said, by the students’ role as “creators of their own knowledge (...) (In the WE setting) they were completely free but more importantly they were really called upon to have their say”. Teachers reported a similar activation in class during group work. Moreover, students displayed fewer behavioral problems during WE, especially if they were given a role and tools to fulfill it autonomously. If the motivational hook is maintained once back in school, the same benefits continue. Teachers wondered: “how to make them feel responsible for their own learning (outside WS) in other settings and using different strategies”. Especially secondary school teachers considered that the enquiry/research-based learning experienced during WE cannot be the rule in the classroom, because it would not be effective in supporting formal learning. Therefore, their question is how to have the same level of motivation and activation during regular schoolwork.

Primary school teachers seem more willing to use active methodologies in their lessons, but they also express doubts on the full applicability of WE methodologies in the classroom, as one of them says: “given the time

constraints and the numbers [of students in the classroom] is not always possible to give them their freedom in seeking their own paths in knowing (...) to adjust and change group according to their interest”. Three aspects strike as transferable: the observational tools students experience during WE, working in groups and providing more time for students to display their growth and learning. Teachers admit that those are transferable also because students explicitly ask for them once they are back in class.

In WE setting students work in small groups “moving independently, discovering, relating to each other”, each student having a specific role and task. A secondary school teacher notices that these organizational strategies support relations and inclusions since each group works separately but to build a common class product with contributions of everyone; she says: “they still had to think beyond their group to also explain what they were doing to others and seek a consistency of meaning with other groups”. Regarding relations and inclusion, all teachers agree that the unusual setting requires new skills allowing academically weak students to display competencies other students do not have. Students’ perceived value changes in the eyes of teachers and classmates. This renewed confidence can only be maintained if there is methodological and organizational continuity between WE and school, otherwise teachers admit that you lose some of the gains.

## **CONCLUSION**

The teachers who participated in this study are experienced, in majority highly educated teachers, with a sense of instructional self-efficacy and an understanding of learning as constructed by learners and therefore coherent with WE. These teachers recognize WE as positive, energetic, inspiring, inclusive, highly motivational, effective learning experiences. Yet, bringing those teaching and assessment methodologies back to school is not easy, due to pressure to reach learning goals, pace of learning, differences in the environment. The more transferable aspects are group work and observational tools both for students and teachers. Sharing the design and responsibility of WE; witnessing educators’ actions, co-conducting the activities in WE and continuing in school the research started during WE are ways to support lasting changes in school setting. However, further research is needed to ensure gains’ transferability to the classrooms. In terms of classroom relations, the dynamic environment typical of WE settings cannot be duplicated in class. Yet, continuity in teaching methodologies and in students’ new roles acquired during WE, can

maintain the relational gains back in the classroom. Given the participating teachers' characteristics, strongly coherent with WE theory, there is a need to confirm the preliminary results with further research.

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# INTERPROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES TO OVERCOME SOME POTENTIAL INEQUALITIES IN LEARNING CONTEXT

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, the closure of schools and remote teaching as the only way to guarantee students schooling opportunities generated educational inequalities among students, and Italy reported an increased level of social exclusion (Save the Children, 2020). The research activity carried out by INDIRE on the forms of diffused and extended schooling (Mangione, Chipa, Cannella, 2022; Mangione, Cannella, Chipa, 2021) has made it possible to deepen those experiences that make use of third-party spaces to build a “community ecosystem” (Teneggi, 2020). During the pandemic the learning experience of lower secondary schools in Reggio Emilia as “extended school in third spaces” has been financially supported by the local administration and carried out to extend the classrooms out of the school walls to guarantee the continuity of the educational offer. It involved 11 comprehensive schools of the city and 19 spaces outside the school starting from the 2020-2021 school year. The model has been observed and monitored to be transferred and small and rural school context.

Community, Multiagency, Curriculum

## INTRODUCTION

The use of multi-agency partnerships, including research-practice partnerships, to facilitate the development, implementation and evaluation of educational interventions has expanded in recent years. Gaps remain in the understanding of influences on partnership working and the characteristics that lead to effective partnership.

The observations carried up in the “scuola diffusa” model identifies key partnership characteristics such as high levels of engagement, regular communication, clear role and responsibilities, formal moments of meeting from the side of the teachers and continuity. It highlights the importance of

implementing organisational structures and systems to support effective partnership working.

Some future challenges should be considered: the members of the interprofessional team recognize that formal daily moments of communication between teachers and experts would be necessary to share observations and findings, and adequate documentation tools to transfer the experiences made, but the lack of time did not always allow space for this type of activity. From a transferability perspective teachers and experts involved noted a lack of time that often did not allow for moments of reflection where sharing of the documentation produced by the students. Emerged the necessities to go beyond established roles to achieve the goal of learning and well-being of the students. The influences on partnership working and their effectiveness, the value of being involved in partnerships to different stakeholders, and how partnerships may influence the capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of educational proposals remain as open questions.

## 1. WHY INTERPROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION

It is generally accepted that schools, encouraged by policy, see ‘engagement’ as important, and think of it in relation to students, parents and communities, ‘engagement’ can be understood in many ways. As Ralls highlights (2017), engagement should not be *doing to* stakeholders who are characterised by deficits, but as *doing with* stakeholders as full partners in the educational process.

“Interprofessionalism represents a necessary condition to allow the school to rethink its educational offer spread throughout the territory”. This hypothesis rests on the role attributed to alliances between teachers and educators in the co-designing of an educational offer that is broad, involves the territory and provides for the use of the cultural spaces offered by the territory.

The research hypotheses set out are classified as ‘deduced hypotheses’ from the theories and international reports disseminated by the major organisations that map out the future of schools worldwide (OECD, 2020; UNESCO 2022).

What is the role of school-territory alliances in rethinking the school in a form extended to cultural spaces (museums, libraries, open-air theatres)? The research question accompanied the research activities carried out by Indire in the city of Reggio Emilia focusing on the learning experience of lower secondary schools in Reggio Emilia as “extended school in third spaces”. It has been financially supported by the local administration and carried out to extend the

classrooms out of the school walls to guarantee the continuity of the educational offer and as permanent laboratory classrooms during the pandemic time.

To explore the role of the experts, their effectiveness on the breath of curriculum, we explored the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders who were involved in partnerships to develop, implement and/or evaluate a local project defined as “Scuola Diffusa” (extended school) in Reggio Emilia.

The research activity was organised in two phases based on a service research approach. The first phase, focused on the analysis of institutional and narrative documentation (instrumental case study) to intercept the key dimensions for the research by linking them to the feature of the standard model. The second phase used an observational instrumental case study methodology, aimed at evaluating the introduction of a change and how this can foster an improvement in the educational field (transferability).

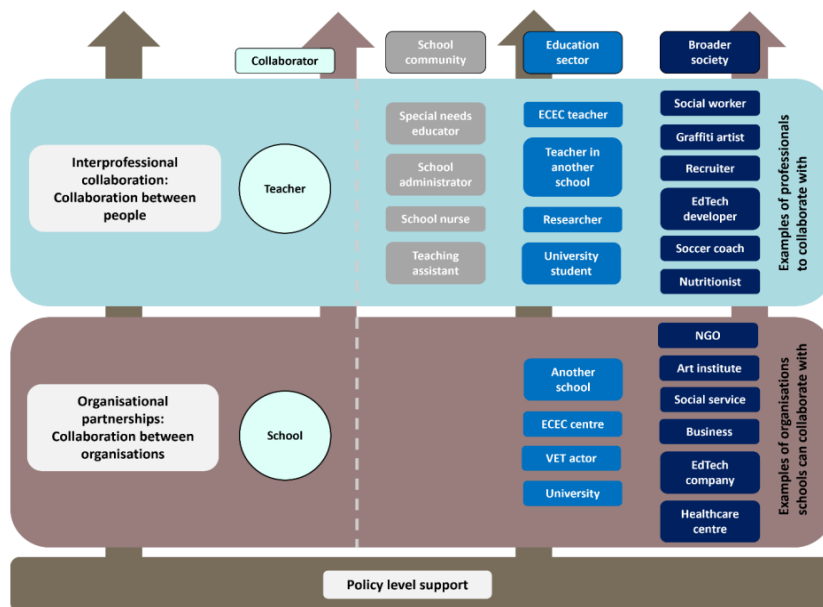
A reasoned sampling allowed the researchers to identify three contexts among Italian schools, housed in different types of decentralized classrooms – outdoors (farm holidays), in cultural spaces (civic museums) and in maker spaces (ateliers). These cases of extended school have been the object of indirect observation through a device of a narrative nature. The selected case is to be considered *typical* for investigating the characteristic features of an extended and participatory community school model.

The approach to the interprofessional collaboration comes from three different experiences that highlight the multifaceted aspects of the topic. Cheminais (2009) proposes multiagency working when educational organizations that relate to the idea of ‘community schools’ serving to the local area to give support to ‘at risk’ groups (Every Child Matters Act, 2003). This approach highlights the social *function* of the interprofessional collaboration. Edwards (2009) values the competence as the negotiated realisation of tasks and sees expert preventive practices as the negotiated realisation of the prevention of social exclusion. This requires seeing expert interprofessional work as a resourceful practice operating through the system within the *context*.

Finally, one of the OECD recent report (2022) focuses on the idea that cross-sector/interprofessional collaboration is one of many terms used in the literature, along with collaborative, new public, and integrated governance highlighting that a group of experts are engaged in “multi-actor collaboration, usually led by a public sector organisation (...) on a formal set of policies designed and implemented to generate public value.” (p. 9). OECD focuses the

activity on the role of the *governance* that led the process among the different stakeholders.

Fig. 1 typology of cross-sector collaboration



A distinction of the collaborative levels: i.e the different level at which the collaborative effort takes place: The policy level, Organisational level, or the interprofessional level. (OECD, 2022)

Collaborations can take two main shapes – 1) teachers and experts team up in an intertwined manner to support students, and 2) the other professional supports students and prepare them for learning by utilizing skills that teachers do not have (OECD, 2022, p. 9).

## 2. THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES AND THE FINDINGS

In 2020-2021 school years research activities involved 3 lower secondary schools learning in 3 cultural spaces: the local Civic Museum, a factory and an atelier Maker Spaces located in the Loris Malaguzzi Centre in Reggio Emilia.

In a second phase, the research assumed a more evaluative character of interprofessional collaboration using a set of tools already used in UK context (Cheminais, 2009) to monitor and evaluate any interprofessional collaboration in a school context. Using tools such as “the ladder of participation”, a “Diamond Ranking”, to evaluate the level of cohesion among the member of the

group, a “Force Field Analysis”, to help the mixed group of teacher and experts to reflect on their collaboration activities allowed the team to list weak and strong side of their interprofessional experience.

The use of the abovementioned tools was accompanied by qualitative tools such as interviews with teachers, experts and local administration, allowed the group to intercept the component of interprofessional collaboration and how trigger a transformative process that is still ongoing by involving all the school’s stakeholders.

A *Force Field Analysis* has been used to reflect on the collaboration activities between stakeholders and the strategies to foster effective interprofessional collaboration. A SWOT analysis helped the research team to investigate the weak and strong side of their collaboration about organisational (co-design/co-design) and professional strategies as unity, role of parents, student assessment. To investigate the participation and the effectiveness of the collaboration a *Participation ladder* and a *Diamond Ranking* have been used. The former had been adapted by Wilcox (2000) 5 levels –participation-ladder. The latter had been readapted by Cheminais (2008) to evaluate the level of internal cohesion using a ranking tool with items in order of priority, from most important to least important.

### **2.1. The finding. Case 1: the school in Museum**

For the inter-professional sub-dimension, the interviews with teachers and educators highlighted how among the central elements enabling the school’s openness to third spaces is the need for schools and agencies in the area to position themselves on the same educational vision and to accurately define the aims and objectives of educational pathways (Cheminais, 2009; Cannella and Mangione, 2023). The extended school experience in Reggio Emilia Civic Museums involved teachers and educators in a path of mutual professional growth. The co-design process took a fair amount of time for the mixed teams to get to know each other and create a shared relational climate (Cheminais, 2009). The evidences collected highlight that the group is at a high level on the scale of participation. Their collaboration has led them to a shared decision-making capacity:

it was an opportunity for professional development and experience through mutual exchange. (...) For us, the experience was much more planning (...) and we planned the week and then basically during the week at the museum they were the hosts, but we could intervene and we could ask the children if we wanted to go further (Teacher).

The choices made by the group using the various instruments to measure cohesion and participation allow us to deduce that the group worked without competition but with clear objectives.

## **2.2. The finding. Case 2**

The extended classroom on the farm was in a predominantly agricultural setting, with small workshop rooms and a garden overlooking vineyards and cultivated countryside. The group worked with an approach that let emerged a general level of participation with some peaks of increased collaboration and cohesion in consultative processes and mutual support as one of teacher affirmed:

the lack of common planning to overcome the extemporaneous condition and to make the work with the experts more stable and together with them better rethink the spaces (Educator).

These positions point to a working group that has begun to reflect on the value of interprofessional exchange based on cohesive relationships, but with still undefined workflows.

## **2.3 The finding. Case 3**

The extended school experience of the three classes of the Leonardo Da Vinci Comprehensive Institute took place where the learning spaces are called Ateliers and are lively multifunctional spaces because of the presence of materials to manipulate (natural, for writing, etc.) and digital tools for observation (e.g. digital microscope). The interprofessional collaboration process involved the collaboration of several professionals: two teachers (one from the humanities and one from the science area), a support teacher due to the presence of a child with certification, and the Educators and Pedagogists.

As for the participation and internal cohesion of the group, the ‘participation scale’ tool, scores the group in high position regarding the group’s decision-making capacity (Deciding together) and the degree of cohesion and effective participation to the interprofessional group’s objectives. The group pointed out the importance of documentation:

Documentation is essential because it allows this to be done, i.e. to keep in mind, to make visible even related issues that in the traditional school are done using the textbook (Teacher).

Although interprofessional practice is not very widespread in school-territory relations, it offers many opportunities to both the school and the territory. From

the cases it emerges that frequent communication, documentation, and systematic exchange of information may be elements that support effective collaborative processes, but they are still immature and not very systemic tools even if they are supported by the great collaboration between institutions that move with the same objective.

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# RETI PROJECT: INNOVATIVE PROCESSES TOWARD EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITIES

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In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the need for a new social contract for education, emphasizing collaboration among social actors to foster collective action for the common good. This evolving educational ecosystem promotes the active participation of diverse social actors and a shared methodology aimed at creatively re-imagining education. This paper presents the R.E.T.I. Project – Educational Research for an Inclusive Territory, coordinated by the EIS Postgraduate School at LUMSA University, with support from Eniscuola. The project integrates Service-Learning, Photovoice, and creative methodologies to address youth marginalization and strengthen partnerships between schools, families, and community actors. This paper outlines the stages involved in building a new Community Educational Pact, where all social actors are co-responsible and interdependent, offering a potential pilot model for inclusive educational governance.

Community educational pact; Community development; Service-Learning; psycho-pedagogical approach.

## INTRODUCTION: REBUILDING THE EDUCATIONAL VILLAGE

Educational poverty, as defined by Save the Children, refers to the deprivation of children and adolescents' opportunities to learn, grow, and develop their skills and aspirations (Morabito, 2022). Studies have shown a strong link between economic and educational poverty. In Italy, INVALSI (2021) reveals that students from low socio-economic backgrounds achieve significantly lower educational outcomes compared to their wealthier peers, which often leads to school failure and dropout. This highlights the need to tackle both types of poverty simultaneously. However, education remains an essential condition for

personal, social, and economic development.

Reflecting on the role of education raises questions about the school's mission. Schools must redefine their approach, moving beyond academic outcomes and disciplinary knowledge to focus on the holistic development of students, addressing cognitive, emotional, relational, social, ethical, and existential dimensions. As Delors (2021) suggests, schools should teach not only how to learn and act, but also how to live and live together with others.

Choosing to create an educational environment that fosters the holistic development of individuals has significant implications for its relationship with the wider social community. Education is a lifelong responsibility that cannot be shouldered by schools alone, but requires collaboration with multiple stakeholders. The African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" highlights that schools are part of a broader community, and education is a shared duty. However, social fragmentation has weakened, and often created conflict, in the traditional unwritten educational pact that in the past ensured coherence of values among the various educational agents: family, schools, and social groups. The UNESCO Report *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (2021) calls for a renewed social contract based on care, reciprocity, and solidarity, emphasizing education as a public good. Rebuilding this educational pact requires transformation both within schools and within the wider community, adopting innovative approaches to create an intergenerational educational alliance that actively engages local social actors (Locatelli, 2023).

The R.E.T.I. Project (*Educational Research for an Inclusive Territory*) emerged from the desire to mend the social fabric of the local community in Porto Torres, weaving together the commitment and expertise of multiple stakeholders into a shared vision. Its aim is to rebuild the educational community or "village". This article outlines the developmental stages of the Project, which brought together the Postgraduate School EIS (Educating on Encounter and Solidarity) of the LUMSA University in Rome and the Municipality of Porto Torres. Through the direct involvement of schools and stakeholders, RETI initiated a model of intervention rooted in Community Educational Pacts, fostering a sense of shared educational responsibility to promote collective and locally anchored educational action.

## **1. PORTO TORRES CONTEXT**

Porto Torres is located in the northwest of Sardinia (Sassari) – with a population of 20.895 – serves as an example of the economic and social transformations

affecting former industrial areas. Once a significant hub of the chemical industry, the city experienced profound repercussions following the collapse of the industrial model developed in the 1960s. The resulting economic decline has left visible scars: high unemployment rates, significant emigration of the workforce, and progressive social fragmentation. These dynamics have had a particularly adverse impact on younger generations, who face an uncertain future characterized by diminishing educational and employment opportunities. At the regional level, Sardinia exhibits particularly concerning data regarding school dropout, with a rate of 18.8%. (Openpolis, 2019). Young people face a range of educational, economic, and social difficulties in a context where the lack of opportunities and support exacerbates their distress. The post-pandemic environment has further intensified the social and educational vulnerabilities in the region. Several studies, such as the VI HBSC Italy survey (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2022), highlight that 41% of Italian adolescents report a deterioration in their mental health and overall quality of life. This situation is also reflected in Porto Torres, where young people are confronted with increasing challenges that are reported to local social and healthcare services in the form of referrals. With the RETI project, the Municipality of Porto Torres has initiated a comprehensive revision of its educational and social policies. The project introduced a community-based approach to educational intervention, moving beyond the traditional individualistic paradigm. Through the Educational Pacts for Communities, tools promoted by the Ministry of Education in 2020, a collaborative network was established among local authorities, schools, associations, and third-sector organizations, aimed at fostering the existential and social well-being of the area. This new model, outlined below, is based on an approach of “proximity education”, where the local community plays an active role in educational governance.

## **2. R.E.T.I.: EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH FOR AN INCLUSIVE TERRITORY**

The RETI project in Porto Torres began in the 2020/2021 school year to address educational poverty and strengthen the alliance between schools and the community through Service-Learning (SL). This pedagogical approach combines experiential learning with community service, involving teachers, students, and the community in joint actions aimed at improving the local area. The decision to adopt SL stemmed from a process of listening and co-designing with local stakeholders, which led to the formulation of three key questions: how can we face educational poverty and promote youth participation in the community?; how can we enhance their well-being and empower them to

become transformative agents in school and life?; how can we build an educating community capable of sharing responsibility and expertise in the educational process?

## **2.1. RETI I**

In the first year of the project, 87 educators, including preschool and lower secondary school teachers, social workers, psychologists, and volunteers, participated in a training program on SL, which led to the launch of 8 local projects. Additionally, 50 middle school students took part in a three-day workshop on art, play, and critical thinking, facilitated by the Pontifical Foundation Scholas Occurrentes and specially trained volunteers. The students shared their visions, needs, and ideas for improving the community. The year concluded with a public event at the local theater, where students presented their proposals to local authorities and community members, alongside the projects already in progress, fostering collaboration and celebration.

The first year also helped reduce the gap between schools and institutions, initiating an empowerment process that transformed the local community into an educating community. This journey focused on recognizing the “educational competencies” of community members, positioning them as educators, and creating spaces for collaboration among schools, families, educational agencies, local authorities, and other stakeholders. Through SL, students, teachers, and the community worked together to impact key areas: 1) renewing teaching methods, 2) addressing needs within the school and community, 3) strengthening peer relationships and adult connections, and 4) expanding collaborations between schools and the local area (Culcasi et al., 2023).

## **2.2. RETI II**

In the second year of the project, the work of the steering committee was further strengthened. Since the early stages of RETI I, the committee has fostered dialogue among various community stakeholders, ensuring that educational and social challenges were addressed from multiple perspectives and areas of expertise. For the first time in the city’s history, the project brought together all local educational agencies on a shared platform, where they could exchange experiences and propose integrated solutions for the benefit of the community, particularly the youth. In RETI II, a workshop-based training on Photovoice was introduced. This participatory action-research methodology uses photography as a tool to capture and represent important social issues, sparking change and participation (Mastrilli & Santinello, 2016). The activity, combined with Service-

Learning, involved 20 teachers and culminated in a participatory exhibition. The exhibition focused on teachers' perspectives of school and aimed to open a dialogue with community actors in the post-pandemic era, emphasizing the importance of co-reflection, co-design, and active participation in shaping the educational experience (Russo et al., 2023).

### **2.3. RETI III**

The third year of the project highlighted a profound process of rethinking the role of the municipal social services, shifting from a model focused on individual case management to a shared and integrated vision of educational responsibilities, creating an intervention context where social services offices cooperate with community actors for youth “care and intervention” sharing educational responsibility. RETI III focused on the formal establishment of a group of local stakeholders – composed of sports, artistic and cultural associations, as well as individual citizens – whose goal was to operationalize the construction of a community educational pact. The EIS Postgraduate School supported the networking process by training and supervising the involved actors in co-design processes necessary for building the Community Educational Pact. The year concluded with a public event where the network, consisting of the Municipality, schools, and third-sector organizations, was presented to the community. This network, coordinated by the Municipality's social services, aimed to launch the Community Educational Pact.

### **2.4. RETI IV**

The fourth year of the RETI project, currently underway, began with the Municipality's publication of a Call for Interest to invite local entities to formally join the working group. The goal is to strengthen existing positive practices, processes, and individual, social, and territorial resources from a perspective of promotion and enhancement. Indeed, starting in 2020, and building on the work carried out within RETI I, II, and III, the Social Services of the Municipality of Porto Torres have adopted a new vision and mission through the SL approach and Community Psychology and action-research methods (Francescato & Tomai, 2023). This shift places a greater emphasis on fostering a sense of shared responsibility among community actors, aimed at initiating collaborative actions in both educational and social contexts. This new focus is opening up the opportunity to experiment with a community-based social intervention model, where welfare is community based, transforming it into a support system for inclusion. This community based intervention model has enabled

Social Services not only to respond to a broader demand for intervention in fragile conditions, but to promote personal resources and aspirations of young people, in a preventive perspective with the involvement of community network.

### **3. CONCLUSION: WITH THE EYES OF THE FUTURE**

An educational project is inherently concerned with the future and transformation. The beginning of every educational act is listening to the needs and expectations of individuals and communities. This listening process leads to a shared planning effort, where a community embarks on a journey of growth, navigating a path that is both defined and open, created through collective action.

The RETI project originated from a deep understanding of the needs of the Porto Torres community. This process of attentive listening guided all the key phases of the project's development. During a training session with middle school students (RETI I), they were asked about their vision for the city's future. Their responses revealed no hope for the future. Some even referred to Porto Torres as "Morto Torres", reflecting a sense of hopelessness. This disillusioned perspective was a key challenge for the project.

In his 2022 New Year's address, President Sergio Mattarella emphasized the importance of changing our perspective to "read the present with the eyes of tomorrow". He noted that young people are "the eyes of tomorrow" and raised questions about what they would ask of today and how they would envision their city, its spaces, and relationships. The challenge lies in measuring the gap between this imagined future and the current reality, and using this gap as an opportunity for human and urban regeneration. Listening to young people's perspectives must be followed by a responsible response.

The RETI project was developed as a responsible answer to a challenge posed by the future. It embraces the dream of transforming an initial situation that, like an alarm cry, mobilized a variety of stakeholders who gradually became part of the same collaborative network, sharing the responsibility of an educational pact, an alliance.

The project focuses on imagining the kind of future we want for the young people who will inhabit it, and taking action toward that vision. Key questions include: What should be different about Porto Torres? How should relationships between people evolve? How can the community become open and welcoming? What kind of spaces for learning, living, and leisure do we want?

Looking at the present from the perspective of the future, the RETI project aims

to transform the dystopian vision of “Morto Torres” into the utopian vision of the dreamed Porto Torres.

*Eutopie*, that is, places, historical experiences, and collective, associative endeavors, characterized by what is implied in the prefix *eu-*, meaning “good”. These are spaces of sharing and conviviality, participation and solidarity, where stories and narratives are exchanged, giving meaning to the present and opening up to the future. They not only enrich the present of individuals and their relationships with meaning, but also point to the direction of the journey, the goal toward which to orient oneself (Manicardi, 2024, p. 17).

This is the journey undertaken by the RETI project, moving toward an horizon driven by dreams and utopias.

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# FOR A SUSTAINABLE IDEA OF SCUOLA DIFFUSA (WIDESPREAD SCHOOL): MEANINGS, PRACTICES AND CHARACTERISTICS

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This paper intends to illustrate the actions that led to the definition of a sustainable (valid, actualized, shared and feasible) idea of Widespread Education, founding concept of the three-year European ERASMUS+ project “Widespread School: innovating teaching approaches outside the classroom”. The project Widespread School, inspired by the Reggio Emilia “Scuola Diffusa” experience, aims at strengthening the alliance between school and territory and experiment an approach to education based on the idea of Education Outside the Classroom (EOtC). Evidence shows that EOtC, roughly defined as conducting curricular activities out of the school building, effectively enhances the capacity to learn. Starting from European theories, models and experiences, the concept has been defined to support and implement its effective development at the cultural, political and practical level (Index model).

socio-educational ecosystem; widespread education; educational sustainability; Education Outside the Classroom

## INTRODUCTION

Research in education and neuroscience have led to an extended and complex idea of the learning environment, encompassing both physical space and relational aspects. Neuro-phenomenological and embodied cognition perspectives are interpreting sociocultural dimensions as embodied cultural dimensions (Caruana and Gallese, 2011), as they are mediated by actors’ bodies, also and especially in the educational and school context (Damiani, Gomez Paloma, 2018; Gomez Paloma, Damiani, 2021). The space is redefined

in an ecological-systemic perspective for the interdependent interaction of all key components of the school-system (students, teachers, tools, content...) (OECD, 2010), that opens beyond “traditional” school.

This paper intends to illustrate the actions that led to the definition of a sustainable (valid, actualized, shared and feasible) idea of Widespread School (WS), an educational experience grounded in Reggio Emilia Pedagogy. Building on the literature regarding the educational and transformative value arising from synergies between diverse contexts, and interprofessional collaboration in support of the idea of schools as hubs of empowerment and learning connected with community and other local services (UNESCO, 2021), the project WS aims at strengthening the alliance between school and territory and experiment an approach to education based on the idea of Education Outside the Classroom (EOtC).

Schools and territories, as part of an educational ecosystem, implement a virtuous process where the variety of teaching, learning and assessment strategies positively influence, encourage and support the development of key competencies in both teachers and students (Mygind, 2019; Mangione, 2021). Inequality and illiteracy in the world are at historically high and rising levels (UN, 2020). A viable idea of WS could be a lever for co-development, well-being and prevention.

To achieve this macro-finality, reflection on the essential and necessary characteristics of WS and EOtC represents an essential step, still not fully investigated by literature (Cannella, et alii, 2023). It is important to specify that the strongly situated and dynamic nature of the concept, anchored to individual experiences and to specific contexts (cultural, physical and temporal), does not allow one to arrive at a closed and univocal definition; for these reasons, the objective of the present work consists in identifying ‘meta’ level foundational elements, capable of making certain types of learning environments and training experiences recognisable and common, also from a comparative point of view, while supporting and enhancing the variety and complexity of the dynamics and contexts. This brings us closer to a ‘sustainable’ guiding idea of WS, open and respectful of differences, but rigorous in the declination of certain key elements (founding characteristics) that guarantee validity, feasibility, efficacy; documentability, thus allowing for its evaluation and implementation.

## 1. RESEARCH DESIGN

Since all project partners had some experience with EOtC programs, a brainstorming round helped defining keywords that guided both the literature analysis phase and the development of a practice collection form.

The researchers carried out a thematic literature review using Education Outside the Classroom as a search term. Of the 29 articles extracted only 15 were considered relevant based on inclusion/exclusion criteria. Articles focusing on digital resources and practices (i.e., Mixed Reality Immersive Learning, Mobile Learning), were excluded. Studies that explicitly investigated experiences with EOtC, theoretically and empirically, were included.

Literature thematic analysis, both driven by a general and provisional definition of WS, but also grounded in the data (Braun, Clarke, 2006), focused primarily on the conditions that favor or hinder EOtC practical implementation. Namely, it sought to respond to the following questions:

- What teaching strategies or methodologies are used in EOtC experiences?
- What impact do they have according to teachers' and students' opinions?
- What challenges and obstacles are suggested for implementing EOtC?

The project partners designed a form to collect EOtC experiences, focusing on prolonged experiences (minimum 5 days, even spread throughout several weeks) of primary and lower secondary school developing curricular objectives through active educational practices, carried out outside the school building with an interaction between teachers, students, the environment and possibly “non-teacher educators”, such as: museum educators, librarians, farmers, artisans, musicians. In this setting formal and non-formal/informal education interact. Key element to identify experiences was the co-designing of learning activities in and out of school. This co-designing process, done before, during and after the experience, takes place among teachers and external educators and has the “non-schooling” educational environment at its core.

Tab. 1. Guiding questions from the practice collection form.

WHO WE ARE? “Our educational ecosystem” (Describe the formal, non-formal, informal agents involved in the experience)
WHAT IS OUR PURPOSE? (Define the objectives of the project/experience/case/example)
HOW WE DO? (Describe the methodology/pedagogical strategies/procedure/tools of the experience and the design process—who is involved in the designing process, what tools do you use –i.e., co-designing grid, flipped chart, conceptual maps, etc.-, what do you design—)
HOW LONG WE STAY? (Describe the timeframe of your experience. How many days? How many hours per day? In which time-period?)
WHAT ARE SOME STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND AREAS FOR IMPROVING? (Describe 2-3 strengths, 2-3 weaknesses and 2-3 areas for improving the project in line with Widespread Education)

Through the form guiding questions (see tab. 1) some pillar elements emerged: description of the educational ecosystem (formal, non-formal, informal agents involved in the experience), i.e. the who; educational objectives of the experience, i.e. the what; methodology/pedagogical strategies/procedure/tools of experience and design process, i.e. the how; timeframe, strengths and weaknesses.

## 2. DATA ANALYSIS LEADING TO A GUIDING DEFINITION

### 2.1. Literature review

The literature analysis (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2024b) confirmed the co-existence of various interpretations and definitions of EOtC, which focus on different practices and characteristics.

According to Mygind et al. (2019):

Education outside the classroom (EOtC) can be characterised as a compulsory curriculum-based programme which is described as a holistic, school-based and pupil-centred strategy that can advance learning, physical activity, social relations, school motivation, and mental health involving all senses (p. 599).

Some scholars focus more on teaching in different places, as “Education outside the classroom (EOtC) is characterised as a teaching method in which teachers make use of the local environment as well as places distant from

schools when teaching specific school subjects” (Jorring et al., 2020, p. 414). Others are more interested in students’ active learning “Education outside the classroom (EOTC) offers students an opportunity to experience new and enriched learning activities and contexts, to take greater responsibility for their learning, and to connect more deeply with their local places and communities” (Watson et al., 2020, p. 25).

As for the research questions on strategies and methodologies, EOTC often involves child-led approaches to interdisciplinary experimentation, project-based learning, peer cooperation, physical activity, games conducted around “real-world” problems, yet no specific in-depth analysis of the teaching methodologies can be found in the literature.

As for impact of EOTC, they are mostly collected through reporting by teachers and are presented in Tab. 2. Benefits for students expand from different dimensions of school learning to soft skills such as research skills, to various dimensions of physical well-being, to better behaviour, to improvement in relationship, to a greater understanding of civic engagement and world real problems. While teachers benefit from the improved relationship with students and other professionals and greater understanding of active teaching and learning methodologies. Some well-being dimensions are captured through physical data such as cortisol levels, trying to measure learning gains for students has been mostly inconclusive.

Tab. 2. Impact of EOTC.

Support, development, and consolidation of school learning.
Development of life skills.
Research skills.
Greater school satisfaction and engagement.
Better understanding of the world.
Civic engagement.
Richer understanding of oneself (increased self-esteem, self-efficacy).
Increased physical activity.
Better regulation of biological stress-reactivity.
Positive impact on personal and social well-being (e.g., social relationships, group work).
Negative associations with hyperactivity-inattention.
Negative association with peer problems in pupils.

Improved student-student and student-teacher relationships.
More situated and experiential learning situations.
More active pedagogical strategies (e.g., experimentation, problem-solving, peer collaboration).
Addressing more authentic problems and projects due to contextualization.
Greater collaboration between teachers and other professionals.

The literature reviewed has identified various challenges and difficulties associated with the development and implementation of Education Outside the Classroom (EOtC) mostly grouped in psychological, social, geographical, material, and political. At a psychological level there is a tendency for gains to be context connected and hard to keep once the students go back to regular schooling. Socially, EOtC requires more work and cooperation from teachers and a reorganization of working environments. Some places might not be suited to have experiences of EOtC due to weather and geographical conditions. At the material and political level, resources could be necessary to ensure transportation, renting spaces, hiring educators, finding partnerships and so on.

**2.2. Collection of European Experiences**

Partners collected 19 concrete experiences of EOtC from Italy, Spain, Norway, Croatia and Finland (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2024a). We summarized key elements such as location, adults involved and timeframe in tab. 3.

Tab. 3. Summary of collected practices.

#	Country	Places	Adults involved	Time
7	Italy (Reggio Emilia, Naples)	Neighborhood and its activities; farm, theatre, natural site, castle	Teachers, Educators, local artisans, families, experts, professionals from the welcoming sites.	1 week (5 days) per year
3	Spain (Catalonia )	Natural site, historical Site, museum	Teachers, professionals, university researchers, families	Many outings throughout the school year/3 hours per week
2	Norway (Oslo)	Public space, private companies	Teachers, professionals, social activists	2 months

3	Croatia (Zadar)	School garden, downtown, technological forum	Teachers, families, professionals, historians, museum personnel, tourist guides	2 hours per week throughout the school year; 1 week;
4	Finland (Espoo)	Local forest, Animal habitats, library, Yrityskylä (business society)	Teachers, professionals, literary art counselors, librarian	2 hours per week during the school year; 5 days during school year

There is a great variety in timeframe (5 days, 2 hours throughout the school year, 2 months), although they are all prolonged experiences. Also, the places (indoors and outdoors, natural and manmade, places of business or of culture, and so on) and learning areas involved vary greatly: from library readings to archaeological digging; from recycling at a company to studying of castles; from farming to forest exploring. Yet, there are some strong elements in common across countries and cultures:

- students' active learning: research-based, project-based; STEAM, interdisciplinary;
- the richness of the socio-educational ecosystem involved, both in terms of actors involved and variety of fields and professions;
- teachers' active involvement in EOtC designing and implementation.

### 2.3. Defining a concept to guide actions

The aim of the Erasmus+ project is to design tools supporting implementation of schooling outside the school building throughout Europe. To that end a common definition was needed. Yet, as we have seen, EOtC is very broad concept that describes a variety of schooling experiences carried out outside the school building but lacks the precision necessary to guide and support implementation. On the other hand, WS, the educational experience that inspired the project, is a specific experience connected to a specific place, culture and idea of education (Cannella et alii, 2023).

The project group decided to move beyond these 2 concepts and characterize Widespread Education, as a culturally transferable, yet somehow prescriptive and defined concept able to orient action in the different contexts.

Widespread Education is a pedagogical approach that engages primary and secondary schools developing curricular objectives in cooperation with other organizations and actors outside the school across time (minimum 5 days) on contextualized, real, and authentic problems that matters to

students and communities by co-researching, co-designing and co-teaching, bridging formal, non-formal and informal agents and connecting learning experiences in and out of school

This operational definition of Widespread Education is coherent and instrumental to supporting the generative and transformative pedagogy in an ecological-relational perspective.

## CONCLUSION

The identification of a common frame for systematizing and defining Widespread Education is aimed at building a Toolkit for teachers, consisting of guidelines and materials for the implementation of Widespread Education. The toolkit will support the development of practitioners and contexts in a coherent and sustainable “widespread” perspective.

Moreover, interviews and focus groups with practitioners, policy makers and leaders help the research group define the key organizational and managerial aspects of Widespread Education, to design policy guidelines helping implementation of Widespread Education experiences across Europe.

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# BRIDGING THE GAP: IMPLEMENTING INNER AREAS GOVERNANCE IN EDUCATION. A CASE STUDY OF THE TERRITORIAL EDUCATIONAL PACT OF CASENTINO

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In 2021, UNESCO's International Commission on the Futures of Education stressed the need to foster participatory processes in order to reshape the educational landscape, highlighting the importance of collaborative governance as a prerogative of the 'new social contract'. Indeed, education as a common good requires a transformation that goes beyond traditional approaches and actively involves all stakeholders. This paper explores how the creation and implementation of public-private alliances at local level can be an exemplary response to this vision, providing a model that promotes sustainable development through community engagement in the collaborative governance of the educational and cultural sector. In this sense, the Casentino Territorial Educational Pact, signed in May 2024, constitutes an innovative experiment that seeks to strengthen the educational offer of Italy's Inner Areas, focusing on the valorisation of intangible cultural heritage as an educational tool and an element of local development. Collaboration between the area's municipalities, educational institutions, third sector organisations and cultural institutions has enabled the development of a unique educational ecosystem that responds directly to the needs of the area and uses local knowledge as a central element to promote a territorial system for lifelong and lifewide learning.

collaborative governance; Inner Areas; Territorial Educational Pact; cultural heritage

## **INTRODUCTION**

As is well known, the report “Reimagining Our Futures Together: a new social contract for education”, produced by the UNESCO International Commission on the Futures of Education (2021), advocates the need for a new vision of the future that is democratic and local, valuing individual and collective action and the wealth of cultural diversity as assets for sustainable, peaceful and inclusive development. The challenges of the modern world, in this sense, entail the need for a change of direction that identifies inclusiveness and high-quality education as driving forces for change. This is not only because developments in the world of work due to the speed of digital technology necessitate a reconsideration of the skills of individuals with respect to economic and employment needs, but also and especially because global and local development entail the increasingly democratic and active participation of individuals in their multiple roles as administrators, workers, volunteers and ordinary citizens in order to plan and manage development interventions that are truly in line with local socio-economic needs and requirements. The challenge posed by the UNESCO document is how to narrow the gap between the vision presented in the report and the current reality, taking into consideration the way in which politics shapes education. The key principles of UNESCO’s ‘new social contract’ (2021) – ensuring the right to quality education throughout life and strengthening education as a public common good – are translated and pursued through a series of interventions that converge in the establishment of local alliances capable of involving the various actors of society in the process of defining educational policies for lifelong and lifewide learning. In this sense, education can no longer be an exclusive area of planning limited to the public sector and implemented in schools, but necessarily becomes a collective goal that can only be pursued by activating and involving the entire community in governance processes, as a form of government that encourages the involvement of all social partners in the definition and implementation of synergistic development strategies.

## **THE FRAMEWORK OF COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE**

The term collaborative governance – similar to the definition of governance offered by the OECD (2001) – refers to a form of governance based on the involvement of economic and civil society structures in the public policy-making process (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh 2012). Since the adoption of the Community Leader Directive (1991), this modality has been the main route chosen by European and national structures to ensure the

participation of civil society in the planning of territorial interventions in the pursuit of systemic objectives of sustainable development, cohesion and social inclusion. The shift from rigid, centralised and hierarchical forms of governance to flexible governance processes based on pluralism in decision-making has been accompanied by a growing awareness of the role that local communities can play in defining and resolving the needs arising from their geographical, economic and social contexts (Trigilia 1999, Barca, 2009), thus opening up the various stages of local development interventions to the participation of non-institutional local actors.

The issue of collaborative governance in education is certainly not new, but has been a constant objective in the European public policy-making process. In the case of Italy, over the past decade, education has been a priority area for the state's executive structures, as evidenced, for example, by the Educational Community Pacts introduced by the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research) with the 2021 School Plan and numerous examples of collaborative municipal agreements implemented at regional and municipal level to achieve shared administration of cultural heritage.

A focus on the 'educating community' has developed in parallel to and in correlation with directives and policies aimed specifically at so-called marginal areas, i.e. rural, mountainous and/or inland areas which – due to depopulation and socio-economic and geomorphological reasons – risk the impoverishment of local resources, with the consequent negative effects. A typical example of this correlation is the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), launched in 2013 and promoted by the Agency for Territorial Cohesion with ERDF, EAFRD and ESF European funds. Within the SNAI planning for 2014-2020 and 2021-2027, the strengthening of local educational systems, together with the implementation of healthcare and mobility services, is identified as a primary objective, both to foster resilience and combat school drop-out, and to mitigate the risk of educational poverty, due in part to the limited availability of services for citizens. Areas of possible intervention were not so much focused on strengthening school personnel and restoring and renewing buildings and their organisation, but more on expanding the educational and training offer through the valorisation of all formal, non-formal and informal educational pathways, in order to create the conditions to increase and enhance the human and social capital of communities, with a view to driving local development that is also in line with the strategic objectives of international and European guidelines and policies.

## 2. THE TERRITORIAL EDUCATIONAL PACT OF CASENTINO

This paper aims to examine the Territorial Educational Pact of Casentino, implemented by the local Unione dei Comuni del Casentino with scientific coordination by the FORLILPSI Department of the University of Florence.

This formal alliance was the subject of a specific case study in the REACT interdepartmental research project *'Regenerating the cultural landscapes of inland areas in a people-centred perspective'* (<https://www.react-casentino.unifi.it/>), carried out by four departments of the University of Florence and focusing on the cultural landscape of the Casentino, with the aim of valorising the region's available heritage and human resources, and identifying strategies and actions for place-based development.

The Casentino, a Tuscan valley with a wealth of natural and cultural resources, is an emblematic example of the educational challenges facing Italy's Inner Areas. Declining birth rates, an ageing population and high teacher turnover are leading to undersized schools and a lack of educational opportunities, increasing the risk of educational poverty (MIUR, 2015). These factors threaten to aggravate depopulation, emigration and economic impoverishment, leading to a gradual loss of the area's natural and cultural heritage. In this context, it is essential to improve infrastructure and service provision in order to attract investment and counteract youth migration. At the same time, facilitating tourism opportunities, strengthening public-private partnerships and leveraging European and national investment are key steps to revitalising the area, but will require an integrated and participatory approach that can:

- combine improved educational opportunities, the valorisation of local heritage and local development needs into shared vision and action that can effectively address the critical issues facing the area and promote a sustainable future;
- encourage the active participation of the rich social and economic fabric of the valley in processes of public policy formulation and implementation, through forms of shared governance that enhance the role of the community and its human capital in the co-programming, co-planning, implementation and monitoring of local development initiatives in the fields of culture and education.

In this sense, the Casentino Educational Territorial Pact – finally signed in May 2024 by 49 stakeholders (of which 24 are public bodies and 29 are private) – represents the concretisation of an existing informal alliance started in 2020 between 7 schools and 19 economic and business partners with the aim of

strengthening local ties and therefore investment in the skills and knowledge of the Casentino community, in order to contribute to local development processes and action to limit and combat depopulation. The Pact is implemented in relation to Action 2 of the “Casentino and Valtiberina Mountains of the Spirit” area strategy (2014-2020 planning period), which explicitly aims to “provide support and tools for young people to train and build the body of knowledge that is essential for their human and cultural development, and for the adult population to update and integrate professional skills to support their working life”. The contents of the document are the result of a co-design process started in 2020 by the CRED office of the Italian Union of Municipalities for the implementation of the interventions envisaged in Appendix 2.2 ‘Casentino Valtiberina: community in education, intangible heritage, sustainable development and training opportunities for young people in the area’, whose planned interventions were geared to building an Educational Community and creating an Atlas of Intangible Heritage, inspired by the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Heritage (2003) and the Convention of Faro (2005), through an inclusive, participatory process of involving the local population in its various forms of organisation.

## **2.1. Case study methodology and objectives within the REACT research context**

The Casentino Educational Territorial Pact has been the object of study, as a relevant form of social organisation and the expression of social capital, within REACT research, specifically in the WP2 project to define a knowledge framework for Casentino. In particular, the Pact was the subject of a specific in-depth study under theme T.2.1 ‘Forms of community organisation’ as part of thematic area no. 2 “Traditions and social practices”. The case study was carried out between March and July 2024 by the research unit of the FORLILPSI department. The research model, inspired by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), draws on a qualitative methodology based on triangulation (Danzin, 1970) between document analysis<sup>1</sup>, participant observation and open interviews with privileged stakeholders in the Pact in order to ensure the validity

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<sup>1</sup> The process involved, firstly, analysis of material collected by the PUSH-D Research Unit – Pedagogical Approach for Sustainable Development and Heritage Valorisation of the University of Florence during the action research and participant observation phases carried out between January 2021 and July 2024 to support the participatory processes accompanying the Pact. At the same time, desk analysis of international, European, regional and local policy planning documents was carried out in order to identify elements of continuity and innovation in the Pact with regard to the regulatory and legal context and the panorama of participatory governance tools related to education and culture.

of the research. Specifically, the aim of the case study was to identify and define:

- the Pact's innovative features in relation to existing processes at local and regional level and to different models of collaborative governance in the education sector;
- the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities that facilitate and/or hamper achievement of the Pact's goals and the functioning of the structures dedicated to their pursuit;
- the potential impact of the Pact on the economic, social, environmental, institutional and cultural sustainability of the Casentino area.

## **2.2. Results**

The Casentino Territorial Educational Pact is an innovative collaborative governance tool that seeks to facilitate the sustainable development of a mountain region characterised by complex challenges such as depopulation, social fragmentation and the need to valorise cultural and natural heritage. The Pact's originality lies in its ability to combine educational, cultural and economic objectives, adopting a cross-sectoral approach that seeks to bring local resources together in an inclusive and sustainable development model. In contrast to the school-centred vision that generally characterised Educational Pacts promoted by the MIUR 2021 School Plan, this Pact aims to create educational opportunities that embrace a lifelong and lifewide approach to learning, valuing continuous development and the integration of educational experiences in formal, non-formal and informal contexts. In particular, the focus on the intangible heritage of Casentino, inspired by the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Heritage (2003) and the EU Convention of Faro (2005), is a key element to stimulate awareness of identity and a sense of belonging. Cultural heritage is identified as an asset for local development, but also as a real educational tool, giving the Pact a distinctive originality in comparison with other similar experiences at national level. Despite its many strengths, the Pact faces significant challenges. The lack of dedicated economic resources and the organisational complexity of the multi-level network are major obstacles. Moreover, the political and social fragmentation of the area threatens to compromise the continuity of the participatory process. Nevertheless, the approach adopted is in line with the most advanced European and Italian policies, such as Agenda 2030 and the Inner Areas Strategy, which encourage inclusive governance models to address the challenges of marginal areas.

The impact of the Pact has several dimensions. On the economic level, it seeks

to boost the skills of the local workforce, making it more competitive and responsive to the needs of the production fabric. The valorisation of the natural and cultural heritage as an educational and tourism resource can generate new economic opportunities, helping to combat depopulation. From the social perspective, the Pact promotes community empowerment and social cohesion through participatory practices that strengthen the sense of belonging and collaboration. Intergenerational and intercultural inclusion is central to fostering a more equitable and inclusive community. On the environmental front, the Pact integrates sustainability objectives into the dynamic conservation of local ecosystems, stimulating responsible and collaborative behaviour among citizens. Finally, from a cultural point of view, the Pact encourages the preservation and transmission of local heritage through educational projects and joint initiatives, contributing to the consolidation of territorial identity and the promotion of intercultural dialogue.

The Casentino Territorial Education Pact is thus designed as an innovative model of integration between education, culture and local development. Despite its criticisms, it offers a strategic vision capable of enhancing the area's endogenous resources and building a resilient and inclusive community. Its implementation requires the ongoing commitment of all parties involved in order to overcome the challenges and guarantee a positive and lasting impact on the Casentino.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

In its own small way, the Casentino Educational Pact constitutes an intervention that is perfectly in line with the aspirations of UNESCO's International Commission on the Futures of Education, which seeks to promote a 'new social contract' based on the vision of inclusive, participatory and widespread high-quality education. The characteristics and opportunities offered by the Pact, as well as changes in the Italian legal and regulatory circumstances, confirm the importance of participatory processes and collaborative governance as essential social drivers for moving beyond the existing situation and achieving the objectives advocated in the 2021 UNESCO report. In this sense, the communities of the Inner Areas often prove capable of promoting innovative models of governance and development in order to cope – through the joint action of institutions, economic actors and civil society – with the endogenous and exogenous exigencies that have long threatened the eco-systemic resilience of their local areas, showing a mature awareness of the role of lifelong



learning as a key element for the achievement of local and global development objectives. At the same time, the precariousness of these areas and their importance in the pursuit of cohesion, subsidiarity and sustainability alert central and regional governments to their responsibility to adopt ongoing and targeted policies aimed at supporting local education systems.

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# THE SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL TERRITORIAL PACTS: PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION AND TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE. A MULTILEVEL ANALYSIS OF THE VERONA CASE

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The article analyzes the role of Educational Territorial Pacts (ETPs) in implementing the social contract for education promoted by UNESCO as a response to global educational challenges. Focusing on the case of Verona, the Territorial Collaboration Pact (TCP) emerges as a model of multilevel governance aimed at fostering an inclusive, participatory, and sustainable school. The TCP identifies four macro-objectives: preventing school dropout, engaging families, opening schools to the community, and enhancing urban and natural spaces as learning environments. Using a qualitative approach based on the analysis of ETP texts and the reflective journals of the 12 participating schools, the study highlights the potential of ETPs to build resilient educational networks and promote a school model deeply rooted in the local territory. The article also examines the role of the National Observatory, coordinated by INDIRE, in supporting the institutionalization of ETPs through training, monitoring, and the promotion of best practices. The Verona experience stands out as a paradigmatic case of educational and social innovation, offering a replicable example of how schools can act as agents of territorial regeneration and community cohesion.

Territorial Collaboration Pact, Educational Territorial Pact, Social Contract for Education, Innovation.

## INTRODUCTION

In a global context marked by social inequalities, environmental crises, and technological transformations, education is increasingly recognized as a central element in building sustainable and inclusive societies. The concept of the social contract for education, relaunched by UNESCO in 2021, represents an innovative and systemic response to the educational challenges of our time. It proposes a redefinition of the school's role as an open and participatory institution, capable of collaborating with families, local authorities, and communities to address complex issues such as school dropout, educational poverty, and structural inequalities (UNESCO, 2021).

This perspective places solidarity-based connections and the school as a common good at its center, moving beyond the vision of the school as a mere service provider to consider it as a place of social innovation and democratic participation. This approach is particularly relevant in the Italian context, where schools often act as strategic nodes in networks of proximity and territorial collaboration (Bartolini, Mangione, Zanoccoli, 2022; Bartolini et al., 2021).

According to recent contributions (Locatelli, 2019, 2023b; Cannella, Chipa, Mangione, 2021), the new social contract for education rests on four fundamental pillars: *Participation* (involving students, families, and local actors in the co-creation of educational projects), *Inclusion* (viewing diversity as a resource for building cohesive communities), *Solidarity* (creating educational ecosystems that strengthen the bond between school and community), and *Regeneration* (positioning schools as agents of change and social innovation).

These principles reflect the need to adopt a relational and transformative pedagogy capable of responding to contemporary challenges. In Italy, they have supported the realization of proximity school experiences based on a symbiotic relationship between schools and their territories, where educational institutions assume the role of cultural and social hubs to promote social justice, urban regeneration, and community cohesion (Mangione and Calzone, 2022).

Educational Territorial Pacts are strategic tools to support and implement this vision of schools. They provide a normative framework that formalizes alliances between schools, families, associations, and local institutions, creating an operational space to co-design targeted educational interventions. Through these Pacts, schools take on an active role in enhancing local resources, regenerating public spaces, and building cohesive and resilient educational communities.

The relationship between Educational Pacts and proximity schools is not merely operational but deeply pedagogical. As Biesta (2022) observes, community-centered education fosters the creation of meaningful relationships that inspire belonging and participation. Educational Pacts, therefore, are not simply governance tools but pedagogical devices that can support school models (Maulini and Perrenoud, 2005) based on equity, diversity, and sustainability.

The institutionalization of Educational Pacts in Italy is supported by the National Observatory, coordinated by INDIRE and LABSUS, which plays a key role in monitoring and promoting the dissemination of this tool. Furthermore, through training, support, and research initiatives, INDIRE is working to consolidate Educational Pacts as a systemic practice.

## **2. THE CASE STUDY: THE PACT IN THE CITY OF VERONA**

In Italy, within the framework of the Educational Territorial Pacts, the collaborative experience of the City of Verona represents a particularly significant case, as it is structured on two levels: a general level of strategic governance and coordination encompassing the entire city, and a local level that concretely impacts specific portions of the territory.

The Territorial Collaboration Pact (TCP) of Verona represents the strategic level of educational and social governance, aimed at defining a shared framework for the construction of educational alliances in various parts of the territory. It acts as a steering mechanism, involving schools, local institutions, families, and other stakeholders to identify common educational priorities and direct resources toward strategic objectives.

From this general level, the Educational Territorial Pacts (ETPs) are developed, operating at the local and proximity levels (e.g., neighborhoods or districts of the municipality), translating the macro-objectives into specific actions and concrete collaborations within the territory.

The TCP of Verona was conceived by a steering committee composed of the Municipality of Verona, the Veneto Regional School Office (USR Veneto-UAT of Verona), the Prefecture of Verona, the Police Headquarters of Verona, and the Diocese of Verona, to define the major strategic guidelines of the city's educational project. It is organized around four macro-objectives:

1. *Prevent school dropout* through systemic interventions and inclusive educational policies.
2. *Engage families as active partners* in the educational process,

strengthening their role through training and participatory initiatives.

3. *Open schools to the community*, transforming them into cultural and social hubs capable of promoting cohesion and participation.
4. *Enhance urban and natural spaces as places* for shared learning and active citizenship.

The TCP serves as a platform for coordinating resources, tools, and expertise, ensuring a unified and sustainable vision for the educational project. After establishing a broad and diversified network of stakeholders, the steering committee, with the methodological guidance and training support of INDIRE, identified tools for monitoring and shared reflection.

Building on the strategic framework outlined by the TCP, the schools of Verona were involved by INDIRE in a training and support process for drafting the Educational Territorial Pacts (ETPs) within their proximity territories. These Pacts, signed by 12 Comprehensive Institutes, are configured as local co-design tools through which schools collaborate directly with local actors—families, associations, public and private entities—to implement targeted interventions.

Below are some significant data collected at the start of the training and support process to outline the context of reference for the macro-objectives set by the steering committee: 1,484 students were involved in extracurricular activities, 26% of whom held non-Italian citizenship, 750 parents participated, with a significant representation of immigrant families, 60% of the participating schools used external spaces, such as parks and open fields, for their activities, 50% of the schools utilized indoor spaces outside the school, such as libraries and cultural centers.

These data already highlight a significant synergy between these schools and their reference territory. The dimension of proximity was crucial for effectively addressing the various needs and challenges faced by the individual schools involved, located in different areas. For instance, in some areas, emphasis was placed on the inclusion of migrant families, while in others, focus was on enhancing cultural and natural heritage.

The complementarity between the Territorial Collaboration Pact and the Educational Territorial Pacts is a strength of the model adopted in Verona. On the one hand, the TCP ensures a unified strategic vision and systemic coordination; on the other, the ETPs allow this vision to be translated into targeted interventions capable of responding to the needs of local contexts.

This dual level of intervention enhances the participation of local actors and

fosters educational innovation, creating an ecosystem that combines learning, social cohesion, and sustainability.

INDIRE has initiated an instrumental case study (Stake, 2000; Evers & Wu, 2006) with the aim of investigating the impact of the Pact on the territory with respect to the identified objectives. The following analysis focuses on the school visions proposed and the transformations made possible by solidarity-based alliances, exploring how these elements contribute to addressing educational and social needs.

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research conducted on Verona's Educational Territorial Pacts is based on a qualitative approach, which allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and dynamics underlying the design and implementation of these tools. This type of analysis, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), is particularly effective for investigating complex phenomena in educational contexts, capturing both the pedagogical visions expressed by participants and their perceptions of emerging challenges and opportunities.

The study involved 12 first-cycle schools, which participated in the project by drafting Educational Territorial Pacts and maintaining reflective journals as monitoring tools. These two data corpora—the texts of the Pacts and the log files from the reflective journals—enabled the analysis of both the visions and objectives outlined by the schools, as well as the connections among them. At the same time, the data revealed the challenges and opportunities encountered by school leaders and teachers who participated in the INDIRE-guided accompaniment process.

The analysis was conducted in four main phases:

- *Data Collection and Preparation.* The texts of the Educational Territorial Pacts and the log files from the reflective journals were collected, digitized, and normalized to ensure consistency and uniformity. This process included reviewing documents to unify terminology and make the corpus suitable for textual analysis.
- *Thematic Coding.* The data was organized into three predefined categories: school visions, objectives, and perceived challenges/opportunities. Manual coding, inspired by the method of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), allowed for a contextualized interpretation.

- *Textual Content Analysis.* Using digital analysis tools such as Voyant Tools, the data categorized a priori was explored through text mining techniques to identify significant linguistic patterns. Keywords such as “inclusion,” “community,” and “spaces” guided subsequent categorization, enabling the identification of recurring themes.
- *Validation and Collective Reflection.* Monthly monitoring meetings between participating schools and researchers provided an opportunity to discuss preliminary results and incorporate additional reflections. This process enhanced the quality of the analysis by valuing the direct contributions of the project’s participants.

The qualitative approach adopted in this research allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the schools’ experiences. It highlighted not only the explicit content of the Pacts but also the relational and organizational dynamics accompanying their implementation.

## **5. IMAGINATION AS DRIVING FORCE OF EDUCATIONAL PACT: VISIONS AND OBJECTIVES**

Educational imagination, understood as the ability to visualize what schools could and should be, is at the heart of the design of the Educational Pacts. INDIRE’s focus on these tools, in fact, arises from their potential to pave the way for a new *formes scolaires*. This process of imagination is not an abstract exercise but a transformative practice that guides school and territorial actors toward a shared vision of the educational future.

As Greene (1995) emphasizes, imagination not only expands the boundaries of the possible but also inspires concrete actions that aim to translate innovative visions into tangible realities. Verona’s Educational Pacts offer a concrete demonstration of this approach, in which schools articulate pedagogical aspirations through a plurality of visions, closely tied to the operational objectives outlined.

The visions emerging from the Pacts can be seen as collective imaginings that reflect both the needs of the local context and the ambition to redefine the role of schools in society. Three are particularly clear.

- *The Inclusive School.* The vision of an inclusive school is a common thread running through all the Pacts analyzed. It imagines the school as an equitable and cohesive educational space, capable of valuing cultural, social, and linguistic diversity. This translates into objectives such as the introduction of innovative teaching methodologies, like



service learning and experiential workshops, aimed at actively involving students with special educational needs or from disadvantaged social groups. As Fraser (2009) suggests, this vision promotes a form of social justice that goes beyond the simple redistribution of resources, focusing on a deep recognition of differences.

- *The School as a Civic Hub.* In this vision, the school is imagined as a social and cultural hub, a meeting place for students, families, and local actors. A “school-city,” therefore, which translates into concrete objectives such as: keeping schools open in the afternoon, organizing cultural events and intergenerational workshops, creating collaborative networks with associations and local institutions. This clearly echoes the concept of community schools described by Schafft (2016), where the school becomes a point of reference for community cohesion and participation.
- *The Ecological and Sustainable School.* Sustainability is another central dimension of the educational imagination found in the Pacts. The school is conceived as a place that educates for environmental awareness and uses the surrounding territory as a learning space. Key elements include the creation of educational gardens, organizing excursions to natural spaces, and promoting interdisciplinary activities that demonstrate how sustainability can be integrated into the curriculum. This vision reflects OECD (2021) recommendations on the importance of linking school learning to global challenges.

The objectives outlined in Verona’s Pacts show a strong correspondence with the visions imagined by the schools. This convergence is particularly evident at the levels of students, families, and spaces. The increased participation of students in innovative educational activities, such as action-research laboratories and projects tied to local traditions, demonstrates how the objectives are designed to make students active participants in their learning. These experiences promote autonomy, collaboration, and critical skills, aligning with Dewey’s (1938) reflections on active learning. The objectives aimed at involving families—through, for example, literacy courses, seminars, and intergenerational activities—reflect the school’s commitment to fostering broad educational synergies. Epstein and Sanders (2019) stress the importance of such parent partnerships for improving educational outcomes and strengthening the cohesion of the educational community.

Finally, the redevelopment and innovative use of both school and external

spaces—such as parks, libraries, and cultural centers—highlight the commitment to realizing a distributed school deeply integrated into the urban and natural fabric. As Lefebvre (1991) observes, space can become an active agent of educational transformation when designed and used participatively.

The visions outlined—from the inclusive school to the ecological school—find concrete expression in objectives that aim to create a new *formes scolaires* (Maulini & Perrenoud, 2005): open, participatory, and resilient. From the pedagogical perspective of social and solidarity connections (Locatelli, 2023a; Chipa et al., 2023), this convergence between imagination and practice shows how schools can use the alliances formalized in the Pacts not only to meet immediate educational needs but also to shape a vision of a more just and sustainable society.

## **6. PERCEPTION OF CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: ANALYSIS FROM REFLECTIVE JOURNALS**

The perception of stakeholders is a crucial element in educational innovation processes.

As highlighted by Fullan (2016) and Hargreaves and Shirley (2020), the way individuals experience and interpret change significantly impacts its implementation and sustainability. Perception, therefore, is not only a subjective dimension but also a valuable indicator of the dynamics of organizational and relational innovation.

The reflective journals of the schools involved in the Educational Territorial Pact of Verona serve as the documentary basis for a qualitative analysis of their experiences. From this analysis emerge the challenges they faced, the opportunities they encountered, and the transformative potential of the journey undertaken in Verona's experience.

One of the *main challenges* identified concerns the *management of collaboration networks*. The average of 13 stakeholders involved per Pact—with up to 40 in some cases—highlighted the complexity of coordination. This issue echoes findings from international research (Cheminais, 2009), which emphasizes that building multilateral partnerships requires significant investment in distributed leadership and negotiation skills. The diversity of stakeholders, including public institutions, associations, families, and local professionals, often led to misalignments in expectations and operational priorities.

Another challenge identified relates to the *adaptation of physical spaces* to

meet the needs of a distributed educational model. Although 60% of the participating schools reported using external spaces such as parks, museums, and libraries for educational activities, logistical and maintenance issues persisted. As explored by Chipa et al. (2023), learning environments must be designed not only as functional contexts for educational processes but also as elements that facilitate participation and active engagement. However, the lack of resources for restructuring and adapting spaces remains a significant obstacle.

Finally, the *divergence of priorities* among stakeholders represented another layer of complexity. Schools, focused on educational objectives, often found it challenging to balance these priorities with the institutional or operational agendas of territorial partners. This phenomenon aligns with observations by (Cannella, Mangione, and Chipa, 2023) on how interinstitutional collaboration can be undermined by the lack of shared goals and fragmented communication. Despite these challenges, the reflective journals also highlight a *significant set of opportunities* that emerged during the process. One of the most significant opportunities is the *strengthening of school-community relationships*. Activities such as intergenerational workshops, literacy courses for immigrant parents, and cultural initiatives fostered closer and more constructive dialogue between schools and families. As Epstein and Sanders (2019) note, such efforts can transform families from mere beneficiaries into active partners, contributing to greater cohesion within the educational community. From a pedagogical perspective, the introduction of innovative methodologies aimed at fostering contextualized learning and an interdisciplinary approach served as a key lever for engaging students, fostering a sense of belonging, and developing transversal skills. This aligns with OECD (2021) recommendations, which promote educational practices that connect school curricula to real-world experiences, strengthening the link between education and sustainability.

Another positive aspect was the *enhancement of reflective professionalism*. The monthly monitoring meetings with INDIRE provided teachers and school leaders with opportunities to discuss the strategies they had adopted, fostering a culture of critical reflection and continuous improvement. As Biesta (2022) emphasizes, professional reflection is essential for adapting educational practices to evolving contexts and for promoting inclusive and participatory educational leadership.

The challenges and opportunities identified through the reflective journals are essential indicators for understanding the dynamics of educational innovation.

On the one hand, the challenges highlight structural and organizational limitations that require targeted interventions. On the other hand, the opportunities underline the transformative potential of the Educational Pacts.

Addressing these challenges through a collaborative and reflective approach can transform schools into authentic spaces of learning and active participation, capable of effectively responding to the complexities of contemporary society.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES**

The Territorial Collaboration Pact of Verona and the Educational Territorial Pacts of its schools represent an innovative model of educational governance, capable of translating ambitious pedagogical visions into concrete actions. This experience has highlighted the centrality of territorial alliances in promoting an inclusive school rooted in its territory and oriented toward sustainability.

The ongoing study emphasizes the transformative potential of territorial alliances, which are emerging as essential tools for building an open, participatory, and resilient school. The relationships between schools and communities have strengthened the sense of belonging, enhanced local resources, and allowed for flexible responses to the educational and social needs of the territory. At the same time, monitoring activities have revealed the need for targeted interventions to strengthen coordination among stakeholders and address logistical challenges, such as the management of spaces and resources.

Through quantitative longitudinal monitoring, it will be possible to assess the impact of these alliances on the macro-objectives identified by the steering committee of the Verona experience—student inclusion, family engagement, opening schools to the community, and enhancing spaces—and to outline guidelines for replicating the model in other contexts.

The Verona experience demonstrates that Educational Territorial Pacts are not merely operational tools but levers for systemic transformation in education. Schools reaffirm their role as central hubs for the development of cohesive, inclusive, and future-oriented communities, inspiring educational strategies that address contemporary challenges.

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# EXAMINING THE ROLE OF GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF UNESCO'S RECENT REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

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In recent years, UNESCO's "Reimagining our Futures Together" (2021) and the revised 1974 "Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development" (2023) have significantly shaped educational policies. Both emphasise Global Citizenship Education (GCED) as a transformative, cross-cutting approach aligned with Target 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals and the broader 2030 Agenda. This paper explores GCED's evolving role through these documents, and it examines how GCED is conceptualised in academic discourse as an educational framework addressing social justice and interdependence. Unlike earlier UNESCO reports, which focused on national citizenship, the 2021 report envisions education as a global social contract fostering justice, inclusion, and civil society participation. This vision broadens the notion of citizenship, emphasising shared responsibility beyond national borders. The revised 1974 Recommendation reflects this shift, emphasising global education's role in creating peaceful, just, and sustainable futures. Its expanded title underscores the integration of global citizenship into education reform. Pedagogically, GCED calls for a "pedagogy of hope" (Freire, 2021) that empowers students to envision and build equitable futures, reinforcing its centrality in rethinking curricula. GCED emerges as a pivotal organising principle for fostering active global engagement and sustainable development through education.

Global Citizenship Education; UNESCO Recommendation; UNESCO's Report on Futures of Education; Pedagogy of hope

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, two influential UNESCO's documents have had a major impact on educational policies and practices, namely *Reimagining our Futures*

*Together: a new social contract for education* (UNESCO, 2021) and the updated 1974 *Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development* (UNESCO, 2023).

This paper examines the pivotal role these documents play in advancing the transformative approach of Global Citizenship Education (GCED), conceptualized as a cross-cutting educational framework that raises awareness of issues outlined in Target 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals and, more broadly, across all 2030 Agenda goals. Specifically, in this paper, I will explore the role of GCED within these documents, highlighting (1) how GCED contributes to reimagining the future of education as proposed by the Report, and (2) how its role emerges from the revised 1974 Recommendation, admittedly inspired by the Report. By comparing the original and revised versions, I will illustrate how GCED has become a central theme.

The Report has been translated into Italian by Rita Locatelli and Domenico Simeone (UNESCO, 2023), while the Italian translation of the Recommendation is currently available at: [UNESCO Italy](<https://www.unesco.it/it/temi-in-evidenza/educazione/la-nuova-raccomandazione-sulle-educuzione-alla-pace/>).

## **1. GCED WITHIN THE REPORT REIMAGINING OUR FUTURES TOGETHER: A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT**

The UNESCO's Report has already been illustrated elsewhere in these conference proceedings; here, I will briefly pinpoint the role of GCED in it. The report endorses a paradigm shift based on pedagogies enabling the construction of a future capable of repairing the wounds created by selfish, socially inequitable and ecologically unsustainable policies.

GCED plays a crucial role in this paradigm shift aimed at redefining the new social contract for education, which is however not well defined in the Report (Milana and Tarozzi, 2022). This shift is essential to address the challenges outlined in the initial section. The report goes beyond offering guidelines and recommendations; it underscores the imperative to reimagine a 'new social contract' to foster more just, peaceful, and sustainable futures. Central to this vision is an expanded concept of citizenship, expanding the sense of belonging beyond national borders, and emphasising the active involvement of citizens and civil society in reshaping the public purposes of education as a common good.



What is the role of GCED in this document? I would like to stress three main elements:

1. The composition of the international commission who wrote it: unlike the previous reports, it is global and chaired by Sahle-Work Zewde the president of the Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the first woman and non-European in this important role. Overall, the Commission is an authoritative independent international team of thought-leaders from diverse fields and different regions of the world, including from the global south
2. GCED was not mentioned in previous 20<sup>th</sup>-century Reports, where citizenship was essential but not global. In the Faure (1972) and Delors (1996) reports, education was aimed at developing skills to support national citizenship; here, futures (plural) are shared, closely interconnected and global and combine various spheres of the human and non-human.
3. The second part of the report includes concrete proposals and guidelines for renewing education, and here a GCED view is explicitly mentioned:

It is crucial to reconceptualise how human beings relate to each other (the human sphere), to the planet (the non-human natural sphere) and to technologies (the non-human artificial sphere). This integrated and holistic vision echoes the one represented by GCED, which embraces an educational approach that frames the core idea of interdependence and integration between the social and natural spheres.

## **2. THE 2023 REVISION OF THE 1974 RECOMMENDATION**

The “Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development” was approved in November 2023 after a long revision process. It is a non-binding aspirational document but is the more powerful legal tool for UNESCO education because it requires member states to produce a report every 4 years on the implementation of the Recommendation.

It is also the only global standard-setting instrument that outlines how education can and should be used to build lasting peace and sustainable development. Therefore, it also provides the legal foundation for Target 4.7 of the SDGs.

The 2023 Recommendation is inspired by UNESCO’s *Future of Education Report*

(2021) and *U.N. Transforming Education Summit* (2022) and it aims at ensuring people with the knowledge, skills – including socio and emotional ones – values, attitudes and behaviours for effective participation in building more peaceful, just, healthy and sustainable societies.

In a nutshell, Agenda 2030, UNESCO’s 2021 Report, and the Revised 1974 Recommendation all together aim to ensure that education systems are well-equipped and “fit for purpose” to meet the challenges of the XXI century.

Where does the need to revise the 1974 recommendations come from? In 1974, the international community was in the middle of the Cold War, and World War II had just passed. Since then, the world has drastically changed. So, the Recommendation has been updated to reflect better contemporary concepts and areas of action related to education for sustainable development, global citizenship education and education for health and well-being. More broadly for advancing Sustainable Development Goal 4, in particular Target 4.7. and that already says something about the central role of GCED in this document.

There are many new elements in this text, compared to the original 1974 text, namely:

- It is holistic because it covers all levels and forms of education
- Its scope is system-wide, since it addresses all dimensions of the education system
- It addresses some of the key contemporary challenges, i.e., digital citizenship, health and well-being, gender equality,
- It provides tools for monitoring and policy learning.

## **2.2. The revision process**

The took place over three years, along three main steps:

1. Preparation: Review of relevant documents, evidence and research, from December 2021 to January 2022.
2. Technical consultations. After a survey, regional consultation, thematic (2022), International Expert Group (composed by women and men from all geographical regions and with diverse backgrounds), a first draft of the Recommendation was delivered
3. Formal consultations with Member States From September 2022 and until adoption in November 2023.

The political consultation had a major impact on the nature of the text and is the result of predictable political mediations. Democracy, the rule of law, and

human rights are not perceived in the same way by all member states. The concept of global citizenship, too, is often seen in opposition to national citizenship and perceived by some as a threat to nationalist policies.

The discrepancy between the initial draft prepared by the experts and the version approved by the assembly is particularly noticeable in the evolution of the titles, especially concerning GCED.

### **2.3 The titles' evolution**

The original title of the Recommendation in 1974 was as follows: 1974 Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

The original title of the draft version after the technical consultation was: Recommendation concerning Education for Global Citizenship, Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development. Which could have been commonly referred as “Recommendation on Education for Global Citizenship”.

Then, after the member states consultation GCED disappeared from the title. In its place, reappears the concept, in my opinion very outdated, of International Understanding.

In the end, however, after the final long consultation. GCED reappears in the subtitle, and the full title approved by the General Assembly is as follows:

2023 (final) Recommendation on Education for Peace and Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development.

But it is commonly referred to as the “Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development”.

## **3. KEY TERMS IN THE ORIGINAL AND REVISED VERSIONS**

I analysed the text in more detail, comparing the use of key terms and the role of the GCED in the recommendation. I also examined how the themes that guide this text have changed over 50 years.

I do not have the space here to report in detail on the analysis, which is still in progress, and I will only point out some highlights that emerge from the analysis of the terms:

- Notably, “GCED” or “Global Citizen” and “Sustainability” were not mentioned at all in the original version, so it is for “Transformative”.

- “Peace” and “human rights” are even more used (also because this version is much longer with almost twice as many articles).
- Concepts related to “nation” are less used in words composed (“International”, “International understanding”), while the very term “national” is obviously still very appreciated by member of the General Assembly, which represents nation states.

There was (and still there is) no mention to “Post-colonial”, or “De-colonial” issues, but a mention of “Post-colonial criticism was included in Article 24 with regard to the innovation of the history curriculum: “fostering critical views of and supporting the struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism in all their forms and manifestations”.

The emphasis on the concepts of “Equality”, and also “Cultural diversity”, has grown considerably.

Finally, it is worth noting the great growth in the concept of “Skill” or “Competence”, which reveals the pedagogical approach underlying this text.

Tab. 1 Comparing the use of key terms in the original and revised versions. \*Not in the title.

	1974 (45 articles)	Revised 2023 (72 articles)
Global Citizenship	0	16
Sustainable	0	43 (sustainable development 35)
Global	5	43
International	75	32*
Transformative	0	11
International understanding	16	11
Peace	28	45
National	10	22
Human Rights	32	54
Civic	5	3
Equitable/equal/equality	3	14/15/6
Diversity	7	15
Skill	1	19 (+7 competencies)

Of course, the approved version is a compromise document affected by the international situation, which has been marked by the resurgence of

nationalism. However, it remains an important reference point for educational policies and practices that focus on a transformative approach to education for sustainability and global citizenship.

In the revised 1974 Recommendation, GCED is one of the core issues, mentioned in many parts of the document. Three elements demonstrate its centrality as a core theme in the new document: (1) it is mentioned in the official title (even if is not the main title, as it was supposed to be in the first draft; (2) the document provides a definition of GCED as one of the key terms; (3) It is Recognized as one of the guiding principles in the second part of the Recommendation and (4) it is acknowledged as a core component in the learning objectives, at every level in formal education from pre-school to higher education.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, both documents underscore the critical importance of adopting a global perspective in education and emphasize the need to provide learners with a global ethos at all levels. Furthermore, GCED is presented in both as a cross-cutting perspective that equips individuals with a fresh lens through which to view the world, raising sensitivity of global challenges and a shared sense of responsibility for promoting just, peaceful, and sustainable development.

The resurgence of nationalist political discourses, which often view global perspectives in education as a threat to national identities, is undoubtedly cause for concern.

However, the new educational social contract can only aim at fostering a deep sense of awareness and responsibility for a different political belonging to the planet and the global social community.

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# REFRAMING UNIVERSITY. IMPACT AND RELATIONAL VALUE IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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This paper examines the connections between universities' emerging missions, emphasizing the valorisation of knowledge for non-academic stakeholders, and the evolution of traditional institutional missions such as teaching and research. Adopting a corporate and public communication perspective, an exploratory multi-case study was conducted across four academic institutions in Belgium, Italy, and Lithuania. The findings reveal how these New Missions can leverage innovative strategic relationships with stakeholders, amplifying universities' social, economic, and cultural impact on their surrounding environments.

civic university, university communication, corporate communication, university missions, university impact

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the links between universities' emerging missions, emphasizing the valorisation of knowledge for non-academic stakeholders, and the evolution of traditional institutional missions—teaching and research—within the European context.

With rapidly changing scenario, the concept of the *Civic University* (Dobson & Ferrari, 2023; Goddard et al., 2016) has gained prominence. This vision, underpinned by reforms and international guidelines, integrates higher education's *economic* and *cultural* missions ("Third Mission"; Boffo & Moscati, 2015) with its *social* one ("Fourth Mission") into an all-embracing field of "University impact". In this perspective, universities are increasingly tasked with generating medium/long-term social and economic benefits for their

communities, transforming both their external and internal environment.

Within this framework, this study focuses on the internal organizational dimensions of University impact (Dobson & Ferrari, 2023). It adopts a relational perspective to investigate how New Missions (NMs) can act as *multipliers of relationships* within academic and non-academic environments (D'Ambrosi et al., 2024), reshaping the strategic model of the University by integrating new areas, activities, and actors (Carayannis et al., 2012).

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Recent crises and reforms have compelled universities to reconfigure their relational models, emphasizing active engagement and responsibility towards stakeholders and society. This shift reflects a departure from the traditional image of universities as *ivory towers* (Etzkowitz et al., 2000) towards institutions committed to societal well-being.

Universities are adopting innovative strategies that prioritize stakeholder engagement, inclusivity, and alignment with the UN Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Research on this topic has examined the socio-cultural values of higher education through the lens of various disciplines, highlighting its significance in contemporary society (Riviezzo et al., 2020). Moreover, universities today are evolving into institutions focused on educating citizens who are not only aware and capable of critical thinking, but also motivated to engage actively in common good (Boffo and Moscati, 2015).

The social mission of universities encompasses a broader range of strategic goals and activities that underscore their responsibility to internal and external stakeholders. This expanded mission is oriented towards *social innovation*, which has become increasingly important in the post-Covid-19 era. It strengthens the University's capacity to generate and disseminate knowledge, while generating social and economic benefits. In this context, it becomes an imperative to ensure social inclusion, innovation, collective well-being, and sustainability. The convergence of these missions, often likened to the concept of a multiple *helix* (Etzkowitz and Leydersdorff, 1997), represents the most strategic approach that universities should proactively adopt to ensure meaningful impact.

In Europe, universities are increasingly called upon to address contemporary challenges, upholding the model of the Civic and Ecological University (Barnett 2018; Dobson and Ferrari, 2023) as an institution dedicated to serving the wider community, especially through social engagement. Post-pandemic universities,



especially in the Anglo-Saxon system, have increasingly focused on rankings to highlight their performance and enhance their global competitiveness in terms of social impact. In Italy, the new evaluation criteria established by ANVUR<sup>1</sup>, focusing on the 2020-24 period, introduce for the first time the assessment of the social impact generated by universities through the interaction with stakeholders and communities.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

From such a scenario, the research addressed the following RQs:

- How do the New Missions (NMs) help universities enhance relationships in academic and non-academic contexts?
- What are the effects of the NMs on relationships among students, researchers, and university staff, as well as between different universities and disciplines?
- How can the NMs contribute to innovate the institutional missions of research and didactic fostering the vision of a Civic University?

A multi-case research was conducted between March and May 2024, focusing on two universities in Italy (Sapienza University of Rome and Polytechnic of Milan), one in Belgium (Ghent University), and one in Lithuania (Vilnius University), representing different regions in Southern Europe (Italy), Central (Belgium), and Eastern (Lithuania).

To examine trends and perceptions using an explorative and grounded theory approach (Grenness, 2022), four case studies were developed, employing several qualitative methods. First, a context analysis of internal documents and communication materials (e.g., strategic plans and corporate websites) was performed. Secondly, four semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed with experts involved in the management of the NMs at each university<sup>2</sup>. The questionnaire included 14 questions aimed at exploring the effects of the NMs on didactics and research from various perspectives, including internal relationships among researchers, students, and personnel; the impact on their knowledge and skills; opportunities to engage with economic and social stakeholders; and collaboration with other universities.

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<sup>1</sup> ANVUR is the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes.

<sup>2</sup> The privileged witnesses included: the Dean of a Dept., Sapienza University of Rome; a member of the Management Committee at the Dept. of Educational Policy, Ghent University; a former head of the strategic planning unit, Vilnius University; a Vice Rector, Polytechnic of Milan.

At Sapienza University, a focus group with a selected group of experts was also conducted in the form of an *autoethnography* (Butz and Besio, 2009), involving two Authors of the current study and three members of the library staff. Additionally, the research incorporated an audio podcast featuring an interview with a representative from Ghent University, which was transcribed and analyzed.

The interviews were conducted remotely, lasting up to 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes. The interview and focus group sessions specific to Sapienza University were conducted in person.

### 3. FINDINGS

#### 3.1. Case studies

The contest analysis, based on documentary sources, highlighted some distinctive themes related to each of the four universities under examination:

- Ghent University (GU) focuses on *challenge-based education*, participating in the European University Network, promoting multidisciplinary policies and centers, and fostering regional and lifelong learning academies. It also engages in the European Dialogues Initiative and supports entrepreneurship via initiatives such as the Dare to Entrepreneur Center.
- Sapienza University of Rome (SU) emphasizes *strategic networking and partnering* with companies and organizations. This librarian platform fosters innovative didactic, scientific, and cultural activities (e.g., researches, publishing, workshops, events), in collaboration with academic and not academic stakeholders.
- Vilnius University (VU) positions itself as an *entrepreneurial university*, promoting innovation through Science and Technology Parks, a Technological Business Incubator, Innovative Enterprises, and a Career Center. It is also a member of the ARQUS European University Alliance and advances interdisciplinary research by funding and supporting such projects.
- Polytechnic of Milan (PM) is recognized for connecting academic research with practical applications, such as projects addressing underprivileged areas and *sustainability-related innovation programmes*. It prioritizes social responsibility through collaborative platforms with nonprofit organizations.

### 3.2 Interview Insights

Thematic analysis of the experts' accounts highlighted that the NMs have a special potential to cultivate relationships across the *non-University environment* (by connecting academic institutions with private, public, and nonprofit stakeholders, starting from the surrounding urban and local territory), and also within the *University system* itself (by stimulating a closer collaboration among researchers, students, personnels, as well as among different academic institutions, academic departments and offices):

We work closely together with the city, the province, and regional stakeholders. Challenge-based education, promoted in partnership with the city, involves the participants in a 'quadruple helix environment' we have created: an ecosystem where different stakeholders can come together, find each other (GU).

In challenge-based courses, students are brought closer together with the staff and teachers to jointly work on challenges which are defined together with companies, public, and nonprofit organizations. Researchers and students from different faculties are encouraged to cooperate (GU).

Impact creates the necessity to bring together different structures, supporting research and education. And they need also to collaborate with other structures, for instance human resources, IT, and so on (GU).

Social responsibility is a cohesion agent for the academic community, it facilitates collaboration and commitment (PM).

The NMs could enhance *material assets* supporting didactic and research tasks (physical and digital workplaces, technologies and laboratories, cultural heritage, patents, startups, spin-offs), as well as the University's *intellectual and social capital*. An intangible value for both the academic system and society emerges, for instance, from the new soft skills academic leaders and actors need to acquire to interface effectively with the external stakeholders and with one another (e.g., within "communities of practice"):

It is not simply a transfer or exchange of resources and knowledge, for which University plays traditionally an upper paternalistic role, but an integration: to align an university's missions ones to others, and also with the missions of other organizations and universities (SU).

Cross-disciplinary has been largely dealt with by setting up so-called "valorization centers", focused on specific topics, where researchers from different groups and faculties are brought together (GU).

The NMs are an unique occasion for diverse academic actors to relate and co-work. They stimulate old and new relationships inside University (SU).

The NMs have the potential to transform the individualistic culture of universities into one more open to a *coopetition* style (Dagnino and Rocco, 2009), grounded in strategic partnerships with stakeholders. This complex form of cooperative relationship evolves from a shared set of goals and values to achieving mutual benefits that partners could not attain independently (Giesecke, 2012; Schiuma and Carlucci, 2018). A key precondition for quality partnerships is the sharing of resources and complementary expertise: to achieve this, universities must step out of their “comfort zones” and experiment with a more participatory and *symmetrical* model of interaction (Grunig, 2016) with society and stakeholders, emphasizing listening, dialogue, and mutual learning:

Partnerships are about understanding the culture of other organizations, as well as developing those “antibodies” you need to be not other-directed and preserve your own identity. For University a unique opportunity to learn from other organisations, but also about itself (SU).

The value of partnership lies in connecting organizational actors that are traditionally different, separated, or even in competition. A highly strategic convergence is possible within academic communities by linking different universities, researchers from various disciplines, and lecturers/personnel/students collaborating in teams.

One of the most strategic relationships that the NMs encourage is the collaboration between different scientific disciplines, following a *transdisciplinary* approach (Lawrence, 2010) that goes beyond pure interdisciplinarity. As suggested by the etymological concept of *vertere ad unum* inscribed in the idea of the University, on one hand different research perspectives are called to engage in dialogue and converge on global challenges affecting the contemporary world. On the other hand, to address and solve societal problems, research must also incorporate first-hand knowledge from non-academic experts.

European policies don't need narrow-minded researchers working on one topic, but researchers who have a wide understanding of different and even transdisciplinary topics. This takes years to see results (VU).

Not least, interviewees highlight the continuity between the emerging topic of impact and an ancient tradition. Indeed, in addressing contemporary social challenges, universities can rediscover and relaunch their unique identity as *purpose-driven organizations* (Basu, 2017), whose strategic potential for the common good (beyond the traditional missions of research and didactic) expresses significant value for the community and society (in addition to stakeholders). To achieve this, universities must invest not only in public engagement, but also in empowering their corporate strategy and culture by implementing specific training, rewards, and evaluation systems to support researchers and personnel committed to the NMs:

The NMs risk increasing the pressure on academics. We need to invest in human research planning and academics should have the opportunity to specialize their career (VU).

Academics are used to their ordinary work, like writing and teaching, while to do research addressed to global challenges is more difficult. Academics resist because they are not educated to think about stakeholders and how to solve their problems. European funding pushes them to think about their impact: this is just a beginning (VU).

Staff need training and support to acquire new knowledge and skills (GU).

In the early stages of resource planning (new buildings etc.), the NMs should be already taken on board (GU).

#### **4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The study illustrates that the NMs express not only an impact on stakeholders and society, but also a strategic *rebound effect* that innovates, in the medium-long term, the academic system itself. By regenerating both the tangible and intangible assets of universities, the NMs foster research and higher education processes: they stimulate researchers and personnel to adopt bottom-up practices and approaches of *self-reform* and innovation, deeply rooted in stakeholder relationships, listening, engagement, and partnering (D'Ambrosi et al., 2024).

Impact, from this perspective, can be considered a *transformation of value through relationships*. The study highlights the unique potential of the NMs in providing academic institutions with material resources and processes of *innovationship* (Buono and Frattini, 2023), based on quality relationships that, in the medium-long term, cultivate both didactic and research.

Among the limitations and developments of the current study, the small sample of universities investigated in Europe and the research design limited to qualitative methods can be mentioned. In the future, a larger number of insights and case studies could be collected to develop a real dashboard of indicators to measure and assess *University meta-impact*—the medium-long term effects the NMs produce on didactic and research—in addition to the “external” impact on non-academic stakeholders and society.

The study also offers recommendations for institutionalizing such relationship-driven innovation. The results suggest that, to effectively drive change, academic leaders should update their strategic vision and promote the opportunities that the NMs can offer to academic communities, in order to concretely encourage and support individual efforts for the rise of a Civic University.

Indeed, the traditional model of the University is reframing itself due to shifts in the nature of relationships with stakeholders and society. The transformation includes moving from knowledge transfer to *co-creation*, tactical cooperation to *strategic partnerships*, interdisciplinarity to *transdisciplinarity*, public engagement to *academic empowerment*, and mission to *purpose*. Not least, it involves the shift from *impact* to *value* (Porter and Kramer, 2011), which universities, stakeholders, and society could mutually share.

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# GROWING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES SIGNALING CHANGING FUNCTIONS IN ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES

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With its ever-increasing role in both the economy and society, knowledge is having significant consequences on university functions and internal organization. Our research on Italian Universities has shed light on a recent development of a new definition of the 'Third Mission' aiming at activities establishing relationships both with the economic world (Technological Transfer) and society (Public Engagement), but which are at the same time sensitive to sustainability initiatives. By means of a comparison between twelve universities, our research reveals the different development of the two types of activities as consequences of the choices made by the individual governances and/or the predominant disciplinary areas in each university, in addition to the characteristics of the reference territories.

Changing Universities; Third Mission; Technology Transfer; Public Engagement; Sustainability

## INTRODUCTION

Following the development of knowledge and its applications in society, universities have been modifying their functions slowly but progressively with the passing of time.

The recent opening of universities to society has been characterized by a constant advancement, though at different speeds in Anglo-Saxon and European countries. The former, in fact, have always been open to society, a characteristic inherent in the spirit of the institutions since the beginning, and even more so in the United States, thanks to the creation of the land-grant universities in the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Europe, the Humboldtian model has put up more resistance to changes. With the passing of the years,



however, the process has accelerated in various areas (in the European context as elsewhere), as is well-known, due to the growing demand for the use of knowledge by the economy. Thus, the *knowledge economy* exerts an ever increasing influence on the transition from an elite to mass and then universal university (Throw, 1974). Following this dimension, a more specifically social optic has gradually been added, evidenced in universities participating directly and formally in public policies, both local and national. The spread of the globalization process has, in fact, familiarized both aspects, as well as problems of collective life to which universities are called upon to provide solutions.

The multiplication of requests from the outside world has however created internal contradictions within universities, which reflect on the management activity, relations between governance and different subject areas, as well as the roles of academics and technical/administrative staff. In fact, adding on initiatives open to the outside world has produced an accumulation of tasks and duties for university leadership as well as for academics and other staff. In particular, for academics not at the top of their careers, involvement in activities lacking scientific recognition has created difficulties and resistances. To counteract this situation, some universities are starting to introduce incentives and positive evaluations useful for career paths. Furthermore, involvement in activities with external social/economic realities may create problems of professional ethics related to the characteristics of external referents, who as clients may request scientific and/or cultural performances giving rise to ethical doubts.

The pressure towards opening up to the outside world is summed up in a new sector of university activity which in Italy is conventionally termed “The Third Mission” (Boffo, Moscati, 2015). Its growing importance is leading to an emphasis on university autonomy and therefore growing diversification, due to the interpretation of the new roles of the universities and the characteristics of each context of reference – economic, social and cultural.

It needs to be remembered that activities that can be linked to the Third Mission today were already present in some subject areas of applied hard sciences –like engineering or natural sciences – or in the form of *technology transfer* activities, based on research projects or experimental/application activities of scientific discoveries (chemistry applied to medicine is a classic example). These projects are now partly patentable and transferable to the market in the form of start-ups and spin-offs.

This new, ever-increasing opening of universities toward the outside world has brought to new forms of relationships between universities, public bodies, local administrations (State) and the business world – the so-called “Triple Helix”. These forms of relationship have assumed characteristics responding the rules of the market in the neo-liberal version (Etzkowitz, Leydesdorff, 1995; Etzkowitz, Leydesdorff, 1998). Thus, in the first phase Third Mission activities denoted universities taking on central roles as driving components of economic development: Burton Clark’s model of “entrepreneurial university” (Clark, 1998; Etzkowitz et al., 2000). Subsequently, universities opened up to other non-economic social realities, developing the idea of a “civic university” (Goddard et al., 2016; Goddard, Vallance, 2013) which has made possible the implementation of the Third Mission even where economic development is not particularly widespread.

Within the process of opening the university to outside reality, the “civic university” proposal marks a decisive leap in quality, signaling a comprehensive (“holistic”) reinterpretation of the institution and its aims (Barnett, 2000; 2011; 2018; Delanty, 2001). As a result, universities have been progressively brought to include civil society issues in their activities, thus giving rise to the process called “Fourth Helix”. In the same direction, a further development and specification of the civic dimension emphasizes the characteristics of the natural context and the transformation of the environment. The “sustainable development” of the *knowledge economy* requires a parallel evolution of the *knowledge society*.

A later specification of sustainability issues is to be found in the growing awareness of the new importance of the ecological problems characterizing the “Fifth Helix” (Carayannis et al., 2012). The development of activities in the Public Engagement sector is particularly interesting also because it very often involves external referents (public bodies) which had no tradition of collaborating with universities. And nevertheless, recent research shows that even in Italy there are increasing cases of university involvement in regional development activities that have long been widespread in other countries<sup>1</sup> (Pinheiro et al., 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> It is significant that this trend has been highlighted by the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) of UNESCO, while the European Union has produced a guide for regional authorities entitled *Connecting Universities in Regional Growth*.

## 1. THIRD MISSION IN ITALY

In the Italian higher education system, the development of the Third Mission follows a slow but progressive pace, according to the characteristics of the universities and their socio-cultural contexts. In our research on twelve Italian universities (Boffo, Moscati, Rostan, 2024), it emerges that the perception of both the responsibilities/duties of universities towards society as well as the possibility of developing initiatives with local bodies and institutions is spreading in different ways and degrees in relation to the relevance of different subject areas (more or less oriented towards the activities of applying scientific production), as well as the readiness of individual university's governance to establish relations with society. In particular, how succeeding rectors interpret relations with the outside world is a central element in continuing policies opening up to the external world. It is also true of the new regulatory framework that puts the evaluation of outreach activities together with that of scientific research as both representing the central requirements for a stable Third Mission development.

The progressive spread of the Third Mission sector may be traced through two indicators: the increase of representatives in governance dedicated to Third Mission (cultural and scientific) activities cooperating with external actors; and the development of “strategic programs” as a new instrument for orienting university politics, especially towards society.

In several cases, Third Mission sectors have been developed in line with the main subject areas within a university. For instance, as it emerges from our research results, in the universities – ‘Polytechnic of Milan, University of Turin, University of Milan-Bicocca and University of Pavia – where STEM disciplines play a crucial role, the main Third Mission activities are projects related to Technology Transfer, which are the more and more oriented towards creating patents (beyond the traditional dissemination of research results), which are carried out by professors together with assistant researchers and PhD students.

As stated above, in each university Third Mission activities are mostly related to the territory where they are located. Another example is given by the University of Venice “Ca’ Foscari”, which provides support activities for urban political and cultural activities, favoring the rationalization of the public and private initiatives by forming a unique coordination, and becoming consequently a reference center for the city.

The conspicuous increase in Public Engagement activities is, however, the most

meaningful aspect of Third Mission expansion in Italy.<sup>2</sup> Public Engagement initiatives are especially widespread in peripheral and territorial contexts with little economic development, such as some areas of Southern Italy. In those regions, universities like those of Sannio, Calabria, Catania and Bari, have built relations with local entrepreneurs, and promote and are involved in activities concerning the civic society, in particular in educative projects, mainly through master courses with private companies, lifelong-learning training courses in state schools or courses in prisons.

Projects designed to impact on the quality of cultural life have been promoted in very different urban contexts. So, for instance the University of Padua has begun to cooperate with the town council's sustainability programs, while Roma Tre University supports cultural initiatives within its district area like running the communal theatre (the "Palladium"). The most relevant case is however the "Poli-social" project of Milan's Polytechnic, which redefined its public engagement policy in "social responsibility". The "Poli-social" project consists in "off-campus" centers scattered in peripheral and sometimes rough neighborhoods, in an attempt to involve local communities in educational and research activities.

The most rapid increase within Public Engagement programs is however with *sustainability*, which is interpreted in different ways. For instance, Milan Polytechnic's "Strategic Program of sustainability" relates the concept of sustainability to ideas of equality, inclusion, shared growth, in order to carry out research activities oriented towards "sustainable development". The University of Padua also talks of "sustainable development" in its strategic program "Unipadova sostenibile", and refers to projects on environmental sustainability. The University of Turin offers

a holistic vision where people are at the heart of the environment and the community (...) favoring a culture based on the equilibrium "human-environment" (...) and enhancing politics of environment sustainability (...) including those oriented to the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change (UniTo. Piano Strategico 2021-2026, p. 29).

The University of Milan Bicocca has gone as far as to create a center for sustainability named "BASE" (Bicocca, Environment, Society, Economy) to develop the university's strategic program.

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<sup>2</sup> A little-known example is the University of Macerata's Third Mission politics, dominated by social science and humanistic subjects (Rinaldi, Cavicchi, Robinson, 2022).

All the Universities, however, emphasize the importance of investing in activities for their own sustainability, with revisions of the mechanisms of energetic production and waste prevention, and sometimes collaborating with the local public institutions, as in the case of the University of Padua. The University of Calabria has produced a “Program of conscious development” to enhance environmental resources, by constituting work groups dedicated to the topics of education, energy, climate change, social justice, mobility and rubbish disposal.

It must be underlined that the twelve universities in our research have incorporated the guidelines of the ONU 2030 Agenda 2030 for sustainable development in their Third Mission, and participate in the “Academic Network for the sustainable development” (RUS), which connects 86 Italian universities.

## **2. SOME FINAL REMARKS**

The recent development of Third Mission programs in Italian universities challenges any future analysis of their impact on the society and their internal organization. One of the main aspects to observe over the next few years concerns compatibility – their orientation towards the economic sphere, which may push them to be more competitive even within the same academic system and their orientation towards the civic society with the aim of countering social inequalities in their territory. This issue seems to be particularly important if we consider the historical, social and cultural differences between different geographic areas of Northern, Central and Southern Italy, as well as the fact that universities have gained more and more autonomy in the last few decades, though under a strong centralized organization, as is shown by the role of the National Agency for the Evaluation of University (ANVUR) in defining the goals and evaluation of Third Mission activities.

A further issue to explore is the relationship between universities and the University Ministry in order to understand how and to what extent the latter fosters or deters autonomous university politics, with in mind how national evaluation criteria are applied to very different social and cultural contexts. Finally, with regards to the issue of sustainability, which has been strongly supported by the government’s national recovery and resilience plan (PNRR) two questions come to mind. The first is whether the funds given in the last few years to support sustainable programs will be in the future included in the Ordinary Finance Fund (FFO). The second is how universities will be able to balance environment issues and issues concerning social-territorial

inequalities, in order to avoid environment sustainability, with its economic costs, becoming a privilege for only few territorial areas.

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# THE SOCIAL MISSION OF A SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY. STORIES WORTH TELLING

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What is the social mission and why is it important in a Southern university? Based upon the results of a participatory research and development project at the University of Calabria, the contribution offers an insight into the Public Engagement experience of this university, useful to deepen the nature of this side of the Third Mission and to focus on the needs for improvement.

Public Engagement; Civic University; Community Participatory Action Research; Mixed methods

## INTRODUCTION

Today's social challenges call universities to strengthen their Third Mission (TM, thereafter) and to commit to activities contributing to economic, social and cultural development: a commitment that should be innovative, participatory, transparent and accountable to society (Vargiu, 2015; Goddard et al., 2016; Palumbo, 2019; Lo Presti et al., 2023), not confined to technology transfer (Boffo, Moscati, 2015), following “an alternative model of the civic university that integrates teaching, research, and engagement with the outside world such that each enhances the other” (Goddard, 2018, p. 362).

## 1. WHAT SOCIAL MISSION IS AND WHY IT SHOULD BE DIFFERENT IN A SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

The Social Mission is a recent category introduced in the language and the institutional framework of the Unical and corresponding to what elsewhere is called Public Engagement (PE, thereafter). Despite its overall goal – the dialogue between university and society, the transformative role of science, its social



impact – is rooted in the origins of the same university, traced back to 1968. Following the national debate on the PE and the guidance by the ANVUR (the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes), the Social Mission has been formally established by the 2020-2022 Unical Strategic Plan and consolidated by the subsequent one as TM second pillar beside the Technology Transfer (TT). Despite being included in the Strategic Plan, up to the present no fundings were assigned by Unical to support PE projects; neither, in most cases, fundings were assigned before. So, all initiatives collected found other ways to be supported and realized.

As pointed out by literature, PE is a discussed and evolving topic. ANVUR defined it as “the set of initiatives with educational, cultural, and social development value, addressed to or involving a non-academic audience” (ANVUR, 2016, p. 41). Discussion concerns issues such as perimeter, stakeholders, the profile of the engaged academics, territorial dimension, and individual/institutional nature of the initiatives (Arzivino et al., 2018). For instance, the perimeter of PE is evolving with the indications of ANVUR referring to the framework evaluation of the research and the TM (VQR), so that some actions (e.g., production of public good, participation in policy-making, etc.) earlier included within the PE taxonomy were later assigned to a new autonomous field (see public calls for VQR 2015-19, and VQR 2020-24).

Not only the boundaries of PE are uncertain and changing, but also the kind of initiatives under the PE umbrella are very much institution and context-related, which means that they are shaped by the needs, assets, and features of the university and of the territory in which this is rooted (e.g. the academic knowledge in place, the organisational infrastructure, the nature of the stakeholders within the academics’ networks, the cooperation attitude of the internal and external environment, the type and extension of social problems, etc.).

As for the social context of Southern universities, the persistence of the North-South divide, the economic underdevelopment of Southern Italy, and the higher incidence of social risks are well known. “The disparity in the economic and social conditions of the regions of Southern Italy compared to the rest of the country is exceptional, both for its persistence and the breadth of the geographical area involved” (Bastasin, 2024, p. 2). Furthermore, within the South, “Calabria is (...) a region that is not only much poorer but also more unequal than the others” (Cersosimo, 2023).

For instance, a look at some national statistics on well-being (see tab. 1) shows

that: people in the South (and even more in Calabria) live shorter and in worse health; when Southern people get old, they can count less on home care services; when young (15-29 years), they are often Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET); when they are students, they achieve less adequate literacy skills, and even less adequate numeracy skills.

Tab. 1. Some well-being indicators, Calabria-Italy. Source: ISTAT – BES, 2023.

	Calabria	Italy
Average number of years one person can expect to live at birth	82.0	83.1
Average number of years in total health	55.4	59.2
Share of elderly people treated in integrated home care	0.9%	3.3%
NEET	27.2%	16.1%
Share of eighth-grade students who do not reach a sufficient level of literacy	49.4%	38.5%
Share of eighth-grade students who do not reach a sufficient level of numeracy	60.7%	44.2%

This scenario poses several arduous challenges to universities’ Social Mission. So, what is the University PE in such a context?

## 2. DATA AND METHODS

Based on the assumption that social change is all more adequate, satisfying, and lasting if rooted in a shared process, the participatory research and development project presented here was informed by the Appreciative Inquiry approach (Barrett, Fry, 2005; Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005; Stavros, Torres, 2018).

In 2021-22, 93 face-to-face qualitative interviews were conducted with academics and staff, discovering the most positive experiences of PE (around 40) at Unical, as perceived by the participants, and gathering their aspirations for the future. The analysis portrayed the most common PE representations and their evolution from the early Seventies. The PE initiatives in Unical (1,975 in 2019-23) were also collected by a questionnaire (annual monitoring) – inspired by guidelines of ANVUR and based on a monitoring form developed by the APEnet network (Associazione – Rete italiana Atenei ed Enti di Ricerca per il

Public Engagement) and adapted on Unical needs – that allowed to delve into PE characteristics.

### **3. FINDINGS**

#### **3.1. Recent trends of PE**

In 2019-2023, most PE activities were organised by Unical (69%), mainly from the Social Sciences departments (61.5%). Research dissemination activities (seminars, workshops, publications addressed to the public, etc.) were more than one-third of the total (39.3%). The main stakeholders were the general audience (23.1%) and the schools (17.4%).

The PE activities contributing to social SDGs UN Agenda 2030 were 1,369 (69.3%). Among them, most contributed to SDG4 – Quality education (36.8%), SDG8 – Decent work and economic growth (18.5%), and SDG3 – Good health and well-being (10.7%). A lower share contributed to SDG5 – Gender Equality (9.8%), SDG16 – Peace, Justice and strong institutions (9.7%), SDG10 – Reduced inequalities (8.8%), SDG1 – No poverty (5.7%).

Those working against social inequalities were mostly “initiatives to valorise, consult and share research” (26.9%) and “participatory democracy initiatives” (20.2%).

#### **3.2. Some stories**

Four of the discovered stories are presented below, grouped in three fields, corresponding to as many directions of community engagement: I. Support in Social Emergencies; II. Working with schools; III. University students’ engagement.

##### *Support in Social Emergencies*

The first story dates back to the first academic year of Unical, 1972-73, when following a flood, the then Rector, Andreatta, sent a group of academics, first-year students with other professionals’ volunteering to provide aid to Fabrizia, a small flooded town in the inner Calabria hit by the catastrophe. Some scholars stayed there for months doing first aid (food and stuff), listening to people, giving professional advice, and helping low-income families create cooperatives to rebuild their houses. The aid to Fabrizia was the nascent state of PE in Unical.

Andreatta said that we had to go and provide help (...). We went with the students (...). We slept together with the families. Families who had lost their houses slept in the school classrooms. People were desperate! We began

distributing the stuff we had brought. (...) Many people could not afford the costs of the building appraisal, which were very high for that time... So, we decided to do the “Red Rescue” with engineers from Lotta Continua, and they were there to do all the assessments for free...We stayed there for 4 months. We had become the confessors of all the people (...) They rebuilt everything there! (...) We were there in the middle and helped them with their choice. It was more coaching that we did (Interview No 12).

The second story occurred almost fifty years later, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the conventional alcohol-based gel was needed and could not be found anywhere. An Unical academic spin-off with the Department of Pharmacy produced the disinfectant gel using alternative, low-cost, and local ingredients. It supplied it for free, sending it even to Codogno, the first Italian town hit by coronavirus. The primary resources were the Unical Spin-off, a team of academics, research fellows, Ph.D. students, administrative staff, department labs, and company donations. This was an example of solidarity from the South.

We produced disinfectant gel. We sent 100 kg to Codogno as the first step...We managed to produce an immense quantity – we’re talking tons – because we made a formulation using a rheological modifier donated to us by a local company: a pectin, a substance used to make jams, in the end. We were a team, and everyone did something different... We produced as a Pharmacy Department, and the last step was left to my spin-off to finalize and control everything (...). Even the police knocked on my house... because they knew where I was and asked me for 5-6 litres of gel (Interview No 72).

### *Working with schools*

Schools are among the main stakeholders of universities, especially secondary schools, which are involved in orientation activities.

Paths for transversal skills and orientation (PTSO), earlier named School-Work Alternance, are part of these orientation activities, and sometimes they have a solid educational impact, like in the story of “Physics goes to Town” when – while preparing the conference of Italian Physical Society (SIF) the department of Physics visited the upper schools of the city of Cosenza and discovered a hidden treasure: dusty ancient instruments that were not used. The researchers brought the most interesting ones at university and, with a PTSO program, involved school students in their restoration and, afterward, in the presentation of their functioning during the Annual SIF Conference.

On the occasion of the SIF, we organised the exhibition open to all schools and the students of the PTSO who had collaborated in the restoration of the instruments and knew how they worked, made the presentation. (...) They were people who did not want to study. At the end, these students were so committed and passionate that I heard principals and professors say: “We have never seen something like this!”...They were lost, they were... apathetic students who instead tried to explain a scientific concept on a machine from the early 1900s that they knew how to operate and how to explain its scientific functioning. This is a spectacular thing! (Interview No 54).

#### *University students' engagement*

In the story *Hackathon! We respond to your business challenges* university students have been involved in an experience of collaboration/co-creating a solution to solve a real problem of a company or public body in Calabria promoted by a professor of International Marketing, Department of Business and Legal Sciences, since a.y. 2019-20.

Companies express their needs and pose challenges to students of my class who are around 50-60. They begin to develop possible solutions, having more or less 3 months to learn the tools to respond to challenges. Afterward, the students discuss the topic with companies and institutions in a meeting and start the work. They have 48 hours, day and night, to work and solve the business challenge. (...) The students came up with innovative ideas, so much that the companies even invited some to intern with them to develop the ideas formulated (Interview No 24).

#### **4. PE: FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE**

As shown, PE's roots go back to the original transformative mission of UNICAL. However, it did not develop into a systematic vision/action because of its fragmentation during the university expansion.

The stories collected confirmed that PE does not have clear-cut boundaries: these are variously interpreted by different disciplinary fields and with original combinations in each department. The PE refers to a vast range of practices: cultural initiatives aimed at the general audience; activities with educational purposes aimed at targets other than university students (training for primary and secondary school students or teachers, summer schools, training courses for disadvantaged social categories, etc.); museum, cinema and theatres offerings as well as research dissemination publishing; health campaigns and health promotion initiatives on campus and in the local area.

It is not easy (nor always helpful) to separate the PE from other areas of the TM and narrow excessively the semantic fields. PE is sometimes upstream and

downstream of TM initiatives that fall into the area of TT. Moreover, according to the experience analysed, there is a strong connection between PE and some university entry/exit orientation activities, and PE is often linked with other academic missions: with teaching, when students are involved in PE activities or when stakeholders contribute to educational activities; with research, especially when this has a social nature and is shaped as participatory action-research, or in the citizen science activities.

The research showed that social inclusion at Unical is usually present in the PE practice but needs to expand and consolidate in less occasional and more durable projects contributing to responding to the social context's complex challenges.

In the Unical experience, PE is made by people committed to values such as social justice or strongly believing in a "redemption dream" for Calabria: "PE is doing things one believes in, with the skills one has" (Interview No 50). PE is also made by people socialized to the dialogue and collaboration with society. This is prevalent among social sciences scholars: "PE is embodied in the way of doing research, of teaching, which was taught and passed on to me by scholars with whom I trained, and I can say that they have made the history of our department" (Interview No 1).

Yet, according to interviewees, PE is hindered by the current university system organization and functioning and by standards and requirements of the academic profession: e.g. the time saturated by teaching, research and institutional workload and the lack of incentives and support for TM activities. Indeed, many agree that recent decades' shifts in the university have reduced the time and energy that can be dedicated to PE. So, there is a strong perception that PE requires a personal sacrifice (of career, rest, family) that is not sustainable nor accessible to everyone. For instance, young researchers who need to invest in more rewarding activities in terms of careers are not encouraged to get involved in PE activities.

Not surprisingly, academics and staff suggest improving the Social Mission above all with structural and organisational measures such as: assignment of balanced time between teaching, research, third mission and institutional commitment; work recognition and incentives; training on PE planning and implementation; skilled staff and permanent organisational support; funding assigned to PE projects; impact evaluation and dissemination of PE activities.

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# THE TRANSFORMATIVE MISSION OF UNIVERSITIES: PERSONAL TRAJECTORIES AND INSTITUTIONAL DRIVERS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

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Higher Education policies acknowledge the need to reframe science-society relationships. Public Engagement with Research (PER) is one of the components of the increasing efforts aimed at this end. Growing financial and operational support for PER requires a better understanding of the science-society dynamics. This paper provides an overview of a research project titled PLACES which employs comparative case studies to examine academic community-engaged scholarship in Italy, France, and the UK. PLACES seeks to fill crucial evidence gaps on proactive science-society relationships at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. The literature reveals ambiguity in the terms ‘public’ and ‘engagement’. Thus, we limit our research to PER forms intended to foster genuine societal change, which we term “transformative community engagement”. This paper presents the theoretical framework underpinning this concept, focusing on the prescriptive, analytical/descriptive, and methodological dimensions of transformativity.

higher education; community engagement

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary higher education policies emphasise reframing the relationships among society, science, and innovation globally, necessitating inclusive governance for shared responsibility. Public Engagement with Research (PER) is vital for these efforts. Enhanced financial and operational support for PER requires a better understanding of science-society dynamics to inform effective



research-based policies. Evidence indicates that publicly engaged research and higher education have progressed globally in recent decades (Tapia, 2018), along with a growing interest in PER (Fransman, 2018).

Despite increased interest in university engagement, numerous obstacles persist. Engagement missions and activities have faced pressure, and within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the global emphasis on excellence and world-class status has not prioritised engagement.

Engagement that generates financial benefits aligns with institutional objectives, but engaging marginalised communities, which may not yield financial returns, demands a courageous commitment to surmount systemic pressures and foster dialogue (Benneworth and Jongbloed, 2013). Research indicates a conflict between academics' propensity for engagement and the pressures they encounter (Farnell and Ćulum Ilić, 2021). There has been limited reflection on enhancing PER by addressing these tensions.

Understanding this phenomenon necessitates an examination of the current organisational structure of HEIs. Empirical evidence indicates that if not implemented carefully, PER may become merely rhetorical or social technology. A thorough examination of higher education's societal engagement, focusing on non-rhetorical forms, is essential. This paper discusses the primary theoretical foundations of a research project conceptualising "transformative community engagement".

## **1. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PLACES PROJECT**

Different methodologies and institutional frameworks produce varied forms of PER, influencing science-society relationships and societal impacts. PLACES (Portraits and Landscapes of Academic Community Engagement Scholarship) is a research project funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research under the PRIN scheme. It aims to bridge the knowledge gap regarding how institutional strategies of HEIs and higher education and research policies shape transformative PER. This study seeks to understand how external pressures from systemic and institutional contexts influence scholars' public engagement practices and values and, conversely, how scholars' engagement can transform these contexts.

To this end, it adopts a dual-pronged approach to comprehensively understand PER in academia. The "Landscapes" stream examines the institutional and policy context shaping PER, analysing how HEIs develop engagement strategies and how higher education and research policies impact these practices. This

stream identifies structural elements that facilitate or hinder science-society interactions. The “Portraits” stream explores individual scholars’ behaviours, motivations, and perspectives, investigating their engagement with citizens and factors driving their commitment. By examining personal narratives, PLACES uncovers the human elements that bring PER to life in academic settings.

To conduct this research, we utilised a comparative case study methodology, focusing on Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, to compare different university traditions (Carazzolo et al., 2024). The case study approach is deemed ideal for examining the complex factors that influence CE in higher education across different contexts (Yin, 2018).

The findings of this research are expected to enhance the understanding of policy, institutional, and personal factors that facilitate or hinder effective community engagement in higher education. This paper outlines the key components of the theoretical framework that supports this study.

## **2. TRANSFORMATIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The literature presents diverse conceptualisations of PE. Based on previous studies, we differentiated between market, state, and community engagement (Vargiu, 2014). This distinction is conceived by considering the different epistemologies (Habermas, 1968) and regulatory actors and relationships (Polanyi, 1944) that shape science-society relations. This aligns with the coordination forces governing universities’ external relationships according to Clark’s triangle (Clark, 1983).

Community engagement, defined by reciprocity, emancipative interests, and critical epistemology, often overlaps with state engagement, particularly in evidence-based policy research. However, state engagement focuses on redistribution, practical interests, and interpretative epistemology (Vargiu, 2014). From this perspective, community engagement pursues active involvement and joint action, fostering symmetrical collaboration between community actors and universities. In contrast, state engagement typically features asymmetrical relationships, with universities controlling the process and the public mainly receiving information (Vargiu, 2014; Wellstead, Cairney, and Oliver, 2018). Market engagement, characterised by exchange principles and technical aims, such as patenting and knowledge transfer, was excluded from this analysis. These distinctions highlight varying participation levels from active community involvement to a more asymmetrical state and market engagement.

To operationalise our research, we define community engagement as a specific form of collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities which engage academic and non-academic actors in an interactive and mutually beneficial process characterised by reciprocity, respect and equal partnership and aimed at generating transformative changes for all parties involved through mutual understanding and co-creation.

This definition posits that community engagement in higher education transcends mere outreach, encompassing a comprehensive approach to integrate academic pursuits with real-world applications and societal needs. According to this definition, community engagement in higher education constitutes a dynamic and collaborative process that bridges the gap between academic institutions and surrounding communities.

The essence of community engagement lies in its reciprocity, with both the institution and the community sharing knowledge, skills, and resources to achieve mutual goals. Its impact on higher education influences institutional practices and community development, thereby fostering lifelong learning and social responsibility. This reciprocal relationship creates a cascading effect beyond immediate participants, implying high levels of transformativity.

### **3. GENERATIVE TRANSFORMATIVITY**

Transformative change is significant in community engagement, and academic interest in transformativity has surged in recent times, with scholars from different disciplines exploring it in diverse contexts. In literature, transformative change is often referred to as durable, intense, and intentional. It is generally assumed that, through this process, academic institutions and communities can shift perspectives, develop new capabilities, and create innovative solutions to complex societal issues.

The literature on transformative universities highlights their capacity to affect positive societal change through research, teaching, and engagement. In the PLACES project, we uphold the transformative mission as the core mission of universities, viewing research, teaching, and service as operational realms to achieve this mission. The transformativity of universities is often discussed in both prescriptive and practical terms as well as in descriptive and analytical ways. These distinctions will be elucidated hereafter.

#### **3.1. Prescriptive level**

Transformativity in higher education suggests that universities should serve as

agents of change, fostering student development and tackling societal challenges. This transformative role is integral to the university's mission, focusing on critical thinking, social justice, and innovation. In contrast, the neoliberal university model, which has recently gained traction, prioritises market-driven principles, viewing education as a commodity and students as consumers. Thus, the tension between transformativity and neo-liberalism in higher education is a significant debate among scholars and policymakers.

Transformativity advocates profound institutional change, urging universities to transcend traditional roles and structures. It emphasises aligning institutional practices with societal values, such as democracy, justice, equity, equality, and inclusiveness, to address societal challenges and promote positive social change. This transformative approach is grounded in diversity, openness, responsibility, and autonomy, and aims to make universities more responsive, inclusive, and impactful in advancing knowledge and societal change.

Addressing societal change requires acknowledging the complexity and unpredictability of social transformations. Change agents must maintain clear objectives, while adapting to evolving circumstances, integrating new insights, and seizing unexpected opportunities. This flexible yet purposeful approach fosters meaningful societal change, recognising the complexity and dynamism of social systems, aligning with the concept of generative transformativity.

### **3.2. Analytic/descriptive level (generative transformativity)**

The analytic/descriptive level of community engagement investigates its transformative potential by examining how stakeholder collaboration can drive significant change. This approach emphasises that integrating diverse perspectives and knowledge systems leads to a thorough understanding of community needs and resources, necessitating a critical view of power dynamics. By valuing multiple epistemologies, this method aims to comprehend these power relations, ensuring that marginalised voices are considered equally with dominant perspectives.

Addressing these issues involves viewing transformative change as a generative process and promoting dynamic interactions, unexpected outcomes, and collaborative contributions, thus creating value greater than individual inputs. It acknowledges that valuable outcomes often arise from the synergy of various viewpoints and experiences, enhancing the likelihood of serendipitous discoveries and breakthrough thinking (Vecchiato, 2016; Holland, 1998).

This approach requires recognising a shift from linear models to a complex

systems perspective, understanding that societal change is nonlinear, unpredictable, and influenced by interconnected factors. Outcomes evolve rather than being predetermined (Doyle 2018). This emergent nature of impact formation challenges the idea of predicting results based solely on initial objectives, highlighting the need for flexibility and adaptability in impact evaluation, along with the need to introduce mid-range indicators for impact assessment.

### **3.3. Operational/methodological level**

Generative community engagement operates at multiple levels, intersecting the analytical and practical aspects of research and education. The analytical framework helps articulate engagement dynamics, whereas operational aspects translate these insights into actions and methodologies. The implementation of generative community engagement is influenced by values, such as openness, participation, inclusiveness, and social and epistemic justice. These principles shape the design and execution of engaged methodologies, informing procedural choices and the ethos of community-based projects. By prioritising these values, practitioners aim to generate knowledge, empower communities, foster equitable partnerships, and contribute to societal transformations, ensuring alignment with ethical considerations and societal needs for meaningful and sustainable outcomes. Epistemologically, this affects the acceptance of methodologies, such as action research by the academic community (Oquist, 1978).

Transformative learning, as conceptualised by Mezirow (1997) emphasises critical reflection and perspective transformation in learning. Transformative research methodologies, such as Community-Based Participatory Research, operationalise generative transformativity in research settings (Hall and Tandon, 2017). Community-based research and learning prioritise collaboration among researchers, learners, and community members, emphasising iterative cycles of enquiry, reflection, and action, and fostering dynamic knowledge generation and change.

## **4. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This paper delineated the principal theoretical foundations of the PLACES project, with a particular focus on what we define as “transformative community engagement”. This notion necessitated a working definition of community engagement, as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the concepts of transformativity. Our literature review led us to identify three frequently

overlapping approaches in addressing transformativity, which encompass the prescriptive, analytical/descriptive, and methodological/operational levels.

This examination delineates the intentional, durable, and socially relevant nature of authentically transformative processes along with their emergent characteristics. The non-linear, substantially unpredictable nature of transformativity portrays it as a generative process, insofar as it amplifies resources and outcomes by fostering diverse perspectives that intersect to yield novel insights and innovative solutions.

The extant literature on transformative community engagement is characterised by a long-standing tradition, which provides a robust theoretical and methodological foundation for practitioners. Within this context, there remains a paucity of comprehensive understanding of the specific policy and administrative mechanisms through which higher education institutions can effectively pursue requisite changes to fully embrace transformative community engagement. Furthermore, it is necessary to address the unresolved issue of political willingness, which can engender such changes beyond rhetorical exercises and institutional makeup.

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## **Stream G**

# **DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE EDUCATIONAL FIELD**



# THE EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOL VICTIMIZATION AMONG ADOLESCENT ADOPTEES

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Bullying victimization by peers has been recognized as a relevant social issue during adolescence as it may be associated with emotional difficulties, greater psychological distress, and lower academic performance. Despite research on adopted adolescents showed higher levels of internalizing problems, lower peer acceptance, fewer prosocial behaviour and close relationships than non-adopted peers, few studies focused on the prevalence of and factors associated with bullying victimization in this group. In order to fill this gap, this contribution is focused on the bullying victimization among adopted adolescent and the associations with their adjustment and well-being, taking into account individual and social risk and protective factors.

adoption; bullying victimization; psychosocial adjustment

## 1. ADOPTION IN THE SOCIAL CONTEXT: THE BULLYING VICTIMIZATION EXPERIENCE

In the adoption literature, several studies investigated the level of psychosocial adjustment among adoptees compared with non-adoptees peers. Adoption research consistently reported a higher level of emotional and behavioural problems, lower academic performance, and mental health problems among transracial adolescent adoptees compared with non-adopted peers. In this research trend, the cross-cultural comparisons are under investigated. A recent empirical study carried out in four European countries, Italy, Spain, Norway and France (Cáceres et al., 2024) showed that, in all the four countries considered, adopted adolescents (all born in East European countries) were more likely to show higher levels of emotional and behavioural problems than expected: it

turned out that about 27% of adoptees had borderline or clinical scores for general psychological problems, and about 30% fall into this range for hyperactivity. These results were similar in the four receiving countries, suggesting that these adjustment difficulties of adoptees are reliable beyond national boundaries.

Referring to their experience at school, a current research trend within the field of adoption showed that, compared to their non-adopted peers, adoptees are more likely to report lower levels of school performance as well as more special educational needs, contributing to experiencing greater educational disadvantages (Pitula et al., 2019; Raaska et al., 2012). In order to deeply understand/shed light to the challenges faced by adoptees in everyday living in the school context, some studies have analysed adoptees' perceptions of their peer relationships. Even if the studies on this topic are few, some preliminary findings suggested that adoptees are likely to show a specific vulnerability to the experience of being bullied within the school context. For example, Cáceres and colleagues (2024) found that more than half of the 199 internationally adopted adolescents in their study sample had been exposed to some form of peer victimization in the previous 2 months, with verbal harassment and social exclusion as the most common forms of victimization. These percentages are in sharp contrast with the ones found in community samples, with frequent victims being at around 10% and sporadic victims at around 22%. Besides, differences among receiving countries were not statistically significant, suggesting a common pattern for adopted adolescents living in the four receiving countries.

The risk of being peer victimized may increase for transracial adoptees that must confront multiple specific challenges related to their adoptive status and their ethnic differences. In fact, the ethnic differences give visibility to adoption, with subsequent negative influences on their peer relationships. These factors might expose them to high risk of peer bullying as well as increase their vulnerability to the experience of victimisation (Ferrari et al., 2022). The experiences of peer victimization play an important role hindering adoptees' psychosocial adjustment. A recent study (Cáceres et al., 2024) confirmed an increased risk of emotional and behavioural difficulties in association with being bullied. Specifically, among frequent victims of bullying, 44% obtained above the cutoff clinical scores on the global scale of emotional and behavioural difficulties, and this percentage went down to 8% among non-victims.

## **2. BULLYING VICTIMIZATION: RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR ADOPTEES**

In light of these difficulties, it is important to disentangle those factors that could exacerbate or minimize the negative consequences of bullying victimization among adoptees. Ferrari and colleagues, (2022) carried out a study involving Italian internationally adopted adolescents. Findings showed that the association between being victimized, and the levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties varied according to the levels of other risk or protective factors. First, adoptive identity resulted to play a significant role. Adoptive identity refers to the sense of belonging to the group of adoptees, together with commitment, pride, and positive feelings about this group (Grotevant et al., 2000). Adoptees have to seek to integrate their adopted status into a coherent definition of self, attributing a different degree of salience to their adoptive status, and feeling part of the group of adoptees. Previous studies have empirically shown that adoptive identity is related to the adoptees' positive adjustment, especially in terms of low level of behavioural problems and high level of self-esteem (e.g., Grotevant et al., 2000; Ranieri et al., 2021). Partially in contrast with this literature, Ferrari and colleagues (2022) found that the association between the adopted adolescents' victimization and their emotional and behavioural problems was moderated by adoptive identity, in the sense that this link was stronger by an increase in the levels of adoptive identity. Specifically, victimization had a more detrimental and negative impact on psychological adjustment for those adopted adolescents who showed higher levels of adoptive identity. We could infer that these discriminating events may target their adoptee status and thus target a central and relevant dimension of the adoptees' identity, profoundly hurting them. Indeed, when individuals are highly identified with their in-group (for example, the adoptive group), episodes of group related discrimination are more likely to be appraised as self-relevant. The more the belongingness to and the identification with the group is central and a core aspect of self, the more the discriminatory events are psychologically significant and threatening.

This research has focused on a further moderating factor that is likely to influence the association between being peer-victimized and adjustment outcomes among international adoptees, the reflected minority categorization. It refers to the adoptees' perception of others' appraisal of their belongingness to the minority or the majority group (Ferrari et al., 2022; Khanna, 2004). This contextual feedback is often related to the visibility of adoptees' ethnic difference and to their physical appearance. Adoptees who report high reflected minority categorization believe of being perceived by others as members of the

minority group, while low levels of reflected minority categorization indicate the adoptees' perception to be categorized by others as a member of the majority group. The association between adoptees' victimization and their emotional and behavioural problems was moderated by reflected minority categorization. Specifically, bullying victimization was found to have a lower detrimental and negative impact on psychological adjustment for the adoptees who reported more to be perceived by others as members of a minority group. Adoptees with a stronger reflected minority categorization might consider their own ethnic group as the target of ethnic victimization (external attribution) and not directly themselves as individual targets because of their own characteristics (internal attribution).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

To summarize, results indicate that adoptees are highly vulnerable to bullying victimization and this experience is associated with more emotional and behavioural adjustment difficulties (Càceres et al., 2024; Ferrari et al., 2022). Peers' rejection represents a risk factor for the psychological adjustment of the adoptees. Besides, the association between being victimized and higher levels of maladjustment resulted to be stronger among those adolescents who have higher adoptive identity. The experience of victimization, often related to the adoptive status, more strongly affects adolescents who feel proud of their adoptive status and strongly identify with the adoptive group. Additionally, adoptees who perceived others' appraisal about them as members of an ethnic minority group reported lower psychosocial difficulties in association with experiencing victimization than those reporting lower levels of reflected minority categorization. Therefore, findings from this study emphasize the potential value of strengthening the relational context whom the adoptees belong to and to create a more inclusive environment in order to increase their psychological adjustment. Taking into account that adolescents are particularly sensitive to peer feedback, other's perception of their ethnic background could be a key dimension to better understand the quality of their social relationships.

Up to date, adoption research has mainly focused on pre-adoption negative experiences and traumas. Alongside these risk factors, research must also broaden the horizon and consider the role played by the current social context and peer relationships quality in fostering or hindering adoptees' psychological wellbeing. Overall, the results summarized in this contribution move adoptive research beyond targeting only mental health problems of adoptees, compared

to non-adopted peers, to include both individual and social factors, concerning the adoptive identity and the broader peer's network, in understanding the process of psychological adjustment to adoption. As a matter of fact, adoption is intrinsically embedded into the social contexts.

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# OPEN ADOPTION: EDUCATIONAL REFLECTIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL PROPOSALS ON THE RECENT JURISPRUDENTIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT (JUDGMENT 183/2023) OFFERING NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE PROTECTION OF THE CHILD

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Forty years after the approval of law no. 184 of 4 May 1983 “A child’s right to a family” as later amended by law no. 149/2001, the very recent sentence no. 183 of 28 September 2023 no. 183 of the Constitutional Court, coherently with the previous judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, has endorsed the most popular interpretation according to which in certain specific cases the Juvenile Courts may, at the same time as issuing the legitimating full adoption judgment, provide that the adoptee shall maintain *de facto* (not juridical) relations with the original family (even if he/she has forfeited parental responsibility) while acquiring the full *filiationis* status of the adoptive family. This is the so-called open adoption or full open adoption, which, basing its provision on the institution of jurisprudential creation of the ‘mild adoption’, intends to add a family to the child without replacing it in those cases where breaking the existing significant emotional relationship would be contrary to the child’s interest to break. These judicial decisions show the extent of the cultural and social change, that recognises the importance of a person’s affective and family history and value the weight of the environment to which the child belongs. This jurisprudence has interpreted the progress and acquisitions resulting from interdisciplinary scientific fields such as psychology, sociology, pedagogy, ethology, neuroscience and psychoanalysis; these disciplines have highlighted how there are specific situations in which maintaining relations with the family of origin may represent an appropriate response to a series of critical issues that full adoption sometimes faces and that, on the contrary, prohibits the same relations (such as the so-called ‘blameless abandonment’ cases due to non-voluntary deficiencies or fragility). However, a more in-depth educational reflection cannot fail to point out how in the open form of adoption complex inter-subjective

dynamics come into play and how that may awaken in all the parties involved (child, family of origin, adoptive family) silent traumas (sense of guilt, narcissistic wounds, bereavements not fully processed, etc.), creating ambivalent or conflictual situations that are detrimental instead of promoting the child's development. In fact, if it is true that the success of the adoption process – whatever its form – depends on the degree of stability and reliability of mutual affective recognition between child and adoptive parent, achieved at the end of a progressive and delicate process of building and consolidating ties, it is therefore urgent to reflect – from a pedagogic perspective – on the good practices to be implemented in the socio-educational systems involved in this process (pre- and post-adoption services, schools, etc.) to promote relations between natural and adoptive parents capable of hinging on the conscious and responsible acceptance of the different roles and functions within the open family environment. This is in order to avoid subjecting the child to what Winnicott called “impingement”, i.e. negative pressure that causes a fracture in the sense of continuity of the self and instead guarantee a unified existential narrative.

Children, Open adoption, Identity, Educational reflections.

## INTRODUCTION

Forty years after its approval, Law No 184/83 “Discipline of the adoption of child custody”, subsequently renamed “Right of the child to a family” by the subsequent amending Law No 149/2001 (with subsequent legislative amendments), represents a still modern instrument in the complex *panorama* of family protection legislation. In fact, thanks to the interpretative activity of the jurisprudence (that has been able to adapt to the transformative pushes of the UN Convention and to the national social and cultural instances generated by the need to adjust some practices not always able to protect the best interest of the minors as in the Bibbiano case or the abuse of *sine die* foster care), the discipline of foster care and adoption has been able to extend and adapt guarantees and protections also to cases apparently lacking specific regulations or poorly defined, always guaranteeing a clear reference for all the juvenile institutions.

In this perspective, the very recent judgment of 28 September 2023 no. 183 of the Constitutional Court, in line with previous judgments of the European Court

of Human Rights<sup>1</sup>, which upholds the majority interpretation according to which in certain specific cases the Juvenile Courts may, at the same time as the legitimating adoption judgment (which attributes to the child the full *filiationis* status of the adoptive family) provide for the adoptee to maintain *de facto* (not juridical) relations with certain members of the original family, even if they have lost parental responsibility (a grandparent, uncle or aunt, a parent, for instance, suffering from a psychiatric illness), who, while not being able to take full responsibility for the child from a socio-educational or economic point of view, have constituted an affective, emotional or even only symbolically significant reference point for the child.

This is the so-called ‘open adoption’ or full open adoption that bases its provision on the jurisprudentially created institution of ‘mild adoption’<sup>2</sup> intended to safeguard – where they exist – certain significant emotional relationships with the family of origin that it would be contrary to the child’s interest to break. This ruling refers to so-called ‘blameless abandonment’ cases in which the lasting situation of incapacity of the biological parents does not depend on voluntary behaviour on the part of the parents of origin, but on deficiencies and frailties of a different nature linked, for instance, to economic or health problems (Vecchione, 2023). In these cases, keeping the emotional bond between the adopted child and these parents alive would, according to the Constitutional Court, provide greater protection for the adoptee.

## **1. OPEN ADOPTION AS A PEDAGOGICAL RESPONSE TO A CHILD’S DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS**

By offering the adopted child the opportunity not to ‘lose everything’ that made up his or her past before meeting the adoptive couple, open adoption is pedagogically oriented towards the promotion of the child’s developmental journey characterised by the constant search for a thread that gives meaning to his or her identity-building story. As Ricoeur states, in fact, identity “is a narrative process because understanding oneself is equivalent to being able to tell intelligible and acceptable stories in a coherent cognitive-emotional plot that allows one to give meaning to each lived experience in a transformative dimension within which one can find the stimulus to desire to realise one’s

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<sup>1</sup> Judgment ECHR of 13 January 2009 – Appeal No 33932/06

<sup>2</sup> Experimented in the 2000s at the Juvenile Court of Bari as a possible response to situations of semi-permanent neglect. Statement of the President of the TM Bari Occhiogrosso of 07.05.2008.



dreams” (p. 8).

An identity weaving that in adoption is much more complex due to the succession of unfavourable experiences (i.e. traumatic events, inadequate, ambivalent, disorganised primary attachment experiences, separation from the biological family and stays in the community that, together with the alternation in each phase of the process of undefined and tormented operators, places and times, characterise the path. Events that often define, on a psycho-educational level, the constitution of an intrinsic fragility, of a low resilience in the confrontation with new experiential challenges, of emotional instability, of an insufficient capacity to redefine one’s everyday life and to activate spaces and paths of self-reflection and awareness ( ). The fact that then, with the start of the adoptive relationship, only one (adoptive family) of the two poles that make up the adoptee’s existence (past and present) manifests itself on a concrete level does not equate tout court with the pale of the other (family of origin), because the prominence of figures who are physically absent but present on a symbolic level may take on a different weight for the adoptee over time, perhaps remaining in the background for years but becoming in some periods (especially in adolescence) a foreground presence in a logic in which the space-time dimension seems to dilate for some and disappear for others (Malaguti, 2005). In the face of this, in many cases not even the re-establishment of an adequate system of affective and caring relations within the new family environment is enough to make up for the impossibility for the adoptee to be able to activate a path of reflection and signification of the previous experiential experiences due to the lack of family figures belonging to his/her original nucleus. A lack that in fact prevents the construction of a harmonious circularity of one’s memories and, on the contrary, leaves lines of shadow and meaninglessness that favour vacuous areas of the definition/construction of personal identity and history that expose him/her to the risk of becoming a stranger to himself/herself.

Faced with the impossibility of preserving and maintaining ties with past experiences, in fact, in order to make up for the lack of the foundations necessary to rewrite one’s own history, it may happen that the child decides to sacrifice excessively painful parts of himself in two different ways. He may adopt an action of cutting off and erasing those shadowy areas of his past that he has experienced as too painful or, on the contrary, he may decide to reject his present by entrenching himself in the idealisation of past parental or parental figures in the conviction that he is guilty of not having been up to the task of deserving their love. Emotional survival strategies, not so rare, which, as Aulagnier states, soon show themselves to be failures. In the first case, in fact,

the mutilation of parts of one's own history is dramatically reflected in the amputation of parts of one's own identity built up precisely from the significant encounters that, for better or worse, punctuate the life of each subject and whose permanent traces shape the psyche; in the second case, on the other hand, the rejection of the present risks keeping one in a state of immutability and existential suspension that hinders elaboration and prevents one from opening up to future time.

In this sense, allowing the child's parental figure of origin to maintain a stable and continuous bond with him (with timed and monitored encounters) represents an unparalleled opportunity to find answers to the need for meaning that characterises his or her existential history, relieving the latter of the tiring choice between belonging to the past or to the present and enhancing the possibility of keeping and emotionally cultivating both within oneself.

The notion of need, in fact, when referred to a child, possesses in pedagogical literature (Rossi, 2008) a great relational value because it is expressed in the context of a bond that implies a responsibility and therefore foresees a commitment on the part of the significant persons in the child's life to provide an adequate response to that need (Milani, 2017, p. 95). This implies that all the adult subjects that make up the open adoptive system – the family of origin and the adoptive family – participate responsibly and proactively in the open educational project addressed to the child: giving him/her back acceptable and plausible motivations capable of reconnecting the experiences that have characterised his/her past with his/her present experience. In order to open up with confidence to the future, it is necessary to be able to construct a past within the present by means of a new signification of the previously lived experiences with which the individual is in continuous relation.

Family of origin and adoptive family, emotional ties and ties of consanguinity are in fact not realities that can be opposed or separated but different experiences that – if well accompanied – can come together in often unpredictable and promotional compositions of positive relationality (Muschitiello, 2023).

## **2. CRITICAL NODES**

Alongside the considerations that defend the appropriateness of open adoption to overcome certain developmental criticalities that full adoption may encounter, educational reflection cannot fail to take note of the complex intersubjective dynamics that may come into play, awakening in all the subjects involved (child, family of origin, adoptive family) silent traumatic remnants

(sense of guilt, narcissistic wounds, bereavements not fully processed, etc.) or creating ambivalent or conflictual situations that are more detrimental than promotional of the child's development.

The successful outcome of the adoption process – whatever its form – depends in fact on the degree of stability and reliability of mutual affective recognition between child and adoptive parent, achieved at the end of a progressive and delicate process of building and consolidating ties. In open adoption, because of its characteristics, this reciprocity can be severely tested if the right preparation, knowledge and awareness of the educational value of this particular form of adoption is lacking on the part of the adult figures that make up the entire open family system.

In fact, the expectation that the new adoptive family system must also include the preservation of the relationship with a parental figure belonging to the child's original environment risks making the adoptive couple feel threatened, as they too are grappling with their own experiences to be processed (infertility, empty cradle, etc.) and often with the desire – even unconscious – to seek an exclusive relationship that can replace or restore the previous one. A desire that, although it may initially appear as a reassuring solution able to ease the pain linked to the child's experiences of abandonment and deprivation and to fill the couple's emptiness, in reality soon reveals itself to be illusory and insufficient to stem the child's inner split that originates from the profound rupture of his existential continuity brought about by the abandonment.

On the other hand, the parental figure of origin, who continues to maintain contact with the child, may – voluntarily or involuntarily – act in a way that provokes feelings of guilt, inadequacy and abandonment anxieties and terrors, unconsciously forcing the child to engage in defensive operations detrimental to its healthy development.

Situations that could leave the child divided in the pain of losing the object of maternal love and the despair of losing the bond with the caregivers (Valdilonga, 2011) thus producing a negative pressure that Winnicott defines as impingement to refer to situations in which the interference of the environment when negative interrupts the continuity of the self, causing an intrapsychic fracture and a split. According to the scholar, that is, when the child's ego does not receive sufficient support from adults significant to it, a traumatic condition occurs that sets in motion a pattern of fragmentation of being. The child is thus faced with a developmental task that is almost from the outset burdened in a psychopathological sense. If this were the case, adoption in its open form instead of

soothing the abandonment experience linked to the first estrangement from the family of origin (the one that led to its declaration of adoptability) would only constantly re-propose the same wounds, making them deeper and more irremediable.

To prevent all this from happening, it is therefore necessary to guarantee the adoptive couple and the original parental figure adequate pedagogical and psychological support to support and monitor them in the elaboration at the unconscious and relational level of effective strategies for accompanying and flanking the adopted child in the arduous path of constructing a self-narrative capable of accommodating cracks and fractures in his or her own history along the jagged edges that separate the past from the present, the before from the after.

### **3. THE ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS AND NEW CULTURE OF OPEN ADOPTION**

Which are, then, the good practices to be put in place in the socio-educational systems called upon to support all components of adoption in its open form? First, the training and updating of operators who deal with socio-educational services, particularly with adoption and family fostering, because when important changes and new perspectives take place, as in the case of open adoption, knowing the contents and reasons for such changes (protection, safeguarding, supreme interest and recognition of the rights of the child) and reflecting on the practices of psycho-socio-pedagogical intervention becomes essential in order to know how to activate complex socio-educational planning in such an unprecedented context in the world of adoption. Moreover, the lack of legal and psycho-socio-pedagogical case histories and practices and of the outcomes of the first open adoption experiences sets in motion a series of new interventions with the emergence of new educational needs, of network and interdisciplinary work that requires, from all the operators involved, renewed skills and quality in intrapersonal and interpersonal training.

Open adoption brings up new cultural and social scenarios for all psycho-socio-educational practitioners and further insights into some of the classic themes of adoption, ranging from multiple attachment styles, the adoption crisis, intra-familial conflicts and the, legitimate, aspirations of adopted children to know their origins, their history and to recognise themselves in an identity process that is as complete as possible. In the case of open adoption, however, we have further significant elements that need to be considered, for instance, the family constellation expands, the perceived complexity of maintaining relations

between adoptive and biological parenting (no longer idealised) is renewed, the ambivalent representation of the biological family (or of some of its members) as an obstacle and competition or as a bond functional to well-being. In addition, legal, culturally and socially defined paradigms, from which it may be difficult to distance oneself (mistrust, resistance and fears with respect to open adoption and its characteristics and management), are also called into question for practitioners. There is, in fact, a pervasive storytelling of adoption that identifies as “good adoption” or “adoption gone well”-that in which the child who has been adopted shows and will never show any temptation to search for his or her biological origins. The guiding word of this narrative is ‘legitimacy’, the family must feel legitimate and legitimised (Ferritti, 2019, p. 30). With the ruling of the Constitutional Court (no.183/2023), the historically established and socially shared principle that with the legitimising adoption of a child, the ties with the family of origin are definitively severed (this is only legally, because we know well when this bond is indissoluble and symbolically present in an unconscious and/or conscious manner in minors), although legally the principle remains valid, after this ruling it is no longer valid for all cases of adoption. Adoptive parents, therefore, must be supported in representing the adopted child as connected to his or her history and birth family; they must be supported in thinking of him or her in all his or her parts, including the dissociated ones; it is this virtuous process that supports the integration of the self. Integration must also be able to heal the temporal split: adoption cuts off a part of the adoptee’s self that remains in the past, therapy (and the educational relationship) must foster the integration in the present of those parts of the self that have been left in the past, bringing order to the “a good” and “an evil” confusedly mixed in memory and disoriented in temporal location (Cancrini, 2020, p. XV-XVI). Both the adult parties involved (the family of origin and the adoptive one) must be carefully prepared not to collude with the child’s possible attempts to erase the past or reject the present by letting one part of his or her history prevail over the other, and to experiment and implement, with the proper support of the operators, strategies for understanding and meaningfully interpreting his or her behaviour within the complexity that characterises the construction of an open adoptive bond. In particular, the adoptive couple must know how to tune in to the child’s evolutionary need to be able to freely desire the meeting with the original relative without the fear of betraying his or her new present and, on the other hand, the original relative must know how to implement relationship modalities capable of promoting the child’s wellbeing in order to support him or her in the elaboration of personal strategies that allow him or her to keep in and

separate from his or her roots and the processing of feelings connected to them. This shed light on new reflections in terms, more than in legal terms, of pedagogical, educational and psychological management of the relational and symbolic worlds of adopted families, boys and girls. A challenge that must be translated into a good awareness of change on the part of operators working in the adoption and foster care system. As operators, it is important to be clear that, in many cases, adoptive families live an intense relationship with the adoptee predominantly in a dimension of the future, projects and legitimate prospective aspirations, rather than on the sometimes uncomfortable reflection on the adopted child's past, which inevitably (regardless of the actual maintenance with the biological family) reverberates in the quality of the parent-child relationship and in the construction of sufficiently good identity development processes, which are based precisely on the awareness of the child's pre-adoptive history.

For good psycho-socio-educational management of open adoption and to avoid the risk of the child being exposed to traumatic lacerations again, in other words, exposing him or her to the risk of the environment failing by producing an impingement, it would be useful to imagine networks and structures capable of working on several levels – psychological, socio-legal pedagogical-educational – to accompany the families (biological and adoptive) in promoting effective educational relations, capable of hinging on the conscious and responsible acceptance of the different roles and functions that each of the elements of the system possesses face-to-face the child within the open adoptive family environment. In particular, knowing how to work in a network, a network of care, a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work can today face the management of change and project a more effective psycho-socio-educational alliance and limit the many professional fragmentations that weaken the quality of intervention. It is important, therefore, to work on the interdisciplinary boundaries between educational-pedagogical and therapeutic-clinical, as each of these sectors naturally trespasses into the other and the challenge lies precisely in the ability, despite the diversity, to implement interventions that inevitably become complementary (Corriero, 2023). There is therefore no clear-cut differentiation between the different situations involving caring for the other. But each one can influence the adjacent sphere by creating a synergy that expands the preventive area with its guiding principles (Berto, Sclari, 2013).

For an adopted child, maintaining the bond with the family of origin, under certain conditions, can be a protective factor (e.g. in managing anxiety with

respect to the abandonment experience, feelings of guilt, the perception of a family betrayal of the original bond, family adaptation, excessive idealisation that may become dysfunctional, etc.) and generative of a quality relationship with the adoptive family itself, a protective factor with respect to a possible dramatic and dysfunctional ‘adoptive rejection’, precisely because of deterministic legal and/or social rigidities, invisible to the adoptive family, due to the dramatic and dysfunctional deterministic rigidity of the legal and/or social system.) and generative of a quality relationship with the adoptive family itself, a protective factor with respect to an eventual dramatic and dysfunctional “adoptive rejection”, precisely because of legal and/or social deterministic rigidities, invisible with respect to the children’s needs to maintain a relationship with the family of origin, managed, monitored and functional to the exclusive interest and wellbeing of the children and children.

To date, open adoption cases are still numerically meagre to be able to make statistics and give definite answers on the developmental impact that this form of adoption produces over time on the developmental balance of adopted children, but it is certainly urgent as operators in the sector (including schools) not to be found unprepared and to commit to adequately train social and educational workers called upon to deal with adoptive and biological families involved in this form of open adoption in terms of psycho-educational skills, fostering resilient developmental processes as an unexpected hope (Cylurnik, 2005).

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# FOR A CULTURE OF FOSTER CARE

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Achieving the full inclusion of children in out-of-home care depends primarily on a supportive school and social community that creates welcoming and accepting environments. Prejudices and limited awareness about these children, their birth families, residential facilities, and foster families restrict foster family availability and limit the supportive strategies that teachers and other adults in the child's support network—such as classmates' parents, coaches, and religious educators—might implement. Persistent myths about foster care, perpetuated by the media, further complicate these challenges. This research seeks to assess the perceptions of prospective teachers to inform targeted training programs that foster better inclusion of children in foster care. The study identifies ongoing issues and significant information gaps, along with an analysis of media influences on perceptions. It concludes by proposing innovative training solutions to enhance foster care inclusion.

foster care; prejudice; training

## INTRODUCTION

Achieving full inclusion for foster children depends primarily on a school and social community that fosters welcoming and supportive environments. Persistent prejudices and gaps in knowledge about foster children limit the support strategies that teachers and other adults in the socio-educational network can offer. False myths surrounding foster care are numerous (Howard, 2010; Delgado et al., 2022). For instance, misconceptions include the belief that foster parents are solely motivated by financial gain, that foster placements are excessively long regardless of circumstances, or that children in foster care are frequently mistreated. Research highlights that the stigma associated with not living with biological parents can negatively impact these children, often leading them to hide their foster care status, particularly in school settings (Dansey et al., 2019; Farmer et al., 2013; Abena Owusu, 2023). Challenges with

peer integration, coupled with common academic struggles, can harm the self-esteem of children in foster care (Hedin et al., 2011). Additionally, frequent transitions in their lives often require them to repeatedly rebuild relationships, which can be especially challenging. However, peers can serve as valuable support systems. According to research, much of this support depends on the competencies and attitudes of adults, who play a crucial role in fostering an inclusive environment and providing adequate support (Rogers et al., 2017). Given this, we conducted a survey targeting future teachers who may work with foster children.

### IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER PERCEPTIONS: THE SURVEY

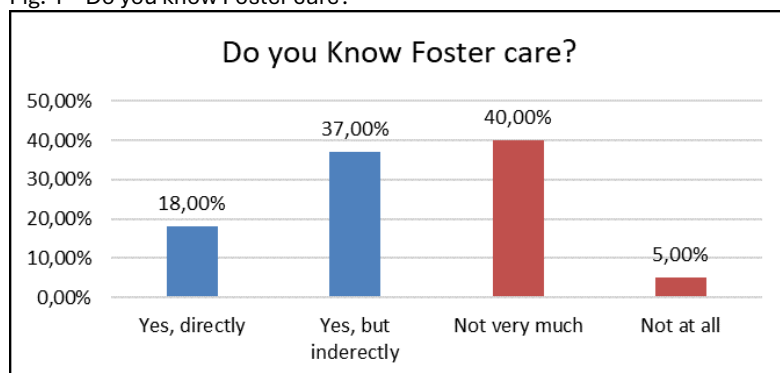
In the training of future educators, psychologists, and social workers, topics addressing the conditions of children living outside their family of origin are generally covered. However, a specific focus on these issues is seldom included in initial teacher training, despite the crucial role teachers play in welcoming and supporting these children. To address this gap, a survey was conducted among kindergarten and primary school teacher trainees to assess their knowledge, perceptions, and potential misconceptions about foster care, with the goal of designing targeted training pathways. The survey sample comprised 355 university students enrolled in initial teacher training at the University of Turin, with 65% of participants aged between 18 and 24.

## RESULTS

### 2.1. Sources of Knowledge and Level of Awareness

The survey reveals that approximately 45% of the students surveyed have limited or no knowledge of foster care (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – Do you know Foster care?

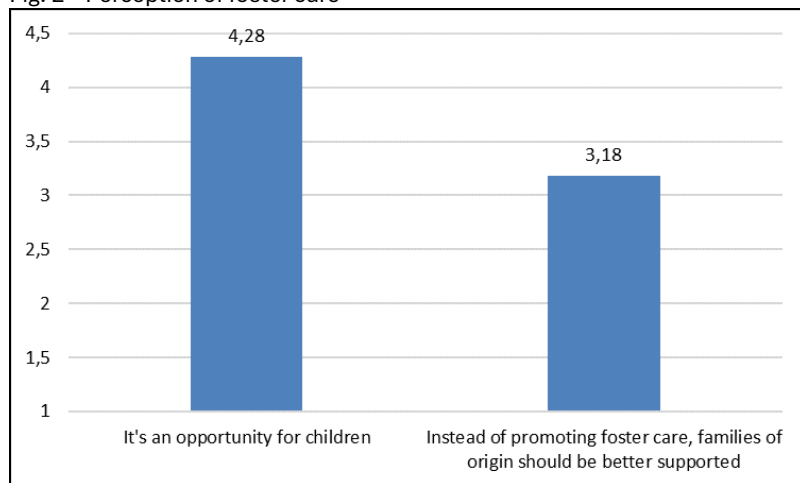


Only a few students have direct knowledge of foster care, either from having met children in foster care (29%) or foster families (33%). Some were part of a foster family (13%) or were in foster care themselves (7%). Unfortunately, most of those with indirect knowledge of foster care (the majority of the sample) gained information primarily from friends (42%) or online (18%). Only a small number obtained information from more reliable sources, such as books (8%) or study materials (14%).

## 2.2. Students' Perceptions of Foster Care

Although the interviewed students have limited direct experience with foster care, when asked whether they consider foster care an opportunity or a risk for children, all respondents shared their opinion. The majority view foster care as an opportunity for children (mean score = 4.28; scale: 1 to 5). However, when asked about the statement, "Instead of promoting foster care, families of origin should be better supported," many agreed, believing it would be more beneficial to support biological families over promoting foster care—without considering that these two actions are not mutually exclusive (mean score = 3.18; scale: 1 to 5) (fig. 2).

Fig. 2 – Perception of foster care

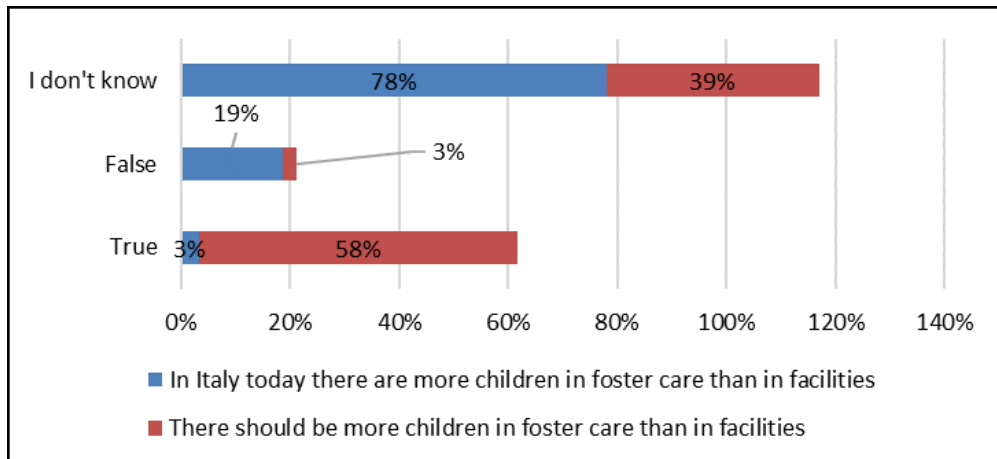


## 2.3. Students' Knowledge of Foster Care Facts

This section first explored whether students were aware that, in Italy, more children are now placed in facilities than in foster care. Only 19% of respondents were aware of this trend—a fact that has received little attention since the shift began in 2019. Unfortunately, this shift reflects a negative trend internationally, sparking debate in countries like the USA and France. More concerning is that

almost 40% of respondents could not say whether it is more desirable for children to grow up in a foster family or in a facility (fig. 3).

Fig. 3 – Importance of family



Approximately 70% of the students interviewed could not express an opinion on the typical duration of foster care, and 54% were unsure whether the headline “80,000 children torn from their family in 10 years” was accurate. In discussions following the questionnaire, students explained that they focused primarily on the number (80,000) and were unsure of its accuracy. However, they overlooked the problematic use of the word “torn,” which inaccurately suggests that children are forcibly removed, rather than receiving assistance from courts and social workers in cases of family hardship.

#### Representations of Foster Care in TV Series and Films

When asked if they could recall films or TV series that address family custody, over 40% of survey participants indicated that they could not remember any titles depicting foster care positively or negatively. This is surprising, given that many American TV series feature at least one unfortunate character who experienced a troubled childhood, often moving from one foster home to another. This data highlights the limited impact or reach of these messages on students’ awareness. Now, let’s examine those who recalled films or TV series relevant to foster care. In total, students identified 81 titles depicting foster care negatively and 77 portraying it positively. Notably, 25% of the titles appear on both lists, as they present both negative and positive aspects or experiences related to foster care. Of the 81 titles identified as portraying family custody negatively, 59 correctly relate to foster care (e.g., *Anne with an E*). However, 10

titles instead concern adoption (e.g., *Candy Candy*), 8 are unrelated to either foster care or adoption (e.g., *Pippi Longstocking*), and 4 depict informal foster care situations (e.g., *Legacies*). The most frequently mentioned negative portrayal is the TV series *Shameless* (an American comedy-drama created by John Wells that aired on Showtime from January 9, 2011, to April 11, 2021). This series follows a highly dysfunctional family with an alcoholic father and children in disarray, depicting foster care as an undesirable alternative despite the dire conditions faced by the children. Unfortunately, when watching such TV series, viewers often misplace their empathy and find themselves wishing for the children to stay in unsuitable situations rather than hoping for a better future for them. Regarding the TV series cited as examples of positive representations of family foster care, only 44 titles were found to be accurate. Notably, many of these positive representations come from cartoons featuring animals or depict informal foster care scenarios (e.g., *Twilight*). There is also considerable confusion between foster care and adoption, leading to the removal of such titles from the count. Additionally, when examining some Italian TV series that positively portray family foster care, we find that they still present incorrect perceptions of the foster care system (e.g., *Blanca*, *Un professore*, *Mare fuori*). For instance, these series depict foster care as a solution arising from a chance encounter between a child in need and an individual or family who decides to become a foster carer based solely on that meeting, rather than through a thoughtful decision involving a selection and training process. This representation suggests a form of “on-demand” foster care. Furthermore, these series often illustrate a lack of collaboration between the foster family and the biological family, portraying the foster family’s fear of letting the children go, which undermines the true essence of foster care. It should also be emphasized that several American films and TV series cited in the survey present a dismal portrayal of family foster care. However, when the protagonist chooses to care for a child by providing foster care, the representation shifts to a very positive one (e.g., TV series: *S.W.A.T.*, *Rookie*, *Truth Be Told*; films: *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, *The Blind Side*). Despite these positive depictions, the general opinion on the American foster care system remains negative. The situation is further complicated by the fact that 76% of those interviewed do not understand the differences between the Italian and American systems. This lack of knowledge raises the risk that they may unconsciously apply their judgments of the American system to the Italian context, leading to lingering suspicion or misconceptions about foster care in Italy. e.g. *S.W.A.T.* (American police procedural action-drama television series) The protagonist chooses to keep the

child because the foster family is composed of kind people, but they only provide rules and not love, appearing primarily motivated by money. Another character frequently shares his experience of having been in 13 foster families. ROOKY (American police procedural television series created by Alexi Hawley for ABC – 2018). In the series Rookie, one of the protagonists is a former foster carer who speaks very negatively about her past. However, when another protagonist takes in a lonely girl as a foster child, the experience turns out to be positive. In *The Blind Side* (2009), directed by John Lee Hancock, the protagonist finds a good foster family after having passed through numerous bad situations. Similarly, in *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (based on the realistic children’s novel by Katherine Paterson), the protagonist, Gilly, also ultimately finds a supportive foster family after experiencing several unfavourable placements.

## **THE NEW PROJECTS**

To promote a correct representation of family foster care and the broader protection of children, we have implemented a five-year curriculum within the initial training of teachers. This program consists of dedicated lessons interconnected in a cohesive design, integrated into courses, laboratories, or indirect internship hours that contribute to the teachers’ training. The training sessions also include explorations of stereotypes and prejudices stemming from social media, TV series, and children’s books. Furthermore, “socio-psycho-pedagogical clinics” have been planned, which are educational activities designed to train mixed teams of future psychologists, social workers, teachers, and educators. These teams will interact in simulated situations to analyse complex cases related to child protection, with guidance from professionals in each of the four fields. This approach allows them to learn collaboration, recognize the boundaries of their respective roles, and connect effectively in a network, particularly for more complex situations. We hope that these pilot initiatives at the University of Turin will expand and help nurture a culture of child protection.

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# RESIDENTIAL FOSTER CARE HOMES AS TOOLS FOR SOCIAL EQUITY AND EMPOWERMENT. A STUDY ABOUT FOSTER CARE IN A REGION OF NORTHERN ITALY

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The proposal arises from some results of a study conducted in Emilia-Romagna, a region in Northern Italy, starting from the hypothesis that residential foster care homes (RFCH) have the capacity to generate interactions and social relationships between those who, at different levels, are involved in it functioning (parents, professionals, educational services, social services, health services, associations, volunteers). This contribution shows only the main results from the quantitative data—specifically, the results from an online questionnaire filled out by a sample of managers of RFCH in the Emilia-Romagna territory. The self-representations that the respondent sample highlighted allow us to identify their ability to generate and nourish fair relationships, thanks to trust-type bonds (both interpersonal and systemic), towards the empowerment of the children and their social participation. The contribution aims to offer some general reflections on the issue of children in foster care (Act. N. 184/1983) and the role of RFCH as a resource for the growth and education of children, as generators of both social equity and empowerment dynamics for the families and the local communities.

foster care; residential foster care home; children's empowerment; children protection



## **INTRODUCTION**

The Italian childcare system and the related social work methodologies can be usefully analysed through a multidimensional approach involving different sectors of the social sciences (Greco and Iafrate, 2001; Greco and Maniglio, 2009). Moreover, in Italy, the social representation of foster care as a set of cognitive and evaluative constructs, as well as that of social work, has changed compared to a few decades ago (Scivoletto, 2013), when the need to open up to the worlds of host families or the private social sector was dictated by ethical and cultural issues as a consequence of the critique of total institutions that culminated in the approval of Law 180/1978, also known as the Basaglia Law (Basaglia, 1967; Goffman, 2001). One of the main challenges in the current welfare system programme is therefore to build a social system supported by an integrated development of economic and social welfare systems, setting measures able to combat poverty and social exclusion towards social equity and the empowerment of foster children (Freire, 1971; Sandel, 2010; Kincheloe, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to offer some reflections on the issue of hetero-familial foster care and on the role of residential services as a resource not only for the growth and education of children placed outside their families of origin, but also as generators of a broader social wellbeing and civic culture. These reflections are the result of a survey carried out in Emilia-Romagna in 2023 as part of a broader research on the children's foster care system.

### **1. RESIDENTIAL FOSTER CARE HOMES AS PRODUCERS OF A BROADER SOCIAL WELLBEING: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL**

The starting hypothesis of this research is that residential foster care homes (RFCH) have the capacity to affect not only internal relationships, but also the local fabric in which they are embedded, generating interactions and social relations among people who do not directly use the services that these residential services make available to their users and internal members.

We therefore decided to investigate the representations that the RFCH have of themselves in terms of subjectivity, the relationships they create, and the methods they use to enrich the social fabric of a territory and to transmit the culture of which they are custodians.

Thus, the question of social capital, which is built up over time in continuous and relatively stable social relationships, becomes a central issue. Social capital, according to Putnam, is a “set of those elements of social

organization—such as trust, shared norms, social networks—that can improve the efficiency of the society as a whole, to the extent that they facilitate the coordinated action of individuals” (Putnam, 1993, p. 169). In particular, this author reminds us that social capital takes on both an individual and a collective character, with a private and a public face, as individuals form relationships from which they themselves benefit, and that “it can also have externalities that spill over into the wider community” so that “not all the costs and benefits of social ties go to the person who formed the relationship” (Putnam, 2004, p. 16). In this sense, for Hanifan (1916, p. 30), social capital coincides with “goodwill, friendship, solidarity, social relations between individuals and families that form a social unit”.

The importance of reviewing the role of children’s residential services in the light of current needs leads us to consider that the more residential services manage to connect social capital of the bonding type—that is, the social capital that is the result of relationships built within a relational system and that generates solidarity in homogeneous groups—with the capacity to generate social capital of the bridging type—that is, that which goes beyond homogeneous groups and which, as Lin (2002, p. 20) argues, acts as a “sociological lubricant” that allows one to “look outwards” and “build bridges”— the less their intervention is institutionalised in education and welcoming action.

## **2. THE RESEARCH: OBJECTIVES AND METHODS**

From the beginning of this work, we asked ourselves what was the relationship between the social potential of pro-social families and the socio-educational potential expressed in the mission of welcoming children and families in difficulty—in other words, what was their capacity to produce wellbeing both towards and in society and internally, in the care and social work pathways, according to their specific family identity.

Based on the research question and initial hypotheses, this quantitative pilot research involved the adoption of an online questionnaire to explore the role of RFCH within the welcoming system and the territory. The questionnaire, which consisted of 36 questions, was structured with a first general section aimed at reconstructing a picture of the RCFH by asking about the year of establishment, territorial location, belonging to a network of associations, and the number of active volunteers. A second section was devoted to identifying their social strength—i.e. the degree of awareness and representativeness that each RFCH believed it had within its own social fabric and its subjective insight in terms of

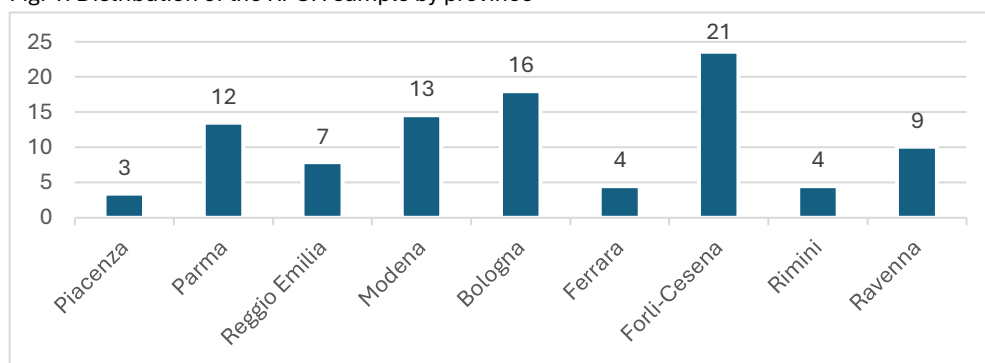
participation, recognition and relationships with citizens, key socialization agencies and institutional agencies in the local community. Finally, the concrete way in which each subject acted within its territory was explored.

The questionnaire was sent to a sample of RFCH in the Emilia-Romagna region and was filled in by the managers or contact persons.

### 3. SOME RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

A total of 89 RFCH in the region responded to the survey, broken down by province as follows: just under a quarter (21) were in the province of Forlì-Cesena, 16 in the area of the regional capital, 13 in the province of Modena, and 12 in the province of Parma. Piacenza, Rimini and Ferrara were the least represented provinces (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Distribution of the RFCH sample by province



Most of the responding RFCH (36) were established between 2011 and 2022, 31 between 2001 and 2010, and the remaining 22 in the last century. More than half reported having between one and five active volunteers, a fifth between six and ten.

Starting from the perception of subjective social potential and the concrete ways in which RFCH act in this area, we can see first of all that more than 60 per cent of residential structures (55) claim to participate directly and actively in the social and cultural life of their municipality. Participation mainly takes the form of adherence to and active participation in social and cultural initiatives organised in the area, along with networking in collaboration with other institutions, but also participation in institutional working groups (at the district level, “Piano di zona”). Despite the reported high level of participation, around a third (28) of respondents felt that the work of their residential structure was little recognised or not recognised at all by their local authority.

Fig. 2. How do you consider your RFCH to be an asset to the territory?

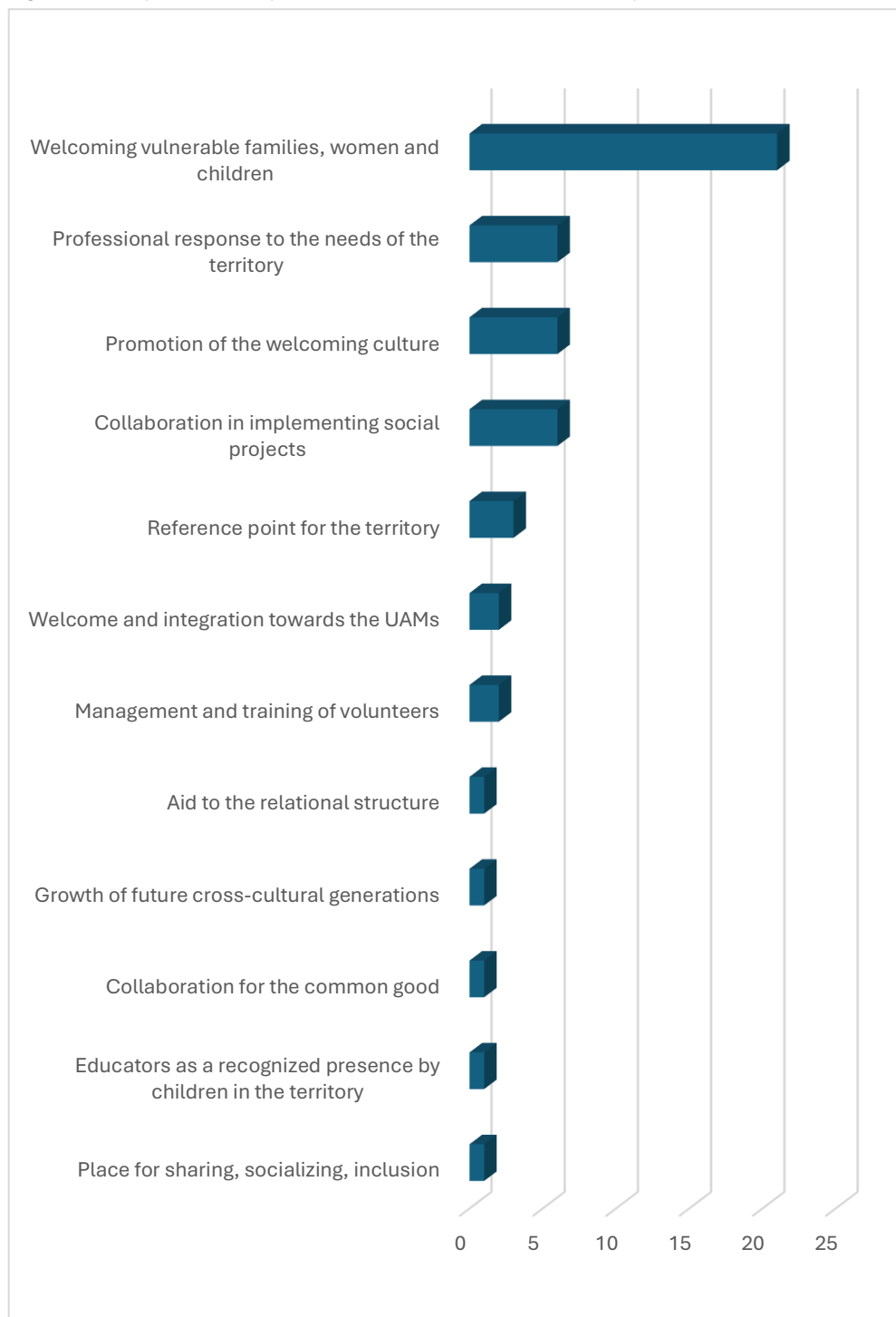


Fig. 3. How do you consider the territory to be an asset for your RFCH?

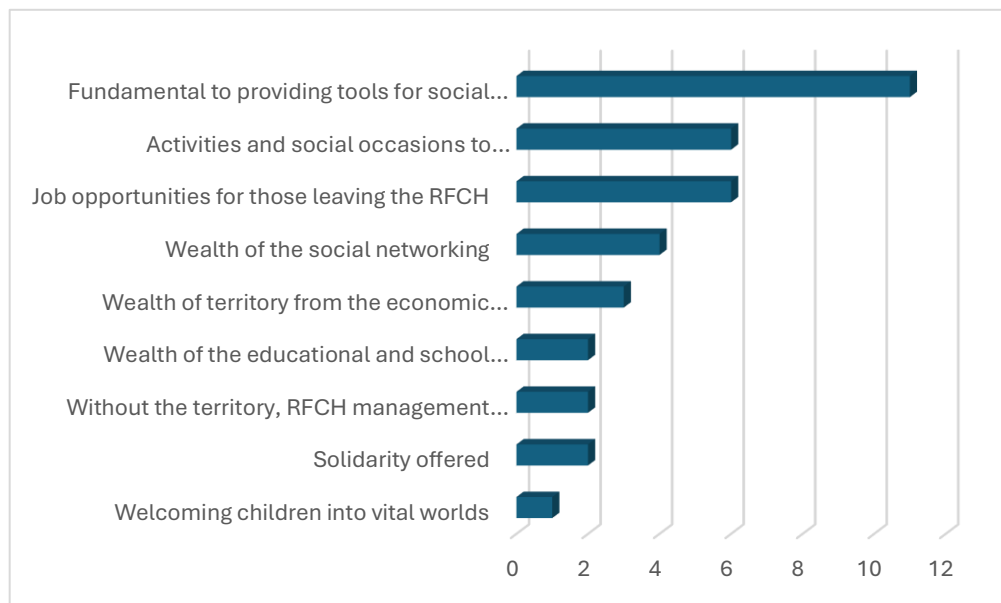
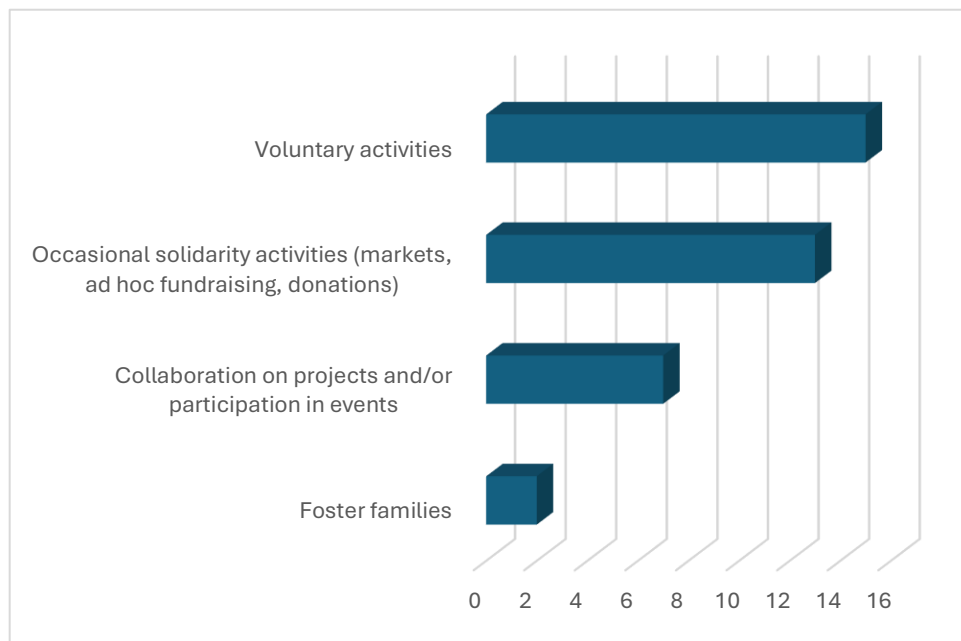


Fig. 4. Activities in which citizens are expected to support the RFCH



Almost all the RFCH that replied to the questionnaire (82 out of 89) considered themselves to be a resource for their local community, particularly in terms of welcoming vulnerable families, women and children, promoting a culture of welcome, cooperating in the implementation of social projects, and/or seeing themselves as a professional response to the needs of the territory (Fig. 2).

Similarly, more than 80 per cent of the respondents (73) affirmed that the territory is itself a resource for their residential structure, as it is fundamental in providing tools for integration and social inclusion, opportunities for socialisation, and job opportunities for young people leaving the RFCH (Fig. 3).

In terms of participation in planning between RFCH and institutions, just over half of the respondents (49) declared that their residential structure actively participates in formal and informal working groups for planning activities in the local community, referring in particular to co-planning working groups in the third sector (such as the coordination of volunteers or working groups for participatory planning at the district level), “Piani di Zona”, and working groups on welcome and poverty. Despite this activism, around two thirds of respondents (57) felt that they did not have a concrete and active influence on decisions affecting their area.

On the other hand, if we look at the activities in which the RFCH perceive citizens’ willingness to support them, almost two thirds of respondents said that this support would take the form of voluntary activities or occasional forms of solidarity (markets, ad hoc fundraising, donations), or forms of collaboration on projects or participation in events organised by the RFCH themselves (Fig. 4).

The RFCH were also asked to indicate the degree of co-operation (none, bad, good, excellent) with certain subjects and institutions in the area (municipal administration, schools, social services, health services, extracurricular educational services, sports associations, cultural associations, parishes, businesses and citizens) and to give a judgement on these relationships (negative, rather negative, neither positive nor negative, rather positive, positive). These are all indicators of movement towards society.

The picture that emerges is one of good or very good relations, considered positive or more than positive, with almost all institutional and non-institutional actors in the area. In particular, more than three quarters of responding residential structures reported good or very good co-operation with social and health services, educational institutions and sports associations. Such relationships are also those that tend to be perceived as good or very good. Co-operation and relations with the local authority, cultural associations, parishes

and citizens also appear to be positive, while co-operation with local businesses is rated as poor or non-existent by just under two-thirds of RFCH, most of them rating this relationship as neither positive nor negative.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, we can say that the self-representations of the RFCH that participated in the research highlighted their ability to create relationships and bonds not only with the children or families that make up the residential structure, but also with and for the territory in which they are located, thanks to the trust-type bonds (both interpersonal and systemic) that they weave and nurture daily. They have a high level of bridging social capital, which in many cases allows the residential structure to become a point of reference for citizens, as well as a significant actor and stakeholder in its local community, thanks to its close contact with institutional services.

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# **ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE: ANALYSIS, REFLECTIONS AND BEST PRACTICE ON EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE AT SCHOOL AND IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

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## **1. ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE: ANALYSIS ON PAST ADVERSE EXPERIENCES AND CONSEQUENCES ON GROWTH PATHWAYS**

Adoption and foster care provide children with a family environment and a positive context in which to recover from early disadvantages. However, while numerous studies have examined the behavioural and emotional adjustment of children in foster care and adoption, little is known about their educational needs and pathways (Stother et al., 2019). Although some studies have not found significant differences in academic achievement between adoptees and non-adoptees (Dalen and Theie, 2019), most research has highlighted the potential vulnerability of these children in terms of learning, academic achievement and literacy (Sempowicz et al., 2018; Anderman et al., 2021). In particular, the literature has highlighted how children from different ethnic backgrounds and late adoptees, both domestic and international, often have language deficits, learning difficulties and poorer academic outcomes (Helder et al., 2016; Rygvold and Theie, 2016).

Similarly, the literature highlights that students in foster care often experience lower academic achievement and higher classroom behaviour problems compared to their non-fostered peers, which may further contribute to classroom failure (Luke and O'Higgins, 2018; McGuire et al., 2021). However, while many studies have focused on the factors related to the backgrounds of adoptive and foster children that are associated with this gap in learning skills and school performance (e.g. Rutter et al., 2010, Anderman et al., 2018), scholars should better explore the protective factors of the family and social

context and the resources that need to be activated to facilitate school engagement, self-efficacy, academic skills and success of these targeted students (Knapp et al., 2013; Goldberg et al., 2021). This means identifying modifiable environmental factors – such as parental attitudes, social support or teaching strategies – that positively support their academic trajectories.

## **2. STIGMA AND PREJUDICE**

The scientific literature highlights the frequent experiences of discrimination and microaggressions faced by children in foster care and adoption (Sue et al., 2007; Garber and Grotevant, 2015; Baden, 2016; Ferritti and Guerrieri, 2019). These negative experiences can lead to marginalization (Migliarini et al., 2019), educational failures (Ferritti et al., 2020a, 2021; Ferritti, 2023), and social exclusion (Morgan and Langrehr, 2019).

To address these issues, it is essential to explore elements that can stimulate a process of analysis and deconstruction of existing realities. This involves creating new narratives and cultural perspectives that challenge the status quo and promote inclusivity. By doing so, we can begin to dismantle the systemic barriers that perpetuate discrimination and marginalization.

One approach is to implement educational programs that raise awareness about the unique challenges faced by children in foster care and adoption. These programs can provide training for educators, caregivers, and peers to recognize and face microaggressions and discrimination. Additionally, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment in schools and communities can help mitigate the negative impacts of these experiences.

Another important element is the promotion of positive representation in media and literature of these life experiences to help change public perceptions and reduce stigma. This can empower these children by providing them with role models and narratives that reflect their own experiences.

## **3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ITALIAN SITUATION**

In 2012, following the constant work of family associations and the Coordinamento CARE, the Italian Ministry of Education set up a working group to study the problems regarding the school inclusion of students with an adoptive background and in temporary foster care. In 2013, the Coordinamento CARE itself organized a help desk for Italian families, to identify clear specific needs, and it signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Education to work on the problem. A special Joint Working Group was

established, leading to the publication of the *Guidelines for the right to education of adopted students* (2014) and of the *Guidelines for the right to education of students outside of their original families* (students in the foster care system) (2017). To verify the impact of the Guidelines 2014, in 2019 the Coordinamento CARE promoted a national research, addressed to teachers of schools of all levels and to adoptive parents (Ferritti et al. 2020a, 2020b). The data collected by the research raised alarm since just over half of the responding teachers (1801 in total) knew the Guidelines and only 21.1% had received specific training on the topic. Through the continuous work of the Coordinamento CARE, the Commissione Adozioni Internazionali, in 2021, signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Education, which made possible to review the Guidelines 2014 with the aim, above all, of triggering a new and organic training process in the country. The new document was transmitted to schools in 2023.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Talk about Equality and Social Justice in the Educational System for children with a history of adoption and foster care leads to consider how political, educational, and cultural measures should be offered to guarantee full opportunity and to contrast inequality and stigma.

At the political level, the *Guidelines for the right to education* (2014/2023; 2017) represent a decisive step, unique in Europe, however, their application is not yet widespread in Italy. It is important to establish a dialogue between school, educational services, and families to build a synergistic and integrated system. It is therefore a priority to delineate common projects and educational alliances among the actors involved (Pati, 2019; Tabacchi, 2021), which provide children the possibility of overcoming some conditions of disadvantage or prejudice resulting from educational poverty.

In this perspective, there are still many questions which need to be addressed by interdisciplinary studies, to examine opportunities and possibilities for promoting resilience in children in adoption or foster care. It is worth delving into what are the conditions that today favour full inclusion and equity in children's processes of growth and education; what proposals can be made to plan actions and interventions that meets their educational needs; what training to provide for teachers, educators, parents to counter stereotypes and bias discourses in formal, non-formal, and informal education science fields (Schools, Services, public consensus). The hope is that interdisciplinary

research can increase knowledge about adoption and foster care, and help to spread a correct culture on the subject-matter.

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# BEING WELL AT SCHOOL: EQUITY BETWEEN WELL-BEING AND STUDENT-CENTRED PEDAGOGY

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## INTRODUCTION

The need to pursue equity in education in order to achieve an ever-higher degree of social justice is internationally shared (OECD, 2012; UN, 2015; UNICEF, 2021), but the different definitions that can be given to these terms lead to various interpretations and different educational projects. We intend to focus on equity visions that value children's school well-being (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020) and promote student-centred pedagogies (Berg & Gleason, 2018).

The topic is becoming increasingly central (OECD, 2023): we must pay attention not only to students' academic performance, but also to their unique ways of approaching learning (Spratt, 2017). In this sense, promoting pedagogical methods and organisational strategies that create a positive school climate is crucial. Therefore, education is an essential disciplinary lens to abandon an adult-centred logic and cultivate approaches based on student needs.

## 1. EQUITY AND WELL-BEING: AN ESSENTIAL LINK

Shaping a school that recognises and values students' strengths means ensuring that each person develops their potential through appropriate educational opportunities that aim not only at achieving certain academic standards, but especially supporting personal growth (Clement, 2010). Establishing a positive school climate is an indispensable aspect of making this vision of equity a reality, both at the level of teachers' professional action in the classroom (Ahghar, 2016; Cohen et al., 2009) and at the level of educational policies formulated by individual schools, also with reference to different models of leadership and governance (Allen et al., 2015; Pepper & Hamilton Thomas, 2002).

In this context, equity represents the horizon of meaning for pedagogical action and school organisation (Ferrero, 2023): it is about considering the different

variables that can affect learning pathways, not having an “average student” in mind, but being open to diverse stories and voices (Granata, 2016). Ultimately, acting from an equity perspective means focusing on school well-being, by nurturing the educational relationship, adopting approaches and methods that promote motivation and joy for learning and implementing organisational strategies based on students’ needs, with school leaders playing a pivotal role (Smith et al., 2020).

## **2. STUDENT-CENTRED PEDAGOGY: A KEY ROLE FOR EQUITY**

Adopting a student-centred pedagogy proves crucial to guarantee students’ excellent school paths in terms of well-being (Bremner et al., 2022), with significant repercussions on learning (Armbruster et al., 2009). It is a matter of considering children’s interests, their cognitive styles and their rhythms from a personalized perspective (Mincu, 2013), not giving in to the temptation of a one-size-fits-all but recognising and valuing everyone’s skills and talents.

Cultivating equity understood as the promotion of children’s school well-being through the student-centred pedagogy approach can be done on several fronts (Anderson et al., 2022). The actions concern aspects related to both pedagogical practice and organisational culture (e.g., school time and space, assessment, inclusive processes that do not create segregation dynamics or lead to compensatory pedagogy, overcoming gender stereotypes, valuing different styles of intelligence and linguistic diversity).

## **CONCLUSION**

We intertwined the constructs of equity, well-being and student-centred pedagogy through the disciplinary lens of education from a theoretical perspective. Our exploration is not self-contained, but is intended to stimulate interdisciplinary reflection. In fact, it introduces the papers presented at the Third International Conference of the journal *Scuola Democratica* “Education and/or Social Justice” (4-6 June 2024, University of Cagliari, Italy) in the panel with the same title as our paper.

Ultimately, the attempt is to answer these questions, which are not meant to be exhaustive:

- how can the construct of equity be conceptualised with reference to school well-being and student-centred pedagogy?
- what dynamics make the possibilities of school well-being unequal?



- what role do school times and spaces play in enhancing the uniqueness of each student and promoting their well-being?
- which assessment practices cultivate students' well-being in terms of reducing anxiety and supporting learning processes?
- how to plan inclusion without creating dynamics of segregation or exclusion?
- how to value diversity in all its forms (linguistic, cultural, learning styles...), without giving in to the risk of a culturalist or differential pedagogy?

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# USING *PEREŽIVANIE* IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE CLASS GROUP

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Within a classroom setting, the relationships and social-emotional experiences that occur between peers are manifold and can be understood as the product of a pattern. Examining the systemic relationship and interdependence between developing individuals and the context of life, Vygotskij observed that in addition to the subjective characteristics of individuals, the objective characteristics of the social environment also determine how an experience is perceived and the trajectory of human development nonetheless. In a Vygotskian perspective, people live the same event very differently from one another and one's *Pereživanie* becomes the way the experience is understood and internalized by the individual in which the emotional and cognitive components are interpreted as a unicum. By proposing autobiographical activities to young students, such as oral or written narratives referring to a significant episode that involved the entire class group (a trip, a particular activity carried out at school, a theatre workshop, an end-of-school-year party, the arrival of a new classmate or a new teacher, etc.) it is possible to bring out the subjective experiences of *Pereživanie* and to use them as an analytical tool between individual and social experiences of the students in order to foster a construction of a positive classroom environment.

School Well-Being, Student-Centered Pedagogy, Activities in a Group Class, *Pereživanie*, Autobiographical Memories.

## INTRODUCTION

Vygotskij's cultural-historical theory distinguishes the necessary *lower* psychological functions understood as spontaneous processes guided exclusively by biological factors from the *higher* psychological functions that are understood as logical memory, abstract thoughts and language, voluntary attention and creative imagination that describe the natural capacities of the

human beings (Vygotskij, 1978, 1987, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2019). In Vygotskij's view, social relationships are the basis for the development of all higher psychological functions and each higher psychological function manifests twice during the process of development; firstly, during social activities in peer interaction through an inter-psychological process and secondly, internally, during individual activities through an intra-psychological process (Vygotskij, Lurija & Leontjev, 1970). The internalized use of tools and signs that leads to the development of higher psychic functions, therefore, occurs through interactions with others (Vygotskij, 1990). During everyday school life a crucial role is played by the linguistic exchanges between adults and children where they communicate and plan together the activity they will be engaged in and through which the adults make their thinking activity visible and comprehensible to the children, leading them to the next step of cognitive and socio-emotional growth. Since it is a common belief that the higher psychological functions are all skills that are learned through practice, there is a tendency to assume the transition between these two processes occurs spontaneously and non-traumatically, rather than considering an inevitable period of 'crisis' (Kellogg & Veresov, 2021). According to Vygotskij, the "qualitative leap" in cognitive abilities happens through an alternation between stable ages during which changes are minimal and the passing of critical ages that allow the transition to a later developmental stage. In this sense, Vygotsky focuses on the individual changes that occur for each child following their unique rhythm of development. What Vygotskij means by 'crisis' is that, in the first place, the situation of social development is one in which internal rather than environmental factors seem to be in control. In the case of an assessment examines exclusively the socio-emotional developmental aspects, what should be of interest is not only the learning capacity but rather the systematic observation of the ways students use and draw on their knowledge and skills influencing their growth steps. If the social and cultural environment is not rigidly predetermined, it can be organized based on the socio-emotional needs that may gradually emerge. Achieving this requires leaving more educational space for each student through a methodology that uses teaching activities to encourage participation and active learning with cooperation processes (e.g. *cooperative learning* and *peer education*). In doing so it becomes possible to provide adequate and appropriate *stimuli*, especially for young students with emotional, affective and relational difficulties. Such an approach would enable teachers to provide specific educational and didactic actions focusing not only on the socio-emotional competencies that children have already achieved, but also on those

that could determine their subsequent growth steps (Minson, Veresov & Hammer, 2022).

### **THE RE-ELABORATION OF LIVED EXPERIENCES (PEREŽIVANIE) AS AN ANALYTICAL UNIT WITHIN THE CLASS GROUP**

The past experience of each student has its own specific weight. In the context of everyday school life, it is often the case that many young students present an attitude that is positively or negatively influenced by past experiences, which may result in good or poor school performances or, more generally, possible fondness or disaffection for the school environment (Karabanova 2010; Mok, 2017). Experience (Pereživanie) is a unit of development comprehending both internal (emotions, consciousness) and external experience (social environment) as integral parts of an irreducible unity, as it integrates the cognitive, emotional and practical dimensions of human life. Such a unity can't be fragmented into separate characteristics of the person and the environment. Instead, it represents a continuously evolving process, capturing the dynamic interplay and two-way interaction between the individual and the surrounding environment (Veresov, 2010). Thus, it is possible to identify Pereživanie as a category for understanding human development, serving as a minimal unit that reflects all the characteristics of the developmental whole, encompassing both social environment and the person. This unit undergoes two distinct types of changes: (a) continuous and quantitative alterations that may be classified as learning and (b) discontinuous and qualitative transformations that are traditionally recognized as development. In individuals, this unity is ideally reflected in consciousness, affectively in emotions and practically in changes to personal action potential. Therefore, when observing a young learner's behavior in a typical school context, what is happening cannot be understood exclusively based on the individual's characteristics but as a developmental continuum (Jóhannsdóttir & Roth, 2014), where previous forms of experience also influence development as a whole (Roth & Jornet, 2014). Within a classroom setting, the relationships and social-emotional experiences that occur between peers are manifold and can be understood as the product of a system. For example, when examining the systemic relationship and interdependence between the members of a class group, in addition to the subjective characteristics of individual students, it is primarily the objective characteristics of the social environment that determine how an experience is perceived and the trajectory of human development (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994). The events young learners experience in the classroom, particularly

those ‘that stands out as a lasting memory’, carry an affective dimension that cannot be separated from its cognitive, emotional and practical aspects. These events hold unique significance as they constitute units of *Pereživanie* shaped by, and building upon, previous experiences (Veresov & Fleer, 2016). From this perspective, *Pereživanie* can be understood as a category that retains and preserves the defining characteristics of a context, while also integrating the evolving personal and environmental elements. It effectively represents an analytical unit embodying the intrinsic traits of the person (Jóhannsdóttir & Roth, 2014). The systemic relationship and interdependence among members of a class group, along with the objective characteristics of the social environment, shape the experiences of young students in school. This reality underscores the necessity for teachers to plan and implement specific activities aimed at illuminating these *Pereživanie*. According to Vygotskij’s cultural-historical theory, developmental processes are shaped by evolutionary changes; however, only ‘dramatic’ and ‘contradictory’ moments from the past influence the subject’s life. The extent to which a young student is supported in realizing and harnessing their full potential to achieve a higher level of socio-emotional development depends on their *social developmental context* (Veresov, 2006). For instance, poorly managed ‘dramatic’ and ‘contradictory’ moments may pose a risk to a young student’s socio-emotional development; however they also hold the potential for significant progresses (Ma, Hammer & Veresov 2021). Ultimately, cultivating a new and different self-awareness for each student can reduce the risk of consolidating an attitude of possible disaffection and can help foster a renewed attitude of interest in their peers and the broader school environment.

## **USING PEREŽIVANIE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE CLASS GROUP**

Vygotskij defines *Pereživanie* as a ‘refractive prism’ that reflects various aspects of its environment and influences the impact it can have on students within the school context (Germanos & Longarezi, 2019). In these terms, from the standpoint of promoting a student-centred pedagogy that safeguards the student’s uniqueness and well-being at school, it is essential for teachers to provide specific autobiographical storytelling activities. Such activities are particularly beneficial when implemented during the last two years of primary school, a period when meaning-making is evolving and the articulation of narratives with autobiographical content is richer in details and nuances. What remains in the young student’s memory regarding school life are the ‘dramatic’

and ‘contradictory moments’ from the past, both positive and negative. The recollections formed today are reflected through *Pereživanie* and serve two key purposes: first, they act as an indicator of how *Pereživanie* functions as a prism; second, they enable the reconstruction of the ‘dramatic’ and ‘contradictory moments’ of the past that the young students experienced. This dual insight enhances our understanding of the role and influence the environment has on each student’s socio-emotional development. Memory and the self are shaped by specific social interactions and cultural structures, leading to the formation of an autobiographical narrative that define what is appropriate to remember and how to do so. It can thus be assumed that autobiographical memories are partially constructed through social engagement (Fivush & Haden, 2003). Through written rather than oral narration, personal memories emerge with less embarrassment and reduced conditioning of other classmates. This allows for the analysis of the social-emotional aspects that influenced the recalled experience. Using autobiographical storytelling in written to examine school memories can be a valuable tool for fostering expression and narration, as well as depicting the ‘prism of experiences’ (*Pereživanie*) that young learners have encountered in the school context (Hedegaard, 2009). Considering the individual *Pereživanie*, it is possible to implement specific autobiographical activities throughout the school year. These activities aim to identify the socio-emotional experiences that may have shaped young students’ personal beliefs, which can lead to an inaccurate self-perception. This, in turn, affects the development of positive relationships with peers and, more broadly, influences the overall classroom climate (Zaporozhets, 2002). The ‘prism of experiences’ (*Pereživanie*) that emerges for each student effectively captures the subjective world and often highlights elements that can be interpreted in relation to their well-being or discomfort within the school context. Notably, biographical involvement enables the reconstruction of the school lives of students in a class group who have shared the same, or similar, experiences, shedding light on their personal cognitive, affective, value-based, and relational dimensions (Demetrio, 2000). An activity that explores autobiographical elements can be implemented by encouraging young students to create written narratives about a significant episode that involved the entire class group (such as a trip, a memorable lesson or activity, a drama workshop, an end-of-year class party, the arrival of a new classmate or a new teacher, etc.). The goal is to use the insights gained from these experiences as a potential analytical tool to explore the interplay between the individual and the social context experienced by the students (Veresov, 2019). In this dynamic,

promoting an active participation of all members of the class group not only enhances the understanding of different perspectives but also fosters a positive climate. Such an approach allows for a deeper understanding on how each student perceives and internalizes their lived experiences, integrating emotional, cognitive and practical dimensions into a cohesive and unique whole (Michell, 2016).

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# BRINGING EDUCATION BACK TO SCHOOL: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT TO STRENGTHEN TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM AND AVOID THE MEDICALISATION OF SCHOOLING

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Bringing education back to school is both an epistemological and a professional issue. Following a theoretical framework, this paper presents the results of an action research involving primary school teachers, parents and a neuropsychiatrist.

school; education; students' well-being; teacher professionalism; Italy

## INTRODUCTION

The pivotal role of teachers in providing equitable and quality education for all with significant impact on society has long been internationally acknowledged (Mincu, 2015; Sahlberg & Boce, 2010). Teacher professionalism is essential to the strength of school systems, concerning educational policies, institutional practices and daily school life (Tatto, 2021). Therefore, investing in teachers through initial and in-service education, career development and enhanced social and economic recognition is a key issue. This paper explores the challenges of the teaching profession, with a focus on the Italian context.

The Italian school system is facing several structural challenges. Low public spending on education (OECD, 2024) leads to various territorial differences: all-day education is widespread in northern Italy, while in the south it often remains below 10%; many school buildings need maintenance. In addition, the increasing adherence to neoliberal logic exacerbates inequalities between schools and students (Baldacci, 2022). Thus, teachers are losing their social

relevance due to a lack of investment and a public discourse that denounces the inefficiency of education as a great equaliser (Gremigni, 2012).

Bringing education back to school is a matter of strengthening the school system and reaffirming the social role of teachers (Ferrero & Granata, 2024). This paper explores the importance of prioritizing teacher professionalism in planning the inclusion of students with special educational needs, in order to counteract trends of medicalization and the delegation.

## **1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Bringing education back to school involves both the relationship between disciplines and the dialogue between professionals. It is essential to refocus on the educational perspective, both epistemologically and professionally.

### **1.1. In Dialogue, but on an equal footing!**

The complexity of educational phenomena makes a single-disciplinary approach inadequate (Morin, 1999). Fragmented knowledge fails to capture the multiple factors influencing students' educational paths, the school culture and organization. Furthermore, interdisciplinary dialogue is authentic only if there are no hierarchical relationships between disciplines (Bertolini, 2005; Granata, 2018).

Education often takes a subordinate role (Moscato, 2012): when it moves into other fields, it can lose its specific insight on the student's growth path. As far as school and special educational needs are concerned, the attention is no longer on the student and their approach to learning, but on what is perceived as a deviation from the idea of norms, on codes and diagnoses (Gambacorti-Passerini, 2016; Gaspari, 2016). As a result, the focus shifts from students' strengths to their difficulties, diminishing the view of the person in favor of aspects like certification, deficits and distance from the norm.

In the school context, education is the key disciplinary lens to understand the various dynamics that arise. Its dual nature, both reflective and practical (Chiosso, 2018), should be more strongly emphasized both at the epistemic level and in dialogue with other disciplines. The educational perspective helps to maintain the connection between instruction and education (Biesta, 2012) ensuring that the school experience is aimed at the holistic growth of the person.

## **1.2. Interprofessional Collaboration for Special Educational Needs**

The ancillarity of education as a disciplinary lens is reflected in the position of the teacher professionalism in the interprofessional dialogue on the inclusion of students with special educational needs. Therefore, it is necessary to affirm the specific professional competence of teachers (Arsena, 2024) in developing pedagogical responses to students' needs. In fact, neuropsychiatrists, psychologists, speech therapists and social workers are considered more entitled to provide operational and planning guidelines for schooling, relegating teachers to a purely executive role, which is detrimental to their professional self and, above all, dangerous for the quality of students' experience.

Medical professionals have a fundamental role in the diagnostic process: the information provided by teachers is certainly useful, but must be supplemented by particular procedures and tools. Likewise, they must respect the competences of teachers, who can respond to the specific needs of each student with pedagogical means (De Anna, 2022). Teachers themselves must defend and strengthen their role as designers of students' educational paths, without ceding this responsibility to others (Martinelli, 2015): otherwise, the danger is to delegate pedagogical planning to professionals who are careful to provide technical and "special" answers and who do not prioritise the collaborative dimension of learning processes and school life.

There is a need to rediscover teaching (Biesta, 2017) in order to design inclusive processes from an educational perspective. If the interprofessional dialogue only marginally considers this point of view, the need for change for the whole context is ignored (Ainscow, 2020). In fact, student empowerment does not take place through their adaptation to the educational offer with individualised teaching methods, but through personalization processes in which the classroom is seen as a learning community to which everyone makes their own contribution (Ianes & Demo, 2023). Ultimately, bringing education back to school means moving away from the logic of the standard and the average student and not delegating pedagogical and didactic decisions to other professionals (Bellantoni & Lombardi, 2020).

## **2. THE RESEARCH DESIGN**

Our research aims to understand how the medicalization of schooling can be avoided by reaffirming teaching professionalism. We want to answer the following research questions:

- what are the consequences of the ancillary educational perspective on schooling?
- how can the inclusion of special educational needs be addressed by purely pedagogical means without medicalization and delegation?
- how can teacher professionalism be brought back into focus?

## **2.1. Methods and Tools**

We used a qualitative approach (Luttrell, 2010). An action research was conducted: the primary school teachers were the main actors; the path with them was triangulated with the voice of parents and a neuropsychiatrist.

Five low structured focus groups (Morgan, 2013) were conducted with the teachers in order to explore their ideas on the research topic and design pedagogical strategies related to special needs. Narrative interviews (Gubrium et al., 2012) were conducted with the parents and the neuropsychiatrist about their perspectives on the theme.

## **2.2. Participants**

9 teachers of three first classes of a primary school in Lombardy (Northern Italy) took part to the research. Furthermore, 2 parents and 1 neuropsychiatrist were involved.

## **2.3. Data Analysis**

The data collected were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After having familiarized with the participants' dialogic interactions, we code them by drawing out the relevant discursive segments in relation to the research questions; then, themes are constructed and defined to summarize the different codes into a central and organizing concept that is declined in different nuances.

## **3. RESULTS**

Some significant excerpts from the interviews with the parents and the neuropsychiatrist are offered. Instead, data collected from the path with teachers are presented from these thematic strands:

- importance of being a diverse but close-knit team;
- teacher habitus;
- classroom as a space for dialogue;
- beyond the traditional schooling;
- enhancing hidden capabilities.

The names used are pseudonyms.

### **3.1. The Parents**

The first parent interviewed explains exactly how school culture and organisation can negatively affect the students' well-being. Specifically, a school transfer produced problems that have never occurred before and the uncritical categorization of the pupil into the special educational needs category by the teachers.

Vicky is a sociable and lively child. She faced major changes after we moved this year.

In her previous school, teachers appreciated her intelligence and empathy for classmates with disabilities. However, new teachers see her behavior as opposite, noting her refusal to write in cursive and difficulty completing assignments.

They recommended screening for dyslexia, dyscalculia and ADHD; they interpreted her sensitivity to classmates with disabilities as "difficulty in relating to *normal* classmates".

As parents, we feel confused and ignored by the teachers.

Lucia, Vicky's mother

The second parent interviewed also points out how schools can extinguish students' motivation to learn and invoke the category of special educational needs if results are unsatisfactory. Furthermore, in this case, bilingualism is considered not as a resource but as an obstacle to learning.

Pablo is a Spanish-Italian child. He has always preferred solitary play and has a strong interest in science and nature.

Despite his intelligence, he struggles in primary school due to traditional teaching methods and limited outdoor activities. While thriving in his interests, he dislikes group work.

Teachers suspected autism or ADHD and requested a screening, which came back negative. They also suggested exempting Pablo from activities he resists.

Julia, Pablo's mother

### **3.2. The Neuropsychiatrist**

The neuropsychiatrist interviewed points out that teachers too often seek external advice without questioning how they can respond to students' difficulties with their professional skills. This approach leads to an overburdening of healthcare facilities and a medicalization of learning paths.

Teachers must carefully consider whether to refer students to neuropsychiatry.

Many foreign children are screened for potential learning disorders based on teachers' reports. While such diagnoses may sometimes be valid, it's also reasonable to consider that these difficulties might stem from the natural process of learning written Italian, which requires time.

Marco, neuropsychiatrist

### **3.3. The Teachers**

Firstly, teachers emphasise the need to be a cohesive team. The diversity of skills and visions is seen as a value.

We are a team with different ages and skills. We get along well: everyone plays their part and the children benefit too.

Carla

A good climate is not created from one day to the next, you must work at it.... Both among adults and with children.

Marta

Secondly, the focus is on the teacher habitus, especially to deal with those cases where students approach learning with anxiety and fear.

We must communicate that even the teacher can make mistakes.

Mattia

Many children have performance anxiety: you must work on this!

Barbara

Anxiety belongs to the teachers too: certifications also depend on taking away the anxiety of getting all pupils to achieve the same goals.

Carla

Thirdly, the ideas about the classroom are crucial: it is not an aseptic space, but a pedagogical environment that must be designed with regard to relational climate.

We take 10 minutes every morning to tell each other how we feel. It is important to create a peaceful atmosphere.

Anna

We create a class museum with our school memories.

Barbara



We have five minutes (which often become much more than five) in which we tell each other what is on our minds...

Maria Grazia

It becomes clear that the school time, space and organisation must be renewed. When students have difficulties, the solution cannot be to immediately refer to the category of special educational needs: this would entail the risk of labelling and medicalization.

The classes divided by age are very rigid: sometimes more flexibility is needed... Mixing the ages would help many children to learn better.

Anna

We should create a toolbox that everyone can use if they need it and independently.

Giulia

Not all students learn in the same way. Some need more attention and different teaching methods. I need to incorporate different approaches to teaching.

Carla

Finally, teachers emphasise the need to focus not only on knowledge and abilities related to school subjects. Every student has skills and talents that must be fully recognised.

The notebook does not tell all the students' abilities. We strive to find them, but it is difficult to communicate this approach to families.

Anna

We carry out activities that bring out other skills than the typical school ones... Tending a plant, contributing to the local area... The best skills emerge when students work together!

Giulia

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The results of our study show that the dynamics of delegation and medicalization as well as the devaluation of teacher professionalism are still present in the Italian school system. Regarding the second area, teachers themselves prefer to turn to other professions to respond to challenges that are primarily pedagogical in nature.

In addition to addressing the structural deficits of the school system at a

political level, we must move away from the belief that certain learning styles or intelligences are more valuable than others. Every student possesses unique skills and talents that deserve to be nurtured, even if they are wrongly deemed irrelevant for school. Cultivating students' well-being requires a pedagogy that places them at the centre, without a false understanding of norm or standard.

Thus, it is important not to prematurely label momentary school difficulties as permanent special educational needs. Conversely, we must question the traditional understanding of the educational experience. School times and spaces must be adapted to the needs of students by finding new organisational solutions, in order to create the conditions for better learning for all.

## CONCLUSION

Our paper focused on the Italian school system, but our reflections may also be useful for other contexts with similar characteristics and problems. In fact, improving teacher professionalism is a central theme in the international debate.

Bringing education back to school is an ethical, epistemic and professional issue. Adopting this perspective means putting learners at the centre of teaching, abandoning an adult-oriented logic and understanding personalization as a classroom-based approach, without separate and multi-level paths. By imagining new ways of schooling, students' hidden talents and skills can be valued.

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# LISTENING TO SILENT VOICES: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE STUDENT VOICE APPROACH TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVENESS AND STUDENT WELL-BEING

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Through a literature review, this work aims to investigate how much the student voice is integrated within the teacher training and how this practice has repercussions on the professional practice of teachers and on the well-being of students. Specifically, we aim to investigate how much the student voice is integrated into the academic training curriculum of future teachers and how this practice impacts on teachers' professional practice in an inclusive perspective. Indeed, the literature shows that students involved in student voice practices demonstrate greater involvement and responsibility for the tasks assigned to them, increasing the likelihood of generating meaningful learning. Based on this assumption, the research hypotheses that experiencing student voice in one's own training helps teachers who will go on to work with students with disabilities to internalise the importance and urgency of giving voice to the people usually unheard, and that experiencing engagement and advocacy can help future teachers to replicate this practice in their work.

inclusion; student voice; teacher training; students well-being

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education aspires to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. However, individuals with disabilities are often excluded from critical educational processes and decisions that shape their experiences. This exclusion reflects a broader pattern of structural and historical ableism that continues to marginalize their voices in educational contexts. The concept of "student voice" challenges these inequities by advocating for the active participation of students in shaping their learning environments. As highlighted by Cook-Sather (2002), neglecting to

include students in the design of educational systems undermines both their agency and the effectiveness of those systems.

Despite the transformative potential of student voice, individuals with disabilities, particularly those with complex communication needs, are frequently absent from these discussions. Batt et al. (2023) underscore the persistent underrepresentation of disabled students in student voice initiatives, a gap that is deeply entwined with epistemic violence. Defined by Spivak (1988), epistemic violence refers to systemic practices that silence or limit the capacity of marginalized groups to speak and be heard. Addressing this exclusion requires a critical reassessment of traditional approaches to education, shifting from a paradigm of doing research “on” students with disabilities to one of doing research “with” them (Boyle, 2012). This shift involves recovering the subjectivity of individuals, restoring their capacity to define their own life paths, and considering their voices authoritative in these processes (Marchisio & Curto, 2019).

This study investigates how participatory methodologies can amplify the voices of students with disabilities, promoting inclusiveness and well-being. Grounded in disability studies, which critique deficit-based models and advocate for approaches rooted in rights, empowerment, and self-determination (UN Convention, 2006), the research emphasizes collaboration, experiential knowledge, and reflexivity as critical tools for addressing entrenched inequalities in education (Cornish et al., 2023).

By bridging the gap between inclusive theory and practice, this research offers insights into the potential of participatory approaches to create more equitable educational environments. Ultimately, it aims to enhance the experiences and well-being of all students, ensuring that their voices are not just heard but actively shape the systems they inhabit.

## **1. STUDENT VOICE AND WELL-BEING**

The concept of Student Voice has evolved significantly, transitioning from tokenistic approaches to practices that position students as active participants in educational reform. Fielding (2004b) outlines this evolution, where students move from being data sources to becoming co-researchers and central actors in shaping their educational environments. This shift aligns with participatory and rights-based approaches, emphasizing power redistribution and student agency.

The integration of Student Voice is closely tied to theories of inclusion and

disability. Disability, as Mitchell and Snyder (2000) observe, has historically served as a trope of human disqualification, forming the “negative space” against which the notion of the ‘normal’ body is constructed. Davis (1995) critiques this construction, advocating for a social model of disability that emphasizes empowerment, self-determination, and equity. Reframing the voices of students with disabilities as central to educational processes challenges ableist structures and promotes inclusive practices.

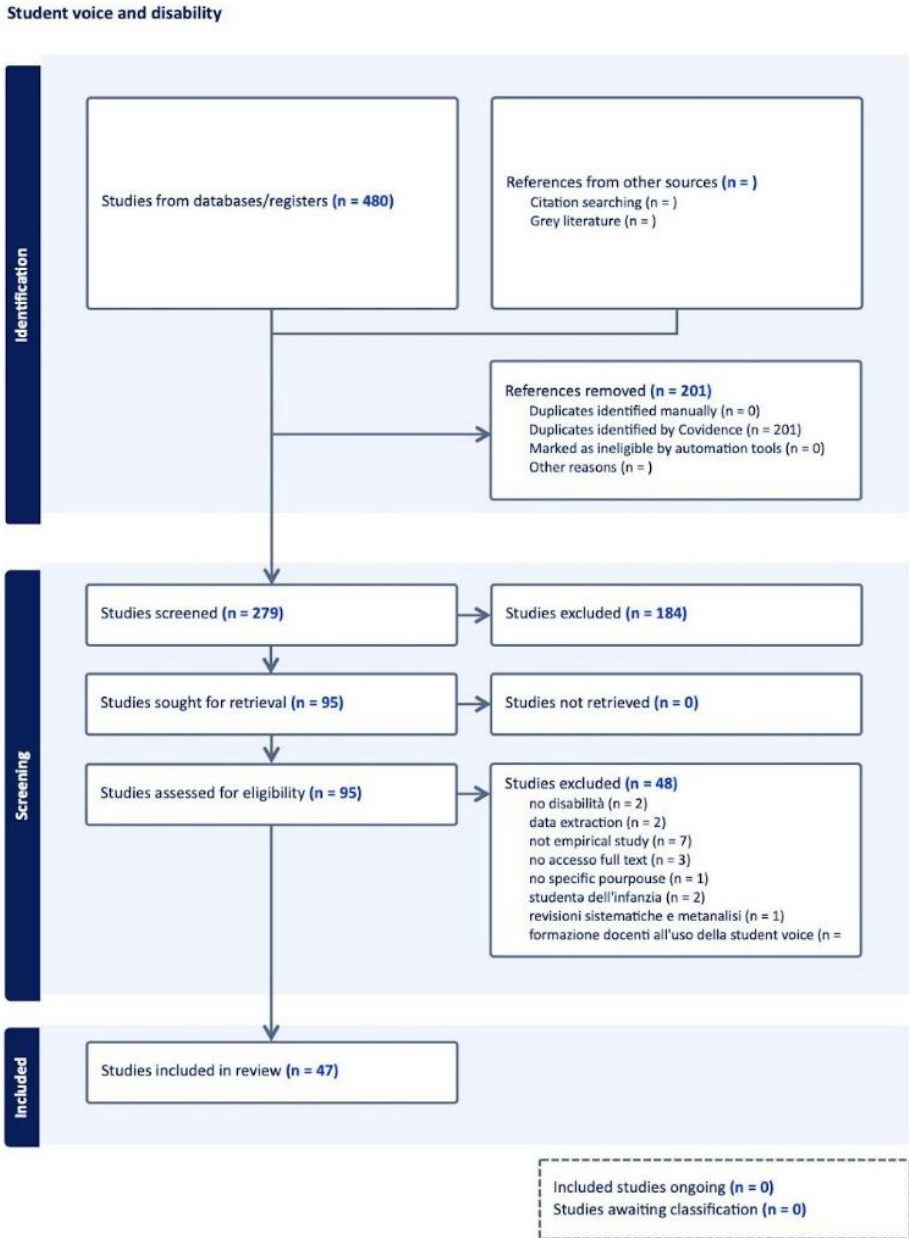
Recent studies highlight the benefits of Student Voice in addressing systemic barriers and fostering equity. Messiou et al. (2020) argue that engaging students as equal partners enhances diversity and aligns practices with inclusive values, linking participation and empowerment to well-being by fostering belonging and self-efficacy. Cook-Sather et al. (2014) report positive impacts on critical thinking, engagement, and agency, while Bovill et al. (2011) and Werder et al. (2012) emphasize its role in fostering leadership, responsibility, and motivation for both students and educators. Halliday et al. (2019) further connect participatory action research (PAR) to well-being, demonstrating how it fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness—psychological needs identified by Ryan and Deci (2000)—while creating inclusive spaces where all students feel valued and empowered.

However, significant challenges persist in implementing Student Voice inclusively. Findings from this study’s systematic review reveal a predominant reliance on verbal communication methods, which exclude students with complex communicative needs. Only 4% of the studies reviewed utilized non-verbal tools like Talking Mats or visual narratives, underscoring the need for methodologies that accommodate diverse ways of expressing and participating.

## **2. METHODS**

This study employed a systematic review and participatory action research to investigate the use of Student Voice with individuals with disabilities in formal academic settings, exploring how and to what extent their voices are heard and hold transformative power within these contexts. The systematic review was conducted using the PRISMA framework to ensure a rigorous and transparent process of identifying, screening, and synthesizing relevant literature (Moher et al., 2009), and was focused on studies published between 1990 and 2024. The workflow is exemplified in Figure 1, which provides a visual representation of the systematic review process.

Fig. 1. Systematic Review Workflow





The systematic review revealed critical gaps in the literature, notably the underrepresentation of students with complex needs and the predominance of verbal communication methods. These findings informed the design of the participatory action research phase, conducted in secondary schools in Turin. This phase involved focus groups with students, aimed at exploring their perceptions of inclusion, the dynamics of being listened to, and the impact of participatory practices on their well-being. The research is expanding to include teachers, families, and self-representation groups, fostering a multi-stakeholder dialogue to co-construct inclusive strategies for educational practices.

Throughout the study, a strong emphasis was placed on reflexivity and intersubjectivity, addressing ethical complexities such as power imbalances and ensuring that participants' contributions were central to the research process. This combined approach provides both a theoretical and practical understanding of the role of student voice in promoting inclusiveness and well-being, bridging gaps between research and practice.

### **3. RESULTS**

The findings of this study reflect the dual focus of understanding existing methodologies for incorporating Student Voice and exploring its practical application through participatory action research. These results are presented in two parts: the outcomes of the systematic review and the preliminary insights from the focus groups conducted in Turin.

The systematic review revealed persistent gaps in the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities and complex communicative needs in educational research and practice. Among the studies reviewed, only 4% employed non-verbal or assistive communication methods such as Talking Mats or narrative-based approaches. The overwhelming reliance on verbal communication methods underscores a structural limitation that restricts the participation of students with diverse communicative abilities. Moreover, the review identified a lack of integration between inclusive education theory and practical methodologies designed to empower marginalized student populations.

Building on these insights, the focus groups with secondary school students in Turin provided a practical perspective on the dynamics of inclusion and Student Voice educational settings. Students frequently expressed feelings of exclusion due to limited opportunities to influence decisions affecting their learning environments but also conveyed a strong desire for meaningful dialogue with

educators and peers. Being heard was associated with a sense of belonging and improved well-being. Preliminary findings suggest that inclusive participatory practices can address these concerns, with students reporting greater motivation and connection to their learning communities when their contributions were acknowledged. These results align with broader literature linking Student Voice to enhanced well-being, agency, and engagement (Halliday et al., 2019; Messiou et al., 2020).

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study underscore the transformative potential of Student Voice in fostering inclusiveness and well-being in education. By examining both the theoretical frameworks and practical applications, this research highlights critical gaps in current methodologies and offers insights into how participatory practices can address these challenges. The discussion explores the implications of these findings for inclusive education, and student well-being.

The systematic review revealed a pervasive reliance on verbal communication methods, which excludes students with complex communicative needs from meaningful participation. This structural limitation reflects broader systemic barriers rooted in ableist assumptions about communication and inclusion. As suggested by Mitchell and Snyder (2000), these barriers perpetuate the marginalization of students with disabilities, framing them as deviations from the norm. Addressing these limitations requires a paradigm shift in how inclusiveness is operationalized, particularly in teacher training programs.

The focus groups provided a practical lens to understand how these theoretical challenges manifest in real-world settings. Students reported a lack of opportunities to influence decisions, which they associated with feelings of exclusion and reduced motivation. However, when given the chance to participate meaningfully, students expressed a heightened sense of belonging and agency, reinforcing the link between Student Voice and well-being. These findings echo Halliday et al. (2019), who emphasize the role of participatory practices in fostering psychological competencies such as autonomy and relatedness, which are central to student well-being.

Participation and inclusion are not merely procedural but have profound effects on students' sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and emotional well-being. These findings highlight the importance of fostering environments where Student Voice is a cornerstone of inclusive education, supported by collaboration with families and self-representation groups. By co-constructing strategies that

address diverse needs, schools can move beyond tokenistic inclusion to create frameworks that value and amplify all voices. Future research should explore how participatory practices can be scaled and integrated into broader educational systems, bridging the gap between theory and practice and ensuring education becomes a transformative force that uplifts all students and prioritizes their well-being.

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# THE WRITING WORKSHOP AS A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

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The paper examines the *Writing Workshop*, a process-oriented approach to teaching writing, in the context of Italian middle schools. This method, which emerged in the 1970s in the U.S. (Murray, 1972; Calkins, 1983), emphasises writing as a process and focuses on autonomy, student agency and teacher support. In recent years, it has also gained importance in Italy (Poletti-Riz, 2017). The adaptation of the method is analysed, as well as *Writing Workshop's* adherence to an authentic student-centred approach (Starkey, 2019). The main strengths of the method and the challenges of its implementation in the Italian context are analysed based on teachers' opinions on the subject and theoretical consideration. The paper concludes that while the *Writing Workshop* has significant potential, its success depends on thoughtful integration, teacher readiness to implement it, and ongoing research. Further research is recommended to evaluate its long-term effectiveness in Italian schools.

Writing Workshop; student-centred; strengths; weaknesses; Italian middle-school.

## INTRODUCTION

Writing is more than a technical skill, it is a powerful tool for personal expression, communication, and the development of critical thinking (Klein et al., 2014; Alber-Morgan et al., 2007). Traditional approaches to writing instruction have often focused on the final product, neglecting the iterative and reflective nature of the writing process itself (Lo Duca, 2013). Since the 1970s, cognitive process-oriented methods have been developed and refined, particularly in the U.S, which then became popular in other parts of Europe. Among these approaches, the *Writing Workshop*, an explicit and student-centred approach, has become well-known in Italy in the last ten years. This

paper therefore examines the *Writing Workshop* in the Italian context, especially in middle school, and analysis its adaptation as a *traveling library* (Popkewitz, 2005): in fact, the approach is adapted and tailored to a different time and space than it was originally developed. How the different aspects can work together is further analysed; moreover, the paper describes how the method can be reckoned a student-centred approach (Starkey, 2019; Tatal & Yazar, 2022). Furthermore, it provides a critical overview of the strengths and challenges of this approach in Italian middle schools, considering both the theoretical foundations and the practical real-world applications. In this way, this text aims to offer insights to educators who wish to introduce or further develop the *Writing Workshop* in Italian educational contexts.

## **1. THE BACKGROUND OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP**

### **1.1 The Writing Workshop roots**

Since the 1970s, the increasing recognition of cognitivism in teaching in the U.S. has also influenced teaching of writing. Donald Murray's essay "*Teach writing as a process, not product*" (1972) was one of the first suggestions to teach writing in a *workshop* mode: the assumption is to teach "unfinished writing" through a process of discovery of writing practice in which the student is the director of his or her own writing and learning. Students are thus seen as apprentices, experimenting with the written text and words through *trial-and-error*, according to their own time and needs. Emig (1971) explicitly described how the various processes involved in continuous, reiterative writing by twelfth graders take place, distinguishing prewriting, planning, starting, composing aloud, reformulating, stopping and contemplating the final product.

Later, cognitivist researchers detailed the writing processes: Hayes and Flower's (1980) model is the first pioneering contribution. The authors identified the processes of planning, translating and revising, as well as the influence of the task environment and long-term memory on composition. Further on, Bereiter and Scardmalia (1987) distinguished the difference between *knowledge-telling* and *knowledge-transforming*: these two developmental models helped to elaborate an evolutionary concept of writing skills; the ability to look back critically at the writing product – in an iterative process perspective – is, as they define it, a central aspect of good mastery of written composition, as is the ability to consider a communicative goal. To help students manage all the cognitive activities implied in writing, the authors introduce the concept of *procedural facilitators*, cognitive strategies designed to simplify or support the

writing activity by breaking writing into small parts.

Based on these premises, various cognitive methods of writing instruction developed in the United States, ranging from strictly cognitivist approaches, in which the learner uses graphic organisers to reduce cognitive load (SRSD program, Harris, 1982; Harris & Graham, 1992; CSIW, Englert et al. 1991), to process-oriented approaches. Among these approaches, the *Writing Workshop* promoted by Lucy Calkins is the one that emerged from the early of Donald Murray. The method became well known in the American and Anglophone context after Calkins founded a research center called the “Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop” at the College of British Columbia University in 1981. In her first book *Lessons from a Child* (1983), she describes the application of the *Writing Workshop* in her teaching practice. In *The Art of teaching Writing* (1986), she then attempts to systematise her experiences by suggesting that the *Writing Workshop* should be used in schools from a very young age. In the same years, Nancy Atwell (*In the middle*, 1987) also supports the workshop approach in schools as an effective method for teaching writing skills from primary school onwards. Both link writing instruction to reading, particularly so that students have examples of good texts to model, draw inspiration from, or refer to, which is close to some aspects of the genre-based approach to writing. Both focus on the processes involved in writing, from initial planning, drafting, revising, evaluating, and publishing of the final product. Calkins focused primarily on writing; in later years, she attempted to embed reading instruction in the same *workshop* method (Calkins & Cunningham, 2000), which has always been the weakest link in the *Reading and Writing Workshop*. Scientific research has highlighted the gaps of the method, especially in terms of learning phonology and phonetics and learning vocabulary (Adams et al., 2020; American Institutes for Research, 2021); at the same time, the method seems to have been successful in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Figge & Sass, 2021). Despite the limitations pointed out, her method has become known and famous in the U.S. and beyond, and in recent years has also become increasingly important in Italy.

## **1.2 The Writing Workshop in the Italian context**

In Italy in the sixties, the practice of writing that focused on the process was initially carried out in an informal way. One of the first documented experiences on this subject is the practice of writing in the Barbiana school by Don Milani and his students (Milani & Scuola di Barbiana, 1967). The collective generation of ideas and the processual writing approach were closely linked to having a strong



theme relevant to the students, which they could choose according to the importance of the theme for themselves. It was a means of denouncing injustice and demanding a school connected to real challenges. Later, the GISCEL (Group of Intervention and Study in the Field of Linguistic Education) published their manifesto (1975) in which they argued for a model of linguistic education that was more student-centred and less focused on traditional, meaningless products for written instruction. They also emphasize the importance of allowing learners to experiment with words, in a processual perspective of writing (and speaking). The practice of writing teaching in Italian schools shows an increasing influence of the cognitivist approach, first thanks to the studies by Boscolo (1990) and later by Cisotto (2006; Cisotto & Gruppo RDL, 2015). Nevertheless, the *Writing Workshop* didn't become known under this specific name until 2017, when Poletti-Riz wrote the first book on this method in order to disseminate it. Since then, many other teachers or researchers have adopted this approach (there is even a website that groups teachers together under the name "Italian Writing Teachers"<sup>1</sup>), and other manuals for teachers have been published (Pognante & Ramazzotti, 2022, 2024; Pellacani & Verziaggi, 2023; Poletti Riz & Turrini, 2024). Originally, Poletti-Riz and colleagues suggested using the *Writing Workshop* mainly in middle school, when students should have already developed the basic skills of writing (the graphomotor and linguistic foundations; Vio et al. 2012); only in recent years these authors suggested using it in primary school (Dicati & Vaudagnotto, 2024). After the first publications, the group "Italian writing teachers" proposed to apply the method to learning to read, and it is now also adopted by many school publishers (e.g. Sanoma). We argue here that the reading method is slightly different from the method proposed by Calkins, as it is influenced by or merged with other methods such as reading aloud (*lettura ad alta voce*; Batini, 2022). These traveling libraries (Popkewitz, 2005) may have taken into account the criticisms leveled at Calkins' original method, or that were critical of its adoption, and incorporated it into a classical didactic tradition of writing with monthly essays in the classroom, where the choice of topic is less flexible (Calkins argues for high flexibility and student choice regarding the topic of the written essays, 2014). The proposal to use the method in Italian schools came at an opportune moment when the context would have been able to embed it in daily practice, also thanks to the strong adherence of the method with the curriculum's description of how written instruction should be conducted (process-oriented). The method is thus

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.italianwritingteachers.it/>, accessed on 10 December 2024.

embedded in a specific context in which previous traditions of writing instruction and *Writing Workshop* merge to create a somewhat different final product.

## **2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP**

The *Writing Workshop* is a structured yet flexible model that adapts to different teaching situations, focusing on the writing process. The methodology is based on three interconnected phases —minilessons, writing and conferencing, and reflection and sharing — each of which serves a specific purpose to foster students’ development as writers. It can be adapted to any genre (Calkins, 1986, 2014). The premise is that the structure described below is repeated at many different stages until a final product is completed, and that the teacher breaks down the various processes involved in writing into parts so that students can focus on one stage at a time (consistent with the procedural facilitations mentioned earlier).

### **2.1 Minilesson**

The *Writing Workshop* begins with a mini-lesson: a short, concentrated lesson lasting about 10–15 minutes. During this time, the teacher introduces a specific writing strategy, concept or skill. Examples include techniques for crafting engaging introductions, strategies for effectively organizing ideas, or the mechanics of punctuation in dialog. The minilesson also builds on students’ prior knowledge to make the new content accessible and meaningful.

The key to this phase is its deliberate brevity and clarity. By focusing on a concrete goal, the mini-lesson should avoid overwhelming students and allows them to immediately apply what they have learned to their own writing. This explicit phase of instruction reflects the principles of effective writing instruction (Slavin, 2019; Graham, 2007; Graham et al. 2016) and emphasizes direct instruction.

### **2.2 Autonomous writing and conferencing**

The writing phase accounts for most of the time in the workshop (if a lesson is dedicated to writing, at least half of it will be in this phase) and is the time when learners apply the taught strategy in the minilesson. They plan, draft, revise, edit and publish their work autonomously. During this time, learners work independently or in small groups, experimenting with ideas and refining their texts. Although they work by themselves (which is why this method is especially recommended for middle school, since students can self-regulate and enjoy

this autonomy), a distinctive feature of the *Writing Workshop* is conferencing, where the teacher circulates between students and gives them individual feedback and scaffolding on strategies. These one-on-one interactions, while students are writing independently, allow teachers to address specific challenges, such as help with planning or restructuring paragraphs, while encouraging students to take risks and think critically about their writing, depending on each student's needs. Conferencing allows students to feel supported in their efforts, but also appropriately motivated to write, according to constructivist Vygotsky's (1990) theory of the zone of proximal development.

### **2.3 Collective reflection and Sharing**

The *Writing Workshop* concludes with a reflection and sharing session in which students present excerpts from their work to classmates or the class and critically reflect on the challenges of the new strategy or key insights that students believe could be useful for this purpose. Sharing also fosters a sense of writing, as students see themselves not only as writers but also as part of a larger creative process. Teachers facilitate these sessions by leading the discussions, asking reflective questions and encouraging constructive feedback.

While the basic structure of the *Writing Workshop* remains consistent, its implementation can vary depending on the needs of the class. For example, some teachers may extend the minilesson to cover particularly complex topics, while others may allow more time for conferencing to support struggling students. This adaptability ensures that the workshop remains relevant and effective in different educational contexts.

## **3. THE WRITING WORKSHOP AS A STUDENT-CENTRED APPROACH**

### **3.1 Student-centred approach: a definition**

Aware of the criticisms levelled at student-centred approaches, particularly the policy implications of these approaches (Schweisfurth, 2013), we further define how student-centred is meant in this paper. As Starkey (2019) states, we can recognise three dimensions of student/learner-centred approaches in education:

- (1) Cognitive dimension: the focus is on improving the performance of individual learners (which can be defined in different ways) but is mainly linked to knowledge and skills.

- (2) Student agency dimension: The focus here is on learner empowerment, where each of them feels involved and is actively engaged in their learning, with intention and self-reflection (Bandura, 1986). This means that students and teachers have equal status in a democratic community and students can decide for themselves what they want to learn (or write, for example).
- (3) Humanistic dimension: Taking into account all the different dimensions of learning, from affective aspects to creativity or contextualisation, is the main aspect of the humanistic dimension (with a culturally appropriate pedagogy). From this perspective, learning also encompasses emotional, social and personal development.

In her analysis, Starkey (2019) emphasises that the second dimension is partially embedded in the third dimension, as a learner who is empowered and able to influence their learning process is part of the consideration of the needs of learners and students as human beings as a whole.

We argue here that aligning the student-centred approach with the democratic principles of GISCEL (see above), an integrated vision of the student-centred approach could be beneficial, where achievement is linked to the competent use of writing for communication purposes. Since we do not yet have experimental results in the Italian context, and we are interested in seeing the effects, we advocate that the *Writing Workshop* is a student-centred approach according to the second and third dimensions (results regarding the effectiveness of the method can be found in the U.S. where there is clear evidence especially for explicit instruction, but they are not transferable to a very different context such as the Italian one; Figge & Sass, 2021; Graham et al. 2017; Slavin et al. 2019).

### **3.2 The Writing Workshop: agency and humanist dimensions**

The main aspects that support the *Writing Workshop* as a learner-centred approach are, according to the previous definition, the following:

- **Autonomy and responsibility:** students are responsible for their writing for at least half of the time they spend on writing instruction. At the heart of the *Writing Workshop* is the belief that students should take responsibility for their writing process. In contrast to traditional approaches, where teachers prescribe topics and structures, students in the *Writing Workshop* can choose their own topics and set their own goals. This autonomy fosters a sense of responsibility and investment in

their work and encourages them to engage deeply with the writing process. Research demonstrates the positive effects of student autonomy on motivation (Brooks et al., 2021).

- Personalization: The *Writing Workshop* is inherently adaptable and allows teachers to personalise instruction based on each student's strengths, weaknesses, and interests during conferences. This allows them to provide tailored feedback that addresses specific challenges. This personalisation, as advocated by Tomlinson (2014), ensures that all students, regardless of ability level, can meaningfully participate in the writing process.
- Community of writers: Emphasising collaboration during the final reflection and sharing stage and during the autonomous writing stage (sometimes providing opportunities to talk or write together) encourages the creation of a supportive environment, a sense of democratic community in which students can feel valued and connected. In addition, feedback from classmates allows students to learn from each other's insights and approaches, empowering them and giving them more agency in their interactions with others.
- Emotions and interests: The reflective nature of the workshop during the conference and final reflection, as well as the opportunity to share and collaborate, encourages students to articulate their thoughts and feelings. In addition, the opportunity to make their own choices gives students the chance to act according to their interests. From this point of view, the *Writing Workshop* takes into account that the learner has cognitive, emotional, personal and social needs.

These features of the method contribute to a positive and empowering writing classroom where students are at the centre of the learning process.

#### **4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP**

The above aspects seem very positive on paper, but when put into practice, they can take a different turn. After an in-service training with three teachers from a middle school in Turin, Italy, the *Writing Workshop* was applied in their classrooms. Thanks to collective reflections, participant observation and a focus group, we present here a balance of the strengths and challenges of this approach, especially when applied in a culturally diverse, urban and Italian middle school.

The balance of strengths and weaknesses is thus the result of a review of the

theory-based limitations and the field implications identified in practice. By examining both, educators and researchers can better understand the impact of the approach and refine its implementation.

## **4.1 Strengths of the Writing Workshop**

### *4.1.1 Fostering Autonomy and Metacognitive Thinking*

As has already been emphasised, one of the greatest strengths of the *Writing Workshop* lies in the promotion of autonomy. Students have the freedom to choose their own topics and control their writing process, which promotes their independence and self-regulation. In addition, the *Writing Workshop* encourages critical and metacognitive thinking (Cornoldi et al., 2018) by requiring students to make decisions at each stage of the writing process. For example, during the writing process, students must assess how best to structure their arguments or convey their ideas and whether this is coherent with their originally planned ideas. This iterative decision-making process prompts students to critically evaluate their own work or that of their peers (Guilford, 1967).

### *4.1.2 Motivation in writing*

Autonomy means that learners can be actively involved, which is one of the key components of writing motivation (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Piazza & Siebert, 2008). Emphasising choice in the workshop allows students to explore topics that match their interests and experiences (intrinsic motivation, Ryan et al. 2021). In addition, peer feedback can enhance motivation in the form of positive peer feedback, encouragement, and a sense of being able to provide valuable feedback to classmates. During the conferencing, the teacher can also encourage the students so that when they feel supported, they are even more motivated to stick with the task (extrinsic motivation, Ryan et al., 2021).

### *4.1.3 Internalisation of writing processes*

Because the *Writing Workshop* focuses heavily on process-based instruction, from planning to publication, students who are exposed to the method for a long time will eventually become accustomed to the structure and be able to use it confidently. The *Writing Workshop* is indeed a framework that can be applied to different genres (as shown in diverse publications: Pognante & Ramazzotti, 2022, 2024; Poletti Riz & Turrini, 2024).

#### *4.1.4 Personalisation through time, choice and feedback*

Learners proceed at their own pace, without time pressure, and have the opportunity to choose their topic: This moves towards a personalised pedagogical setting (Tomlinson, 2014). In addition, the teacher can provide help, support and feedback tailored to the student's needs to make learning more effective given the limited time allotted to writing in Italian schools (Boscolo & Zuin, 2015; Rossi, 2019).

#### *4.1.5 Work on revision*

The current practice in Italian schools is to work on writing during the essay lessons dedicated to writing practice, but with students working independently, sometimes following direct guidance on planning and drafting. Lessons on revising the text are often omitted (Boscolo & Zuin, 2015). *Writing workshop* allows teachers to use an appropriate moment in their didactics for intentional revision.

## **4.2 Challenges of the Writing Workshop**

### *4.2.1 Transferability of the learned techniques*

As the method is proposed as a framework for all different genres, it is essential for students to apply the method to all types of writing tasks they might consider in the real world so that they are able to transfer their knowledge to all writing tasks. This is particularly important according to the infusion model (Trincherò, 2022), where students need to focus on the specific content of applying a strategy in order to subsequently apply it competently. With this in mind, the choice of topic – which encourages motivation – should be carefully balanced with the more focused writing topics, taking into account the circumstances. Perhaps this is also the reason why the Italian authors who publish manuals to introduce the *Writing Workshop* into daily classroom practice link each manual to a genre (Pognante & Ramazzotti, 2022, 2024; Poletti Riz & Turrini, 2024).

### *4.2.2 Demotivation and lack of autonomy*

For students to be independent, they need to be trained. Because if we change the whole didactics from one day to the next, which could be more linked to direct teacher-led activities, students might feel lost and not enjoy the autonomy. On the contrary, they might even feel frustrated and demotivated. It is therefore suggested to proceed gradually and give students a little more autonomy time each time so that they learn to cope with it. Writing time may also be underutilised if the explicit instruction or strategy is not well explained or illustrated: Learners may feel confused and lost in the task.

#### *4.2.3 Identification of personal needs, providing feedback and teacher preparation*

If students do not gradually learn to deal with the open-ended nature of the method, there is a risk that students who have difficulties with self-regulation or self-confidence, for example, may feel overwhelmed by the freedom to choose their topics or direct their own learning. The feeling of being alone and perhaps lost in the face of writing could lead to students asking lots of questions and seeking help from the teacher, who can easily feel overwhelmed with all the requests. It is therefore crucial that teachers are well prepared to implement the method in the usual didactics that students are used to, that they are culturally and contextually sensitive before putting the method into practice. They also need to be aware of their students' needs, from the socio-emotional support learners need to the challenges each student has in writing. Educators should be prepared to be flexible to learners' needs in order to respond to them effectively.

In Italy, the school system is inclusive, so that students with disabilities can also come into contact with the method. The flexibility of the *Writing Workshop* is crucial for these students. At the same time, students who have great difficulty with writing should be supported through personalised methods where writing can be replaced by oral narration. While the method itself is inclusive, it does not go as far in terms of flexibility: this is the space where classroom practise is challenged by creativity to find tailored and different means of communication to meet the needs of individual students.

#### *4.2.4 Difficult to implement in the "traditional" practice*

In connection with the last weakness, the difficulty of introducing the new method in daily practise is a real challenge. A middle school teacher (female, 43 years old) in a urban school in Turin explains:

One weakness that I notice is that the Writing Workshop has a structure, it is a method, and like all methods it offers involvement in a framework, a framework with its own meaning, which gives value and makes you understand that if you start from there, you arrive there because you follow a whole process, which is in a way a process (...) a bit armoured... So that means that the structure of the week: (...) the hours that are dedicated to reading, the hours that are dedicated to writing.... You have to (...) distort in an important way what your habit is in order to organise the weekly structure of the hours of writing. (...) The risk I have encountered, I mean, the fear I have encountered, is that if I change everything without knowing exactly what I am going to do, I will mess everything up.



As she clearly states, the introduction of the method must be prepared, can be gradual (it is preferable if the students are used to a different kind of approach), but with the knowledge of what the target point is. Without a critical and clear analysis of the teaching context in which we want to introduce the *Writing Workshop*, there is a great risk of being superficial or losing the purpose.

#### *4.2.5 Time consuming*

Compared to traditional didactics, teachers who use the *Writing Workshop* state that it is much more time-consuming. This is indeed related to the nature of the workshop itself: the process-oriented approach requires longer periods of time for planning, drafting, revising and conferencing. In schools with tight schedules, it can be difficult to find enough time for these activities, and without adequate time there is a risk that the workshop will become fragmented, undermining its effectiveness.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

*Writing Workshop*, rooted in process-oriented pedagogy, offers a student-centred approach to writing instruction. It emphasizes learner ownership and iterative improvement, allowing learners to take responsibility for their writing process. However, as with any pedagogical method, its successful implementation requires an attentive awareness and understanding of its strengths and limitations.

In order to assess the actual effectiveness of the method in Italian schools, it is crucial to understand the implementation of the *Writing Workshop* in the Italian context: further research is needed, as the balance between strengths and weaknesses here is based on teachers' impressions and theoretical analysis, – which are very relevant but cannot be the only evaluation criterion. Before advocating the incorporation of process-oriented methods such as the *Writing Workshop* in teacher education and training, it is essential to evaluate their effectiveness at national level (by experimenting several times and listening to the experiences and impressions of numerous teachers). At the same time, teachers who want to experiment with *Writing Workshop* in their classrooms should undergo professional development through reading, confrontation with peers, courses, etc., in order to be prepared for a correct and not a-critical implementation of the method (Murtonen et al., 2024).

As for the strengths of the method, these are anchored in the main features of the method itself, which, when implemented and applied as intended, can truly

promote writing learning and metacognitive writing skills (Cornoldi et al. 2018) throughout the writing process. It can also support students' agency and empowerment and have a positive impact on students' whole school experience. Furthermore, it can effectively promote the democratic language education that the GISCEL group supports and which is highlighted in the national curriculum for language education (MIUR, 2012). Personalising teaching and learning and fostering motivation are key to promoting students' writing proficiency and passion.

The challenges are not negligible: the difficulties in the transferability of the strategies learned and in the implementation of the *Writing Workshop* in Italian classrooms are the main aspects that teachers, book authors and school publishers should pay attention to. Teachers, schools, and curriculum designers should really consider and extend the time devoted to writing exercises: results regarding students' written productions are not encouraging (Prada, 2009, 2020, 2021).

In conclusion, we recommend that teachers who find the *Writing Workshop* nowadays embedded in their textbooks to adopt it critically, and only after having thoroughly studied the principles of the method themselves. Otherwise, the risks mentioned above have a greater chance of becoming a reality in their classrooms. Collaborative networks such as the "Italian Writing Teachers", where educators share good practices and challenges, can further promote the dissemination of the *Writing Workshop* and advocate for research into the method in schools.

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# THE CHILDREN OF MIXED COUPLES IN THE POSTDIGITAL AGE: WHEN DIGITAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES COME TOGETHER

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Starting with the concept of “Digital Educational Poverty”, the study focuses on digital competences and differences based on socioeconomic factors using the Depend tool (Digital Educational Poverty in Educative Networking and Development). This tool was tested in the Digital Connections project (2021-2024), involving 6.598 second-year middle school students. The concept of digital educational poverty stems from the hybridization of two perspectives in defining digital competence: the “Rights” perspective and that of “New literacies”, which focuses on the dynamism and transdisciplinarity of competencies. Through the survey of the Digital Competence Score submitted in 2022-23, it emerges that the results of children of mixed couples (6.20% of the total) surpass those of children with both parents born abroad (11.65%) and those with both parents born in Italy (82.15%). Using the concepts of “cultural capital” and “intercultural capital,” the article theorizes that these better results can be explained by the fact that both digital competences and intercultural competences are characterized by dynamism, contextualization, and a collective component.

Digital Divide; Digital Educational Poverty; Digital Competences; Depend; Intercultural Competences.

## FROM ‘DIGITAL DIVIDE’ TO ‘DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL POVERTY’

This article ranks among the studies on combating digital educational poverty, a construct that was introduced in 2021 by the Research Centre on Media, Innovation and Technology Education (Cremi) of the Catholic University, together with Save the Children (Marangi, Pasta and Rivoltella, 2022). The

purpose of the Index of Educational Poverty (IEP) was to broaden the measurement of inequality from the, albeit important, economic poverty to the ‘educational opportunities’ offered by a territory. In a similar way – but not measured on a territorial basis – “Digital Educational Poverty” refers to the lack of acquisition of digital skills, understood as new alphabets (Rivoltella, 2020) necessary to analyse the production and fruition of the various digital contents by the “spectators” (Pasta, 2021) and, therefore, to access the opportunities offered by the social web. Citing Save the Children’s definition (2021, p. 15), “digital educational poverty thus refers to the deprivation of opportunities to learn, but also to experience, develop and allow skills, talents and aspirations to flourish freely, through the responsible, critical and creative use of digital tools”<sup>1</sup>. It should be pointed out that such an approach does not, with a utopian and cyber-enthusiastic outlook, equate the Internet only with positive aspects, but associates it, consistently with classical media-educational frameworks, with an ‘extension of reality’ and thus of possible opportunities (Pasta, 2018). Countering digital educational poverty means promoting literacy skills, of functional languages to manage communication and access to information, and the cultural capital of the subjects, i.e. their reference encyclopaedia, their ability to understand and elaborate the meanings of their culture understood as a whole way of life in the postdigital society. With the latter term, we indicate the urgency of thinking about existence and relationships after the digital has redefined them: the construct of Postdigital (Jandrić, MacKenzie and Knox, 2023) indicates a critical evaluation of the premises embedded in the cultural understanding of the digital, with reference, for example, to the deep socio-technical relationships that have significant consequences for forms of learning in contemporary times.

The measurability of digital educational poverty has been discussed elsewhere (Pasta, Marangi, Rivoltella, 2021). The concept is the outcome of the hybridisation of two perspectives with which digital competence can be declined: that of “Rights” and that of “New Literacies”. The first is inspired by the European *Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) 2.1* and by the integrations of 2.2, to which more than half of the educational systems (including Italy) refer in their attempts to define digital competences, albeit within a European framework of high heterogeneity (Pasta, 2023). The second perspective, that of the New Literacies, is more attentive to the dynamism and transdisciplinarity of competences (Buckingham, 2020) and to the concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by the authors.



Dynamic Literacies (Potter and McDougall, 2017), underlining how a segmented approach betrays the “citizenship vocation” of digital competence (Pasta, 2021).

A significant non-coincidence between educational poverty and digital educational poverty has already been noted (Marangi, Pasta and Rivoltella, 2023). Here, we briefly report the results of a survey of 6,598 pupils in 410 classes in 99 lower secondary schools in 17 Italian regions as part of the Digital Connections project (2021-2024)<sup>2</sup>, focusing on the data of the children of mixed couples, in order to reflect on possible overlaps and commonalities between digital competences and intercultural competences.

## **2. USING THE DEPEND TOOL TO EVALUATE DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL POVERTY IN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

In 2022-23, 6,598 seventh grade students were given the Depend (Digital Educational Poverty in Educational Networking and Development) tool<sup>3</sup>, created in Digital Connections by Cremit researchers Michele Marangi and Stefano Pasta.

Next to a questionnaire part on the socio-cultural characteristics of the respondents (children between 12 and 14 years old), Depend consists of a 30-question test that, in twelfths, detects the Digital Competence Score (DCS) (Marangi, Pasta and Rivoltella, 2022). The DCS is calculated on 12 indicators related to the four dimensions of learning based on the digital educational poverty framework proposed by Cremit and Save the Children in 2021: (I) learning to understand (technical knowledge of digital formats and environments; knowledge of publishing and copyright rules; ability to filter data and contextualise information in digital content), (II) learning to be (knowing how to recognise and activate digital creativity; possessing and using narrative skills; to know strategies for protecting one’s digital identity), (III) learning for living together (knowledge of netiquette and awareness of cyberstupidity; competence in the logic of algorithmic functioning; recognition of the collaborative dimension of digital knowledge), (IV) learning for an autonomous and active life (use of digital in a perspective of conscious and active citizenship; the ability to share content; the ability to verify and situate information).

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<sup>2</sup> It is a project implemented by Save the Children, Cremit and the Cooperative Edi Onlus, with the aim of combating digital educational poverty, working with girls and boys between the ages of 12 and 14.

<sup>3</sup> The tool is available at the link [www.cremit.it/depend/](http://www.cremit.it/depend/).

It should be pointed out that the sample of respondents is made up of schools whose headmasters responded to the call circulated by Save the Children together with the Italian Ministry of Education, with a particular focus on areas characterised by significant indices of educational poverty. The Depend tool was submitted both to the children of the classes participating in the project and to the control classes of the same schools; it was submitted before starting the two-year course, so participation in Digital Connections does not influence the outcome of the sample.

Some trends that emerged in the survey with the 6,598 minors are summarised below. A first variant to be considered is gender: against a sample that has a mean of 7.267 and a median of 7.542 out of a maximum of 12 (standard deviation 1.870), the results are better for female respondents (7.526) than for male respondents (7.019); this is in line with the self-reported grade in Italian in the last evaluation form, while there are no differences in mathematics. The number of books that boys claim to have at home and the level of education of both parents confirm how cultural capital is often linked to the results their children achieve, indicating that digital competence is also one of the objectives that democratic and innovative schools must strive for in order not to reiterate the preservation of initial cultural disadvantages, yielding to the social determinism of cultural inheritance and not resigning themselves to an inequality that is handed down. On the other hand, neither the geographical area nor the size of the municipality in which one lives emerge as particularly significant variants; this trend is in line with the most recent research on digital access, as, in the Italian context, emerges in the Cif Report 2024 (Pasta, 2024). Of particular interest for the discussion on overcoming the digital divide are the data collected by Depend, which show that the indicators classically used for digital access do not significantly influence the distribution of the four digital competence percentiles. There is no correlation, for example, between higher values of the Digital Competence Score and the presence or absence of high-speed internet, or the ownership of smartphones, tablets, and PCs (Tab. 1, 2, 3, 4). This is not meant to diminish the need for an adequate digital infrastructure, which is central to the classic concept of the digital divide: ensuring accessibility to performance technologies and adequate connective infrastructures remains a necessary condition, but no longer sufficient; the variants that impact on digital competence are also others, precisely included in the concept of digital educational poverty.

Tab. 1. Availability of a high-speed connection across the 4 groups, from low DCS (group 1) to high DCS (group 4).

	No	Yes	I don't know
Gr. 1	11.8%	71.4%	16.8%
Gr. 2	9.5%	76%	14.5%
Gr. 3	9%	77.9%	13.1%
Gr. 4	9.6%	80.1%	10.1%
Tot.	10%	76.4%	13.6%

Tab. 2. Availability of smartphones at home across the 4 groups.

	None	1	2	3	+3
Gr. 1	2.6%	3.4%	4.4%	18.5%	71%
Gr. 2	0.7%	2%	3.1%	21.1%	73.1%
Gr. 3	0.2%	0.9%	4.1%	22.9%	71.8%
Gr. 4	0.2%	0.6%	4.5%	24.8%	69.8%
Tot.	0.9%	1.7%	4.0%	21.8%	71.4%

Tab. 3. Availability of tablets at home across the 4 groups

	None	1	2	3	+3
Gr. 1	25%	38.5%	23.1 %	7.5%	5.6%
Gr. 2	17.6%	42%	27.8%	8.2%	4.4%
Gr. 3	17.8%	41.7%	27.6%	7.8%	4.8%
Gr. 4	16.9%	40.7%	30.2%	7.4%	4.8%
Tot.	19.4%	40.7%	27.2%	7.7%	4.9%

Tab. 4. Availability of computers at home across the 4 groups

	None	1	2	3	+3
Gr. 1	14.2%	40.1%	26.4 %	11.3%	7.9%
Gr. 2	8%	35.8%	30.5%	15.3%	10.3%
Gr. 3	4.7%	32.5%	31.7%	18.2%	12.7%
Gr. 4	3.5%	30.1%	33.8%	18.2%	14.4%
Tot.	7.6%	34.6%	34.6%	15.7%	11.3%

### 3. CHILDREN OF MIXED COUPLES: A 'POSTDIGITAL INTERCULTURE' PERSPECTIVE

The data on migrant family background does not hold any surprising results if we focus on the place of birth of the minors themselves: for foreign-born minors the results are much lower, also due to the difficulties in understanding<sup>4</sup>. It should be pointed out that, even though we are talking about schools in areas with a high presence of pupils with a migrant background, foreign-born pupils account for only 3.76% of the sample: among them, 2% went through the entire primary school cycle, 1.15% only a few years and 0.61% none at all. The figure of 3.76% is in line with the national figure on pupils with non-Italian citizenship at secondary school, which in the 2021-22 school year was 11.2%, of which only 33.1% (i.e. 3.7% of total pupils) were not born in Italy (Ministry of Education, 2023). It should be remembered that the percentage of pupils 'with non-Italian citizenship' – this is the terminology used by the Ministry of Education – is much higher, as a result of an anachronistic Italian citizenship law (Ambrosini, 2020) that often leads to minors born and raised in that country being called foreigners. In 2022, out of the 865,388 students with non-Italian citizenship surveyed by the Ministry of Education, there were 16,000 new arrivals (NaI)<sup>5</sup>, a number more than halved compared to ten years earlier, of which 14,000 in the two secondary schools (from 6th to 13th grade).

In the same sample of Digital Connections, on the other hand, the number of children of mixed couples<sup>6</sup> is almost double in percentage terms (6.20%) compared to those born abroad, next to the children of parents both born in Italy (82.15%), or both born abroad (11.65%) and 398 of mixed couples (6.20%)<sup>7</sup>, a figure that provides a snapshot of the anthropological change underway: according to ISTAT (2022), 14.6% of marriages celebrated in Italy in 2020 concerned couples with at least one parent of non-Italian nationality. Assuming this tripartition – children born in Italy, children born abroad, children of mixed couples – there is a figure to be discussed: among the children of those born in Italy, the DCS is 7.36; among the children of those born abroad, it is 6.74; among the children of mixed couples, the highest value of 7.44 is recorded.

A focus on the socio-economic description, media consumption and skills of these children of mixed couples is to be found elsewhere (Marangi and Pasta,

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<sup>4</sup> 49.2% of those born abroad are placed in the lower DCS percentile, compared to 24.4% of those born in Italy.

<sup>5</sup> Students newly arrived in Italy who are unable to use Italian L2 as a language of communication or students who have been enrolled in school for less than two years.

<sup>6</sup> In this case, children with one parent born in Italy and the other abroad are counted.

<sup>7</sup> Minors who do not declare where one or both parents were born have been excluded from the count. In the article, the percentages therefore refer to the sample of valid responses.

2023), but the data can be re-read within the research space that goes by the name of 'Postdigital Intercultures' (Pasta and Zoletto, 2023).

We will now try to explain this excellence in the 'digital competences' of the children of mixed couples in the light of the link with 'intercultural competences' (Reggio and Santerini, 2014).

The theoretical reference of the proposed interpretation combines Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of 'cultural capital' with Andreas Pöllmann's (2013) more recent concept of 'intercultural capital'. As for the former, reference is made to its *embedded* state (the others are the institutionalised and objectified one), i.e. the set of experiences, modes of relationships, patterns of understanding, skills of knowing how to do, which the individual can develop even outside the institutional contexts and canons of education. This form of capital is accumulated over the course of life through the process of socialisation that takes place to a large extent unconsciously, ending up creating the cultural distinctions that one feels are natural. Intercultural capital' (Pöllmann, 2013) refers to the set of relational and communicative skills, of codes and signs belonging to different languages, of the capacity for empathy and decentralisation in the relationship with the other. From a psychopedagogical perspective, Anna Granata has applied this framework to the children of immigrants, the so-called "second generations" (2011), and to children who experience international mobility by living their fourth year of high school abroad (2015): in both studies, the thesis that growing up among several cultures is a resource before being a problem clearly emerges. This model can also be applied to the children of mixed couples, who can therefore be considered – in addition to being highly digitally competent as shown by the data – particularly competent from an intercultural point of view. Indeed, young 'intercultural equilibrists' (Granata, 2011) grow up in a context of daily multiculturalism experimenting with how to manage their own internal conflicts and how to find a synthesis between shared values and personal projects with a dynamic process very similar to the *Dynamic Literacies* that Potter and McDougall (2017) talk about with regard to third learning spaces. In this way, intercultural competence is based on two dimensions, understanding and freedom. The former, in its meaning of 'containing within oneself', involves the ability to translate (not only linguistically, but also of attitudes and meanings), to compare different cultural backgrounds, to empathise (with parents, native peers or those with histories similar to one's own) and to remember one's roots and past experiences. On the other hand, freedom, in its meaning of 'free to' experience a bond, involves the ability to express oneself (to tell one's story), to

have an opinion, to diverge (to be able to look with a critical eye) and to be ironic. The dynamism of (digital and intercultural) competences is thus a first point that may explain why the most interculturally competent children on paper are also those with the highest Digital Competence Score.

A second element is the particular relevance of the contextualisation of competence, both in the valorisation of plurality, which must also address tensions and not remain only on a value and abstract level (Santerini, 2003), and in media literacy interventions, which must aim at developing media competences considering the variables that from time to time intervene to co-determine situations and striving not to apply linear and deterministic models of competence development (Rega and McDougall, 2023). In blended families, interculturalism becomes a daily experience, experiencing interaction with people from cultures other than one's own on an ongoing basis (Alred, Byram and Flaming, 2002): the focus shifts from identities to lived experiences. Similarly, the fight against digital educational poverty underpinning Digital Connections measures the ability to analyse by resorting to iconic supports referring to media consumption widespread among students, such as a screenshot from TikTok (Pasta and Marangi, 2023).

Finally, a third element that links intercultural competence with digital competence is the collective component in the experience. Flye Sainte Marie and Tisserant (1997) write of “collective intercultural competence”, i.e. the possibility of transforming individual knowledge into collective feeling, into cultural and intercultural capital. Granata (2015) identifies as a fundamental condition for an intercultural experience to turn into true intercultural competence the fact that those who have lived it can share it with others: sharing means stopping to think, but also perceiving that one's own experience has elements in common with the experience of others. We thus understand another reason why young “balance” learners who are used to practising intercultural competence in a collective way perform well, since the tool used for the Digital Competence Score contextualises the media competence in the community, as – and this is seen in the design of Digital Connections (Pasta and Marangi, 2023) – analysis and production skills in the perspective of Onlife Citizenship Dynamics, contextualisation and the collective component are, therefore, the three elements that in the presented view unite digital and intercultural competences, helping to understand the shift from the static measurement of the digital divide to the – more dynamic, situated and also collective – detection of digital educational poverty.

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# THE CONTRIBUTION OF COMPLEXITY EPISTEMOLOGY TO A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE “CHILD AT THE CENTER” PEDAGOGICAL IMPERATIVE

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The XX-century recognition of children’s rights has changed their role from the socio-cultural margins to a more central position. The concept of “child at the center” has become increasingly present in pedagogical discourses and policies, also as a key principle of the European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (European Commission, 2014). This study epistemologically explores the pedagogical foundation of the “child-centered” approach in order to preserve its meaning. Who is the child placed at the center? What does their centrality mean in nursery schools? Morin’s epistemology of complexity provides some key tools to redefine this centrality, addressing the tension between identity, multiplicity, diversity, and unity. At the center there is not the idealized but the real child, with their unique complexity, shaped by diverse needs and interests forming their identity. In nursery schools, the real child encounters other real children, each with their own diverse needs and interests. Educational design becomes a key tool to help every child perceive themselves and others as complex individuals with multiple needs. This reciprocal recognition fosters new ideas of collectivity and multiple citizenship (Ceruti, 2018) to be promoted both at a local level and through global policies.

child-centred; nursery schools; complexity epistemology; educational design

## INTRODUCTION

The centrality of the child is increasingly prominent in pedagogical discourse and the development of educational policies and services. The European Quality Framework for Early Childhood and Care identifies ‘child centrality’ as a guiding principle for pedagogical reflections. This concept embodies the dual

vision of childhood and adolescence outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child: children are both citizens, with distinct perspectives and interpretations of the world, and individuals requiring protection for whom adults are responsible (Lamarque, 2016). This duality generates contradictions in the interpretation of child centrality. The pedagogical principle of ‘child at the center’ risks losing its core meaning when decontextualized, as it may be reduced to an idealized, detached view of childhood that neglects educational perspectives on children’s roles and positions in a pluralistic society (Biesta, 2022). Malaguzzi (1975) wrote: “Children are certainly the primary reference point, but outdated and idealized child-centeredness should be avoided” (Cagliari, 2016, p. 228). It is, therefore, significant to examine this principle from an epistemological perspective to prevent the concept of ‘child at the center’ from losing its meaning. Who is the child placed at the center? What implications arise from their centrality within an educational service? This paper examines how Edgar Morin’s complexity paradigm offers valuable tools to redefine child centrality in early childhood education. It is organized into three sections: the first outlines the historical trajectory that placed childhood at the center of socio-cultural discourse; the second investigates the foundation of child centrality through a complex epistemological perspective; and the third explores its educational implications within early childhood contexts.

## **1. BETWEEN MARGINALITY AND CENTRALITY: KEY MILESTONES IN A HISTORICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL PATH**

In the 20th century, the recognition of childhood and its rights prompted a major shift in educational and pedagogical policies. The social condition of childhood, once marked by exploitation and violence, was transformed by the gradual recognition of rights, protection, and opportunities (Macinai, 2013). Ellen Key’s ‘The Century of the Child’ initiated discourse on adult-child relationships, while Eglantyne Jebb, in 1923, laid the foundations of the Geneva Declaration, the first step in recognizing children’s rights (Dal Toso, 2017). Janusz Korczak advocated for children as rights-holders, a key idea in the New York Convention (Macinai, 2013). Montessori, reflecting on adult-child relationships, valued children’s resources, placing them at the center:

What sparked the most discussion was the reversal between adult and child: the teacher without a podium, without authority, and almost without instruction, and the child placed at the center of activity, learning independently, free to choose their tasks and movements.  
(Montessori, 2017, p. 148).

Goldschmied values children's perspectives by centering them in reflections and challenging adult viewpoints (Goldschmied & Jackson, 1997). Malaguzzi emphasizes the child's role within a network linking home and daycare experiences to the broader city context, while questioning child-centered policies (Edwards et al., 2010). This awareness redefined early childhood contexts as daily life environments for children rather than services for families. Tracing the evolution of child centrality offers insights into its establishment as a core principle of the European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (European Commission, 2014).

## **2. IDENTITIES AND POSITIONINGS**

Exploring pedagogical experiences that affirm the child's rights and central role is just a starting point. It is essential to question the lens through which we see the child: Who is the child at the center? What does placing the child at the center mean in nursery school? Examining the centrality of the child through the epistemology of complexity prompts reflections on the challenges of the contemporary.

### **2.1. Complex thought**

The concept of "child centrality" frequently appears in pedagogical discussions on policies and services for children, yet it risks losing its significance when decontextualized, particularly when an idealized, imagined child is placed at the center of reflection and practice. The child who lives within families, services, and cities is not ideal but real. If the ideal child reflects adult stereotypes and expectations (Luciano, 2017), being unobtrusive, compliant, and engaged, the real child acts based on their own needs and interests. They might be tired from a sleepless night, curious about their surroundings, or melancholic. The experiences of a real child are inherently non-linear, as is reality itself. In the epistemology of complexity, reality is understood as intertwined and multidimensional, concepts clarified by the etymology of the term itself.

Complexity, ultimately, derives from the Latin 'plectere' (to weave) and 'plexus' (woven), combined with the preposition 'cum' (with), meaning "woven together." Thus, the etymology highlights notions of multiplicity as well as unity.

(Ceruti, 2018, p. 98).

This perspective sets the stage for the second point of this contribution, where the complex epistemological approach delves into the foundation of the child's

centrality. A real child, like any person, cannot be understood apart from their complexity, with its intertwined elements, diverse interests, and varying needs that collectively form the whole, contributing to the person's identity.

The human unity embodies the principles of its multiple diversities. Understanding humanity means grasping its unity within diversity and its diversity within unity  
(Morin, 2001, p. 56).

Complexity is the work that sustains the cohesion of what is intertwined, preserving the ongoing tension between unity, identity, multiplicity, and diversity, a tension that is neither diminished nor resolved, but rather acknowledged and valued. Edgar Morin, theorist of complex thought, advocates for a reform in thinking that enables the comprehension of human existence in all its interconnected dimensions: physical, biological, psychological, social, and political. This reform aligns with the complexity paradigm. The European Quality Framework reflects this notion of human multidimensionality in its key principle: "Child-centred pedagogy including the interest of the child."

A child-centred approach is one which builds on children's needs, interests, and experiences. These include cognitive, social, emotional and physical needs. A child centred approach is one that uses a pedagogy which promotes children's holistic development and enables adults to guide and support their development.  
(European Commission, 2014, p. 65)

This view requires recognizing the whole—the child—and its parts, dimensions, and interconnections. Morin emphasizes the need to develop a form of thinking that overcomes disjunctive reasoning, which fails to perceive connections. Inspired by Montaigne's reflection that "a well-made head is better than a well-filled one," he advocates teaching thinking that organizes and imparts meaning to knowledge rather than merely accumulating fragmented facts (Morin, 2001). An approach that grasps complexity is vital for achieving 'pertinent knowledge,' which situates information within its context and the larger whole (Morin, 2001). Complex thinking addresses contemporary challenges (Morin, 2000) arising from fragmented and decontextualized knowledge and the failure to recognize connections.

## **2.2 Some challenges**

One of the key challenges Morin identifies is the "cultural challenge," rooted in the divide between scientific and humanistic cultures. This separation obstructs

a holistic understanding of humanity, which encompasses chemistry, physics, and biology, as well as social relations, ideas, and emotions. Humans are both biological and cultural beings. Grasping complexity requires dialogue between the sciences and humanities, addressing physiological diversities within the unity of the human being. Applying this principle to understanding children in real contexts requires contextualizing their behaviors and recognizing them as individuals in dynamic development. Their actions reflect not only their psycho-developmental maturity, as outlined in scientific studies, but also their history, ideas, and interests, expressed in ways congenial to their age (Arace, 2018). Interpreting their behaviors through a developmental lens and situating their actions within their age, history, and experiences allows us to grasp their complexity rather than diminish it. Morin also identifies the “sociological challenge,” addressing the relationship between knowledge and society. As knowledge grows, it often leads to fragmented or conflicting perspectives due to the dominance of technical languages. Mastering and integrating information fosters the development of ‘pertinent knowledge,’ a concept Morin defined through specific principles. This knowledge arises from the ability to situate information within its context and the whole, uncovering connections. Developing ‘pertinent knowledge’ about children requires acknowledging their multiple, interconnected experiences—cognitive, social, emotional, and sensory-motor—as elements that collectively shape their identity. It is not possible to center the child while prioritizing select dimensions, characteristics, or potentials and denying others. Viewing complexity as a dynamic tension between unity, identity, multiplicity, and diversity can guide our reflections. A real child experiences multidimensionality, where diverse needs and interests intertwine, shaping a unified identity. Acknowledging the child’s varied experiences allows them to embrace their multiplicity, validating even challenging aspects within the same cognitive-body unit and enabling them to fully experience their identity. Morin’s concept of ‘pertinent knowledge’ allows children to develop a mode of thinking that integrates and contextualizes diverse information about themselves. Fragmenting experiences and elements without recognizing their interconnections isolates unacknowledged aspects. Anger or physical fatigue, for instance, are integral to a child’s identity and cannot be overlooked in an educational context that claims to center the child. Recognizing a person as a multifaceted identity and acknowledging aspects like anger and joy fosters an experience of diversity within unity, cultivating a sense of being both partial and whole. As Morin states, “democracy needs diversity and antagonism” (2001, p. 114), and recognizing every dimension of a person,

physical, cognitive, and emotional, while accepting their contrasts enables a localized experience of democracy. The child's centrality in nursery schools requires deeper contextualization: the child is not alone but shares the space with many others. To fully grasp this complexity, we must revisit the initial question through the lens of complex epistemology: What does child centrality mean in a nursery school? No longer is it an idealized, imagined child at the center but a real child, with their complexity and interwoven needs and interests shaping their identity: a real child meeting other real children, each with their own complexity. At the center are multiple and diverse children's identities.

### **3. MULTIPLE AND DIVERSE CHILDREN'S IDENTITIES**

The child's centrality, examined through a complex epistemological lens, carries significant educational implications for early childhood contexts. In these settings, educational professionalism and training are crucial. If educators embrace contemporary challenges, as discussed in the second part of this paper, they can foster 'pertinent knowledge' in children, allowing them to recognize themselves as multifaceted, complex identities. Helping each child see themselves as a multiple and complex reality, while also recognizing the complexity of others, fosters reciprocal recognition, nurturing a sense of community (Ceruti, 2018). Such a sense of community itself fosters experiences of plural citizenship, which are key for cultivating a democratic sentiment. Educational design, focused on expanding each child's environment and creating experiential contexts (Guerra, 2023) that embrace and intertwine the needs and interests of each child's identity, enables the experience of democracy on a 'global' level within the classroom context. The adult's relational and intentional mediation is a key tool within the dynamics connecting the various microsystems, where the child is simultaneously at the center and surrounded by these interconnected systems, as outlined in the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). When educational planning embraces the diverse identities of children, they can see themselves as integral parts of the classroom unit, recognizing themselves as part of their interconnections, not through an inclusion/exclusion dynamic but as interwoven components of the whole. This idea of being 'interwoven together', rooted in the etymology of the word complexity, highlights the 'relationships between the parts and the whole,' which Morin defines as 'global' (2001, p. 36), characterized by mutual interdependence. The local shapes the global: a child's interest in bell towers, facilitated by educational design, can inspire citywide exploration. The global shapes the local: a dish on the nursery school menu may

evoke varied emotions in children, creating opportunities to share narratives. Recognizing the interplay between the local and the global, along with the diverse needs and interests of multiple child identities, fosters a sense of collective belonging, enabling children to see themselves as parts of a complex whole where their actions drive meaningful change. This perspective addresses the ‘civic challenge’ (Morin, 2000), advocating for a broader sense of responsibility that connects the local and the global. Centering not a single child but diverse children’s identities not only informs local practices within nursery schools but also expands reflections to a global scale. In doing so, it cultivates a sense of Earth citizenship, which Morin considers essential for individuals to see themselves as active participants in their environment, whether in the classroom, the nursery school, the city, or the Earth itself (Morin, 2001).

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# EQUITY, JUSTICE, INCLUSION AT SCHOOLS

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Education is a human right and a social right and guarantees the possibility of access to other rights as it allows the full exercise of citizenship. The right to education is defined as a human right by various norms of international law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which defines this right as right to education, and the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which uses the same term: right to education. OECD Report *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools* (2012), underline that the best education systems are those that combine equity with quality.

The terms equity, justice, and inclusion in reference to our school system are closely interconnected and represent the fundamental principles upon which a school aiming to ensure the right to education and the appreciation of individual differences is based. These concepts, moreover, evolve and change in response to ongoing societal transformations and different conceptions of the right to education. Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda is dedicated to quality education and aims to ensure that everyone has access to inclusive, equitable, and quality education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, leaving no one behind. This goal contributes to the building of a more just society. In fact, inclusive education is the tool through which this right to quality education is concretely realized, to then make it effective in teaching practice.

The principle of equity was recalled by the Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen (2010) and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2007), who understand equity as an act of justice.

The fundamental thesis of Nussbaum's approach to social justice is that "respect for human dignity requires that citizens achieve a high level of capability in all specified spheres" (2012, p. 41). Education plays a crucial role

in ensuring the formation of citizens by promoting conditions that guarantee opportunities for everyone. Schools, therefore, serve as the context in which the foundations of an equitable, just, and inclusive society can be built.

According to Benadusi et al. (2008), equity is a distributive arrangement of goods that foresees equalities and inequalities deemed legitimate in light of one or more theories of justice.

The connection between these three principles can be highlighted as follows:

- Equity: Ensuring that every student has what they need to learn.
- Justice: Ensuring that all students are treated fairly and with respect.
- Inclusion: Integrating all students into the school community without discrimination.

Rawls (2002) understands “justice as equity”. Justice and equity are terms that combine well with inclusive ones: guaranteeing equity in fact means giving everyone what they need, considering the fact that the starting point is not the same for everyone.

These conceptual references can already be found within Italian Constitution and should guide educational policies and practices towards building a school system that aims to promote the educational success of all students. The inclusiveness of our school system can already be found within the Constitution (Matucci, 2020), where it refers to substantive equality and not merely formal equality—meaning the actual possibility of being placed on an equal footing with others, regardless of one’s starting point. In fact, the legislation aims to achieve equity in practice (Ferrero, 2023). Access is only the first step: it is essential to ensure the acquisition of skills that are both applicable in the labor market and necessary for the active exercise of citizenship within democratic societies. The shift from cultures to inclusive practices (Booth & Ainscow, 2014) is not linear, and there are various factors that hinder its implementation. The right to school inclusion has yet to be fully fulfilled, as it is protected in legislation but is not always concretely implemented, given that the issue of the lack of resources due to the economic crisis undermines the social right to education (Matucci, 2019). The right is not alone sufficient to guarantee a positive school experience, in which the student can experience well-being and inclusion, being able to develop both the relational and learning levels. Pedagogy, in fact, in a complementary manner to law, also investigates the pedagogical conditions that allow one to feel good at school, paying attention to developing the talents of students to the maximum and achieving educational success. It is no longer satisfied with just everyone’s right to access school, but

it would like a quality and inclusive school, capable of guaranteeing individualisation and personalization (Baldacci, 2005) of learning paths and a school “student’s size” (Baldacci, 2008), and Matucci (2016) noted in the school of today a progressive trend towards the recognition of this right.

Equity does not mean treating everyone the same, but recognizing the differences among students and providing each one with the resources and support needed to achieve their educational goals. It is indeed important to provide greater opportunities to those who have fewer and to allow the achievement of skills in many different ways, as outlined pedagogically in the UDL (Universal Design for Learning) approach (Montanari&Ruzzante, 2021). The UDL Guidelines (CAST, 2024) explains that the plurality of teaching methodologies and mediators in teaching is more sensitive to differences.

Our school system seems to perpetuate inequalities rather than seeking strategies to overcome them, by valuing differences as a resource for learning rather than as an obstacle.

How can schools promote equity? How can the concept of equity and the quality of the education system find a common ground?

Within the school context, ensuring equity means removing barriers and enhancing facilitators to ensure that all students can participate in school activities and the social life of the class, with appropriate adjustments.

What role do selection and meritocracy play within our educational landscape?

One of the key moments for equity in the Italian school system was the establishment of the unified middle school. This historical milestone transformed the country’s educational system, making it more inclusive, equitable, and democratic. This change was formalized by Law No. 1859 of December 31, 1962, which introduced the unified, mandatory, and free middle school. It marked a shift from a class-based school system rooted in social inequalities, fostering the democratization of education and a reduction of disparities.

Our country has also adopted a comprehensive system for secondary education (Benadusi & Giancola, 2014), allowing access to university with any diploma.

Today, issues related to equity that are worth exploring include the inclusion of foreign students and school dropout, which primarily occurs in the 14-16 age group. Dropout is, in fact, one of the most significant problems from an equity perspective in education.

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# WELLBEING AT SCHOOL: BETWEEN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES AND FAMILY CULTURES

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This study examines the role of linguistic and cultural mediation in parent-teacher meetings with migrant families, focusing on how it promotes a Moroccan mother's agency in discussing her daughter's progress. In addition to translating linguistic and emotional aspects, mediation enables parents to express their perspectives, fostering mutual understanding and supporting more inclusive, equitable educational environments.

Plurilingualism, Identity, Parental involvement, Migration

## INTRODUCTION

To ensure the rights of children and young people to be fulfilled as individuals and actively involved in their societies, school well-being is a central concern (Anderson and Graham, 2015). Collaboration between teachers and parents is an important factor in promoting a positive sense of self and academic achievement. On the other hand, various difficulties have been identified in the school involvement of parents with a migrant background, partly linked to cultural factors and partly linked to linguistic factors.

In this contribution we will consider the possible obstacles for foreign parents to play an active role in family-school meeting. Some conversational dynamics will be examined where linguistic and cultural mediation strategies stimulate the active role of a Moroccan mother in understanding an emotional situation of her daughter's difficulties.

## **2. TO BE WELL AT SCHOOL IN CONTEXTS OF LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

### **2.1. Linguistic discomfort of foreign students**

The school plays a crucial role in shaping a more democratic, cohesive, and inclusive society by facilitating access to knowledge for all students and providing tools for critical analysis of current events (Ferrero and Granata, 2023). The Italian education system's structural presence of foreign students is a source of diversity that is added to the wide range of factors that shape the educational landscape. According to the latest official data (Italian Ministry of Education and Merit, 2024), non-Italian citizens make up nearly 11.2% of the student population, with 64.5% of them coming from migrant backgrounds but having been born and raised in Italy.

In addition to the diversity of family cultural heritage, linguistic diversity can have positive implications for cognitive development (Bialystok, 2021) and the construction of an integrated identity. However, the widespread adoption of multilingual education is still far from reality (Sordella, 2015). Consequently, students' native language and culture can be perceived as obstacles to learning. Cultural difficulties may stem from differences in school organization, learning content, participation methods, and parental expectations, which may not align with their previous experiences. Linguistic challenges include both the comprehension of written and oral communication from teachers, and the ability to communicate with them. Limited proficiency in the second language can also hinder parental involvement in overseeing their children's homework and studies.

The perceived gap between students' linguistic knowledge, along with the symbolic values attached to the family's language, and the school's linguistic model can generate a sense of linguistic discomfort (Iannaccaro, 2019). This sense of inadequacy can lead to the devaluation of the family context, often seen as a disadvantage in achieving academic success, with potential implications for identity formation (Van Gorp and Verheyen, 2024). The devaluation of a family's linguistic heritage compounds challenges in parenting, especially within a sociocultural framework where immigrant families often struggle to navigate the educational system.

### **1.2. Foreign families participating in their children's schooling**

Effective communication and collaboration between home and school are crucial for supporting children's development as learners and active

participants in both formal and informal educational settings (Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti, 2006). Numerous studies have highlighted the important role of families in students' academic achievement (Jeynes, 2005; Fan & Chen, 2001), especially in contexts with a disadvantaged cultural and socioeconomic background. Parental involvement, as identified in several meta-analyses (Jeynes 2024), includes factors such as teacher partnerships, homework monitoring, participation in school events, and engagement with community resources. Focusing on parent-teacher communication, academic expectations, and attendance at institutional meetings, Jeynes (2024) emphasizes the relational dynamics underlying these aspects of involvement. Many immigrant parents view their primary responsibility as providing emotional, physical, and financial support, and they expect teachers to be responsible for their children's learning.

Differences in expectations create mutual miscommunication which adversely affects children's learning. Immigrant parents have rich resources to offer, but because of language barriers, lack of information on the school system available for parents, and inadequate preparation of teachers working with immigrant parents, these resources are often under-utilized. (Antony-Newman, 2019: 373)

Communication barriers between immigrant parents and teachers often go beyond language, arising from differing views on childhood, education, and the role of schools (Antony-Newman, 2019, p. 368). In Italy, these issues are similarly evident, though collaborative projects between schools and universities have proposed strategies to enhance the involvement of immigrant families in the educational process (Cognigni, 2020; Carbonara and Scibetta, 2020; Andorno and Sordella, 2022; Sordella, 2022, 2024).

### **1.3. Mediating a dialogue to rebalance the agency of parents and teachers.**

When institutional power is unbalanced, the agency of others can be acknowledged or not in the conversation (Bazzanella, 2009). This means that building a collaborative relationship is challenging when one assumes that the other party either cannot or does not want to play an active role in achieving the shared goal. The theoretical and methodological construct of agency, defined as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahern, 2001:112), allows for the examination of mutual expectations in school-family collaboration. According to this anthropological approach to language, meanings are co-constructed by participants through specific social interactions.

In the context of school-family collaboration, where linguistic and cultural disadvantages may limit participants' agency, the mediator plays a crucial role in promoting and enhancing the resources of immigrant parents.

As Baraldi and Gavioli (2024) highlight, mediation is not limited to translating across languages to facilitate understanding, but also includes non-translation interventions within monolingual exchanges. In the main conversational thread, the mediator can indirectly involve the non-native participants by directing the conversation toward topics where they are empowered to contribute; in lateral conversations in foreign language, the mediator can enhance details, simplify language, and encourage migrants to share narratives about their world.

Far from simply reproducing text in another language, renditions are contextualised in communication considering participation opportunities, multiple perspectives and explicitation of assumptions (Baraldi and Gavioli, 2024, 165).

Traditionally used to resolve conflicts arising from cultural and linguistic differences, mediation can also promote collaboration in intercultural contexts. According to Davitti (2013), mediation helps prevent misunderstandings, bridging cultural gaps and fostering cooperation between parents and teachers.

### **3. PROMOTING PARENTAL AGENCY IN A HOME-SCHOOL INTERVIEW**

#### **3.1. The research context**

This study examines how mediation promotes agency in a parent-teacher meeting as part of a larger ethnolinguistic study conducted in the Aurora district of Turin (Sordella, 2024).

In this multilingual conversation, a university student mediates, enabling the mother's active participation with the teachers. The meeting, held after school, includes the mother, daughter, and mediator, a Moroccan student, who introduces herself and explains her role. This session was convened to address the child's discomfort due to changeover of Italian L2 and the reduction of her attendance in the language lab, as she has become more autonomous compared to her peers.

#### **3.2. The interplay between quantitative and qualitative data**

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used to identify areas of parental involvement in the interview. The length and frequency of exchanges between participants were measured after transcribing the interview. Table 1



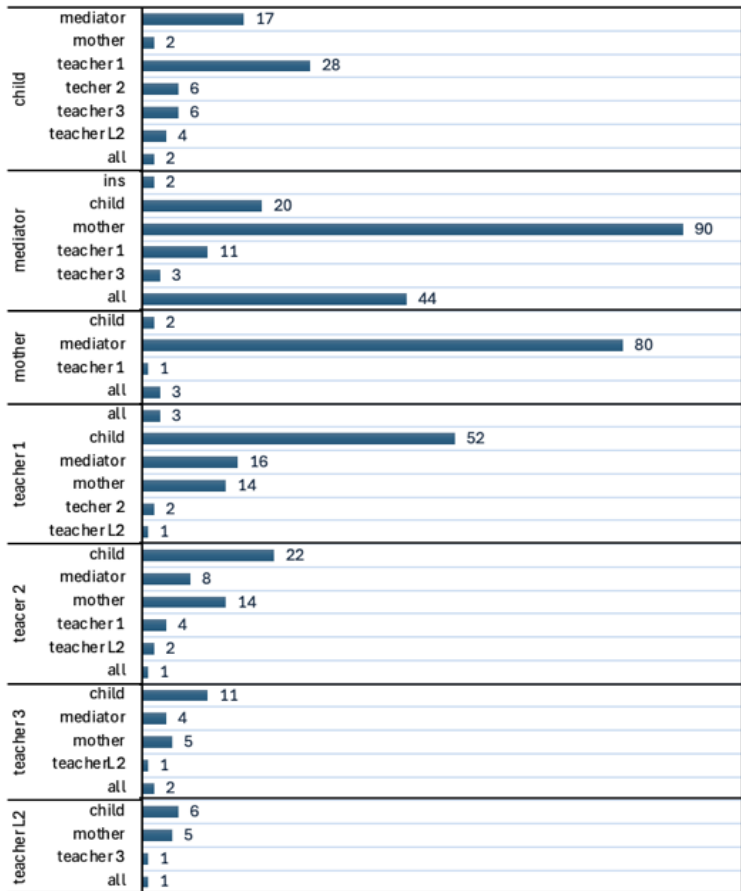
presents the average length of exchanges longer than 40 words, along with the participants and conversational moves.

Tab. 1. turns exceeding 40 words in school-meeting.

Speaker	Addressee	Convesational move	No. words of exchange	Mean lenght
teacher 1	child	request to do something	87	60
	child	motivation to do something	83	
	mother	narrative	74	
	mediator	narrative	55	
	child	narrative	55	
	child	request to do something	44	
	child	request to do something	42	
	mediator	narrative	41	
teacher 2	child	motivation to do something	85	57
	mediator	narrative	63	
	child	narrative	56	
	mother	narrative	56	
	child	request to do something	50	
	mother	narrative	46	
	mediator	request to do something	43	
teacher 3	all	self-narrative	85	55
	mother	motivation to do something	56	
	child	narrative	51	
	child	request to do something	44	
	child	narrative	41	
teacher L2	mother	narrative	159	159
child	teacher 3	reading	58	52
	teacher 3	request to do something	45	
mother	mediator	self-narrative	40	40
mediator	teachers	report of rendering/rendering	111	57
	teacher 3	self-narrative	67	
	mother	rendering	53	
	mother	rendering	51	
	teachers	report of rendering	49	

	teachers	report of rendering/rendering	49	
	mother	rendering	49	
	teachers	rendering	44	
	teachers	report of rendering/rendering	42	

Graph. 1. Frequency of exchanges in school meeting.



Teachers tend to speak more, primarily in narrative forms, to explain the student's progress and emotional difficulties. The girl also speaks at length, especially when sharing a message from her L2 teacher and discussing a homework assignment. The mediator translates and explains, with shifts in length comparable to those of the teachers. Notably, both teachers and the mediator share personal anecdotes about being bilingual, while the mother

uses this mode to connect her own anxieties about learning at CPIA<sup>1</sup>. with her daughter's fear of making mistakes. In terms of the frequency of conversational exchanges, Graph 1 shows the mediator interacts most frequently with the mother, followed by the mother's responses to the mediator.

On the level of qualitative analysis, the following conversation extracts illustrate key moments of mediation that promote the mother's.

Excerpt 1

- 1 INS 1: bene Basma, cosa diciamo alla mamma? >  
CHI (MOT)  
okay Basma, what do we say to your mom?
- 2 CHI: boh... > INS 1  
I don't know...
- 3 INS 1: come boh? > CHI  
what do you mean by 'I don't know'?
- 4 INS 2: come stai andando in questo periodo a scuola?  
> CHI  
how are you doing at school these days?
- 5 CHI: bene? > INS 1  
good?
- 6 INS 1: be:ne! mo::lto bene. > CHI  
very good!really good!
- 7 INS 2: cosa vuol dire questo bene? proviamo a riempirlo un po'.  
>CHI (MED)  
what does 'good' mean? Let's explore it a bit.  
visto che è un po' difficile, magari sfruttiamo anche...  
given that it's a little challenging, maybe we could also make use  
of...
- 8 MED: sì sì. io sono qui apposta. > INS 2  
yes, yes. I'm here for that.

The child starts crying, possibly due to decision regarding her reduced attendance in the L2 Italian lab. To ease the tension, the teachers reassure the mother, highlighting the child's academic progress through narrating school episodes and using the math notebook as a visual aid.

In the second excerpt, we can see how the mother's role in the conversation becomes more active, initially as the recipient of information about her daughter, and later as a co-participant in a parallel exchange with the mediator, which is subsequently incorporated into the main conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> Provincial Centers for Adult Education.

In turn 4, the mediator shifts the focus from the school environment to the child's emotional state at home. The mother interprets the crying of daughter as linked to attachment behaviors, a view confirmed by the teachers, who acknowledge her perspective, reinforcing her agency in the conversation.

Excerpt 2

1 T 1: e stai riuscendo veramente tanto!

>

CHI

you're really doing so well! Not just in Italian, but in all subjects.

e non solo in italiano, ma in tutte le materie, mamma.

>

MOT

and not only in Italian, but in all subjects, Mom.

perché quando le riesce meglio a comprendere, a capire,

because when he can understand it better, to understand it,

poi riesce anche meglio, per esempio in matematica.

then he can even better, for example in mathematics.

vai a prendere il quaderno di matematica che facciamo vedere

>

CHI

get the math notebook that we show mom

quel problema che hai fatto da sola! la prima a risolvere,

that problem you did yourself.

vero Basma?

is it true, Basma?

2 CHI: sì. > INS 1

yes.

3 T 2: la prima a consegnare. e giusto! e con la sua strategia!

> MOT

the first to submit. and correct!

4 MED: does she cry at home because of school? (arabic)

> MOT

5 MOT: a little. It's like when a teacher is about to leave. (arabic)

> MOT

6 MED: yes, exactly. They told her she finished the course. (arabic)

> MOT

7 MOT: she gets attached. When guests come to our house, she gets

attached and doesn't want them to leave. (arabic)

>

MED

8 MED: ha detto che si è affezionata molto alla maestra, e anche a casa

> ALL

she said that she was very fond of the teacher, and even at home

quando va qualcuno a visitarli, a trovarli, lei si affeziona tanto

when someone goes to visit them, to see them, she's getting too

fond

- e non vuole più che vadano via.  
and does not want them to go away anymore.
- 9 T2 è una bambina che si affeziona molto. > MOT  
she has a strong sense of affection.
- 10 T1 che fa fatica all'inizio, fa fatica all'inizio e poi invece quando  
> MOT  
si abitua si affeziona tanto.  
who struggles at first, struggles at the beginning and then when  
he gets used to it he becomes very fond.

After the mediator report of rendering the mother's perspective to the teachers in turn 8, the teachers then address the mother directly, validating her description of the child, both at home and at school.

In the analysis of the school-family interview, agency is not located in individual linguistic elements, but rather in how turn-taking is managed across various dialogical sequences. Agency emerges in the way conversational roles are allocated to participants, highlighting how different actors are called upon within the evolving narrative of the interaction.

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# ADOLESCENTS, WELL-BEING AND MEDIA PRACTICES: ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN THE METROPOLITAN CITY OF BOLOGNA.

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This article explores the evolving dynamics of adolescents' digital media practices and their implications for socialization, identity, and well-being. The research, conducted over two years with students aged 14-19 in Bologna, employed a mixed-method approach to examine media habits before and after the pandemic. Findings reveal increased screen time, shifts in communication toward more functional interactions, the challenges of fragmented identity across platforms and the pivotal role of group chats in peer dynamics, often amplifying misunderstandings and exclusion.

Adolescents, Well-Being, Media practices, Socialisation, Digital technologies.

## 1. THE NECESSITY OF A PERMANENT OBSERVATORY

Social media have long been considered both a strong driver of peer-to-peer social interactions (Caronia, 2002; Turkle, 2012) and an important ground for the establishment of participatory cultures and self-expression (Ito, Jenkins & boyd, 2016). Particularly in the last decade, the infosphere has undergone a development that, although expected, has surprised in terms of its speed and in terms of how profoundly it has changed young people's online practices (Floridi, 2017).

Understanding adolescents' media practices requires a continuous and dynamic investigation. This necessity arises from the constant remodulation of cultural contexts, technological advancements, and the evolving generational

attitudes toward media. Adolescent behaviours online do not exist in isolation but are interwoven with their cultural and social environments, making longitudinal and comparative research essential to capture these shifting paradigms.

## **2. THE RESEARCH**

### **2.1. Objectives and research questions**

Has this transversal, constant and pervasive change affected the way young people negotiate their role in the peer group? The two-year research hereby presented (2020-21; 2021-22) involved students aged 14 to 19 from 9 secondary schools in the territory of the Metropolitan City of Bologna, with the aim of exploring this general question in order to offer a detailed descriptive and interpretative picture of the issue.

### **2.2. Timeline of the research**

The first year was guided by two specific research questions (what are the media practices of today's adolescents? In what terms do their practices have an impact on their way of socialising and negotiating their identity?), was articulated into a quantitative study dedicated to gathering – through an online questionnaire (88 classes involved, 1658 respondents) – the general situation of the students and into a qualitative study – structured as a series of online focus groups (5, one for each year, for a total of 49 participants) – aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the results of the quantitative phase. A picture emerged in which technologies and social media assume a fundamentally important role in adolescents' relationships and identity formation (Pacetti, Soriani, Bonafede, 2023). Media practices represent a fundamental junction in the way adolescents behave, interact, act with their peers and socialise with reference figures (adults, peers and influencers). Very few use social media 'actively' (in the sense of being content creators), but they perceive their peers doing so positively and with admiration. Moreover, the lockdown profoundly changed their media practices: digital tools were the only means of communication and were used much longer than normal.

The contribution aims to present some results of the second year (s.y. 2021-22), of the research focusing on:

- students' media practices and modes of interaction through technology among adolescents;



- dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in peer groups in informal contexts connected to school or educational contexts (e.g. class chat);
- research into subjective well-being from forms of socialisation among adolescents through technology.

The stages of the research, conducted according to a mixed method (Creswell, 2015), were twofold:

- a quantitative study dedicated to collecting – through an online questionnaire (1286 respondents) – the general situation of the students;
- a qualitative study – structured as a series of online focus groups (54 participants) – aimed at deepening the results of the quantitative phase.

### **2.3. Methodology**

The hereby presented research can be considered as an explanatory study conducted by following a phenomenological research approach.

Seeing the complexity of the phenomenon addressed the researchers opted to adopt a mixed method approach (Creswell, 2015) by following an explanatory-sequential strategy of inquiry (Trinchero, Robasto, 2019). The phases of the research consisted in two main moments: in a first moment, a quantitative study devoted to collect – by the mean of an online survey – the general situation from the students and, in a second moment, a qualitative study – structured as a series of online focus groups – aimed to deeply understand the results of the quantitative phase.

Questionnaire:

- Media practices: after the pandemic, how much has changed in terms of:
  - Performance;
  - Behaviour;
  - Relationships;
  - skills and hours of technology use;
  - most used device;
  - night management;
  - changes in use;
- Role models: examples of influencers used to assess the link between teenagers and social icons;
- Class chat: emotions, exclusion, acceptance

Focus groups:

- Peer communication before and after the pandemic;
- School and technology, before and after the pandemic: uses and perceptions of attention;
- Notification management and sleep;
- Social media and comparison of body exposure;
- Interactions with people known online;
- Group chats: what emotion is associated and presence of exclusion dynamics.

The research was conducted in 7 upper secondary school located in the area of the Metropolitan City of Bologna and involved a total of 1287 students (first year – 202, second year – 285, third year – 295, fourth year – 244, fifth year – 261; males – 721, females – 520, non-binary – 24, did not want to answer – 22).

### **3. THE RESULTS**

The results from the student questionnaires will be presented and discussed here. In particular, we will focus on a part of the data collected, relating to the change in media practices following what happened during the quarantine for Covid-19 and how students perceive the class chat in terms of online well-being.

#### **3.1. How have media practices changed since the pandemic?**

Figure 1 depicts an aggregate of the responses to the series of items gathered under the question ‘What has changed after COVID’s pandemic?’. The students had to respond with a Likert scale where 1 represents the lowest value of change (‘Nothing has changed’) and 5 the highest (‘A lot has changed’). It can be seen that the values are all at the top end of the scale (3 and above), and in particular that the items that seem to have changed the most are the ‘Level of relationship with peers’ (3,52) and ‘Level of Digital Competence’ (3,98). This can be interpreted as the fact that during the quarantine the students had much more time to spend on digital devices, learning to use them with more familiarity, in a constant and continuous exchange with their peers.

FIGURE 1. What has changed after COVID. Likert: 1 (nothing has changed) – 5 (a lot has changed).

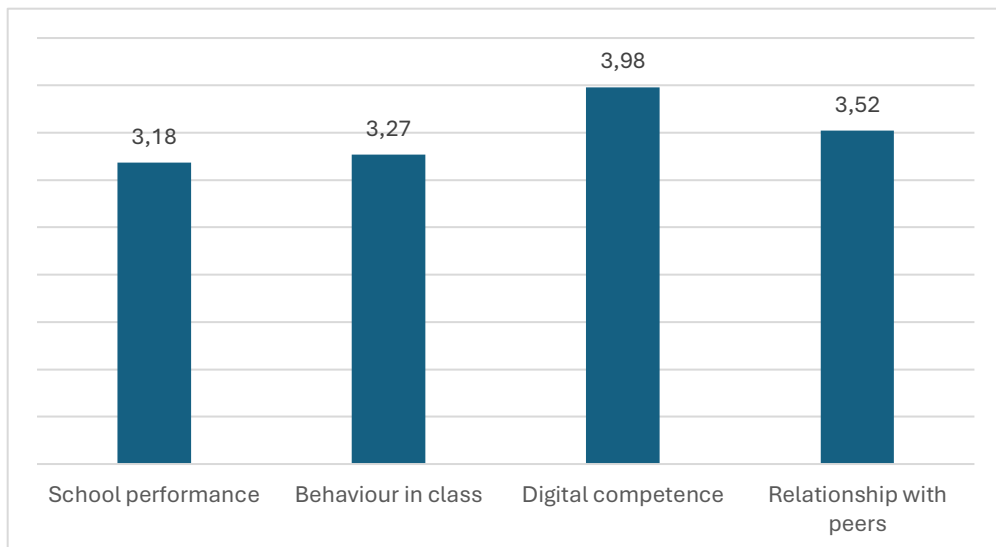
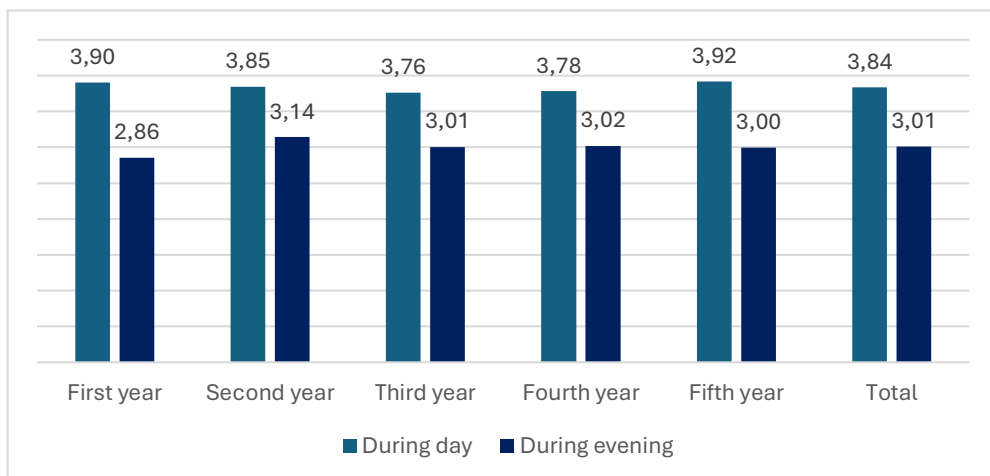


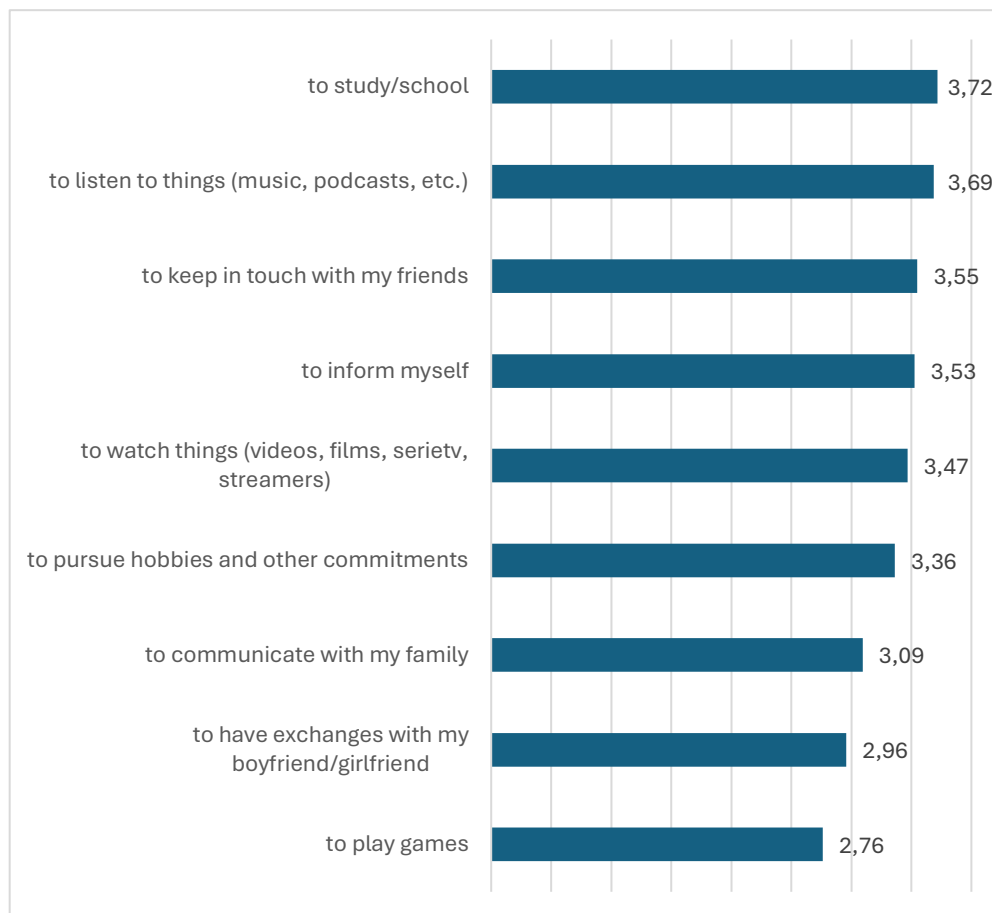
Figure 2 show an account of the hours students spend in front of devices during daytime and evening hours in relation to before and after the pandemic. What emerges is a picture where the number of hours spent on devices during daytime hours has increased (Likert = 3,84) while it remains almost stable in the evening hours (Likert = 3,01). The most frequently used digital devices are smartphones (both during daytime – 1072, and evening hours – 844) and television (especially in the evening hours – 184).

FIGURE 2. Hours spent on digital devices during daily and evening hours. Likert: 1 (less than before) – 5 (more than before)



In Figure 3, the answers to the question ‘How have you changed the way you use technology after Covid’ are aggregated. The aspects of daily life which have been most influenced and which see a greater use of technology after the pandemic than before are: ‘to pursue hobbies and other commitments’ (3,36); ‘to watch things (videos, TV series, etc.)’ (3,47); ‘to inform myself’ (3,53); ‘to keep in touch with my friends’ (3,55); ‘to listen to things’ (3,69); and with the higher Likert score (3,72) ‘to study’.

Figure 3. How have you changed the way you use technology after COVID. Likert: 1 (much less than before) – 5 (much more than before).

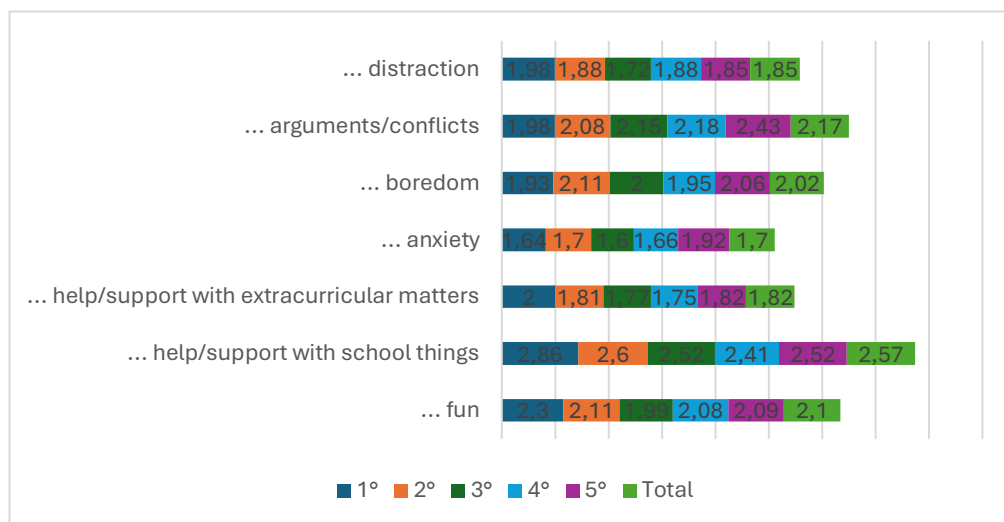


Despite the fact that the values are all between 3 and 4 (and thus relate to a slight increase), it is interesting to note that the highest value is precisely that of the use of technological devices for studying. This element was then taken up again in the focus groups, from which emerged the use of messaging services

(chat and e-mail) and VoIP calls as channels used more frequently than before to get in touch with teachers, but above all as tools aimed at building a network of mutual support among peers. In this sense, class chat plays the role of the nerve centre of most exchanges.

In fact, in the graph below (Figure 4), it is possible to observe how one of the major uses of these chats is precisely to seek support from peers for school-related reasons.

Figure 4. The class group-chat, for you, is a source of... Likert: 1 (nothing) – 5 (a lot)



However, it is important to note that the highest values are linked, in addition to the request for support in school matters (Likert = 2,17), above all to relational situations: conflicts and discussions (2,17) and moments of fun (2,1). Even if the values are shifted towards relatively low values on the Likert scale, the importance of these instruments (both in their more scholastic and more informal uses) in delineating the social climate of the classroom can be noted (Soriani, 2018).

### 3.2. Presentation of the qualitative data

Two thematic areas emerged from the conversations as the main findings:

#### 3.2.1. Digital Media and Communication Among Adolescents Before and After the Pandemic

The pandemic brought significant changes to adolescents' use of digital media, transforming how they spend their time, communicate, and engage with others. One of the most striking trends was the increase in screen time. Younger students shared how their digital habits intensified, both for school and leisure.

A ninth-grader remarked: “I’ve gone from maybe having an hour of computer time a day, now I spend eight hours, both for school and recreational purposes.” Similarly, a tenth-grader reflected on how boredom at home often pushed them toward their phone: “When I’m at home, I struggle much more to find something to do, so for me, it’s inevitable after a while to pick up the phone and spend a lot of hours on it.” Meanwhile, older students highlighted extreme cases of digital immersion during online schooling, with one twelfth-grader admitting: “Some days I even reached like 16, 17 hours a day because TikTok takes up time.”

Communication habits also shifted during this period. Many adolescents observed that interactions became more functional and less personal, with group chats and messaging apps replacing face-to-face conversations. A ninth-grader captured this sentiment, saying: “Once we used to organize ourselves by word of mouth... now we do everything through WhatsApp, and even when we meet, we don’t have much to say.” Others mentioned how the written format often led to misunderstandings or conflicts, as it lacked the emotional nuance of in-person exchanges.

While web conferencing tools proved invaluable for maintaining education and social connections, they elicited mixed feelings. Younger students appreciated their convenience for group work, with one tenth-grader noting: “It’s easier if someone has different schedules; you log in at a certain time because you don’t want to move, and you’re set.” However, these platforms also took on unconventional roles, as one twelfth-grader shared how they were used for watching movies with quarantined friends: “We said, okay, let’s watch a movie together, so we watched it on Google Meet.” Such examples illustrate how adolescents adapted to the tools at hand, blurring the lines between productivity and leisure.

Another notable shift was the fragmentation of communication across multiple platforms. Adolescents frequently described moving between apps like social media and WhatsApp while interacting with the same person. A thirteenth-grader explained: “I see this funny thing, I think of you and send it to you, then you reply on social media. Then I switch to communicating with you on WhatsApp. I communicate with the same person on three platforms in parallel”. This reflects the dispersed nature of digital interactions and aligns with Rivoltella’s concept of fragmented identity representation in digital alphabets (2020), where the self is expressed differently across platforms.

### *3.2.2. Well-being and Group Chat Dynamics*

The dynamics of digital communication were also closely tied to adolescents’

emotional well-being, with group chats playing a pivotal role. Many participants highlighted how group interactions, though efficient, often led to misunderstandings and heightened tensions. A ninth-grader commented: “On WhatsApp, it’s not like talking face-to-face... I never know the real reason behind a message or what’s behind the person writing it.” This lack of emotional context frequently resulted in conflicts, as a tenth-grader explained: “In group chats, there are sometimes big controversies over pointless things. You write a message that gets misinterpreted, and suddenly you’re in a storm of messages.” Such experiences underline the challenges of managing relationships in digital spaces where tone and intent are easily lost.

Exclusion, both intentional and unintentional, emerged as another theme. Some participants recounted instances of being left out of group chats during lower secondary school, which left lasting emotional scars. One ninth-grader admitted: “In lower secondary school, I was excluded, but I also excluded others... there was always that classmate I didn’t want in the group.” Others described self-exclusion due to the overwhelming nature of constant digital interaction. A tenth-grader shared: “I can’t dedicate the whole day to these people and contact them—so I exclude myself or feel excluded.” This reflects the pressures of digital connectivity and the pervasive fear of missing out (FOMO).

For many, these dynamics were compounded by the rigidity of group chats, where leaving a chat was not always an option. A ninth-grader lamented: “If you try to leave a chat, they put you back in... I left a chat twice, and they kept putting me back in.” Such experiences highlight how digital environments can feel inescapable, further intensifying adolescents’ emotional strain.

Despite these challenges, participants also recognized the potential for online tools to foster connection and productivity when used thoughtfully. These insights serve as a foundation for developing strategies to support adolescents in navigating their increasingly digital lives.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

This quantitative and qualitative analysis underscores the complexities of adolescents’ digital lives, highlighting both opportunities for connection and risks to emotional well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach to digital education and well-being. The overall findings emphasize the need for a balanced approach to digital engagement—one that maximizes its benefits while addressing the

complexities of communication and well-being in virtual spaces.

Reflecting on digital well-being today means addressing the pervasive presence of technology in the lives of adolescents, while promoting a deeper awareness of its implications on intimacy, relationships and emotional health. Educational efforts must prioritise the cultivation of social skills and digital empathy, equipping young people with the ability to navigate online interactions with care and understanding and to develop parallel skills in everyday in presence-life. In this sense, the concept of citizenship – broad and inclusive – should transcend specific digital connotations, integrating ethical, social and participatory skills essential for online and offline life. By incorporating these values into education, we can empower future generations to thrive in an interconnected and ever-changing digital society.

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# PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN, CHARACTER SKILLS AND WELL-BEING IN THE CLASSROOM

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The paper explores the relationship between well-being, character skills, and learning, highlighting the importance of social-emotional skills in educational processes. After providing an overview of the benefits and critiques of the concept of educational well-being, the analysis focuses on character skills, non-cognitive qualities such as resilience and cooperation, which are crucial for personal and academic success. The Philosophy for Children method is shown to be an effective approach to integrating learning and well-being that promotes complex thinking, agency, and positive relationships, crucial for student growth and classroom harmony.

Philosophy for Children; Character skills; Social skills

## INTRODUCTION: WELL-BEING IN EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES

Defining well-being in the context of educational processes is challenging both conceptually and operationally. The concept of student well-being includes different categories such as ‘emotional competence’, ‘emotional intelligence’, ‘positive mental health’ or ‘emotional well-being’. This variety of interpretations also leads to a range of operational terms such as social and communication skills, resilience, determination, motivation, self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy (McLaughlin, 2008, 353-354). The growing recognition of these components demonstrates how the field of education is increasingly understanding the interconnections between emotional states and academic success.

Furthermore, the concept of well-being in schools can give rise to different views. Proponents of well-being in education argue that it can permeate all aspects of school life and learning, serving as an indicator of the quality of school life and contributing to students’ physical and psychological health and

development, thereby improving learning outcomes (Hascher, 2012; OECD, 2019). Conversely, critics have raised concerns that well-being programs in schools could move towards therapeutic education, and shift teachers' focus from promoting critical knowledge to solely promoting students' emotional well-being (Biesta, 2017; Hayes, 2009; Füredi, 2004; Ecclestone, 2011; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). Such debates highlight the need to find a balance between cognitive and emotional development, ensuring that educational interventions remain holistic.

Despite the ongoing debate about the definition and focus of well-being in education (Thomas et al., 2016; Amerijckx and Humblet, 2014), there is some consensus on key factors such as agency, autonomy, respect, sense of community, happiness, esteem and positive relationships (Cassidy, 2017). Non-cognitive skills or soft skills are often highlighted as crucial components of well-being that influence student learning experiences and outcomes. Integrating these elements into curricula may not only enhance academic performance but also foster a generation capable of navigating the complexities of modern society.

In essence, well-being in educational processes is a complex and multi-layered concept that is interwoven with students' emotional, social and cognitive development and influences their entire learning journey. Acknowledging this interwoven nature allows educators to design interventions that address the diverse needs of students.

## **WELL-BEING AND CHARACTER SKILLS**

The contradiction between well-being and learning becomes apparent when analysed in depth, as well-being can be seen as a result of positive educational relationships and activities that develop resilience and agency in students (Eaude, 2009:185). It is worth thinking about character skills (Heckman and Kautz, 2017; Chiosso, Poggi, Vittadini, 2021) or soft skills, also known as socio-emotional skills. There are different conceptualizations of this construct that do not always agree (Pattaro, 2016; Patera, 2019). In general, these skills encompass a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual, and practical skills, and ethical values that enable individuals to adapt and behave positively to deal effectively with everyday and professional challenges (Haselberger et al., 2012). Recognizing the diversity of these constructs underscores their universal applicability across educational contexts.

The emphasis on these aspects highlights dimensions that are not strictly categorized as ‘cognitive’ but play a crucial role in academic learning and personal development. Often referred to as Social and Emotional Skills (SES), there is ongoing debate in the literature as to whether these are competences or skills. Despite the analytical distinctions, the terms are often used interchangeably in relation to SES (Maccarini, 2021). This interchangeable use, while occasionally confusing, points to the fundamental overlap in their goals and applications. Although nominally distinct, many studies suggest that terms such as soft skills, non-cognitive skills, life skills, socio-emotional skills, and transversal skills refer to the same conceptual space (Heckman and Kautz, 2013). These constructs are distinct from cognitive skills, are beneficial for learning and achievement, are considered stable attributes once acquired, and are responsive to educational interventions. They include personality traits such as perseverance, open-mindedness and teamwork. Such traits, when nurtured effectively, form the bedrock for success both inside and outside the classroom. Taking into account the Big Five personality traits, cultivating character virtues generally increases students’ well-being (Heckman and Kautz, 2017; Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Borgogni, 2008). Positive emotionality and sociability contribute to satisfying relationships, a sense of belonging and general happiness. Traits such as politeness, empathy, altruism and cooperativeness promote positive interpersonal relationships. Thoroughness and perseverance encourage a proactive approach to commitments, promote self-efficacy and prepare children for adulthood. Emotional stability, emotion control and impulse control create a supportive environment in the classroom. Open-mindedness, creativity and appreciation for diversity foster positive relationships and the development of resilient personalities. Educational policies should therefore emphasize these traits to prepare students for complex interpersonal and professional dynamics.

It is crucial to develop educational strategies that explicitly integrate well-being and learning in a positive cycle. Such strategies ensure that the mutual reinforcement of these elements can create environments where students thrive holistically.

## **PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AND CHARACTER SKILLS**

Among the various approaches that promote the intertwining of well-being and learning, it seems interesting to focus on the role of Philosophy for Children (p4c) (Limpan, Sharp, and Oscanyan, 1980; Lipman, 2004). According to

Lipman, p4c aims to develop complex thinking: cognitive, creative and caring. It is a hypothesis that does not separate the cognitive dimension from the non-cognitive and, what we want to support here, is not in opposition to learning and well-being, but rather integrates them as a goal of the whole educational process. This integrative approach aligns with broader educational goals that value the interplay between intellectual rigor and emotional depth.

Recent research carried out in a high school has shown a correlation between p4c and the improvement of social skills, at least in relation to certain dimensions such as the ability to disagree, express one's doubts, accept remarks and express one's difficulties (Zamengo, 2022). This has made it possible to hypothesize a clearer link between p4c and the aspects that seem to be most strongly associated with respect for others and tolerance of disagreement. Lipman's instrument therefore seems to fit well within the Global Competence perspective (Schleicher, 2017): attention to understanding one's own point of view and the point of view of others, tolerance of disagreement, and the ability to form 'reasoned' opinions about situations are all aspects that p4c insists support the promotion of respectful and democratic attitudes in students. By fostering these attitudes, p4c prepares students to engage constructively with diverse perspectives in a globalized world.

To the extent that p4c succeeds in developing social skills, it can be seen as a pedagogical practice that is able to support students' well-being and is clearly understood from a relational rather than an individual perspective. This relational dimension underscores the collective nature of learning and its impact on community well-being.

Philosophy for Children is a teaching practice that supports the acquisition of character skills and structures the learning context as a place of positive relationships to promote students' agency and well-being. In other words, it creates a pedagogical context based on serenity among participants and fosters interaction among peers and with the teacher/facilitator. It allows students to feel part of a (research) community, thus drawing attention to a dimension that is not only individual in the notion of well-being, but rather understood as a feature of contexts and relationships (Cassidy et al., 2024). This community-focused approach reflects the broader social role of education in nurturing responsible and empathetic citizens.

Precisely because it promotes the ability to think together, p4c accustoms children to being challenged in their thinking and to facing challenges with a positive attitude: In this way, it contributes to the development of resilience. Due

to its structure and didactic principles, p4c also creates a sense of agency. In the research community, students steer the direction of inquiry from the formulation of the initial questions and thus determine the subsequent dialog about their interests, concerns or “questions”. In p4c encounters, students engage in ‘social, cognitive and emotional’ relationships that are relevant to their world and develop the habit of seeking and finding meaning, which is central to a person’s identity, relationships and well-being (Kizel, 2017: 87). This habit of inquiry not only reinforces cognitive skills but also contributes to lifelong personal and social development.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Although the issue of student well-being in the classroom presents some conceptual difficulties, it is a fundamental element in the development of the younger generation. Based on this conviction in mind, more attention should be paid to character skills in educational pathways. This does not mean that specific training should replace curricula; instead, we propose that the focus in school education should be on character education and, in particular, on social skills. Through the teaching of subject content, it is possible to cultivate attitudes and mindsets that shape a person’s character and thus promote their well-being. By embedding these principles into everyday classroom practices, schools can become transformative spaces where cognitive and emotional growth are seamlessly integrated. The p4c experience presented here is a methodological proposal based on two easily implementable elements: the creation of a dialogical environment and the attitude of a teacher who is attentive to promoting the overall development of students. These elements highlight how simple yet intentional practices can profoundly influence students’ trajectories.

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# DESIGN OF SCHOOL CONTEXTS AND AN INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM ACCORDING TO THE UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING APPROACH: RESULTS OF THE EXPLORATORY PHASE

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The exploratory phase of the action research project was conducted with the participation of 30 primary school teachers and 185 children across nine classes in the cities of Reggio Emilia and Bologna. The research employs focus groups and thematic analysis to identify critical issues in educational and instructional planning, space and time management, curriculum use, and inclusive practices. Teachers have reported difficulties in addressing the heterogeneity of the classroom environment, citing rigid learning environments and a lack of cohesive planning for students with disabilities as key challenges. Despite the embrace of inclusive values, challenges persist in the effective translation of these principles into teaching practices. The findings emphasise the necessity for continuous professional development, equipping teachers with theoretical and practical skills to foster flexible, dynamic, and participatory learning environments. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of rethinking structural and organisational frameworks within schools to promote inclusion. The UDL approach emerges as a pivotal strategy for designing proactive and flexible curriculum that address individual variability from the outset. This research underscores the necessity of innovative pedagogical models to advance inclusive education and improve responsiveness to the diverse needs of contemporary classrooms.

inclusive education, diversity, universal design for learning

## **INTRODUCTION**

Our society is increasingly pluralistic, complex, and characterized by diversity. Heterogeneity is an inherent quality of any social group and has always existed. However, social changes stemming from rights-based movements have transformed how diversity is conceptualized and made visible, identifying it as a fundamental component of both society and education. Diversity in school settings arises from socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, familial, or individual differences, including skills and needs. The international debate on education upholds the right of all children to quality education, where everyone can develop their potential and achieve the skills necessary to become active citizens in society. Today, schools face various challenges both in terms of pedagogical models and the methodologies and teaching practices to address the diversity of students' needs, interests, learning profiles, and functioning with the perspective of inclusive education (UNESCO, 2009; EASNIE, 2016). IE is a foundational theoretical model guiding global educational policies, supported by key international organizations (Cottini, 2017). The European Council and the European Commission have issued a series of recommendations aimed at promoting actions to improve education for all and enhance teachers' skills, acknowledging them as essential elements in the implementation of inclusive educational practices. This perspective still encounters challenges in its implementation, particularly in teachers' ability to design and apply educational and didactic practices that effectively address classroom heterogeneity. The following section will present data from the exploratory phase of an action research study, offering insights into these critical issues and potential pathways for improvement.

## **1. THE ACTION RESEARCH**

### **1.1. Exploratory phase objectives**

The Action Research (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2018; Pastori, 2017; Canevaro, 2004) presented was conducted between May 2023 and September 2023, following a mixed methods approach (Trincherò & Robasto, 2019). It involved 30 primary school teachers and 185 children across 9 classes and 7 primary school, in the cities of Reggio Emilia and Bologna. The aim of this research was to experiment an inclusive curriculum, following the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach (CAST, 2011; 2018). The research, divided into four phases, incorporated alternating reflective and training sessions, which structured the entire process. In the initial exploratory phase, four focus groups were conducted, two for each school district, involving all teachers from the

participating sites. The objective was to identify emerging practices related to inclusive education. Specifically, this phase investigated: motivations for participating in the research, needs, challenges, and resources present in these school settings; attitudes and beliefs regarding the concept of inclusion; and the instructional methods and curriculum approaches used within the school districts.

## **1.2. The methodology**

The choice of focus groups in the Research-Action methodology was a crucial tool to give voice to teachers and encourage meaningful interaction. This approach clarified perspectives, fostered shared understandings, and revealed group dynamics. The opinions, feelings, and interpretations of the participants in the research clarified individual perspectives and allowed for comparison with others, leading to the definition and articulation of subjective meanings and ultimately fostering new shared realms of mutual understanding (Cataldi, 2009). Specifically, when the focus group coincides with the research group involved in the intervention, it becomes a valuable perspective for observing dynamics and relationships. The facilitated access to these behavioural norms provides valuable insights into the processes through which participants formulate interpretations, opinions, and conclusions (Albanesi, 2012). Two focus groups were conducted for each school district. The topics were introduced using prompt questions related to the themes being investigated:

- Reasons for participating in the research
- Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding the Concept of Inclusion
- Teaching Methods and School Curriculum

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) with an inductive, “bottom-up” approach (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) and a realist method (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). The process involved transcription, data familiarization, initial coding, and themes identification. Codes were iteratively reviewed and grouped into broader categories. Recurrence analysis refined the themes, ensuring accurate representation of participants’ perspectives.

## **2. THE RESULTS OF EXPLORATORY PHASE**

The following section will present the themes and sub-themes that emerged during the exploratory phase, outlining the barriers faced by teachers in school contexts.

Tab. 1. Themes and sub-themes from the focus groups

The Educational and Instructional Context	Cluster No. 1: Educational and Instructional Design Cluster No. 2: Spaces Cluster No. 3: Time Cluster No. 4: Curriculum
Inclusion	Cluster No. 1: The culture of Inclusion Cluster No. 2: Participation of Students with Disabilities in School Life Cluster No. 3: Relational Dynamics Cluster No. 4: Co-Teaching

## 2.1. The Educational and Instructional Context

Teachers involved in the research highlight difficulties in designing and implementing educational and instructional plans (Cluster No. 1) that considers all the difficulties and needs within the classroom. Today's classrooms, including those in this research, show the complexity of contemporary schools. There are many students who require an Individualized Educational Planning (IEP), a Personalised Educational Plan (Law 170/2010; Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012; Ministerial Circular No. 8 of 6 March 2013), such as those with Specific Learning Disorders, Special Educational Needs and non-Italian-speaking children. Teachers report the difficulty of implementing inclusive teaching that effectively considers the students' different abilities and skills. The organisational and didactic practices, as well as the educational planning implemented by teachers, do not appear effectively address the heterogeneity of classes. The analysis shows that teachers use only five educational and didactic methodologies, underlining the difficulty of addressing the educational needs present and the need for a reorganisation of contexts and shared planning. The second sub-theme is the use and availability of school space. Space represents the physical and material container where teaching activities take place. The way in which a learning environment is organised, using furniture and teaching materials, makes the school's educational project immediately evident (Weyland & Attia, 2015), reveals the teacher's pedagogical choices, conditions the teaching action and affects the relationship between teachers and students. Teachers report that school spaces are not very modulable and do not allow differentiation according to didactics and various educational activities. The third sub-theme concerns time management within the school context (Cluster No. 3). Many teachers report complexity in the management of

full time at school, expressing difficulties both in class organisation and in the inclusion of pupils with disabilities. The organisation of the school timetable in a rigid logic linked to structuring the disciplines separately generates disorientation and cognitive overload in students. The fourth sub-theme relates to the use of the curriculum in the design and assessment dimension (Cluster No. 4). The curriculum is perceived by teachers as a bureaucratic tool rather than an educational and didactic planning tool. Teachers state that they do not use the school curriculum in their educational planning, perceiving it as a bureaucratic tool and disconnected from their planning practice. Furthermore, the difficulty for teachers to implement formative assessment, officially introduced by Ministerial Order No. 172 of 4 December 2020, in primary schools emerges as a critical issue. In this document, the periodic and final assessment of pupils' learning in primary school classes is made explicit, emphasising its formative nature. The new mode of assessment, introduced by this law, is still difficult for teachers to acquire and apply. The main challenge is related to an assessment culture still anchored to a summative model. The problem is therefore the lack of coherence between instructional design and assessment.

## **2.2. The culture of inclusion**

The second theme emerging from the thematic analysis of the focus groups concerns the culture of inclusion. The culture of inclusion expressed by teachers does not only refer to pupils with disabilities, but as the ability to respond to the different educational needs of students, ensuring that everyone could actively and fully participate in school activities. Inclusion is seen through the lens *pedagogy of encounter*, where encountering the other and sharing gives meaning and significance in a community, such as a school. Teachers' attitudes play a key role in inclusive practices (Davis & Layton, 2011; Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012). Nationally (Canevaro, D'Alonzo, Ianes & Caldin, 2011) and internationally (Forlin, 2011) research highlights how teachers' attitudes and beliefs influence inclusive processes. However, this attitude is coupled with a recognition of the difficulties in translating these practices into action. Teachers report the difficulty of implementing effective inclusive education (Cluster no. 1) that considers all the difficulties and needs within the classroom. Although teachers adhere to and share the values and assumptions of inclusive education, the difficulty is in translating these principles into effective teaching actions. Often, teachers only use bureaucratic devices such as IEP and Personalised Educational Plan, without any real change about educational and didactic curriculum. This difficulty is also highlighted by the second sub-theme,

the participation of pupils with disabilities in school life (Cluster No. 2). The activities are planned for the class without considering the characteristics and cognitive potential of the disabled pupil and then these are adapted by support teacher into individual and parallel pathways. The third sub-theme concerns the presence and management of complex relational dynamics between children and challenging behaviour in the classroom (Cluster No. 3). Several teachers report widespread discomfort in pupils' behaviour, attention difficulties, motivation to learn, challenging and difficult to manage behaviour. The final sub-theme relates to the use of co-teaching (cluster No. 4), understood as a collaborative dimension of teachers' planning and teaching practices. Co-teaching is a practice in which two or more teachers, one of curricular subjects and one of support subjects, work together in co-planning, co-teaching and co-assessing a heterogeneous group of pupils within the same classroom and school setting, using different approaches (Friend & Cook, 2007). It is a crucial dimension for promoting inclusion processes in educational contexts. The teachers' experiences show a variety of situations within classes. In some of them (4), only partial recognition of the value of co-planning and co-teaching in the classroom emerges. The teachers emphasised the presence of attitudes that hinder the full promotion of a collaborative approach. There is a tendency to consider the support teacher not as an equal figure in the classroom, but rather as a figure to whom responsibility for the child with disabilities is exclusively delegated, thus limiting the potential of co-teaching and its function in promoting inclusive processes.

## **THE CONCLUSION**

The findings of the exploratory phase of the research show that the challenges faced by teachers in educational and school settings are closely associated with the growing complexity of contemporary classrooms. In an environment characterised by diversity, there is a clear need for a rethinking of teaching and organisational practices to ensure effective responsiveness to the needs of students. The critical challenges observed in didactic and educational planning, space and time management, classroom organization, the inclusion of students with disabilities and the use of the curriculum underscore the urgent need for continuous professional development. Such training must focus on fostering both theoretical knowledge and practical skills from an inclusive perspective. It is essential that initial and ongoing training equips teachers to effectively address the complexities of managing diversity while creating flexible, dynamic, and participatory learning environments. There is a need for a structural and

methodological reorganisation of educational contexts through a didactic approach based on the valorisation of differences, the promotion of a positive classroom climate and inclusion as a cardinal principle of educational action. The school, as a place based on the principle of education and inclusion, following the approach of inclusive education, must therefore consider a change of a structural and organisational nature to respond to the variability of today's classrooms. In this perspective, where diversity is seen as the uniqueness and originality of each person, one of the international guidelines that emphasises individual variability is that of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), (CAST, 2011; 2018). The objective of this approach is to design a flexible and proactive curriculum, intentionally and systematically designed (Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014), by all the teachers. This is done from the outset, with the aim of avoiding subsequent adaptations and changes. In addition, the approach considers the differences between pupils, including those with disabilities, in the various components that constitute the curriculum: objectives, methods, materials and evaluation. Faced with the challenge of inclusive education as the key to quality education, it is necessary to adopt and experiment with new approaches, such as UDL, which serve as inspiration for the teaching-learning process, but also provide the resources for its implementation.

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# COGNITIVE DISABILITIES AND PERSONALISED LEARNING: THE CASE STUDY OF THE AGENZIA FORMATIVA OF THE PROVINCE OF VARESE

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The contribution aims to present and examine the pedagogical-educational approaches and experiential learning processes implemented at the Agenzia Formativa in Luino, offering an example of vocational training that is primarily educational. Personalised educational strategies for students with disabilities are crucial to creating an inclusive school environment and reducing dropout risks, particularly for vulnerable students, both cognitively and socio-culturally. The professional courses for students with disabilities, launched in 2018/2019, aim to prepare them for full societal integration through collaboration with local institutions. Students, with varying degrees of cognitive disabilities and from challenging socio-cultural backgrounds, require environments that respect their individual strengths and difficulties, ensuring equal opportunities. The educational experience includes internships, initially in protected environments and later in companies, to develop skills such as responsibility, respect for rules, and relational abilities. This educational approach values each student's uniqueness, fostering active inclusion and promoting autonomy in social and professional life. The experience is explored through case analysis, focusing on teaching strategies, tools, and methods with both didactic and psycho-pedagogical goals.

cognitive disabilities; personalised learning; Vocational Education and Training (VET); learning strategies; inclusive education

## INTRODUCTION

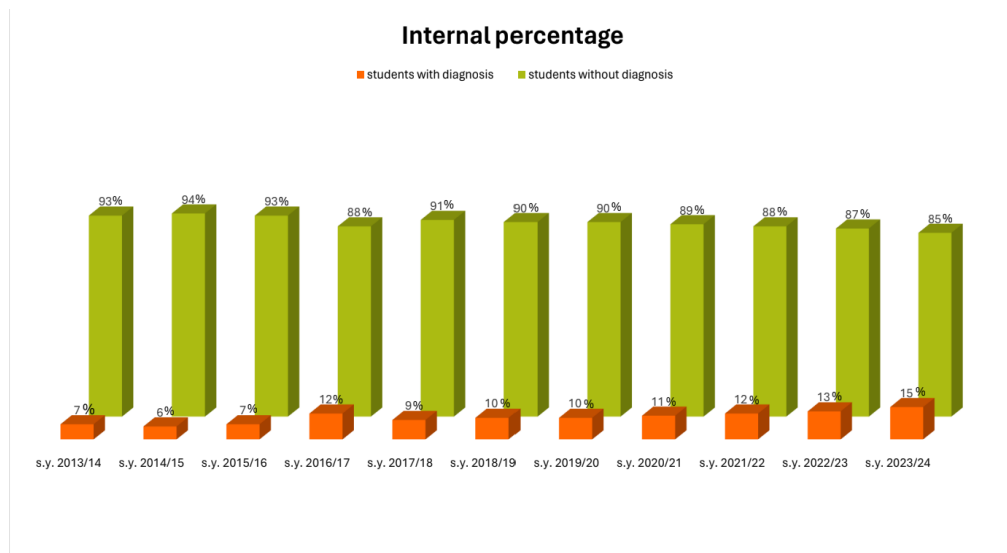
Since the 2018/2019 academic year, the Agenzia Formativa of the Province of Varese, has implemented two vocational training courses for disabled students (PPD) at its branch in Luino. These courses aim to nurture individuals capable of contributing to society as active citizens through personalised learning, which values each individual's uniqueness, and by fostering engagement with local institutions. Integration occurs gradually, with continuous support from the school. Students enrolled in personalised learning paths typically present varying degrees of cognitive disabilities, ranging from mild to moderate. Most of these students come from challenging socio-cultural backgrounds and, therefore, have a heightened need for inclusive environments that can offer equal opportunities, considering their individual inclinations, difficulties, and strengths (Wehman et al., 2018). The school provides learning spaces and pathways based on the principle of equal rights, ensuring personalisation that enhances the uniqueness of each student. The purpose of curriculum for disabled students is not to segregate or emphasise differences, but rather to welcome vulnerable individuals into a safe and supportive environment, enabling them to gradually open up to the world as human beings and engage with society (Beyer et al., 2010). As they become aware of their own limitations and rights, they can take an active role in the social, economic, and political spheres of the country (Honey et al., 2014), ultimately achieving personal fulfilment (Dewey, 2012). The decision to introduce personalised paths for students with disabilities (PPD) stems from the national context, where the percentage of students with functional diagnoses at our centre stands at 15%. In the academic year 2018/19, the first annual PPD programme was launched in the field of catering, and subsequently, a pathway in the agricultural sector was introduced. Adequate training for work and adult life is required, especially in a challenging context that involves both age-related and student-specific difficulties, as well as limited resources allocated to them (107 hours of annual individualised support in standard courses).

Furthermore, a suitable learning environment is essential to support students with mild disabilities, who are unlikely to benefit from the provisions of Law 68/99 (Camera dei deputati e Senato della Repubblica, 1999). The type of courses has been established based on three criteria:

- A high percentage of students with mild disabilities, therefore potentially able to find employment opportunities;

- Employment prospects in a territory, that of Alto Verbano, known for tourism and landscape conservation;
- Catering and Agriculture as sectors that can offer employment with simple tasks.

Figure. 1. Internal percentage of students with diagnosis in Luino



## 1. PEDAGOGICAL PARADIGM

The topic of educational strategies associated with the personalisation of learning needs to be addressed from a psycho-pedagogical and social perspective. These strategies are intended as learning tools and methods that:

- foster an inclusive environment (Patrick et. al, 2013) in upper secondary schools;
- potentially limit school drop-out and exclusion of the most vulnerable students, particularly those facing intellectual challenges and social or economic instability.

Schools must guarantee the possibility of personal fulfilment for all students, through a systemic approach aimed at personalising learning, especially for students with disabilities. From a systemic perspective, it is not only the school system that contributes to building the student's life plan, but also the extensive network of relationships outside the school. This includes the student's socio-economic and cultural environment, which is shaped by their family and the

social networks they interact with (Caponera e Losito, 2016; lanes, 2005). Family dynamics often take on even destructive forms when families are left to face situations laden with hardship and emotional strain on their own. For this reason, the methodology adopted in this study actively involves parents as much as possible in their children's educational journey, through the shared decision-making of choices, goals, and interventions. This methodology also extends to the network of local services, which may be involved in cases of social distress. The practical application of this theoretical paradigm is organised into two broad areas: traditional subjects and vocational subjects, alongside practical workshops. The theoretical framework is delivered through traditional (core) and vocational lessons, with a simplified curriculum adapted to the specific class group, or even to the individual student. The learning of theoretical concepts is reinforced through their application in workshops, often with the presence of both the subject teacher and the workshop instructor. Particular attention is given to internship experiences, which initially take place in a controlled environment within the school, involving activities aimed at the public. Only at a later stage students are assigned to external training placements. The goal is to encourage independent work experience and the development of cross-cutting competencies, such as adherence to rules, responsibility for assigned tasks and roles, empowerment, and improvement of relational and communication skills. This skill set has notable long-term potential for fostering independence and employability (Southward and Kyzar, 2017). The individualised path for disabled students (PPD) arose from the need to offer an educational path for students who do not find an appropriate learning space within the traditional system but possess skills and competencies that can be cultivated and utilised in their life project. This represents a training gap for a category of individuals who face challenges but are not sufficiently impaired to qualify for social support once they complete their schooling. The aim is to finalise their learning (professional and social integration) by maximising each student's individual characteristics so that they can achieve a sufficient level of autonomy

## **2. CASE STUDY: EVALUATION AND STUDENT PROGRESS**

This preliminary study is based on the analysis of 28 cases, offering an initial exploration of the impact of personalised learning pathways for students with cognitive disabilities. While the findings provide valuable insights, they also highlight the need for further research to substantiate these observations and refine the methodologies employed. Within the professional training courses,

the evaluation of each individual student has been conducted through both direct and indirect observation of a set of competencies, aiming to integrate the educational and professional spheres. In the early stages, each competency was assessed using a three-level evaluation scale. Subsequently, to achieve more precise observation, a four-level scale was introduced:

- Inadequate level (1)
- Slightly adequate level (2)
- Fairly adequate level (3)
- Adequate level (4)

Based on these criteria, the systematic evaluation of each student enables teachers to collaborate effectively during both the preliminary observation phases and the subsequent stages of drafting assessments. Continuous exchange among the team is crucial for monitoring the progress of individual students. An analysis of the collected data revealed that students' educational and personal development is not always consistent. Periods of growth may be interspersed with phases of decline, which are particularly evident in areas such as work execution, attention and concentration, adherence to rules, and interpersonal skills. The underlying causes of these fluctuations are varied and may include familial changes, internal family conflicts, significant economic hardships, protective interventions requiring separation from the family of origin, or prolonged absences from school, each of which significantly impacts academic performance. Improvements are often attributed to additional external support provided by institutions, such as home-based educators, or to prior experience in a relevant field, for example, working alongside parents in an established family business. Class dynamics also play a critical role in fostering students' well-being. The ability to form meaningful, empathetic, and stable relationships is frequently hindered by personal challenges, making it difficult for students to manage relationships and emotions effectively. However, the opportunity to experience a classroom environment with a small group of peers (currently capped at nine) allows students to better navigate social interactions and feel more engaged in the educational dialogue. By the third year, most students demonstrate the ability to meet the majority of the expected objectives across all evaluation areas. This progress can be attributed to significant personal maturation and the motivation derived from participation in internships, which expose students to the broader world, enabling them to become "active" citizens capable of contributing meaningfully (Mason & Arcaini, 2010; Olivari et al., 2016).

### 3. CASE STUDY: STUDENT 3 AND STUDENT 6

Among the students' part of the study analysis, two cases (student 3 and 6) who completed the catering course in the 2022-2023 academic year are here examined, with key trends highlighted:

- Student 6 exemplifies the typical trajectory of improvement observed throughout the programme, with all skills showing measurable progress over the three years. This student, who has mild intellectual disabilities (IQ = 61), demonstrated a strong start in the first year, across most competencies. However, areas of relative difficulty included logical-mathematical reasoning, work pace, work endurance, and attention. Over the subsequent years, this student made significant gains, ultimately achieving levels of performance consistent with his cognitive potential.
- In contrast, student 3 experienced a decrease in performance during the second year, a trend that was not uncommon among participants in the study. This student, who has a moderate intellectual disability (IQ = 44), exhibited a temporary decrease in performance across several competencies, followed by gradual improvement. The decline can be attributed to several factors: the dynamics within the student's peer group, the increased demands of the second-year curriculum, which required greater autonomy and self-management, and the emotional and relational challenges typical of adolescence. Specifically, this student faced personal difficulties within the family during this period, which likely contributed to the dip in performance. Despite these challenges, the student ultimately achieved more stable and adequate competency levels by the end of the course.

These cases highlight the complex interplay of cognitive abilities, personal circumstances, and the demands of the educational context in shaping student progress over time.

Figure 2. Student 6: skills development.

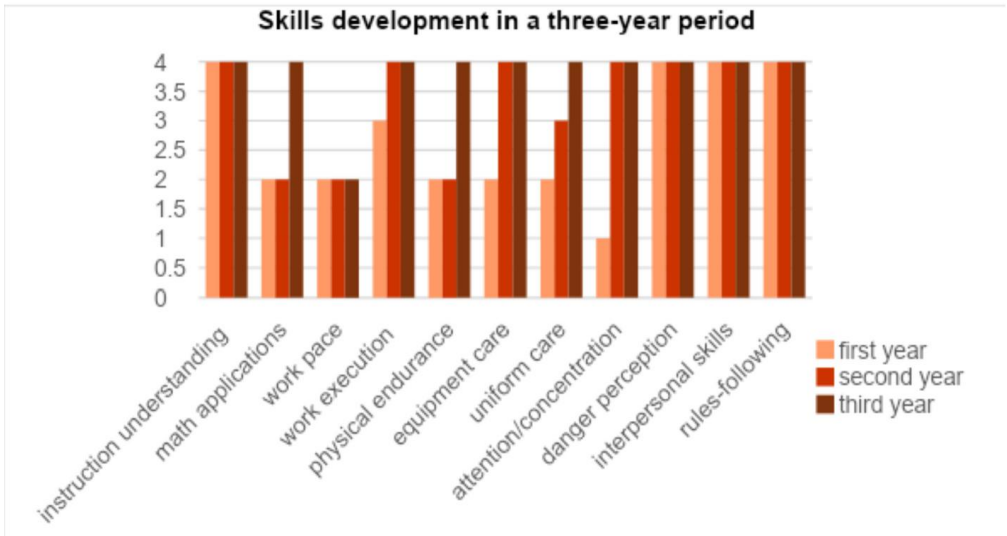
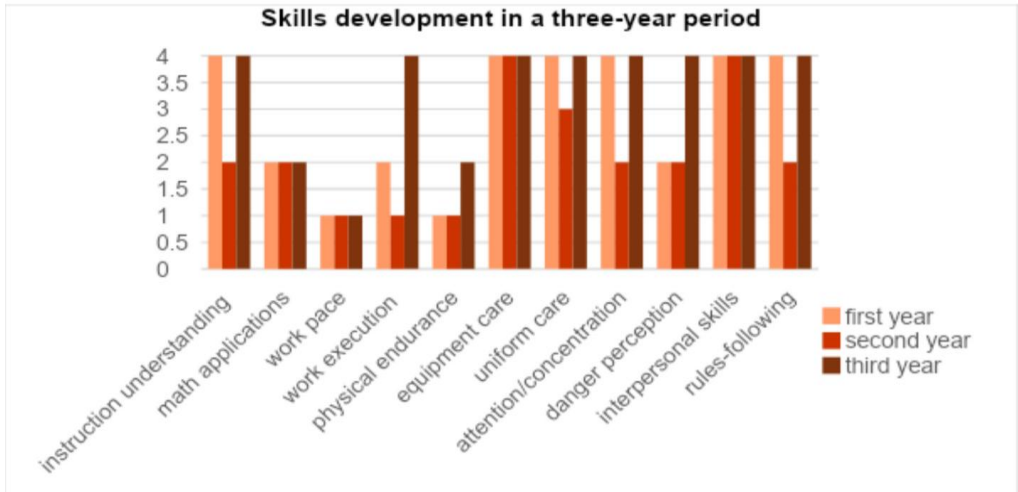


Figure 3. Student 3: skills development.



## CONCLUSION

The study acknowledges the importance of developing study paths that can promote the aforementioned competencies, corroborating the topic of school inclusion and students with disability can be conceived as an active part and not as recipients of the service. The analysis of the teaching methodology and the progression of competencies assessed during the initial years of the PPD course trials in Luino indicates that students have achieved educational success and are well-prepared to advance towards integration into the workforce and society. The limitations found in this research, which is based on experimentation that did not have quantitative research as its purpose and whose data – consequently – were analysed afterward, are as follows. The tools used for learning assessment were constructed within the Training Agency and were not intended to be usable externally. However, to present an exportable path, it is necessary for evaluation criteria to be more objective, although this raises the perennial dilemma of integrating quantitative data collection with qualitative ones. It is fairly evident that a personalised path cannot be universalised and that the evaluation of achieved competencies cannot ignore the Individualised Education Plan (PEI, Progetto Educativo Individualizzato) developed for each student. However, it is important, even through the presented experience, to design and build more objective and readable tools also beyond the Vocational Training Institution in Luino. This step, besides being important for the project's improvement, would also enable the programme to be expanded and tested for its effectiveness in other socio-economic contexts, potentially through integration and comparison with similar experiences across Italy. To achieve this, it would be necessary to establish a network, at least on a regional level but ideally on a national scale, in order to present data to the policymakers and guide legislative decisions in a more informed direction. In this regard, the role of the Agenzia Formativa is crucial, as it seeks to explore the possibility of building partnerships with academic institutions. This collaboration could reinforce the methodology developed in Luino and foster a dialogue between academic pedagogy and territorial pedagogy (Baldacci, 2024). By bridging the gap between theoretical approaches in academia and the practical, contextualised learning strategies in vocational training, such collaboration has the potential to refine and expand the pedagogical paradigm, ensuring that it becomes more adaptable, evidence-based, and widely applicable.



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# THE INDIVIDUALIZED STRATEGY FOR AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL

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Individualization is a strategy that aims to enable each pupil to learn and train under the best possible conditions. It enables optimum learning and training because it pays attention to the *individual and social differences* that each pupil manifests by attempting to overcome them. Indeed, each student comes to school with individual differences that may consist, for example, in the possession of different forms of cognitive ‘skills’ or different motivational attitudes towards the learning task. These differences, whether they take the form of different family environments or different socio-cultural backgrounds, often fuel the difficulties that the student must face to fit successfully into the educational system. Thus individualization, in its concrete implementation, is embodied in the adaptation of the teaching proposal to the characteristics of the pupil. The project hypothesis intends to make use of the more formalized model of individualized strategies, theorized by Bloom, known as Mastery Learning. The fundamental assumption of Mastery Learning holds that most learners can achieve full mastery of basic objectives in the presence of adequate teaching quality. This is possible irrespective of a learner’s ‘aptitude’ for a certain subject, as this aptitude can only predict the time required to reach a certain level of learning. This model will be integrated and revisited in the light of studies relating to the psycho-pedagogical and motivational sphere to ensure that pupils achieve the basic and essential objectives, presenting operational solutions that adapt teaching to the individual characteristics of the students.

Individualized Strategy, Individual Differences, Mastery Learning

## INTRODUCTION

The educational debate has dealt, in recent decades, with a topic of great relevance to educational action that of the individualization of teaching and learning processes. Individualized educational guidance constitutes, in fact, one of the most adequate responses to the demands for real equality of

educational opportunities. Mass schooling has resulted in the access to schooling of pupils from broad segments of the population that were previously excluded and has motivated the search for new strategies for education. Under traditional paradigms of schooling, the existence of social and/or merit 'filters' conditioned students' access to and retention in school. Such filters made it possible to moderate the dispersion of pupils' characteristics, and educational communication could be organized according to a 'typical' pupil, whose individual characteristics matched the average values of the population admitted to schooling. Now when mass schooling occurred, the educational and training task emerged in all its complexity, as the different characteristics of the school population were found to reproduce the same dispersion found in the totality of the population. In practice, the development of schooling, at the time when the possibility of schooling as a right for all was recognized, could no longer be based on traditional conditions built on social 'filter' or merit. Under the traditional conditions each pupil bore the burden of adapting to the learning proposition, but as conditions changed, new propositions became necessary, capable of differentiating instruction in relation to the diversity of individual pupils.

## **1. THE INDIVIDUALIZED STRATEGY AND THE DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL**

The democratic school only makes sense if it moves on a ground of transformation and change, wants to take note of everyone's differences and refer to them as the basis of the educational program. The democratic school is a service structure for all social groups; it intends to counter the negative effects of cultural 'deprivation'. It is about reversing the traditional attitude, that is, not forcing all pupils to conform to a single, predetermined program. A technically viable way of counteracting these limitations is to offer everyone experiences and means of growth that allow them, at the same time, to use their current cultural codes and models, to expand them in the direction of different codes and models in which they can find possibilities and advantages of integration. The problem of the relationship between personal and social culture is even more complicated because, in addition to differences related to, for example, backgrounds, it is necessary to consider the originality and particularities of everyone's development. Beyond alleged genetic determinations it is probably an interactive result between these and original and unrepeatable biographical events. Students, then, are not only different, but they are also "immeasurable" (Hawkins, 1979, p. 261) in their differences. The immeasurable differences do not undermine the acquisition of common cultural forms, understood as skills,

meanings, cognitive tools. In fact, “individual development can bridge individual differences, but only through an appropriate diversity of learning styles and strategies” (Hawkins, 1979, p. 264).

Traditional schooling, characterized by a uniform proposal of educational opportunities, targets individuals hypothetically believed to possess the necessary wealth of experience, prerequisites, skills and cultural acquisitions. By pretending to disregard the initial inequalities among pupils, that is, by treating all as equals, traditional educational practice results, in the case of the absence of some necessary element, in an inevitable progressive accumulation of that disadvantage which, instead, schools should help to eliminate. Thus, traditional practice itself attributes the responsibility for failure to the individual characteristics of the pupil. This attribution finds its origin in the school’s unwillingness to consider the diverse cultural and social conditions of the pupils. In this way, failure is bound to become implicitly and largely taken for granted at the outset. The concept of school failure can be seen as the obvious consequence of learning difficulties, as the expression of a lack of knowledge and competence. In this sense, failure is seen to be represented in the distributions of academic achievement that, accomplished within the school context, sort students according to their mastery of some practice, material or theoretical. In school, evaluative judgment ratifies in a ranking the assumed position of the student, and school failure cannot simply be equated with a lack of culture, knowledge or competence.

Profit distributions, it should be pointed out, are the object of social and institutional representations (Allal, Cardinet, Perrenoud, 1989). Indeed, the deficiency is related to forms and norms designed to detect school excellence, to programs, to evaluation procedures. Therefore, assessment does not create the inequalities even if, by showing them in evidence, it justifies and legitimizes them. To impute the causes of academic failure to causes pertinent to the student or the student’s family, poor aptitudes demonstrated by a student that persist despite egalitarian treatment are called into question. This justification is based on a twofold element of interpretation: one based on aptitude endowment, the other based on ‘indifferent to differences’ school treatment.

For the first element of interpretation, it is important to note that the social status of the family is an important element in determining students’ academic success. It is argued that due to a different genetic, social or cultural heritage some people lack certain things to succeed in school, for example: insufficient IQ, too poor cultural heritage, slow development, rudimentary or restricted

language, low motivation and rejection of schooling. These deficiencies would explain school failure.

For the second element of interpretation, constitutive differences (biological, psychological, economic, social, cultural) are transformed into diversity of learning and cognitive success precisely because the school system stands as 'indifferent to differences.' In fact, what might appear to be a demand for educational equality: an egalitarian treatment 'indifferent to differences' transforms initial diversity in the face of the cultural system into inequality of learning and school success. It is enough to ignore the differences among students to observe how the same teaching:

- enhances the success of those with rich cultural and linguistic capital, information, learning levels, aptitudes, and interests to succeed.
- causes, in mirror form, the failure of those who lack these resources and convince themselves that they are incapable of learning, that their failure is a sign of their personal inadequacy rather than a sign of the school's inadequacy.

Equity has been a key justification for federal involvement in K-12 education. Since the civil rights movement and the Great Society program of the Sixties, federal education programs have played an instrumental role in promoting equal educational opportunities for all students.

## **2. DIFFERENTIATION AND ADAPTATION IN MASTERY LEARNING**

Mastery Learning provides an appropriate training proposal for everyone, according to everyone's ability, by differentiating the teaching proposal. So, it aims to ensure the principle of equality of educational opportunities by guaranteeing basic skills. The idea of individualization, understood as the need for differentiation, represents a kind of rule for all those who find it contradictory to teach the same thing, at the same time, in the same way, to different pupils. Individualization as differentiation means, therefore, making sure that each student is, as frequently as possible, in a learning situation that is beneficial to him or her.

Individualizing also means striving to ensure that qualitative differences are respected and quantitative inequalities that distinguish students are mitigated. "Aptitudes exhibit differences in quantity and quality. Two individuals may differ in that one is a draftsman and the other a poet, or because one is a better draftsman or poet than the other" (Claparède, 1997, p. 34). Qualitative reference to diversity refers to those characters that distinguish one subject

from another, bring out personal identity, highlight not only the presence of potentialities, endowments, subjective skills but also the peculiarities that in each person these present, the way they are expressed and are used. Despite the debate that has developed on the problem of educational equality (Baldacci, 1993; 2002) the dominant model of school organization has not changed. Students are grouped according to their age into classes considered homogeneous; in fact, they are believed to have the opportunity to assimilate the same program at the same time. How to explain the persistence of a pedagogical and educational approach that continues to be 'indifferent to obvious differences'? Does there remain, perhaps, a common conception, extremely widespread among teachers, that leads to accepting students' academic failure as an inevitable consequence of the different distribution of aptitudes? The problem emerges most clearly in the school systems of democratic societies, where the right to education should be respected, where the provision of equal educational opportunities to all citizens should be guaranteed. In these systems there are still phenomena of school dropout (Frabboni, Baldacci, 2004) both explicit and implicit. In essence, there continues to be a rupture between democratic principles and the real effectiveness of schools, a dissimilarity between the equality of educational, scholastic and training offers directed to the most adequate development of human resources and the factual situations. About the complex relationship between equality of educational opportunities and respect for individual differences-both in their qualitative meaning of diversity and quantitative meaning of inequalities-the challenge of individualization, understood as differentiation, seeks to make unified, general and common educational objectives-equal for the entire school population-with the cultural and individual differences that characterize students coexist in schools. By treating students as "equal in rights and duties," qualitative differences and quantitative differences – of culture, personality, acquired skills – are transformed into inequalities in school learning (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967).

It is important not to consider school failure as the simple consequence of learning difficulties, as the expression of a lack of knowledge and competence. This failure is always a classification linked to rules of school success, to programs, to levels of need, to assessment procedures. Above all, it is important to emphasize that distributions of school achievement reflect the reality of gaps, but do not cause them. In this sense it is crucial to remember with Bloom "...under favorable conditions there can be equality of learning; this, however, does not require assumptions about equality among men, but rather evidence

of equality in learning” (Bloom, 1979).

We attempted to see how the causes of school failure were sought in the student and his or her family. The analysis identified a possible cause in the action of a ‘deterministic nexus’ that is established between a student’s demonstrated personal aptitudes and attainable learning levels, and a further cause due to the uniformity of educational treatment. The search for causes takes a decisive step when it is realized that differences and inequalities -- biological, psychological, economic, social, cultural -- do not turn into inequalities in learning and educational achievement that to a particular degree of the educational system, which corresponds to the way these differences are treated. That is, cultural inequalities among students belonging to different social classes are imputed to the undifferentiation of content, methods, techniques and criteria for judgment. The possibility of intervening with an educational proposal in favor of the differentiation of precisely the content, methods, techniques and assessment methods is considered. In this way, the focus is no longer on the learner and his or her differences, whether qualitative or quantitative, but on the characteristics of teaching. If the goal is to provide everyone with opportunities to learn whatever their social backgrounds and cultural resources, there is a need for rational instructional action geared toward explicitly defined mastery through individualized adaptations based on criterial and formative assessment. To individualize teaching is to ensure that each student is, as frequently as possible, in a learning situation that is beneficial to him or her. To individualize is to strive, through differentiating learning conditions, for initial school differences to be smoothed out. “When favorable learning conditions are provided, the ability to learn, the rate of acquisition, and the motivation to continue become very similar, for most students” (Bloom, 1979, p. 28).

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# PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN EDUCATION, TRAINING AND LABOUR SYSTEMS: AN ISSUE OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Ivana Guzzo  
INAPP

Although international legislation supporting the inclusion of people with disabilities in education, training and labour systems strongly calls on member States to put in place *ad hoc* national policies, the opportunities for young people with disabilities to develop skills that can be used in the labour market still seem very low, considering their early school leaving, their difficulty in accessing to vocational and educational training pathways, the problems still related to the skills certification system, the lack of specific professional figures (guidance counsellor, job tutor) for the construction of Individual Transition Plans and the absence of a territorial network of guidance and job support services for young people with disabilities. Further steps should be taken to mainstream the disability perspective in all European policies and to develop an ambitious second phase of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Inclusive Education; Disability Gap; Equality; Individual Transition Plan

## INTRODUCTION

The rights of persons with disabilities have been enshrined in the European Treaties since 1997. Combating inequalities and discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation is enshrined in European law<sup>1</sup>. Article 19 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, in fact, stipulates that:

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<sup>1</sup> Consolidated versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (OJ C 202, 7.6.2016, p. 53).

in defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall aim to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation’.

Moreover, equality strategies and inclusion policy frameworks are included in the 2020–2025 European Gender Equality Strategy, the 2020–2025 European Anti-racism Action Plan and the 2021–2027 Action Plan on integration and inclusion, focusing on groups at risk of discrimination, such as Roma people, LGBTIQ+<sup>2</sup>, people with disabilities and Jewish people. Nevertheless, most recent data at European level show that persons with disabilities still face considerable barriers to be involved in education, training and labour systems and have a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion.

## 1. EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

In 1996, when the Treaty on European Union was revised, the European Parliament, with the Resolution on the rights of disabled people called on the Member States to include a clause on non-discrimination on grounds of disability, to enact a new legal basis for social programmes, to introduce non-discrimination measures and to treat the rights of disabled people as a civil rights issue.<sup>3</sup> In 1997, the inclusion of disability in the Treaty of Amsterdam (Article 13) gave the European Union a new competence enabling it to combat discrimination against disabled people.

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 26) adopted in 2000, is dedicated to the professional and social integration of persons with disabilities:

All disabled persons, whatever the origin and nature of their disablement, must be entitled to additional concrete measures aimed at improving their social and professional integration. These measures must concern, according to the capacities of the beneficiaries, vocational training, ergonomics, accessibility, mobility’.

Having come into effect in 2009, the Treaty of Lisbon attributed the same legal value to the Charter as the Treaties.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) adopted in 2006, was the first international legally binding instrument to set minimum standards for the rights of persons with disabilities

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<sup>2</sup> LGBTIQ+: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other sexual identities.

<sup>3</sup> Official Journal C 020 20/01/1997 P. 0389.

and the first human rights convention to which the Europe became a party. The right to work and employment is a fundamental right enshrined in Article 27 of the Convention. By ratifying the UNCRPD in 2010, the European Union associated itself with the efforts agreed at the international level to guarantee the fundamental rights of disabled people.

The European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 enables persons with disabilities to enjoy their rights in full and to participate in society and the economy on an equal footing with others. It draws on the UNCRPD and complements the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The areas covered in the Action plan are eight: accessibility, participation, equality, employment, education, social protection and inclusion, and health and external action.

In March 2021, the European Commission adopted the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. The Strategy builds on the results of the previous European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, which paved the way to allow persons with disabilities to enjoy their rights and participate fully in society and economy.

### **1.1. The European Pillar of Social Rights**

The European social dimension is an important part of the broader debate on the 'Future of Europe'. In this context, the European Pillar of Social Rights aims to build a more inclusive and fairer European Union. The European Pillar of Social Rights, a flagship social initiative jointly launched by the European institutions and the member States in November 2017, provides further impetus to the active social and labour market inclusion of persons with disabilities through its Principle 17, expressly dedicated to such persons:

People with disabilities have the right to income support that ensures living in dignity, services that enable them to participate in the labour market and in society, and a work environment adapted to their needs.

## **2. EDUCATION GAP OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY**

Strengthening inclusive education is highlighted as a priority dimension in many European strategic documents, as 'education and training is the foundation for successful participation in society and one of the most powerful tools for building more inclusive societies'.

Improving quality and equity in education is a strategic priority of the European Education Area (EEA), which determines the need to address the diversity of

learners and enhance access to quality and inclusive education and training for all. One of the most important initiatives under the EEA is the Council Recommendation on pathways to school success, which aims to ensure better educational outcomes for all learners, regardless of background or situation, by improving performance in basic skills and reducing the rate of early leaving from education and training (ELET)<sup>4</sup>.

In the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), one of the five strategic priorities of the EEA, the priority 1, aims to improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training. In 2023 the European Commission created an expert group focused on developing evidence-based policies to support learning environments and well-being in schools and build positive learning environments for all learners.

Nevertheless, early leaving from education and training although reduced in the last decade, remains a challenge, first for students with disability/SEN<sup>5</sup>. The disadvantage for young persons with disabilities in comparison with young persons without disabilities can be measured by the difference in the respective proportions of early school leavers.

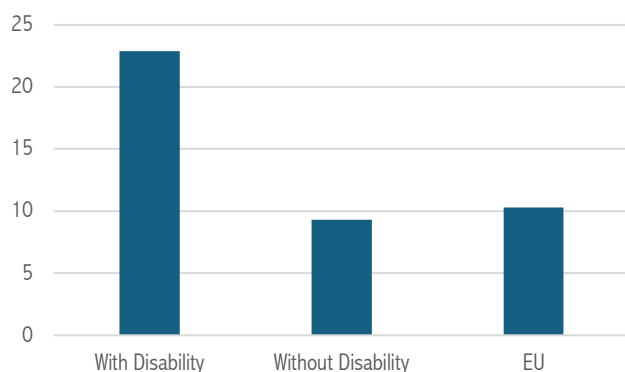
According to the European Survey on Income and Living Conditions, at European 27 level in 2020, about 22.9% of young disabled aged 18-24 were early school leavers in comparison with 9.3% for non-disabled young persons (EU-SILC, 2020), while the European total average was 10.3%. The EU-SILC analysis shows also that the high rates of early school leavers among young disabled persons indicate problems relating to accessibility and an absence of adapted programmes. Physical and architectural barriers might present important obstacles, in addition to methods and instruments that do not meet the abilities of young disabled persons.

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<sup>4</sup> The Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success replacing the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving (2022/C 469/01).

<sup>5</sup> According to Eurydice data the most common grounds leading to discrimination cases in the school are special educational needs/disability and ethnic background, followed by gender, nationality, sex, religious affiliation, socioeconomic background and sexual orientation.

Figure 1. ESL rate for persons with and without disability (EU 27, % 18-24 age). Source: EU-SILC 2020



In 2022, all European countries registered a great difference in the ESL rate of people with disability, in comparison to those without disability. Also Italy, registered 29,5% of young students with disability who leave education system early, vs 11,5% of those without disability (EU-LFS, 2022). Specific top-level legislation, strategies and action plans dedicated to the inclusion and support to students with special educational needs or disabilities have been registered in most European countries. Most of these policy frameworks establish the right of such students to education in mainstream settings and promote the development of inclusive teaching environments.

Nevertheless, data show that there is still a need to identify political measures which can boost educational success for all learners.

Data from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASIE)<sup>6</sup> show the share of students with disability or with an official decision of special educational needs (SEN) who are out of any form of recognised education (that means students who should, by law, be in some form of recognised education but who are out of any recognised form of education) are still enormous. Those students who are not in inclusive settings are in separate classes in mainstream schools, fully separate special schools, other recognised forms of education maintained by health or social services, or are out-of-education.

According to EASIE data 2021, the enrolment rate in inclusive education for students with disability show differences both between ISCED levels and in the

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<sup>6</sup> European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2024. European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education: 2020/2021 School Year Dataset Cross-Country Report.

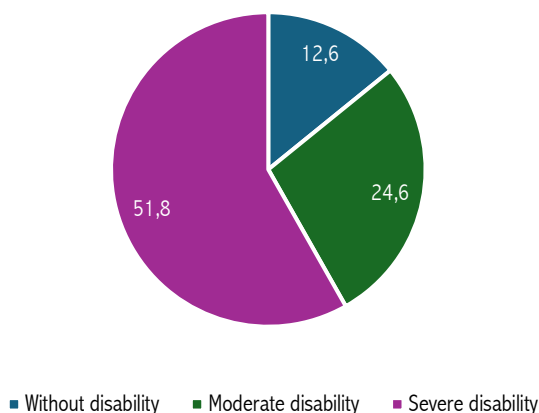
proportion of boys and girls enrolled in the education systems.<sup>7</sup>

In 2021, the enrolment rate in inclusive education for students with disability or SEN ranges, at primary level, from 0,27% in Luxembourg to 6,69% in Lithuania for girls and from 0,76% in Luxembourg to 16,12% in Scotland for boys, with a total average of 2,81% for boys and 1,29% for girls, referring to 25 countries. At lower secondary level (ISCED 2) the share of all students with disability enrolled in inclusive education ranges from 36,42% in Scotland to 0,36% in Luxembourg, with a total average of 2,18%, referring to 24 countries. At upper secondary level (ISCED 3) the share of students with disability enrolled in inclusive education ranges from 33,44% in Scotland (UK) to 0,14% in Luxembourg, with a total average of 2,18%.

## 2.2. Neet with disability

In 2020, about 51,8% of young people with severe disabilities, aged 16-29, were neither in employment nor in education and training, in comparison with 24.6% of persons with moderate disabilities and 12.6% of persons without disabilities in the same age group<sup>8</sup>.

Figure 2. Percentage of Neet with and without disability by degree of limitation (EU 27 16-29 age). Source: EU-SILC 2020.



<sup>7</sup> An inclusive setting refers to education systems where the students with disability or SEN follows education in mainstream classes/groups alongside their peers for the largest part of the school week, 80% or more.

<sup>8</sup> The new Europe 2030 Strategy redefined a certain number of indicators (e.g., low work intensity, material deprivation and consequently people at risk of poverty and social exclusion). Data according to the new definitions, adopted by Europe 2030, were not available at the time of elaborating this paper.

### **2.3 Tertiary education**

Referring to the involvement of people with disability in tertiary education, according to the EU-SILC 2020, the percentage of persons aged 30-34 who had completed a tertiary or equivalent education was 33.5% for those with disabilities and 45.3% for persons without disabilities, while the rate for all persons aged 30-34 was 44.1% and the target for Europe 2020 was 40 %.

To ensure a truly inclusive education and equal opportunities for all learners in all levels and types of education and training, in line with the article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), all other actions towards broader inclusion are to be encouraged, such as supporting access to inclusive quality education for persons with disabilities, persons with specific learning needs, learners with migrant background and other vulnerable groups, supporting the re-entering in education in a lifelong learning perspective and providing opportunities to enter the labour market through different education and training pathways.

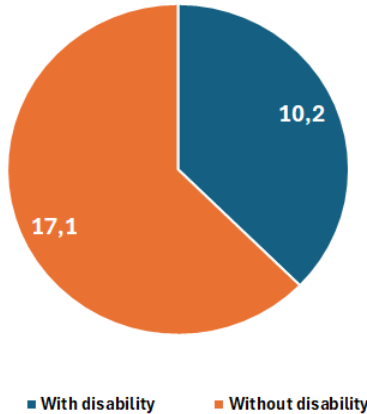
### **3. DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT GAP**

The right to work and employment is a fundamental right enshrined in Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

A dedicated flagship initiative, the ‘Disability Employment Package’ is included in the new European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030.

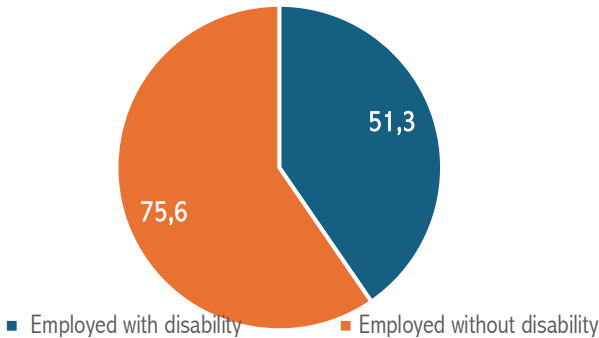
Nevertheless, employment rates are notably lower among persons with disabilities in every member State. In 2022, the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities, aged 20-64, was 17.1 %, compared to 10,2% of persons without disabilities, at european level. Moreover, women with disabilities, young disabled persons and persons with high support needs are more likely to be discriminated against and excluded from the labour market.

Figure 3. Unemployment rate of persons with and without disability (EU, % 20-64 age). Source: European Commission data 2020



Data presented in the 2022 by European Commission, based on microdata 2020, finds that 51.3% of persons with disabilities are employed, compared to 75.6% of those without disabilities.

Figure 4. Percentage of employed with and without disability (EU 20-64 age) Source: European Commission data 2020



The gap between the employment of persons with disabilities and the employment of persons without disabilities is known as the disability employment gap. The disability employment gap was added as headline indicator to the European Pillar of Social Rights social scoreboard in 2021.<sup>9</sup> This indicator shows that persons with disabilities are persistently disadvantaged in

<sup>9</sup> Principles 3 and 17.



the labour market compared with persons without disabilities.

In 2022, the disability employment gap for male and female, with some or severe level of activity limitations, in European Union ranged from 8,5% in Luxemburg to 36% in Croatia, with an EU27 average of 21,4% (EU-SILC, 2022). From 2014 to 2022, in 11 member states the disability employment gap has increased and in 4 countries the increment was more than 3,5%. The highest increment has been noted in Cyprus (+7,7%).

## CONCLUSIONS

To ensure truly inclusive education and labour systems, national policies should be dissociated from social, economic and cultural status, or from other personal circumstances. To be inclusive, education, training and labour systems need to develop diversity sensitivity in the learning and working processes, as well as in education, training and labour institutions, so to challenge and dissolve cultural paradigms and diversity stereotypes

### Acknowledgements

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# RETHINKING EDUCATION: A THREE-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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The essay explores the evolution of the educational system, starting from the crisis of the traditional model based on the principles of sequentiality and hierarchization. It analyses the development of the pedagogical triangle concept, highlighting the relationships between teacher, student and content, and its transformation into a tetrahedron with the addition of the community/territory in the context of Service Learning (SL). SL emerges as an innovative response to contemporary educational challenges, integrating theoretical learning and practical service to the community, and evolving through the impact of new technologies on the educational process. In conclusion, it emphasizes the importance of shared reflection on teachers' professional identity to develop an ethical and conscious educational practice, capable of addressing the challenges of contemporary society and forming an active and responsible citizenship.

Service Learning; Educational innovation; professional identity

## INTRODUCTION: THE CRISIS OF THE TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The idea of education that, based on Rousseau's concept of "social contract," not only allows the acquisition of knowledge but also contributes to the formation of free, equal citizens actively participating in democratic life, has led to the creation of public and universal national educational systems currently criticized from various points of view. As Juan Carlos Tedesco (1995) also recalls, what is today considered the traditional educational system was forged at the end of the 19th century as a response to the political and social needs of building democracy and nation-states, based on two fundamental principles:

- Sequentiality, as the educational process is structured in successive degrees of knowledge, closely linked both to the psychological evolution of subjects and to their possible social ladder.

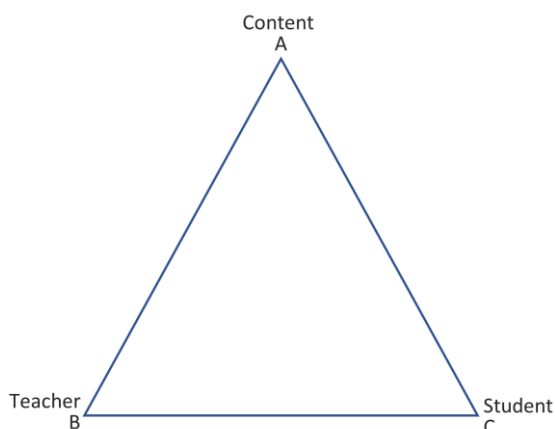
- Hierarchization, defined through the distribution of roles based on age and level of knowledge acquired.

If the discussion continued in subsequent centuries between supporters of state education and supporters of private education, between secularism and religious teaching, universality and elitism, these two principles were never questioned. From the beginning, this did not happen on the part of those who proposed an education more based on sciences and oriented towards practical utility, such as Spencer (1919), who indeed suggested that education should be intellectual, moral and physical, progressing (sequentially) from simple knowledge and concepts towards complex ones. Or on the part of those who, like Durkheim (1922), defined education as a process of cultural transmission, in which young people are adapted to the physical and social environment based on prevailing values in society, so as to prepare them for differentiated roles (hierarchically) based on specific skills and functions they can perform.

## **1. EVOLUTION OF THE PEDAGOGICAL OR DIDACTIC TRIANGLE**

The principles of sequentiality and hierarchisation also permeated the reflections on lesson planning in the five steps – preparation, presentation, association, generalisation, application – that enable the realisation of ‘a map in which the eye can orientate itself’, linking multilateral development of intents and moral formation through the integration of ‘educational instruction’. Integrating ethics and psychology with the principles of philosophy, J.F. Herbart highlights the centrality of the relationship between teacher, student and content, emphasising the central role of the teacher in the transmission of knowledge to the student through the intermediate objective of ‘versatile interest’, the fulcrum of the dynamic relationship between student and content (Herbart, 2020). Emphasising the relationship between the teacher and the student, mediated by the disciplinary content, in a process that aims not only at the transmission of knowledge, but also at the character formation and moralisation of learners, it certainly anticipates the concepts formalised in the following century in the pedagogical triangle (Houssaye, 1988).

Fig. 1. Pedagogical triangle



This conceptualization with content at the vertex, as proposed by Houssaye (1988), confirms the importance of the teacher, who has passed from the role of transmitter to that of mediator, and makes the importance of knowledge predominant in the three postures of education

- Teaching, relationship between teacher and knowledge, with the student on the margin;
- Learning, relationship between student and knowledge, with the teacher on the margin;
- Training, relationship between teacher and student, with knowledge in the background.

In the reasoning on the pedagogical triangle, changes between the three vertices depend on the different emphasis placed on the psychological needs of the student and the needs for personalization of learning, up to including attention to the social context and the relational dynamics within the classroom to see the educational process as an activity co-constructed between teacher, student and community and to emphasise the importance of 'didactic transposition' as academic knowledge that is made accessible by the teacher (Develay, 1992). The focus on the process of adapting scientific knowledge (*savoir savant*) into teacher knowledge leads Chevallard (1985) to overturn the triangle, placing the relationship between teacher and student at the top, to highlight how the epistemological conceptions of the former influence the teaching-learning process.

If the sequentiality and hierarchization of the educational process are cornerstones of the traditional educational system, the relationships between teacher, student and content emphasize the communication present in pedagogy and didactics, while using a triangular scheme different from the diagrams generally used to represent any communicative process. On the other hand, as Lacotte (1994) concludes, depending on the context, the teacher produces different types of didactic communication, being able to foresee both unidirectional situations starting from the knowledge to be transmitted, and interaction situations, but on conceptualisations of two contents – to be taught or to be learned – and referring to different realities and meanings, or of true mediation for the co-construction of the meaning of the content.

## **2. CRISIS AND INNOVATION**

### **2.1. The breaking of traditional educational system**

As mentioned at the beginning, sequentiality and hierarchization are now obsolete, no longer able to respond to the new needs of contemporary society, and the crisis of traditional educational institutions has been felt for several decades. It is enough to remember how Hannah Arendt (1958) highlighted the crisis of authority of the teacher, due to a loss of stability in knowledge and in the sense of responsibility for the world in which new generations are brought, which leads to the rejection of hierarchies and distinctions for a progressive homogenization of educational projects.

The last fifty years have led to a simultaneous increase in difficulties in the functioning of institutions responsible for social cohesion, the relationship between economy and society, and the formation of individual and collective identities (Fitoussi and Rosanvallon, 1996). Moreover, economic globalization has led to the collapse of forms of national cohesion and the institution of delegations to local communities has increased the crisis of legitimacy of the State, favoring the tribalization of society (Castells, 1997).

With the loss of the constitutive value of knowledge, which also meant certainty and trust in the institutions that transmitted it, the reflexive nature of knowledge has been affirmed through its application and the continuous reformulation of knowledge itself in light of new information, which has led to the need to reformulate the articulation of education and knowledge with the formation of the citizen (Giddens, 1994).

In this reality, however, it is possible to build knowledge in relation to the community. As Tedesco (2000, 2004) recalls, the need for each individual to

acquire cognitive skills for active citizenship and develop the ability to build a complex identity without a dominant gaze, leads to an idea of an educational institution whose autonomy necessary for knowledge as reflection linked to practice is also a stimulus for bonds and not for isolation.

This is why SL speaks of a virtuous circle or double gift. A virtuous circle in which through learning there is an improvement of the service carried out with the community and through the service an improvement of the complete training that feeds new learning and so on to infinity. On the other hand, as Puig recalls with this paradigm shift for the common good, if the culture of giving is important, it is necessary to provide for its learning in the educational process, so that the first gift of established knowledge from adults to young people is followed by their gift of activity with the community motivated by the value of disinterested offering.

## **2.2. Service Learning: an innovative pedagogical model**

Service Learning emerges as a response to contemporary educational challenges, combining theoretical learning with practical service to the community and allowing individual protagonists to acquire skills for active citizenship and develop a complex identity. In this perspective, learning is no longer a unidirectional process, in which the teacher transmits knowledge to students, but a process of co-construction of knowledge that actively involves students in service to the community.

SL as a methodology creates a “virtuous circle” that implies continuous improvement of both the service provided to the community and academic learning (Tapia, 2012). In other words, through service, students not only contribute to the common good but also improve their training, fueling a self-reinforcing learning cycle.

In this context, the culture of giving becomes fundamental in the educational process, as it allows students to transform from simple recipients of knowledge to donors of actions and skills for the good of the community/territory (Puig-Rovira, 2021).

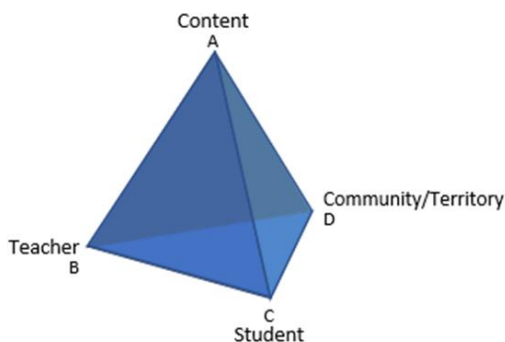
To the relationships between teacher, student and knowledge, SL adds that with the community/territory. Indeed, as highlighted by UNESCO (2021), SL allows breaking down the “walls” between the classroom and the community,... proposing a broader vision of education, which goes beyond the physical and theoretical boundaries of the classroom. Thus, the process expands, including the community and territory, in a constant interaction that enriches the

formative experience.

If on one hand it breaks the principles of sequentiality and hierarchization through reference to the “virtuous circle,” on the other hand it makes the pedagogical triangle insufficient, introducing the relational dimension with the community with which all three vertices – teacher, student, content – relate. Hence the need to move from a two-dimensional representation to a three-dimensional one that allows considering the three relational dimensions with the content of the teacher, student and community/territory: the “tetrahedron.” In this model, each vertex is in relation to the others, and knowledge is no longer an isolated product, but the result of a dynamic process that involves different actors – teacher, student, community/territory – inside and outside the classroom. Each of the triangular faces of the tetrahedron represents a relational perspective with knowledge: one takes up the pedagogical triangle and represents disciplinary learning, the student-content-community one represents social learning related to the intervention carried out, the teacher-student-community one represents critical thinking learning due and the teacher-content-community one represents learning derived from interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration.

The introduction of this new figure allows conceiving education as a complex process, where the social and community dimension is an integral part of the learning experience (Lotti et al. 2023).

Fig. 1. SL Tetrahedron



### 2.3. The role of technology: towards the double tetrahedron

The transition from triangle to tetrahedron was also made in reflections on mathematics didactics starting from David Tall (1986) to suggest the role of

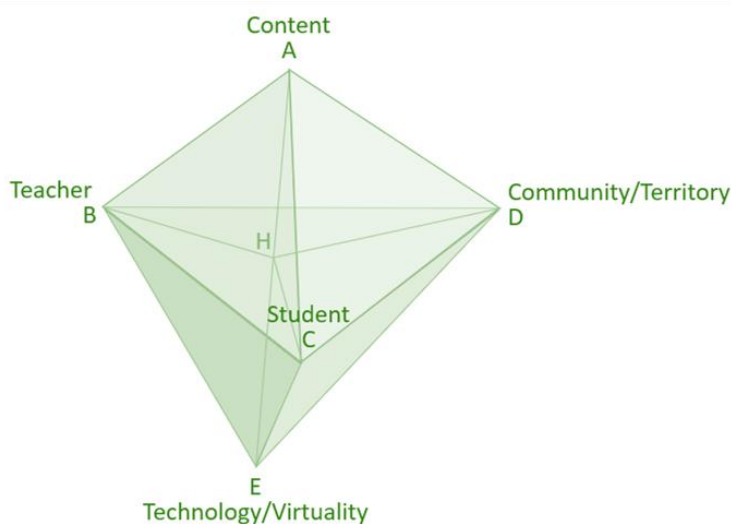


computers in the learning process, and on this basis the vertex related to technology has been updated over time, up to taking into consideration the relational dynamics with virtual reality and artificial intelligence always in relation to mathematics learning (Dasari et al., 2024).

In recent years, the integration of technology in education has added a new dimension to Service Learning. The use of digital technologies, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, has spread new forms of Service Learning, such as Virtual Service Learning, which combines distance learning with community service (Ruiz-Corbella & García-Gutiérrez, 2022).

Technology is not seen as a substitute for direct interaction with the community, but as a tool that enhances and enriches the learning experience, expanding the possibilities of interaction and social engagement, giving rise to three different models of real-virtual interaction and learning-service, up to the extreme case of the completely distance path (Waldner et al. 2012).

Fig. 3. Double Tetrahedron



The possibility of also considering the dimension of interactions through technology therefore leads to considering the combination of two tetrahedra, overlapping on the teacher-student-community face related to critical thinking learning. The new combination allows the conceptualization of a renewed and more complex didactic triangle, which allows reflection also on the complexity of the ethical and pedagogical challenges of teaching in relation to the pressure of different relationships inside and outside the classroom both in relation to

content and technological interaction, opening the need for a shared reflection on the ethical professionalism of teacher identity.

### **CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A REDEFINITION OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE**

SL, with its ability to combine theoretical learning with practical engagement in the community, represents a response to the educational challenges of our time. This approach allows developing a new conception of the teacher as a facilitator of the learning process, which extends beyond the walls of the classroom and is rooted in the territory and community.

The tetrahedron model, which integrates teacher, learner, content and community, offers a three-dimensional vision of education that responds to the needs of an increasingly complex and interconnected society. The breaking of the cardinal principles of sequentiality and hierarchization is determined both by historical-social changes and technological evolution. SL on the philosophical level looks at the educational process both in relation to the relational dimension with the community and territory and to that with technologies, allowing the complex overall vision that the double tetrahedron graphically synthesizes.

In this new educational context, it is essential that teachers continuously reflect on their professional identity, considering not only the relational dimension with students and contents, but also those with the community-territory in relation to both interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration and critical thinking learning as well as social learning, without forgetting the enhancement due to interaction with technology and virtuality. Only through this shared reflection will it be possible to develop an ethical and professionally aware educational practice, able to respond to the challenges of the contemporary world and build active and responsible citizenship.

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# BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF TRAINING OF TRAINERS IN PROMOTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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The CUAP training course *Expert in Inclusive Educational Processes*, developed by the University of Turin to respond to the increasing demand for qualified university teachers to support the growing number of students enrolled in *Specialisation Course for Support Activities (CdS)*, is a key initiative to promote inclusive education. Drawing on the principles of Disability Studies in Education (DSE), the CUAP course reconceptualises inclusion by viewing diversity as a core strength rather than a challenge to be overcome. Participants develop broad skills, including cultural awareness, organisational agility, relational skills and strategic thinking, which are essential for implementing inclusion strategies. Initial evaluations show that the course is successfully transforming participants' understanding of inclusion and creating a cascading effect where trainers inspire future educators to incorporate inclusive principles into their practise. This initiative is an example of how targeted professional development can bring about sustainable and meaningful change that meets both national priorities and international standards for equal opportunities in education.

expert; inclusive education teachers; training of trainers; higher education; professional development

## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1970s, Italy has been recognised as a pioneer in the international education landscape for its pioneering role in the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream classes. This approach, which is now recognised worldwide and supported by numerous international standards and documents (UN, 2006, 2015; Unesco, 2017, 2019; EU, 2021), advocates inclusive

education not only for ethical reasons, but also because it provides an optimal framework to promote the development of each student's potential and create a climate of acceptance and respect for all forms of diversity.

The recent adoption of the "Government Disability Mandate Act" (L. 227/2021, *Delega al Governo in materia di disabilità*) represents a significant step forward. This law envisages a society in which people with disabilities participate fully and equally moving beyond specialized settings to live "on an equal basis with others" (Piccione, 2023; Tarantino, 2024). This paradigm shift emphasises the importance of an 'expert' education system, not only to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream environments but to prepare them for life, work and active democratic citizenship (Medeghini & Fornasa, 2011). This legislative milestone emphasises the need to develop pedagogical practises accordingly and to ensure that teachers are both theoretically informed and practically equipped to guide and facilitate these transformative changes (Bocci, 2018; 2021).

In response to these needs, the University of Turin has developed the Professional Development Course entitled "Expert in Inclusive Educational Processes" (CUAP). This initiative, aimed at those who conduct laboratory activities as part of CdS, focuses not only on improving the skills of teachers specialising in support education (Romano et al., 2021), but also and above all on the trainers who prepare these teachers.

The course is based on the principles of Disability Studies in Education (Gabel, 2005; Slee et al., 2019; Baglieri & Bacon 2020), a theoretical reorientation that not only challenges traditional approaches, but also encourages trainers to embrace inclusion as an opportunity to celebrate difference rather than simply accommodate students with disabilities (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Considering the great influence instructors have on the attitudes and practises of future educators, adopting a DSE-based approach is essential for reshaping perceptions of disability (Naraian, 2017).

## **1. BUILDING ALLIANCES TO CREATE AN ENLARGED EDUCATING COMMUNITY**

The University of Turin has implemented collaborative networks involving schools, educators, and policymakers to transform its theoretical commitment to inclusive education into practical initiatives that address evolving student and school needs (Alessandrini, 2007).

The institution of territorial networks represents an answer to increasingly urgent needs, and the presence of higher education institutions, as hubs for

innovation and research, is essential within these local networks (Harkavy, 2006). Within these networks, universities play a central role, not only as sources of advanced knowledge, but also as active contributors to social progress (Grau et al., 2017).

This approach reflects the broader mandate of the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes in Italy, which emphasises the need for academic knowledge to directly address societal challenges (ANVUR, 2018).

## **2. DEVELOPING EXPERT TRAINERS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: THE CUAP INITIATIVE.**

The CUAP programme was developed as part of a cooperation agreement between the University of Turin, the regional government of Piedmont, the regional education authority and various local educational organizations. The aim of this partnership was to cultivate a culture of inclusion by implementing systemic measures to improve the training of support teachers and ensure their seamless integration into the school environment (Covelli & De Anna, 2021).

The course followed a Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) model, that combined theoretical instruction with practical application to enable participants to tackle complex professional challenges (Burke, 2005). The CUAP course consisted of 100 hours of blended learning and included both general course content and workshops that encouraged collaboration and sharing of best practises among participants.

The course was carefully structured to provide a comprehensive range of competences essential for promoting inclusive education. Both disciplinary and non-disciplinary elements were integrated to ensure the comprehensive development of participants (Gopalaswamy & Mahadevan, 2010): at the centre of the course was the promotion of cultural awareness, an essential competence that highlights the importance of understanding the complex social and cultural dynamics that underpin inclusive education (Ko & Sammons, 2013). In this way, participants were encouraged to critically engage with and appreciate the different contexts in which they work, providing the basis for sensitive and informed pedagogical approaches (Gibson et al., 2016).

In parallel, the programme emphasised the development of organisational skills to enable participants to navigate multi-layered school systems while effectively implementing inclusive strategies. Equally important were relational and emotional competencies that emphasised the ability to foster constructive

relationships and manage the complexity of diverse classroom dynamics (EASDNE, 2012).

In addition, strategic awareness took centre stage as participants were guided to align their teaching practises with the overarching principles of inclusive education (Gephart & Marsick, 2016). This holistic approach underscores the transformative potential of equipping educators with a solid and nuanced understanding of inclusion that enables them to effect meaningful and sustainable change.

To foster these competences, the course used a multi-faceted approach that incorporated participatory methods such as collaborative workshops, reflection exercises and interactive peer-learning sessions. These activities, deeply rooted in the principles of transformative learning theory (Taylor & Cranton, 2012), aimed to promote critical reflection and experiential learning as core elements of professional development. Through these combined strategies, the course sought to equip participants not only with technical expertise, but also with a reflective and adaptive mindset that is essential for tackling the complexities of inclusive education.

### **3. EARLY INSIGHTS AND IMPACT**

Based on the rights-based paradigm of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the programme aimed to empower educators to dismantle barriers and promote educational environments in which all learners can flourish. By embedding these competences within the theoretical framework of DSE, participants were encouraged to critically question existing pedagogical assumptions and to envision inclusion as a dynamic process that values diversity and human dignity as foundational principles.

Initial evaluations indicate that participants' perceptions of inclusion have changed significantly (Damiani et al., 2021). Participants reported an increased understanding of the broader implications of inclusive practises in creating an equitable educational environment (Di Masi et al., 2023).

The potential of the programme to create a multiplier effect lies in its ability to refine trainers' practises, ensuring that inclusive principles are not only adopted but also deeply embedded in teacher training. This systemic integration is expected to reshape pedagogical approaches by fostering a paradigm shift where inclusive education becomes deeply rooted in everyday classroom practise (Kammis et al., 2014).



## CONCLUSION

The CUAP programme *Expert in Inclusive Educational Processes* is a decisive step towards overcoming the challenges of inclusive education. By focussing on trainers as key agents of change, the initiative combines theoretical foundations with practical applications, promoting a holistic approach to teacher training. Through strategic alliances, interdisciplinary approaches and an emphasis on non-disciplinary skills, the CUAP programme is an example of a scalable model for systemic change. Its expected multiplier effect underscores the importance of investing in trainers to achieve sustainable and far-reaching impact on educational inclusion (Priestley et al., 2015). Continued research and analysis will further illuminate the long-term outcomes of this transformative initiative and contribute valuable insights to the global discourse on inclusive education.

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# DECISION-MAKING AND JUSTICE: UNRAVELING THE THREADS OF SOCIAL EQUITY

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## INTRODUCTION

Decision-making is a multifaceted cognitive process central to human behavior. Defined as the ability to evaluate choices, assess risks and benefits, and select the most appropriate course of action, decision-making is an interdisciplinary area of study, incorporating insights from psychology, economics, and neuroscience (Hastie & Dawes, 2010). According to Sanfey (2004), “Good decision-making is a prime example of intelligent behavior,” highlighting its role not only in personal achievements but also in fostering social cooperation and societal advancement.

In this article, we aim to explore decision-making through a social lens, emphasizing how social decision-making shapes values such as fairness, altruism, and social equity. We will examine the psychological underpinnings of fairness sensitivity, discuss the development of altruistic behavior, and analyze how these contribute to social equity—a principle that extends fairness from interpersonal interactions to broader societal structures. By understanding the components and developmental stages of fairness sensitivity, we can appreciate how social decision-making supports justice-oriented behaviors, ultimately fostering a society where justice and equity thrive.

## DECISION-MAKING IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT

### The Nature and Theories of Decision-Making

Decision-making has traditionally been studied from two main perspectives. The normative approach, grounded in economics, posits that individuals should aim to make rational choices to maximize their utility. This perspective, embodied by the Expected Utility Theory (von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1947), suggests that decision-makers are rational agents who calculate the optimal course of action based on objective assessments of costs and benefits

(Marchetti & Castelli, 2012).

Conversely, the descriptive approach, rooted in psychology, emphasizes the limitations of human rationality. Prospect Theory, introduced by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), suggests that people often rely on heuristics and exhibit biases when making decisions, particularly under conditions of risk and uncertainty. This perspective acknowledges bounded rationality, where cognitive limitations and emotional states influence decision outcomes, often deviating from optimal choices.

### **Social Decision-Making: Definition and Dynamics**

Social decision-making extends beyond personal gain, incorporating ethical, moral, and collective considerations. Defined as choices that affect others, social decision-making involves balancing self-interest with societal expectations and values (Baumeister & Bushman, 2016). When individuals make decisions with social implications, they engage in behaviors guided by empathy, social norms, and fairness sensitivity.

One key component of social decision-making is altruism, the concern for others' welfare, which serves as a motivation for prosocial behavior (Batson, 1991). For example, research using social interaction games like the Ultimatum Game shows how individuals often reject unequal offers, even at a personal cost, to enforce fairness (Güth, Schmittberger, & Schwarze, 1982). Such findings reveal that people value equitable outcomes and are willing to make sacrifices to uphold fairness, even when acting anonymously.

The sensitivity to fairness is an essential part of moral development that begins in childhood. Developmental psychologists have observed that children as young as two years old show basic forms of altruistic behavior, such as sharing and helping (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). By age five, children start to understand reciprocity and fairness, often expressing dissatisfaction when they perceive unequal distributions of resources (Marchetti & Castelli, 2012).

Through adolescence, individuals refine their sense of fairness, integrating principles of justice and empathy into their decision-making. This progression is influenced by socialization and exposure to prosocial values, leading to a greater alignment with social equity as they reach adulthood. At this stage, individuals are better able to evaluate situations from multiple perspectives, fostering a commitment to social justice that guides their interactions and influences their broader societal contributions (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Morris, 2016).

## **SOCIAL EQUITY: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **Understanding Social Equity**

Social equity, in a psychological context, refers to a commitment to fairness, equality, and justice in opportunities and outcomes. Unlike simple equality, which implies uniform distribution, equity considers individual needs and circumstances, aiming for just outcomes that address systemic disparities (Tyler, 2000). According to Rawls (1971), a socially equitable society must ensure fair access to resources and opportunities, thereby minimizing inequalities that result from structural disadvantages.

Social equity is critical for fostering trust and cooperation within societies, as individuals who perceive fair treatment are more likely to engage positively with social institutions and participate in prosocial behaviors (Tyler & Lind, 1992). Conversely, a lack of social equity can lead to feelings of alienation, decreasing social cohesion and undermining community well-being (De Cremer & Tyler, 2005).

### **Interpersonal Equity as a Foundation for Social Equity**

Interpersonal equity—fairness in individual interactions—is essential for building social equity. When people experience fairness on a personal level, they develop a broader sense of justice that extends to societal structures. This foundation of fairness fosters fairness sensitivity, which is the inclination to notice and respond to issues of equity and justice. Individuals with heightened fairness sensitivity are more likely to champion social justice causes, as they internalize these values and apply them in broader social contexts (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004).

## **FAIRNESS SENSITIVITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

### **Cultivating Fairness Sensitivity for Social Justice**

Fairness sensitivity can be cultivated through educational and social programs that emphasize empathy, perspective-taking, and the moral implications of decision-making. Studies show that individuals who develop fairness sensitivity are more inclined to support social policies that promote equity and participate in activities that advocate for marginalized groups (Skitka, 2009). From a psycho-pedagogical perspective, fostering fairness sensitivity involves encouraging individuals to reflect on the consequences of their actions and recognize the value of just and equitable treatment for all members of society.

Fairness sensitivity thus plays a significant role in promoting social justice, as it

underpins actions and attitudes that advance equality. This sensitivity bridges personal interactions and societal norms, enabling individuals to contribute actively to a just society by making decisions that prioritize collective well-being over personal gain.

Decision-making, when viewed through a social lens, reveals the interconnectedness of personal choices and societal values. Through an understanding of fairness, altruism, and social equity, individuals can contribute to building a society grounded in justice. The development of fairness sensitivity, nurtured through socialization and education, empowers individuals to engage in actions that promote social equity and foster inclusive communities.

In advancing decision-making practices that emphasize fairness and empathy, we move closer to realizing a society where justice is not merely an ideal but a shared reality. By appreciating the psychological foundations of fairness and social equity, society can encourage decision-making that serves as a tool for social progress and justice.

This capacity for socially-informed decision-making reflects an integration of equity and fairness, essential for fostering altruism and prosocial behavior (Castelli et al., 2021; Marchetti et al., 2016). Research highlights how children's conceptions of fairness evolve alongside the development of empathy and the reduction of parochialism—the tendency to favor those within one's immediate social circle over others (Marchetti & Castelli, 2012). These qualities are foundational to promoting equitable decision-making, which involves balancing self-interest with the needs of others, often resulting in behaviors that favor shared well-being and cooperative relationships.

Contextual factors—from familial and cultural norms to educational practices—play a pivotal role in shaping children's decision-making skills. In family settings, decision-making is often exercised during resource allocation, where parents can model fair distribution practices that teach children the value of equity. Economic education, specifically, can underscore the importance of fair resource sharing, emphasizing both the ethical and practical benefits of altruistic decision-making (Bicchieri, Muldoon, & Sontuoso, 2018). Adults in both family and educational environments are crucial as models and guides, shaping how children perceive and implement fairness in their interactions. By helping children understand the consequences of their decisions, adults encourage behaviors that promote positive social relations and contribute to more equitable societies (Marchetti et al., 2021). As decision-making studies



expand, challenges emerge in fields like career selection, where young individuals make impactful decisions that shape their futures. Career choices often require consideration of personal aspirations and economic factors, encouraging individuals to prioritize decisions that enhance their quality of life. These decisions, influenced by values of fairness and self-improvement, illustrate how a well-developed sensitivity to equity can motivate actions aimed at personal and societal advancement. Such decision-making is integral to fostering social justice and equitable societies, where individuals, guided by fairness sensitivity, seek out roles and opportunities that benefit themselves while contributing positively to their communities.

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# INDIVIDUAL VARIABLES INFLUENCING SUCCESSFUL CHOICES IN INTERNATIONAL WORK MOBILITY

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International work mobility depends on motivations, skills, satisfaction, needs, and conditions. The AToM (Attitude Toward Moving) study, part of the EMoCC (European Mobility Career Counseling) project, looks at these factors to understand why people choose to work abroad. Through interviews and focus groups in Italy, France, Germany, and Spain, the study explored what influences mobility. It found five main areas: motivations (like cultural experiences and career growth), skills (such as adaptability and problem-solving), satisfaction (including personal and professional growth), needs (like education and family support), and conditions (such as financial stability and knowledge of the host country). These areas show the challenges and opportunities of working abroad. The study highlights the need for tailored support and inclusive policies to reduce barriers, improve skills, and help people succeed. It also suggests further research to improve frameworks and outcomes for international workers.

work mobility; career counseling; international migration; professional competencies; qualitative study

## INTRODUCTION

Migration and mobility are central to human development, driven by better living conditions, career growth, and personal goals. In today's world, international work mobility offers opportunities but also unique challenges. Decisions to work abroad depend on motivations, skills, satisfaction, needs, and conditions, shaping the experience and its outcomes.

While global labor markets create opportunities, barriers like cultural adaptation, economic inequality, and bureaucracy persist. Career counsellors lack tools to assist those pursuing international work. The AToM (Attitude

Toward Moving) study, part of the EMoCC (European Mobility Career Counseling) project, examines factors influencing mobility decisions. Using qualitative methods, it investigates personal and professional dynamics to guide counsellors and policymakers.

This article shares AToM findings across five themes: motivations, competencies, satisfaction, needs, and preconditions, offering insights to better support individuals working abroad.

## **1. INTERNATIONAL WORK MOBILITY CHALLENGES**

Migration and mobility have been studied through geographical, historical, and political lenses (Shah & Long, 2004), highlighting human capital—skills, talent, and knowledge—as key to modern labor markets. Challenges like “brain drain,” labor integration issues, and unemployment persist (Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974; Stark & Bloom, 1985). This paper explores mobility, labor market gaps, demographic shifts, and the “split labor market,” where low-skilled worker surpluses coexist with skilled labor shortages (Koser & Lutz, 1998; Massey et al., 1993).

Solutions include immigration policies to attract skilled workers, boost productivity, and address labor gaps (Ottaviano & Peri, 2008). Programs offering job placement and cultural training ease adaptation, while profiling migrant populations helps tailor policies (Bonacich, 1973). Anti-discrimination measures and intercultural training create inclusive environments benefiting migrants and communities (Bloemraad, 2006).

Theoretical insights call for tools to understand migration behaviors. Despite EU work mobility opportunities, cross-border transitions remain low. Career counseling helps individuals navigate working abroad, addressing psychological and practical mobility factors.

## **2. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS IN GLOBAL JOB MOBILITY**

The study of migration and mobility reveals gaps in resources for career counsellors, limiting their ability to guide clients through career and geographic transitions. The EMoCC project addresses this with tools to explore mobility motivations. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) integrates personal beliefs, socio-environmental factors, and career actions (Lent et al., 1994), examining how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and social influences shape migration decisions and adaptation (Lent & Brown, 2013). Career mobility depends on economic factors, perceived abilities, and social contexts (Betz, 2006).

SCCT's evolution includes intrinsic motivation and meaningful work in career decisions (Kaminsky & Behrend, 2015). Traits like extraversion and openness drive migration, while emotional stability and conscientiousness encourage caution (McCrae & Costa, 1987; Crown et al., 2021). Psychological well-being and family proximity, especially for women in Mediterranean regions, also play a role (Mulder et al., 2020). Policies combining economic strategies with social support improve labor market access and address demographic changes (Zimmermann, 2005). Incorporating SCCT fosters inclusivity and aligns expectations with workplace conditions (Brown et al., 2018), supporting aspirations and enhancing global mobility outcomes.

### **3. ADDRESSING RESEARCH GAPS IN CAREER COUNSELING FOR MOBILITY**

Building on prior research, there is a clear need for tools to help career counselors understand factors influencing decisions about job mobility. In a rapidly evolving global workforce, understanding the psychological basis of migration behaviors is key to effective policies. Despite the European Union's efforts to promote work abroad, mobility within Europe remains low, prompting questions about underutilized opportunities and how counseling can bridge this gap.

To address these issues, the EMOCC (European Mobility Career Counseling) project conducted two studies. First, the AToM (Attitude Toward Moving) study used interviews and focus groups to explore personal dynamics, skills, attitudes, and values shaping mobility decisions. Second, the WoMSA Scale (Work Mobility Skills and Attitude Scale), a quantitative self-assessment tool, was developed to evaluate mobility attitudes, offering valuable insights for counseling and policymaking.

## **4. THE ATOM STUDY**

### **4.1. Study objectives**

The AToM (Attitude Toward Moving) study aimed to examine the personal dynamics, skills, attitudes, and professional values that influence decisions related to geographical mobility for work purposes. Its primary goal was to understand the motivations and challenges behind these decisions and assess the attitudes and competencies of individuals considering relocation for professional opportunities.

## **4.2. Study design and data collection**

The study used a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews and focus groups in four European countries: Italy, France, Germany, and Spain. The interviews took place between September and December 2022. The questions were created by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore after a detailed review of relevant studies, helping to define the main topics.

The focus groups involved different groups: university students in Italy, high school students in Spain, people interested in au-pair work in France, and young people in international civil service in Germany. Individual interviews included four groups: people who voluntarily moved abroad for at least six months, workers sent abroad by their companies, refugees or asylum seekers, and people who never left their home country.

The semi-structured interviews combined prepared questions with open-ended ones, allowing participants to share their experiences. The questions were adapted to fit each group's situation but stayed consistent across countries. Interviews were conducted in person or online, depending on what participants preferred. Ethical standards were strictly followed, including informed consent based on each country's rules.

## **4.3. Sample**

There were 160 participants: 120 joined individual interviews, and 128 took part in eight focus groups (two in each country). By descriptive statistics on key demographic variables emerged that mean age was 40.16 (SD = 13.08, range 19–82), gender distribution was perfectly balanced (50% male, 50% female), as the country representation (Italy: 27.6%, Spain: 25.6%, France: 24.4%, Germany: 22.4%). These descriptive analyses ensured the robustness of the sample composition and provided context for the thematic findings.

## **4.4. Data analysis**

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2006), chosen because it balances flexibility with rigor, allowing for a detailed and nuanced understanding of patterns in qualitative data without being tied to a specific theoretical framework.

Researchers in each country first analyzed transcripts on their own to find key ideas and themes. These ideas were then organized into bigger groups about motivations, skills, attitudes, and professional values. To ensure reliability, researchers shared their work with project partners to discuss and agree. This teamwork helped compare results across countries and made the findings

clearer. Researchers also thought about their own biases and how cultural differences might influence their work.

## **4.5. Results**

This section presents the results, organized into five thematic areas—motivations, competencies, satisfaction, needs, and preconditions. Each area is explored through its specific dimensions, offering a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing work mobility decisions.

### *4.5.1. Motivations*

This area looks at why people choose to move for work. It explains what makes relocation attractive, such as personal growth, learning about new cultures, career progress, or gaining new skills. Reasons can differ but often connect, making the decision stronger and increasing satisfaction. Knowing these reasons helps create better support that matches people's goals and improves their experience abroad.

- **Cultural Knowledge:** This dimension refers to a strong interest in understanding the values, belief systems, and traditions of other cultures. Participants expressed a desire to authentically engage with local communities and move beyond superficial experiences or stereotypes.
- **Learning Different Languages:** Many participants highlighted the intrinsic satisfaction of mastering new languages, which enhances independence and fosters deeper connections with local communities.
- **Career Development:** The pursuit of career progression emerged as a key motivator. Participants sought opportunities for professional growth, higher-level positions, and qualifications gained abroad to increase their marketability.
- **Skills Improvement:** This dimension focused on the continuous desire to refine and expand professional skills, often through exposure to diverse work environments.
- **Independence:** The value placed on self-reliance and autonomy emerged as a significant factor, with participants associating mobility with personal empowerment and growth.
- **Relationships:** Social motivations included the desire to build meaningful connections, both personally and professionally, often driven by empathy and a commitment to collaboration.

#### *4.5.2. Competencies*

Competencies are skills and abilities that help people adapt and succeed in a foreign environment. They include practical skills like planning and communication, as well as interpersonal and emotional skills like understanding other cultures and handling stress. These skills help individuals face challenges and grow both personally and professionally in a new setting.

- **Adaptability:** The ability to adjust thoughts, behaviors, and emotions in response to new challenges was recognized as critical for navigating unfamiliar environments.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Understanding and respecting cultural differences, including norms, behaviors, and traditions, emerged as essential for building meaningful relationships in diverse settings.
- **Strategic Planning:** Participants emphasized the importance of detailed preparation, including anticipating obstacles and breaking goals into manageable steps.
- **Coping with Stress:** Resilience in handling emotional and physical pressures was viewed as fundamental for maintaining clarity and persistence in challenging situations.
- **Problem Solving:** The capacity to analyze and address issues creatively and effectively played a pivotal role in overcoming obstacles.
- **Effective Communication:** Clear and empathetic communication, particularly across cultural and linguistic boundaries, facilitated mutual understanding and collaboration.
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Building trust-based connections and leveraging social networks were identified as crucial for both personal and professional success.

#### *4.5.3. Satisfaction*

This area looks at how people assess their experiences working abroad, focusing on what affects their sense of fulfillment. Factors like career growth, managing time, personal growth, rethinking their home country, and building meaningful relationships all play a role. Understanding these helps organizations and policymakers create ways to improve expatriates' well-being and encourage them to stay.

- **Professional Progression:** Rapid career advancement, higher earnings, and increased recognition contributed significantly to job satisfaction.



- **Time Management:** Effective allocation of time between professional and personal responsibilities enhanced work-life balance and overall well-being.
- **Personal Development:** Participants reported growth in self-awareness, confidence, and wisdom, often attributed to overcoming challenges abroad.
- **Home Country Re-evaluation:** Living abroad often led to a renewed appreciation for cultural and institutional aspects of participants' home countries.
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Expanding social and professional networks was a source of satisfaction, fostering personal growth and collaborative opportunities.

#### *4.5.4. Needs*

Needs are the resources, opportunities, or situations people need to successfully move abroad. These include access to education, jobs, and family support, as well as solutions for problems like unstable governments or personal challenges. Meeting these needs helps people make better decisions and handle the move with more confidence.

- **Education:** Opportunities to specialize or complete academic programs abroad were seen as essential for professional growth.
- **Job Opportunities:** The perceived abundance of employment options and higher wages abroad motivated many participants.
- **Family Problems:** Relocation often stemmed from personal or familial circumstances, such as separation or health-related issues.
- **Professional Satisfaction:** Higher job satisfaction, freedom, and recognition abroad made international opportunities attractive.
- **Turning Points:** Life transitions, such as ending a relationship or finishing studies, often prompted individuals to seek change through mobility.
- **Government Instability:** Participants from politically unstable regions cited safety and freedom as primary reasons for leaving their home countries.

#### *4.5.5. Preconditions*

Preconditions are key factors to consider before deciding to work abroad. They include support from family and community, financial stability, professional help, and knowledge about the host country's culture and rules. These

preconditions help people prepare for their move, making it safer and more successful.

- **Family Support:** Emotional encouragement and practical assistance from family members played a critical role in fostering confidence.
- **Economic Availability:** Financial stability and independence were key enablers of mobility, providing a safety net during transitions.
- **Professional Support:** Organizational resources, such as accommodation and logistical assistance, eased the relocation process.
- **Affective Relationships:** Support networks in the host country helped participants navigate cultural and practical challenges.
- **Knowledge of the Host Country:** Reliable information about local socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts was crucial for effective adaptation.
- **Higher Qualification:** Specialized skills and international qualifications increased participants' competitiveness in the global job market.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The AToM study highlights the many sides of international work mobility, focusing on motivations, skills, satisfaction, needs, and conditions that shape people's decisions and experiences. These five areas provide a clear framework to understand the personal and professional factors behind mobility, offering helpful insights for career counsellors, organizations, and policymakers.

Key motivations include career growth, cultural experiences, and personal independence. Important skills for success are adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and communication. Satisfaction comes from professional and personal development, showing the need to match individual goals with mobility opportunities. Meeting needs like financial stability and ensuring support systems can make mobility more achievable and successful.

The study suggests career counsellors should use tailored approaches to help individuals prepare for mobility and build the right skills. For policymakers and organizations, it emphasizes creating supportive policies and programs to remove barriers, promote cultural integration, and support international workers.

Future research should look deeper into how these areas connect and impact the long-term results of mobility. By using the study's findings, stakeholders can

create strategies that help people succeed in global job markets, supporting their personal growth and contributing to social and economic progress.

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# CAN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT FOSTER ALTRUISM? PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE FROM CHILDREN PLAYING THE DICTATOR GAME IN “SCUOLA SENZA ZAINO” METHOD

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The tendency to give and to share goods with others is a topic of study with a long tradition in developmental psychology, that involves both the domains of moral reasoning and of social decision-making. Studies with the well-known Dictator Game showed that children act altruistically already from the preschool period, and that the socio-economic status of their family plays a role indeed. But the receiver plays a role too: children tend to offer more to people belonging to their own social group, and less to people of another group. To better explore this aspect, 10 years old children were involved in a series of rounds with the DG under different conditions. The two groups belonged to two different Primary school contexts in Northern Italy: one group attended a school with a special method, the so-called “Scuola Senza Zaino” (Orsi, 2014; 2016) and the other group attended a classical primary school. Preliminary results showed the tendency of both groups to act altruistically and to be influenced by the “parochialism” phenomenon. More interesting elements emerged from the discussion, carried on after the three DG rounds. Implications for the education to citizenship at school are discussed.

Decision-making; altruism; Dictator Game; children; “Scuola Senza Zaino”

## INTRODUCTION

In a systemic view of human development and of educational processes rooted in a complex socio-cultural context, schools pay growing attention to the socio-relational dimension of children with teachers, with peers and with the

surrounding environment. School, therefore, plays a central role in the education for pro-sociality and altruism, and aims to form responsible and caring citizens in everyday life. The Italian guidelines for the school place the Constitution of the Italian Republic and other European and ONU documents that call citizens to ethical and solidarity-based behaviour at the basis of the teaching action. In this regard, it is necessary to allow children to actively participate and co-construct their learning process together with teachers. An alternative school model, attentive to these aspects, is the so-called “Scuola Senza Zaino” method, which allows children to learn what it really means to live in a democratic society, where learning is co-constructed by teachers and pupils and rules are agreed and shared, just like in a community.

### **1. “SCUOLA SENZA ZAINO” METHOD: A SCHOOL THAT BECOMES A COMMUNITY**

The idea of the “Scuola Senza Zaino” method was born in Lucca (Tuscany) in the late 1990s. The creator of the model, Marco Orsi, felt the need to rethink the school in a radical way, taking up the ideas of classical authors such as Montessori, Freinet, Dewey, Pestalozzi, Don Milani and Steiner. The basic idea was to build a more active school, one that would lead pupils to achieve skills, stable learning, and a truly useful education outside the school walls. Today, the “Scuola Senza Zaino” movement has 294 institutions and 634 schools throughout Italy, which apply the model from pre-school to secondary school. Marco Orsi (2014, 2015, 2016) points out how the schoolbag hints at a transmissive and individualistic school model, based on formalism, in which there is no connection between the various knowledge acquired and in which there is a strong dualism between the teacher and the learner. Removing the schoolbag, according to Orsi, would therefore mean a change in the educational process, where knowledge is co-constructed by teachers and students mainly from experience, and where teachers take care to work collectively to offer an environment rich in stimuli.

There are three core values of the “Scuola Senza Zaino” method (Orsi et al., 2013):

- Community, understood both as a *community of practice* and as a *research community*. Knowledge, methodologies and competences are shared among teachers at the plexus level. The pupils also operate in a context that enables them to learn through a research process.

- Hospitality, understood in a dimension of caring for both the environment and the relationships established in it. It is also a push towards autonomy, as the conditions are created for the pupils to experiment and learn to do things on their own.
- Responsibility, according to which learning must first and foremost be based on the free adherence of the subject and on the understanding of the meaning of what is being proposed. It is also understood as responsibility towards others, in that pupils are called upon to cooperate and help the fellow pupils, so that learning is effective.

In the “Scuola Senza Zaino” context there are tables arranged in groups, where the pupils work in small groups, but also in pairs or individually as required. Particularly significant is the Agorà space, used by the whole group of pupils for listening, for dialogue or guided discussion, and also to take decisions that affect the life of the community. The material is shared within each table and usually managed by a pupil in charge, who must make sure that everyone takes care of it and puts each item in the right place. The design of teaching paths is based on the Global Approach to the Curriculum, which means that the curriculum has a situational and contextual perspective and involves all the systems of school life which inevitably intersect with each other. The differentiation of teaching has strategic importance, as it enables teachers to identify potentialities and limitations of individuals, and to make them participate in the school community. Assessment is also referred to as ‘mild assessment’, as it should be friendly, give confidence to students and should be sustainable for teachers; it is also oriented towards a formative and metacognitive dimension. There is therefore a move towards an authentic assessment based on reality tasks, which allow the child to act in real or simulated contexts, applying knowledge and skills acquired at school to realize projects or solve problems related to a concrete need.

The pupils are involved in deciding the various procedures that govern the school day, such as the choice of places, assignments or organization of materials. All the collectively elaborated procedures and contents for the functioning of the class are included in the Class Manual, a notebook that can be consulted at the moment of need and possibly revised and modified: the written and agreed instructions are defined as IpU (Instructions for Use) and contain both a description of how a particular task is to be carried out, its contents and the reason and when they are to be used. The authentic tasks promote of openness towards the community and society: pupils, through

activities such as the one described above, can be confronted with real problems or needs that require a creative response, for which they are called upon to bring their skills into play and to collaborate with their peers. The model also involves pupils' parents, as this is a fundamental requirement for a meaningful learning condition for their personal and social growth.

## **2. EDUCATING IN PRO-SOCIALITY AND ALTRUISM**

Generally speaking, prosociality can be defined as the set of all those behaviors directed towards the benefit of others, without expecting external rewards (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Castelli & Marchetti, 2012). Although the term 'altruism' has sometimes been used as a synonym for 'prosociality', it can be considered as a specific form of prosocial behavior, centered mainly on the possibility of incurring personal costs, such as making a sacrifice. The rich debate about the roots of prosociality and of altruism – the well-known question “Nature or Nurture?” – has shown, on one hand, that infants between 14 and 18 months spontaneously act prosocially and altruistically (Warneken et al., 2007; Warneken, Tomasello, 2008), but on the other hand, the development of the variables influencing prosocial behaviour are closely linked to the child's socio-affective and cognitive-moral development, as well as to the social context. One of the variables that most influences the development of prosociality from early childhood is the quality of the educational relationship established with the child's main caregivers, i.e. parents and, later, teachers (De Beni, 1998). Children of parents who adopt an authoritative parenting style behave in a more responsible and affectionate manner in contrast to children of parents who treat them coldly and tend to be over-controlling: this points out that it is crucial to establish the right level of authority, which allows the children to feel encouraged and stimulated to develop their autonomy. Other studies have highlighted the importance of adopting a democratic education based on the freedom of the individual, so as to stimulate children above all to solve conflicts in a civilized manner.

When entering the school world, the child experiences another relationship that is fundamental to his/her growth, namely that with teachers (Pianta, 2001).

The teacher is called upon to establish personal contact with each child, and should aim to stimulate a sense of security, but also to foster dialogue and interpersonal collaboration. It is essential that the teacher listens to pupils, makes them feel welcome and places trust in their abilities. The teacher should also act as a role model, explicitly disapproving aggressive and violent behavior,



and valorizing the behavior of sharing, of cooperation and support for others. Even before implementing educational projects aimed at acquiring pro-social skills, it is essential to build a learning environment in which the relationship is at the center, where the teacher reflects on the communication methods adopted and on the quality of the teaching activities proposed. Curricular contents can also become vehicle to sensitize children to the implementation of pro-social behavior: for example, it can be interesting to introduce children to personalities from recent history who are famous for having acted in the name of solidarity values. Finally, it becomes increasingly necessary to have a critical mindset and structure systematic paths of socio-affective education.

### **3. A PRELIMINARY RESEARCH COMPARING CHILDREN IN “SCUOLA SENZA ZAINO” METHOD AND IN A CLASSICAL SCHOOL**

The starting hypothesis of this research project was that children who had followed the five years of “Scuola Senza Zaino” Method tended to implement more prosocial behavior than the others, who attend a classical school. This is because this model, as explained above, is strongly focused on the community dimension, and provides strategies and methodologies that focus on the relationship with the teacher and among pupils, to foster collaboration and sharing.

The experimental class consisted of 20 pupils (11 boys and 9 girls, 5 pupils had Special Educational Needs) from the Fifth grade of a “Scuola Senza Zaino” method in Northern Italy. The class in the control group, on the other hand, consisted of 23 pupils (12 boys and 11 girls, 5 pupils had Special Educational Needs) and followed a traditional school model.

Despite the different approach of the two school models, there were many similarities in the positive atmosphere in the classrooms, which showed how both groups, in the course of the five school years spent together, managed to build solid relationships and a learning atmosphere, both in terms of peer relations and relations with teachers. The analysis began, in both classes, with the administration of a variant of the Dictator Game to each pupil. The Dictator Game (Kahneman et al, 1986) is one of the most widely used interactive games in the developmental age to investigate decision-making skills in children and is one of the games used to assess the propensity for prosociality and altruism (for an overview, see Castelli & Marchetti, 2012). In this game, two individuals are called upon to share a given good within a single interaction, with no possibility of bargaining. The recipient has no power to decide whether or not to accept the

offer of the proposer, who can act in effect as a 'dictator'. Depending on the age of the participants, different goods may be used, e.g. money, cards or candy: in any case, it is essential to guarantee anonymity from the outset, so as to avoid distortions caused by the phenomenon of social desirability.

In this research project the variant of the Dictator Game involved the use of cards as a good to be shared, and served to analyze also the in-group and out-group dynamics and the presence of the phenomenon of parochialism (Fehr et al., 2008), through the following three questions:

1. You have 10 cards; you have to decide how to share them with one of your classmates. How many would you give to him/her and how many would you keep? Take into account that he/she cannot refuse your offer.
2. Now imagine that you have to share them with a child from another class in your school. What would you do?
3. Now let's play another game, you still have 10 cards, you always decide how to divide them up: now you play with a child from another school that you do not know. How would you act?

During the administration, gender homogeneity was maintained, i.e. boys were told that they were playing with boys, and the girls that they were playing with girls. Furthermore, the three rounds were counterbalanced, changing the order from time to time, so as to avoid any possible influence of the order on the decisions. Following each answer given, the pupils were asked to give a reason to understand the decision made.

There were some slight differences between the two groups, although the numerical responses and motivations were overall very similar. Six children from the experimental group and ten from the control group stated that they would split the number of cards equally, keeping five for themselves and giving five to the recipient, in all three variants of the game. There was the tendency of many children to motivate their choices based on moral reference to fairness, e.g.: *It would be fair if we had the same amount*. The phenomenon of parochialism also emerged quite well, as 12 children in the experimental group and 5 in the control group chose to keep more cards for themselves when the playing partner was not a classmate, with motivations such as *Since he is not in my class, I don't know him well, so we are not very good friends*. It may be also worth noting that one pupil in the experimental group and two in the control group chose to give more cards to children who were strangers or knew little about them, with this motivation: *I don't know him, so maybe we can become friends*. For the answer to the second question, since they were all fifth graders,

and there was only one section for each school, many of them took it for granted that the partner with whom they would share the asset would be from a lower class. This, however, has led to different attitudes in the two groups. In the experimental group, three stated that they would like to give fewer figurines to their smaller companion (example of motivation: *Since she is a bit smaller and I like the cards, I can decide. They would be mine, so I keep 6*), while in the control group two children would have given a few more (example of motivation: *I am already grown up, he needs more education and has to go all the way, he needs it more than I do*). There was also the tendency – on the part of a few boys – to donate figurines in the hope that, in the future, that their gesture would be reciprocated: *Since she is a classmate of mine, we see each other often and in the future she might find some more in the packets and give them to me*.

## CONCLUSION

This research, though based on a small sample, seems to show that the educational model adopted by a particular school is only one of many components that contribute to the development of prosocial and altruistic tendencies in children. The fact that there were no strong differences between the responses of the two groups may be related to the presence of a serene and welcoming atmosphere in both classes. Moreover, the Fifth grade of the “Senza Zaino Method” school was the first class in the institute to follow that model, and two school years were experienced with the string limitations of the Covid-19 pandemic, so all the pivotal elements described by Marco Orsi were not yet fully present at the time of the research. For the future, it would be interesting to extend the project to a larger sample, and it would be also meaningful to analyze the differences at an inter-temporal level, monitoring the prosocial tendencies of pupils from the First grade to the Fifth grade, so that more evidence could be obtained regarding the influence of the school context on the development of prosociality and altruism.

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# EMPOWERING FUTURE GENERATIONS: THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF PARENTS IN SHAPING FINANCIAL DECISION-MAK- ING SKILLS

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Financial education is a critical component in the development of responsible and conscious individuals. This study delves into the pivotal role that parents play in instilling financial skills in their children. According to the OECD (2017), financial education should start as early as possible, with parents being the first educators in this context. Early financial education, for example, appears to have a positive impact on long-term financial health, including a higher likelihood of saving and lower levels of indebtedness (Webley and Nyhus, 2006). Our study builds upon previous research (Jorgensen and Savla, 2010; Shim et al., 2010) that demonstrated the influence of parents on their children's financial behavior. We conducted an online pilot survey on a sample of parents (N= 21; Female= 18; mean age = 49 years) with children aged 6 to 14 years, examining parents' financial education practices and their perception of the financial attitude and knowledge in their children. Preliminary results indicate that 25% of parents perceive it as very important to discuss financial matters with their children and the same percentage consider themselves adequately equipped to educate their children. From the research analysis, it is observed that 44% parents feel confident in imparting financial knowledge to their children, yet admit to being unprepared when it comes to updating their own knowledge. Schools are viewed, for the 61% of the sample, as the primary source for a more structured education. Regarding pocket money, most children receive a fixed amount (67%), believed by parents to foster their financial competency. However, some parents refrain from this practice, considering their children too young to manage money (23%). However, only a 22% of the sample feel equipped to educate their children on financial matters, specifically when this education involves technologies (i.e., digital payment systems). Therefore, we underline the importance of providing parents with the resources and skills necessary to perform this key role. This could include training programs for parents,

educational materials, and the integration of financial education into school curricula. These findings underscore the importance of providing parents with the necessary resources and training to educate their children about financial matters, including digital payment systems. This could be achieved through various means, such as parental training programs, educational materials, and integrating financial education into school curricula.

financial education, decision-making, financial behaviour

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Children’s financial education is essential for developing future decision-making skills, with parents playing a pivotal role in guiding their children through practical experiences and imparting the knowledge necessary to make informed economic choices. This paper explores psychological concepts related to financial education and best practices for educational programs, presenting findings from a recent study and linking these ideas to the broader theme of social justice. Understanding these dynamics can lead to more effective financial education strategies, helping to reduce economic disparities across different social groups.

Research (Berti & Bombi, 1988; Berti et al., 2017; Valle et al. 2019) suggests that children develop “naïve” theories about the adult economic world. These initial understandings often lead to misunderstandings of essential economic concepts, which effective financial education should aim to bridge. Parents can address these misconceptions early, helping children align their ideas with the realities of economic contexts. Financial and economic literacy is often promoted in schools through extracurricular financial education programs that introduce children to adult economic concepts, such as money management and financial institutions (Lombardi & Ajello, 2017).

Amagir et al. (2018) identified the primary objective of financial education programs as motivating and empowering children to adopt positive financial behaviors, fostering sound decision-makers. These programs typically include three components of financial literacy: knowledge and understanding (providing information), skills and behaviors (teaching management practices), and attitudes and confidence (enhancing self-efficacy and motivation). Together, these components form a foundation for children’s financial literacy, equipping

them with not only knowledge but also the confidence and skills needed for effective financial decision-making.

### **1.1 The Psychological Perspective on Financial Education**

Children's economic behaviors are shaped not only by their understanding of the world but also by their developmental level regarding specific fundamental psychological skills (Lombardi et al., 2017). Financial education programs thus need to consider the following aspects: decision-making processes, time management, motivations and interests, mathematical reasoning skills. By addressing these foundational skills, financial education can be tailored to children's developmental stages, allowing them to gradually build a more realistic and practical understanding of economic concepts. Moreover, economic decisions often involve social contexts, then to train in social competencies can significantly enhance children's financial decision-making abilities. Key areas of focus include:

- **Emotional awareness and regulation:** these skills are essential for sound financial decision-making, helping children manage impulsive spending. Parents can support this by modeling responsible financial behavior and teaching children to recognize their emotional responses.
- **Perspective-taking and Theory of Mind:** perspective-taking enables children to consider economic outcomes from various viewpoints. Theory of Mind, the ability to understand others' thoughts and intentions (Bicchieri & Chavez, 2008; Castelli et al., 2014), is crucial in financial contexts characterized by interpersonal exchanges and the need to distribute resources. Encouraging children to see situations from multiple perspectives helps them predict the economic behaviors of others, leading to more empathetic and informed decisions.
- **Understanding social norms and rules:** economic behaviors are guided by social norms and expectations. By teaching these rules through everyday financial activities, parents can help children navigate financial decisions more effectively.

Developing these social competencies supports children in making better financial choices, integrating both individual and social perspectives in their decision-making processes. Effective financial education programs incorporate both cognitive and social aspects of financial decision-making. Practical, hands-on experiences are crucial, and parental involvement reinforces these lessons at home. Regular program evaluation also helps refine strategies and

improve outcomes. Recent study highlights the impact of parental involvement in financial education. Programs combining cognitive and social training appear to be most effective, with children of actively engaged parents displaying a stronger understanding of financial concepts. These findings underscore the importance of integrated financial education strategies.

One of the goals of good financial education is to build ever better social justice. Providing equitable access to financial knowledge can help reduce economic disparities, empowering individuals and promoting fair economic opportunities. Parents play a key role in ensuring that children, regardless of their background, have access to this essential education. Efforts to improve financial literacy ultimately contribute to a more equitable society.

## **2. THE RESEARCH**

Given the significant role parents play in financial education, it is crucial to understand the beliefs and assumptions they bring to this task, as well as their level of awareness regarding financial education. These factors are the foundation from which parents approach financial education, shaping both the values they emphasize and the strategies they use in guiding their children's financial development. The research aimed to explore parents' perceptions of their children's financial education through an online pilot survey conducted with 22 parents of children aged 6 to 14. We construct a questionnaire focused on several key areas: sociodemographic information, frequency and importance of financial discussions, parents' confidence in teaching financial concepts, and children's financial practices such as pocket money and digital payment usage.

## **RESULTS**

The first results concern the description of parents' responses to key issues:

- Importance of Financial Discussions in family: 54% of parents consider it very important to discuss financial matters with their children.
- Confidence in Financial Knowledge: only 23% feel confident in imparting financial knowledge, with 9% acknowledging gaps in their understanding.
- Pocket Money: 67% of children receive pocket money, which parents view as a way to foster financial competency.
- Digital Financial Education: only 22% of parents feel equipped to teach



their children about digital payments.

Non-parametric correlations were used to explore relationships among variables, revealing significant associations. The first result shows that parents who value discussing financial topics tend to feel more confident in their ability to educate their children ( $\rho = 0.585$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Second, we found a positive correlation between parents' perceived importance of financial education and their children's correct reception of financial concepts ( $\rho = 0.592$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Finally, familiarity with digital payments among parents was positively correlated with their capacity to educate their children about these tools ( $\rho = 0.731$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

The study underscores a strong relationship between the perceived importance of financial education and parents' confidence in providing it. Effective communication also plays a critical role in ensuring children's understanding of financial concepts. Familiarity with digital payments enhances parents' ability to guide their children in this area, and pocket money is widely perceived as a valuable tool for practical financial learning.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND CALL TO ACTION**

Parents play an indispensable role in their children's financial education. To fulfill this role effectively, they need resources and training to bolster their confidence and knowledge. Collaboration between families, schools, and institutions is essential to support comprehensive financial education, which not only equips children with crucial life skills but also promotes social equity.

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# DECODING CHILDHOOD PROSOCIAL DECISION-MAKING: THE ROLE OF MENTALIZATION AND PERSONALITY TRAITS IN SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

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Prosocial decision-making, characterized by behaviors aimed at benefiting others, is a critical component of social development in childhood. This study explores the interplay between Mentalization (i.e., Theory of Mind and empathy), and personality traits in influencing fairness and altruism in school-aged children. Using decision-making tasks such as the Ultimatum Game (UG) and Dictator Game (DG), alongside assessments of cognitive abilities and personality dimensions, the study examines how mentalization and socio-emotional factors shape children's decisions. Results indicate significant relationships between empathy, ToM, and prosocial outcomes, offering insights into the mechanisms underpinning fairness and altruism during childhood development.

Decision-making; children; empathy; Theory of Mind; personality

## INTRODUCTION

Mentalization, defined as the understanding of one's own and others' minds, emotions, and thoughts, is considered a crucial process in mediating human experience within social contexts (Allen, 2006). This complex construct encompasses specific cognitive and emotional abilities, with Theory of Mind (ToM) and empathy being key components that develop during childhood

(Luyten et al., 2020).

The development of decision-making skills during childhood, particularly in primary school, is a significant focus. Prosocial decisions, involving considerations for the well-being of others, are often evaluated through tasks such as the Ultimatum Game (Guth et al., 1982) and Dictator Game (Kahneman et al., 1986; Benenson et al., 2007), where individuals decide how to share money with peers. Fairness is commonly understood through the lens of inequity aversion, which describes the tendency to avoid situations perceived as unjust or unequal. In social settings, fairness motivates individuals to sacrifice personal gains to restore balance and equality. The Ultimatum Game (UG), an interactive economic game, is often used to measure fairness. In this game, two participants—a Proposer and a Receiver—must decide how to divide a set amount of money or resources. Receivers generally accept equitable offers, where the distribution is fair, and reject inequitable ones, where the division is lopsided. Research indicates that children begin rejecting disadvantageous inequity by the age of 3–4, and by 8 years old, they also start rejecting advantageous inequity, even when it benefits them (Smith et al., 2013). Altruism refers to the human tendency to assist others in achieving their goals and to share valuable resources, with the broader aim of enhancing societal well-being, which indirectly benefits the individual. Children’s altruistic behaviors typically emerge around the ages of 2–3 years (Warneken & Tomasello, 2013) and become more consistent during the primary school years. The Dictator Game (DG) is a common method for assessing altruism, wherein the Proposer determines how much to share with the Receiver, who must accept the offered amount. Both fairness and altruism are associated with long-term benefits for communities while also providing immediate advantages to others. Concerning the psychological dimensions involved, literature highlights the role of the Theory of Mind in decisions involving other people (Castelli et al., 2014; Lombardi et al., 2017; Lombardi et al., 2021; Tsoi and McAuliffe, 2020), emphasizing how the ability to take another’s perspective leads to a better understanding of intention and, more generally, the internal states of the other player in the decision-making process. This ability helps children move beyond an egocentric position to consider this information from their own and others’ perspectives. More recently, some studies have shown that empathy plays a significant role not only in prosocial behavior (Brazil et al., 2023) but only specifically in decision-making related to fairness (Yijuan et al., 2022).

A final construct that could influence decision-making skills in children in social contexts is related to their personality traits. Recently, Demedardi and

colleagues (2021) demonstrated that certain personality traits, such as agreeableness, influence decision-making processes regarding white lies, a decision-making process specifically linked to prosociality aimed at building and maintaining positive relationships with others. Exploring this connection is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing decision-making in childhood. Furthermore, the study introduces the role of personality traits on decision-making processes, emphasizing the prosocial dimension aimed at building and maintaining positive relationships.

This study examines how fairness and altruism, assessed through the Ultimatum Game (UG) and Dictator Game (DG), respectively, are linked to ToM, empathy, personality traits, and cognitive abilities. While previous research has highlighted ToM's impact on fairness and empathy's role in altruism, the interplay between these constructs and personality traits in school-aged children remains underexplored.

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1 Participants and measures**

Sixty (60) children (35 females) were recruited from public primary schools, grades 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> (M=114 months, SD=12 months). Parental consent was obtained, and the study adhered to ethical guidelines.

The measures are:

- Fairness and Altruism using the Ultimatum Game (UG; Güth et al., 1982) and Dictator Game (DG; Kahneman et al., 1986). In both games, participants played as Proposers. In the UG, the Receiver could accept or reject the offer, with rejection resulting in no gain for either player. In the DG, the Receiver had no option to reject, and the amount offered by the Proposer was scored.
- Theory of Mind (ToM) was evaluated with three False Belief Tasks (FBTs; Astington et al., 2002; Perner & Wimmer, 1985), utilizing the unexpected displacement paradigm, assessing first and second-order reasoning through a combination of story-based questions and justifications. Each task offered a maximum score of 5, for a total of 15 points.
- Empathy was measured using two questionnaires: the Index of Empathy (IE; Bryant, 1982) a 22-item questionnaire evaluating affective empathy (score range: 0–22), and the How I Feel in Different Situations (HIFDS; Feshbach et al., 1991), a 12-item self-report assessing cognitive and affective empathy on a 4-point scale.

- Personality Traits were assessed with the Big Five Questionnaire for Children (BFQ-C; Barbaranelli et al., 1998), comprising 65 items rated on a 3-point Likert scale. It measured Extraversion, Neuroticism, Openness to Experiences, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.
- Cognitive abilities were tested using Raven's Coloured Progressive Matrices (CPM; Raven, 1984), a 36-item non-verbal task requiring participants to identify missing pieces in patterns.

## 2.2 Data Analysis

Pearson correlations were conducted to examine relationships between all variables. Statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ .

## 3. RESULTS

The Pearson's correlational analysis revealed several significant correlations between the measures of prosocial decision-making (fairness and altruism), mentalization (ToM and empathy), personality traits, cognitive abilities, and age. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of prosocial behaviors in childhood.

Fairness (measured by the UG) was positively correlated with ToM scores (measured by FBTs) ( $r = 0.341, p < .01$ ), indicating that children with greater ToM skills were more likely to make equitable offers. The cognitive dimension of empathy (measured by HIFDS) was moderately associated with fairness ( $r = 0.279, p < .05$ ), suggesting that the ability to understand others' emotions contributes to fair decision-making. Among personality dimensions, Agreeableness showed a significant positive correlation with fairness ( $r = 0.190, p < .05$ ), reflecting its role in cooperative and prosocial behavior.

About Altruism (measured by the DG), the affective dimension of empathy (measured by the IE), positively correlated with altruistic behavior in the DG ( $r = 0.291, p < .05$ ), suggesting that emotional resonance drives altruistic decisions. No significant direct relationship was found between ToM and altruistic offers, indicating that altruism may rely more on empathic dimension. Among personality dimensions, Conscientiousness is correlated with altruism ( $r = 0.301, p < .05$ ).

Cognitive abilities, as measured by Raven's scores, were strongly correlated with ToM ( $r = 0.483, p < .001$ ), suggesting that cognitive skills underpin mentalization processes but do not directly influence fairness or altruism.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This study provides significant insights into the relationships between fairness, altruism, mentalization, personality traits, and cognitive abilities in school-aged children. These results highlight the multifaceted and interconnected nature of prosocial decision-making during a critical developmental period.

The positive correlation between fairness and Theory of Mind (ToM) underscores the importance of mentalization in guiding fair decisions. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that ToM enables children to consider others' perspectives and intentions, facilitating fairer offers (Castelli et al., 2014; Lombardi et al., 2017). The ability to reason about others' beliefs and desires appears to play a critical role in shifting children away from egocentric behavior towards more socially considerate decision-making.

Empathy, as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive and affective components, demonstrated distinct relationships with prosocial behaviors. Cognitive empathy, reflected in the ability to understand others' emotions, was moderately associated with fairness, suggesting that children who can recognize and interpret others' feelings are more inclined to make fair decisions. On the other hand, affective empathy, which involves emotional resonance, was positively correlated with altruism in the DG. This suggests that altruistic behaviors, which often involve giving without reciprocity, are primarily driven by emotional sensitivity rather than cognitive reasoning. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that empathy motivates prosocial behaviors, particularly in the context of sharing and helping (Yijuan et al., 2022; Brazil et al., 2023).

The role of personality traits in prosocial decision-making was evident in the correlations between Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, fairness, and altruism. Agreeableness, characterized by traits such as kindness and cooperativeness, was linked to fairness, supporting its association with behaviors that prioritize social adaptability. Similarly, Conscientiousness, often associated with responsibility and self-discipline, was positively correlated with altruism, suggesting that children with higher conscientiousness may be more inclined to act in ways that benefit others. These findings corroborate existing literature on the influence of personality traits on prosocial behavior in adults and extend this understanding to children (Demedardi et al., 2021).

The strong correlation between Raven's scores and ToM highlights the cognitive underpinnings of ToM. Higher cognitive abilities may enhance children's capacity for complex reasoning about mental states, which in turn facilitates

more sophisticated social interactions. However, cognitive abilities did not directly correlate with fairness or altruism, suggesting that while they support mentalization processes, prosocial behaviors are more closely tied to socio-emotional factors such as empathy and personality traits.

Although not statistically significant, the observed trends indicating higher fairness and altruism in older children are consistent with developmental theories suggesting that prosocial decision-making becomes more refined with age. Older children's growing ability to consider others' perspectives, regulate emotions, and adhere to social norms likely contributes to these trends (Smith et al., 2013; Warneken & Tomasello, 2013).

These findings emphasize the importance of fostering both cognitive and emotional components of mentalization in educational settings to promote fairness and altruism. Programs designed to enhance ToM and empathy through perspective-taking exercises, role-playing, and social-emotional learning could support the development of prosocial behaviors. Additionally, incorporating personality assessments into interventions may help tailor approaches to individual differences.

The study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships, and the sample size does not allow for the generalization of results. Additionally, the use of simplified economic games may not fully capture the complexity of real-world prosocial behaviors. Expanding the scope of assessment to include naturalistic decision-making scenarios could enhance ecological validity.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

These findings suggest a gradual improvement in prosocial decision-making with age.

Overall, the results demonstrate that fairness is closely linked to cognitive and personality dimensions, particularly ToM and Agreeableness, while altruism is more strongly associated with affective empathy and Conscientiousness. Cognitive abilities appear to support mentalization, which in turn influences prosocial tendencies. Understanding these relationships provides a foundation for interventions aimed at promoting prosocial development, ultimately fostering cooperation and equity within communities.



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# COMPARING TEACHING METHODOLOGIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF FINANCIAL LITERACY IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL: AN EXPLORATIVE AND EVIDENCE-BASED STUDY

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International and national surveys rank Italy among economies where financial literacy levels fall below the OECD average, indicating that many individuals lack basic financial skills for informed decision-making. Recognizing the importance of financial education for personal and social well-being, more systematic involvement from educational institutions is needed. This exploratory study investigates which of two innovative pedagogies—game-based learning and cooperative learning—is more effective in primary-level financial education programs. The research involves two fifth-grade classes in an Italian primary school, addressing topics aligned with the European Financial Competence Framework: one class employs cooperative learning, and the other uses game-based learning via the Jun€co program from the Amiotti Foundation. Pre- and post-tests, alongside focus groups, assess educational impact and offer deeper insights. Preliminary results show that while cooperative learning is more effective for enhancing students' financial literacy, both methods are well-suited for financial education, aligning with recent evidence-based research supporting experiential and active teaching approaches over traditional ones.

financial literacy; cooperative learning; game-based learning; evidence-based research; primary school

## INTRODUCTION

Financial education plays a fundamental role in fostering active citizenship in a rapidly changing and complex society (Amagir et al., 2018) and should be implemented in response to low financial literacy levels observed across all age groups and continents (OECD, 2020a; OECD, 2020b). Although this need is acknowledged internationally, there is still insufficient discussion on the educational processes necessary to support the development of financial literacy at the school level. This research aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the most effective teaching methods for financial education in primary schools. The research question is: “Which teaching method – gaming or cooperative learning – is more effective in developing financial literacy at the primary school level, and why?”. These methods fall within the cluster of innovative, student-centred pedagogies (Paniagua & Istance, 2018), designed to develop competencies through active learning processes.

Following a literature review on the topic, this article presents a study conducted in a primary school in the province of Trento with two fifth-grade classes. Both classes engaged in a financial education program aligned with the European Financial Competence Framework, though differing in teaching methods: one class adopted CL, while the other used GBL. By analysing the preliminary results, the study assesses the educational impact of each method on the development of financial literacy.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Europe, financial literacy has been identified as a key competence to develop from early childhood, essential for achieving personal and financial well-being. This shift has redefined the perception of citizenship, now seen not only as a status with rights and responsibilities but as an active role involving public participation and accountability (Parricchi, 2019). Despite its recognized importance, financial illiteracy persists across all continents: studies such as the OECD’s PISA surveys and the Eurobarometer report indicate that knowledge, behaviours, and self-awareness related to personal financial literacy remain insufficient for individuals to act as active, informed, and responsible citizens.

Growing interest in strengthening the financial literacy of young European citizens culminated in the *Financial Competence Framework for Children and Youth in the European Union*, developed under the OECD-INFE initiative (OECD, 2023). This document aims to provide a unified framework for financial

competencies, categorized into knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and grouped into four content areas that all European citizens should develop, beginning in primary school.

While the European approach to financial literacy remains primarily finance-centred and often overlooks the educational processes needed to effectively develop these skills, in Italy, the academic debate has introduced a more pedagogical perspective. This approach emphasizes education aimed at well-being not only in financial terms but also in personal and social dimensions, embracing a holistic view of the individual. It seeks to foster active citizenship through participation, belonging, responsibility, awareness, and identity. As Parricchi notes, the objective is not simply to encourage financial socialization but to establish meaningful educational pathways that support present well-being with a forward-looking mindset. This vision led the Italian EduFin Committee to release guidelines (2020) for teachers to facilitate the integration of financial education into school curricula. These guidelines emphasize a vertical approach with increasing depth and complexity and advocate for the use of active, innovative teaching methods, though they do not specify which would be most effective. This gap, along with a lack of evidence-based research, motivated the design of this study. Drawing on clusters of innovative pedagogies (Paniagua & Istance, 2018), we chose to test the effectiveness of CL and GBL, as research indicates that the effect size of CL (0.53) is comparable to that of GBL (0.52) (Hattie, 2023). This allowed us to examine how their effectiveness differs in financial education programs.

In CL, students work collaboratively to achieve shared learning goals. This method relies on positive interdependence, individual and group accountability, constructive interaction, the use of social competencies, and group assessment (Johnson et al., 2021).

GBL, in contrast, employs games and playful environments to foster engagement and develop personal and social well-being. Games, with their mechanical elements (goals, participation, challenges, rapid feedback) and emotional elements (competition, collaboration, identities, and narratives), promote learning through inclusion, experimentation, and immersion. The educational value lies in connecting students' in-game experiences to personal and real-world topics (Flatt, 2016).

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a case study methodology, offering an in-depth exploration of a single, contextualized unit from multiple perspectives. This approach captures the complexity and uniqueness of the phenomenon under study, avoiding oversimplification (Tight, 2022). Conducted in spring 2024, the research involved two fifth-grade classes totaling 32 children from a primary school in the Province of Trento, Northern Italy. The research question was: “Which teaching method – gaming or cooperative learning – is more effective in developing financial literacy at the primary school level, and why?”. To address this question, two 12-hour financial education programs were designed in line with the competencies of the European framework and Italian guidelines. Topics included the value of goods and services, specialization and exchange, price estimation, the history of money, loans and interest, and sustainable economy. Learning outcomes, teaching-learning activities, and assessment methods were initially defined according to Biggs’ constructive alignment (2022).

In Class A, CL was used, with students organized into stable, heterogeneous groups throughout the program and limited adult intervention. Each session comprised three phases: the first focused on group organization, reviewing feedback, and assigning roles; the second covered financial topics and activities to achieve the defined learning outcomes; and the third involved individual and group assessments to identify areas for improvement and further development.

In Class B, GBL was implemented using the educational kit *Jun€co – Ethical and Sustainable Economics for Active Citizenship*, developed by the Amiotti Foundation. This kit includes six games designed to enhance students’ financial literacy using flashcards, game boards, card decks, dice, game pieces, puzzles, sets of banknotes and coins, crosswords, income and expense ledgers, and rhymes.

To assess the effectiveness of each teaching method in achieving learning outcomes and developing financial literacy, pre- and post-tests were administered alongside semi-structured focus groups. Each test, comprising 24 items, was based on the Italian INVALSI tests for grade 5 in Italian and mathematics, covering financial topics from the programs and adopting a competency-based approach. Pre- and post-test results were compared to evaluate improvement and performance differences between classes, and to calculate the effect size of the two teaching methods.

Focus groups were conducted at the end of each session. Guiding questions

promoted discussion and encouraged students to reflect on both what they learned and how they learned it. Content analysis will be conducted to categorize patterns and speaking turns related to learned content or learning process. This analysis will clarify why one method proved more effective than the other in developing financial literacy among students.

### 3. PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 illustrates the pre- and post-test results for Class A, where the financial education program was implemented through CL. The figure enables a comparison of each student’s performance before and after the program: all students showed improvement, though the degree of progress varied. Some students, like Student 5, showed a notable increase of 13 correct answers, while others, such as Student 1, exhibited only a minor gain, with one additional correct answer in the post-test compared to the pre-test. This variation indicates considerable heterogeneity in the performance of students in Class A, possibly influenced by differences in motivation and engagement during the program – factors that have a significant impact on the learning process. The average pre-test score was 8.69 correct answers out of a total of 24, while the average post-test score rose to 14.63. Based on these results, the calculated *effect size* (ES) is 1.72.

Figure 1. Comparison of pre- and post-test results achieved by students in Class A.

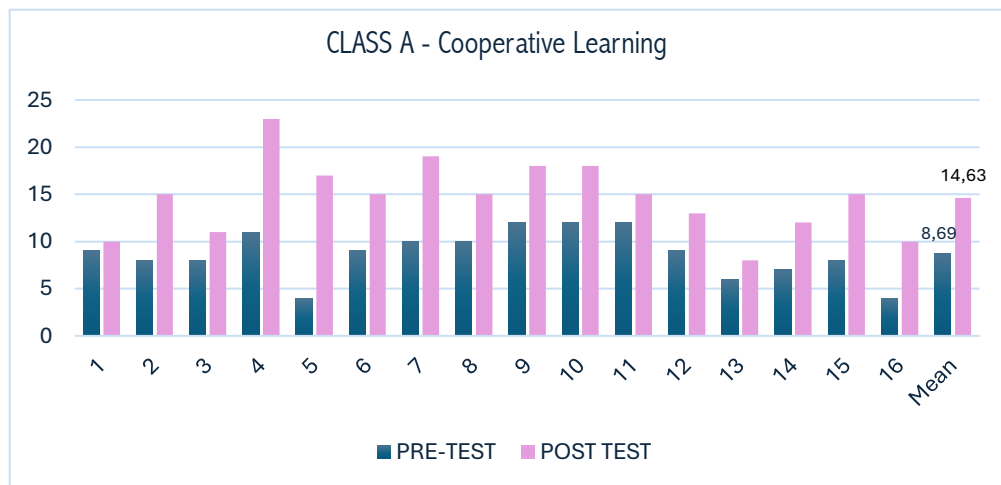
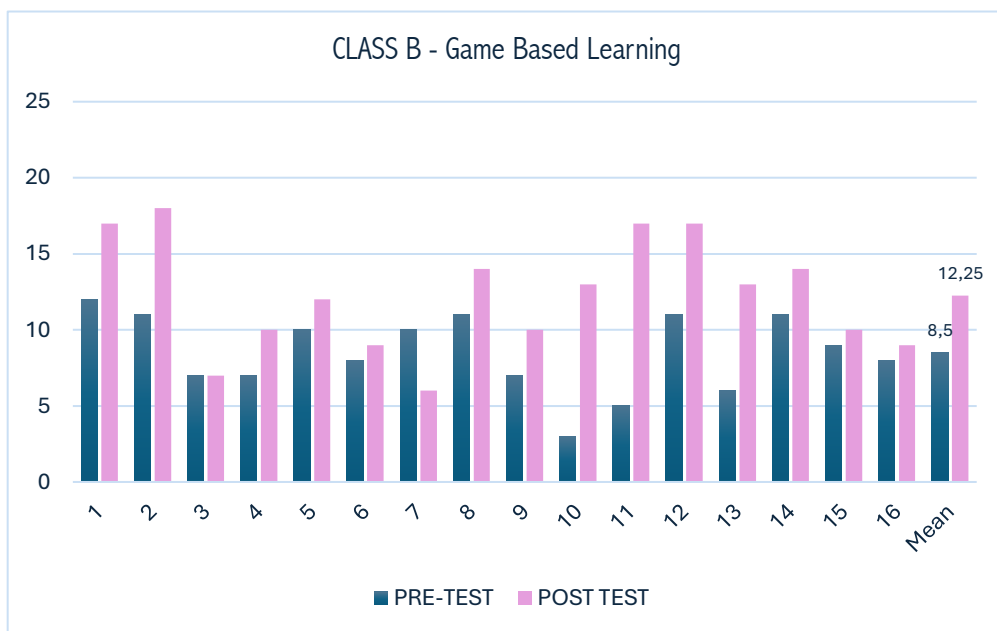


Figure 2 shows the pre- and post-test results for students in Class B, where financial literacy was developed using GBL, specifically with the *Jun€co kit*.

Comparing each student's performance in the two tests reveals significant gains in some students (e.g. Student 11) and only minor differences in others (such as Student 6). Notably, Student 3 showed no change between the pre- and post-tests, while Student 7 experienced a decline, dropping from 10 correct answers in the pre-test to 6 in the post-test. In Class B, the average pre-test score was 8.5, similar to Class A's 8.69. However, the post-test average was 12.25, notably lower than Class A's post-test average, with an *effect size* (ES) of 1.08.

Figure 2. Comparison of pre- and post-test results achieved by students in Class B.



Both effect sizes exceed 0.4, which Hattie identifies as the hinge point, marking the threshold for desirable effects. According to Hattie (2023), 90% of educational programs are effective, with the highest impact occurring above this threshold. The application of both CL and GBL in financial education aligns with Hattie's findings and those of Paniagua & Istance (2018), suggesting that both methods were particularly effective. Kaiser & Menkhoff (2020) propose that high effect sizes in financial education may be attributed to factors such as small group settings, experiential learning, and the primary school environment, all of which enhance program effectiveness.

In terms of qualitative data, the authors are conducting a content analysis of the focus groups. Preliminary results show that students not only discussed the



content they learned but also reflected on the learning process. In Class A (CL), students emphasized their autonomy, fostering a strong sense of responsibility. Some compared their learning groups to assembly lines, where each member played a crucial role, managing their own part in the learning process.

In Class B (GBL), although an active method was used, focus group discussions revealed limited autonomy, as the games were teacher-led. Students noted that they had insufficient time to discuss and reflect on their experiences. The analysis also indicated that students were more focused on competition and winning than on the learning process, suggesting a potential limitation of this method. These preliminary findings may help explain the observed differences in efficacy between the two methods in promoting financial literacy in this study.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study applied two teaching methods – Cooperative Learning and Game-Based Learning – to financial education at the primary school level. The research question investigated the effectiveness of each method regarding learning outcomes and explored the reasons for any differences in their effectiveness. Two fifth-grade classes from an Italian primary school participated, each receiving a 12-hour program on financial topics aligned with the OECD's Financial Competence Framework (2023) and the Edufin Committee's guidelines (2020). In Class A, topics were addressed through CL, while in Class B, GBL was employed. To address the research question, all students completed a financial literacy pre-test and post-test, with items based on INVALSI assessments, and focus groups were conducted after each learning session. Figures 1 and 2 compare each student's pre- and post-test results in Classes A and B.

Both teaching methods proved to be particularly effective, fitting within Hattie's (2023) zone of desired effects. However, CL was more effective ( $ES: 1.72$ ) than GBL ( $ES: 1.08$ ). Preliminary content analysis suggests a reason for this difference: students using CL appreciated the autonomy and responsibility involved and were highly engaged in the learning process. In contrast, GBL students reported limited time for discussion, less autonomy due to teacher-led games, and a greater focus on competition than on learning. A more detailed analysis will further clarify why one method may be more effective than the other. Future research could build on these findings by involving a larger student sample and a control group, evaluate the appropriateness of additional methods, and involve students of different ages and school types. These sample

studies could be complemented by extended studies, which could examine not only the rate of development in financial literacy but also the broader competencies and skills which would be honed through these learning experiences.

### **Acknowledgements**

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# FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE AND HOUSEHOLD VULNERABILITY. EVIDENCE FROM ITALY

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This study examines the role of financial knowledge in reducing financial vulnerability among Italian households. Drawing on a dataset of 4,412 observations from the Bank of Italy's IACOFI survey, the analysis employs multivariate linear and logistic regression models to evaluate whether enhanced financial knowledge reduces a household's risk of vulnerability. The findings indicate that higher levels of financial knowledge, as measured by the OECD/INFE Financial Knowledge Index, are generally associated with a lower probability of financial vulnerability. However, notable differences emerge based on specific socio-demographic characteristics, behaviours and attitudes. The study also highlights two significant phenomena: overconfidence and chronicisation. Overconfidence, driven by excessive financial self-efficacy, substantially increases the probability of financial vulnerability. Meanwhile, chronicisation underscores how being financially vulnerable perpetuates itself over time, often becoming a persistent condition that households struggle to overcome. The analysis concludes that while financial knowledge can help prevent financial vulnerability, it is not effective in addressing existing situations of vulnerability.

financial vulnerability; financial literacy; financial knowledge; financial education; financial inclusion.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, and particularly since the 2007 financial crisis, a phenomenon known as 'everyday financialisation' (Martin, 2002) has emerged. This refers to the pervasive presence of finance in nearly every aspect of individuals' lives, from purchasing a home to planning for welfare needs (Bertolini and Moiso, 2020). In today's society, where managing financial resources – such as creating a savings plan, securing a mortgage, opening a

bank account, or investing – requires increasingly advanced knowledge and skills, interest in financial literacy and policies promoting it has significantly grown. However, the role of financial literacy in developing financial capability, and thereby fostering financial well-being, has only recently gained recognition (Sherraden, 2013; CFPB, 2015). Financial literacy is now understood as a multidimensional concept, with knowledge identified as its most crucial component. This knowledge underpins the development of skills that reduce financial vulnerability and support greater financial well-being (Willis, 2022).

A wealth of studies, supported by institutions, international organisations, and academic research, have explored the relation between vulnerability – a condition now pervasive in contemporary society, marked by employment, social, and family insecurity alongside insufficient welfare systems – and social exclusion. Despite this extensive attention from academia and leading institutions, there remains a lack of empirical analyses testing the importance of financial skills in preventing vulnerability and reducing the risk of exclusion. This study seeks to examine the relation between vulnerability and financial knowledge. By estimating a robust association, it aims to determine whether higher levels of financial knowledge can prevent households from becoming financially vulnerable. In essence, the research asks: does improving financial knowledge lower the probability that a household will find itself in a state of financial vulnerability?

## **DATA AND METHODS**

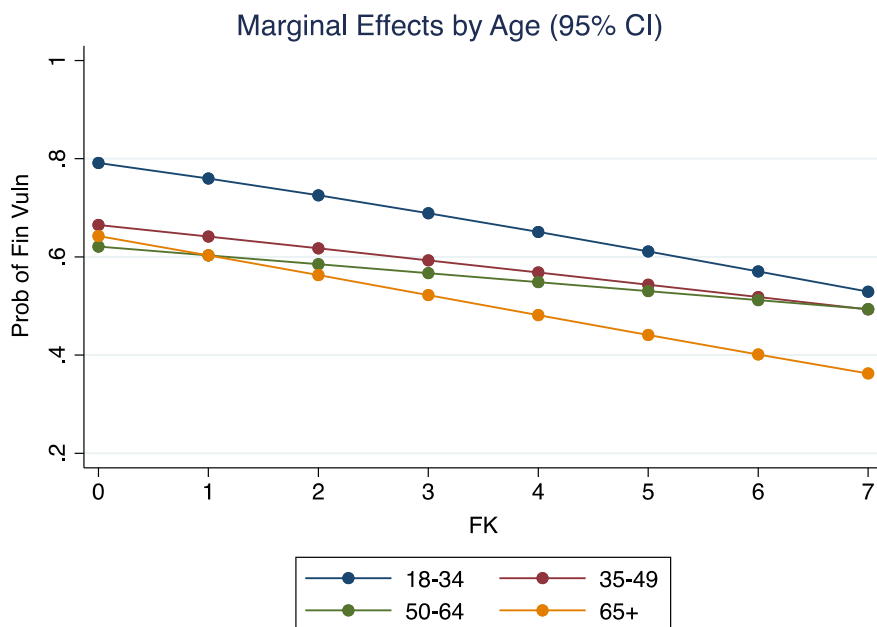
The analysis employed mono- and multivariate linear regression models, contingency tables, and a multivariate logistic model with interactions. These were applied to a sample of households residing in Italy (N=4,412), derived from the harmonised integration of data from the first two waves (2017 and 2020) of the Bank of Italy's Survey on the Financial Knowledge and Competence of Italians (IACOFI). Financial knowledge was measured using the Financial Knowledge (FK) Index developed by the OECD/INFE. The index, ranging from 0 to 7, is calculated as the sum of seven binary indicators (scored 0 or 1), derived from respondents' answers to questions on topics such as purchasing power, loan costs, simple and compound interest, the risk-return trade-off, inflation, and risk diversification. Financial vulnerability, on the other hand, was assessed using two combined indicators: one measuring a household's resilience to the adverse shock of losing its main income source, and the other evaluating the respondent's ability to manage an unexpected expense equal to its monthly

income. Vulnerability status was assigned following approaches proposed in studies by the ECB and the Bank of Italy, which provide methodologies for calibrating financial vulnerability indicators (Ampudia et al., 2016; Michelangeli and Rampazzi, 2016).

## RESULTS

The analysis reveals that 56.6% of Italian households are financially vulnerable. Overall, the probability of being in a vulnerable state decreases as financial knowledge increases. At the lowest level of knowledge (FK=0), households face a 67.6% probability of vulnerability, which drops to 46.7% at the highest level (FK=7). Thus, controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, financial knowledge reduces the probability of vulnerability by approximately 21 percentage points, from the lowest to the highest knowledge levels, equating to a 3-point reduction for each 1-point increase in FK.

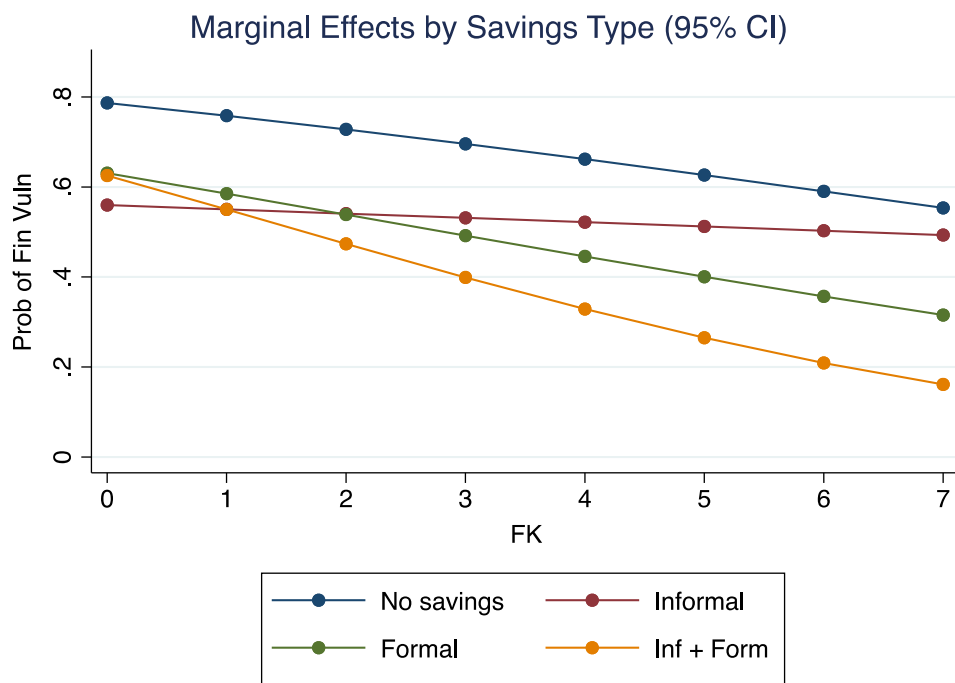
Figure 1. Financial knowledge and probability of financial vulnerability by age group. Source: author's calculations based on data from the Bank of Italy's IACOFI survey.



Considering the interactions between socio-demographic characteristics, behaviours, and attitudes with financial knowledge reveals differences in vulnerability probabilities across household groups. Young people, for instance,

show a vulnerability rate of 79.1% at the lowest knowledge level, which decreases by over 26 percentage points at the highest level. However, they remain the most exposed group to financial vulnerability. As shown in Figure 1, the elderly (yellow line) consistently exhibit the lowest probability of vulnerability across all knowledge levels, in stark contrast to younger individuals (blue line). These results underscore the necessity of designing protective measures tailored specifically to young people, who often have low incomes and limited saving capacities, leaving them highly vulnerable. Current welfare models remain oriented towards the needs of older generations, who are less financially vulnerable.

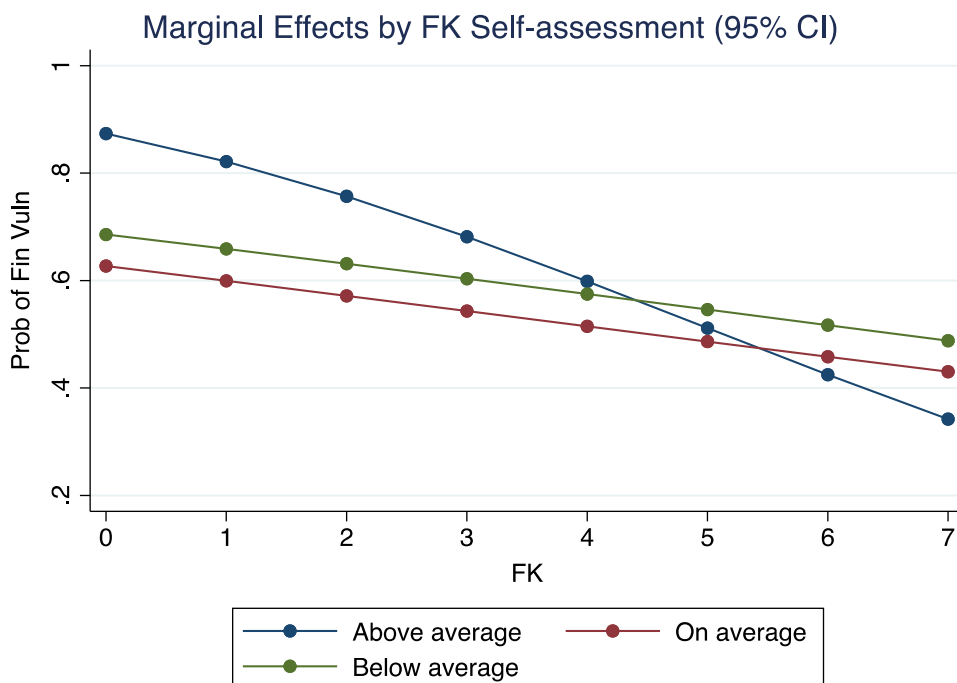
Figure 2. Financial knowledge and probability of financial vulnerability by savings type. Source: author's calculations based on data from the Bank of Italy's IACOFI survey.



Although saving helps to mitigate income shocks, it is insufficient on its own to significantly reduce financial vulnerability. Figure 2 illustrates that households not utilising the financial system for savings (red line) reduce their vulnerability by only 6.7 percentage points as financial knowledge increases. Their vulnerability rates are comparable to households that do not save at all (blue line). Conversely, households that actively manage savings through the

financial system (green and yellow lines) achieve reductions of 31.5 and 46.4 points, respectively, due to increased knowledge and improved savings management. This suggests that financial knowledge influences the relationship between attitudes and behaviours, fostering better financial decisions and enhancing the ability to use savings effectively.

Figure 3. Financial knowledge and probability of financial vulnerability by financial knowledge self-assessment. Source: author’s calculations based on data from the Bank of Italy’s IACOFI survey.



Another critical factor impacting financial vulnerability is overconfidence – an overestimation of one’s financial knowledge and skills. As shown in Figure 3, individuals who significantly overestimate their financial knowledge (blue line, between FK=0 and FK=3) face consistently higher vulnerability probabilities compared to those who do not overestimate (green line) or slightly overestimate (red line, between FK=0 and FK=3). It is also noticeable that the more one overestimates one’s level of knowledge, the higher the probability of a household being vulnerable: at maximum overestimation (blue line, FK=0), the probability of vulnerability reaches 87.4%.

Studies by McCannon et al. (2015) and Robb et al. (2015) indicate that overconfident individuals are more likely to take risks when using financial

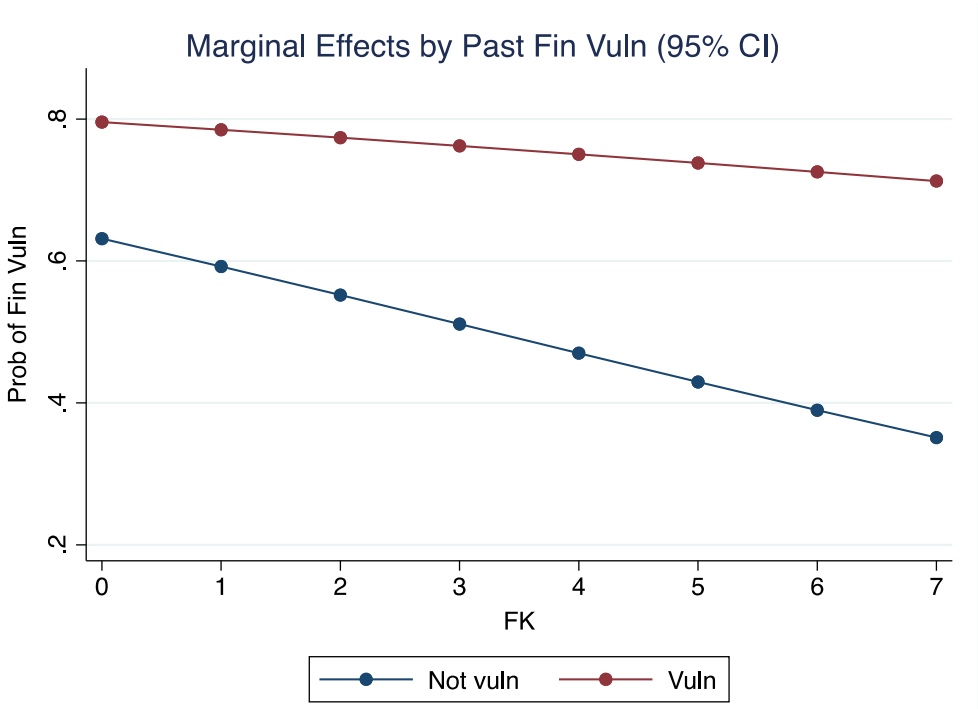


instruments and are prone to making decisions that are financially incorrect or, at the very least, unsuitable for their needs. Overconfidence leads to a strong reliance on inaccurate personal judgement, resulting in decisions that are difficult to control and reducing the likelihood of seeking advice or assistance from others. This lack of awareness about one's actual level of knowledge creates a vicious cycle: incorrect judgements lead to poor decisions, which, in turn, increase the likelihood of falling into a vulnerable state, further compounded by an inability to recognise it. As self-efficacy plays a crucial role in financial literacy and strongly influences behaviour, Furreboe and Nyhus (2022) emphasise the need for research to explore its determinants and identify strategies to prevent its excesses, which often result in an overestimation of individual abilities. Warmath and Zimmerman (2019) recommend adapting financial education programmes and initiatives by incorporating modules designed not only to clarify the gap between objective knowledge and subjective perception, but also to raise awareness of the tendency towards overconfidence.

Lastly, the analysis identifies the phenomenon of chronicisation in financial vulnerability. Similar to social vulnerability and exclusion, households that have previously experienced financial vulnerability are highly likely to remain in this state. Figure 4 shows that these households (red line) exhibit a significantly higher probability of vulnerability than others (blue line), with financial knowledge contributing to only about an 8-point reduction in vulnerability. In contrast, other households achieve a 28-point reduction when moving from the lowest to the highest knowledge levels.

The almost non-existent effect of knowledge appears to suggest that financial vulnerability is a determinant of its own consequences over time, thereby becoming a permanent condition for families who, from the moment they first experience it, tend to chronicise it and find it challenging to overcome. In summary, two key elements emerge. The first relates to the nature of vulnerability in general, and financial vulnerability in particular, which is shown to be not only a pervasive phenomenon but also a chronicising one: families experiencing a state of vulnerability struggle to escape it and remain in a state of permanent precariousness. The second issue concerns the role of financial knowledge in reducing vulnerability. It is clear that knowledge cannot resolve pre-existing situations of financial vulnerability but can, at best, serve a preventive role. For pre-existing vulnerability, alternative measures must be identified and implemented, whereas financial education, which enhances knowledge levels, can only serve as an effective tool for preventive purposes.

Figure 4. Financial knowledge and probability of financial vulnerability by past financial vulnerability. Source: author's calculations based on data from the Bank of Italy's IACOFI survey.



## CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrates that financial knowledge plays a role in preventing financial vulnerability among Italian households, with the probability of vulnerability decreasing on average as the level of knowledge increases. However, significant differences arise in relation to socio-demographic and behavioural characteristics: young people are particularly vulnerable due to their low income and consequent difficulty in saving, as are households that manage to save but make poor choices in how they use their savings. The phenomena of overconfidence and chronicisation also emerge. Overconfidence, defined as an overestimation of one's financial competence, increases the probability of vulnerability through uninformed decisions and risky behaviour. Chronicisation, on the other hand, highlights that financial vulnerability is a condition that tends to persist over time, with already vulnerable households struggling to overcome it, even with improved financial knowledge. In conclusion, while financial education, which enhances knowledge, can be an effective tool for preventing vulnerability, it is insufficient

to address entrenched situations. It is essential to complement the increase in knowledge with targeted measures to support families that are already vulnerable and to ensure that the welfare system is better aligned with the needs of younger generations.

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# FINANCIAL EDUCATION IN ITALY: TRAINING THE FUTURE TEACHERS

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Financial literacy is an essential skill for navigating modern economic systems. This paper explores the Bank of Italy's collaboration with universities offering Primary Teacher Education programs to integrate financial education into the training of future primary school teachers. The initiative aims to equip educators with the basic knowledge necessary to teach economic and financial concepts effectively and to address cultural skepticism surrounding economics and finance.

financial literacy; teacher training; primary education.

## 1. THE CONTEXT

Before discussing financial education in schools, it is essential to address two key questions: How much do Italian students currently know? And why is financial education important for them? This first section aims to explore these core queries.

To understand the level of financial literacy among Italian students, we can turn to the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD-PISA surveys assess the skills of 15-year-old students from over 80 countries every three years, evaluating their competencies in fundamental areas such as reading, mathematics, and science. For a subset of countries, the survey includes a module that measures the financial literacy of participants. According to the OECD, financial literacy encompasses “a combination of financial awareness, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to

make sound financial decisions and ultimately achieve individual financial well-being” (OECD, 2024).

The 2022 PISA survey revealed that the average financial literacy score across 14 OECD countries was 498 points. Italy’s score of 484 points placed it statistically below the international average (INVALSI, 2024). Over time, Italy’s results have remained consistent with those from 2015 and 2018, showing an improvement of 17 points compared to 2012. Gender, geography, school type and socio economic background all contributed to variations in scores.

To expand our understanding of young Italians beyond 15-year-olds, we can look at the 2023 Bank of Italy Financial Literacy Survey, which targeted individuals aged 18 to 34 (Marinucci et al., 2024). Only 35% of respondents correctly answered questions about core economic principles, such as inflation, interest rates, and risk diversification.

Focusing on university students pursuing degrees in Primary Teacher Education, there is a lack of comprehensive national data on their financial literacy. The only relevant study was conducted at the University of Molise in 2019 (Refrigeri, 2019). This survey, conducted on 340 students and not comparable with the Bank of Italy’s due to differences in the questionnaire and the sample, required students to answer progressively complex questions on economic and financial topics. Just 6.3% of students correctly responded to questions on basic financial topics.

These findings highlight significant gaps in financial literacy among young people, emphasizing the importance of targeted financial education initiatives at both the university and school levels. Addressing these gaps is essential to prepare educators to confidently teach financial literacy and basic economic concepts, and foster a cultural change.

Why is it important and why do we care? Financial education is increasingly relevant for navigating today’s complex economic and financial landscape, influenced by rapid financial innovation and digitalization (Bianco and Vangelisti, 2022). While accessing financial products has generally become easier, their variety and complexity demand greater understanding and more competences in order to be able to grasp opportunities and avoid unnecessary risks. Financial literacy empowers individuals to make informed decisions, manage credit responsibly, plan finances, and leverage legal protections effectively, reducing the likelihood of becoming a victim of fraud or over-indebted (Lusardi and Mitchell, 2014). Beyond individual benefits, financial education promotes social inclusion, reduces inequalities, builds trust in

financial systems, and enables informed citizenship, all essential components of a resilient and inclusive financial ecosystem (Bianco et al. 2022; Fornero and Lo Prete, 2022).

Against this background, the Bank of Italy is committed to contributing to increasing financial literacy among the young by training both current (Section 2) and future teachers (Section 3).

## **2. TRAINING CURRENT TEACHERS: FINANCIAL EDUCATION AT SCHOOL**

Financial education is a strategic priority in many countries, though approaches to its implementation in schools differ widely: in some nations, it is a mandatory component of the curriculum, in others it remains optional. In a few cases, it is taught as a standalone subject; however, it is more commonly integrated into broader disciplines, such as civic studies, economics, or social sciences. In Italy only recently has financial education become part of the curriculum: Law No. 21/2024 incorporates financial education into civic studies, that is a mandatory cross-disciplinary subject for all school levels since 2019. Following the law, the updated Ministerial guidelines on civic studies explicitly mentions financial education outlining specific competency goals for primary, lower and upper secondary schools (Ministry of Education and Merit, 2024).

The Bank of Italy has long been committed to financial education, particularly towards young people in schools (De Bonis et al. 2022; Cantarini et al. 2024). Starting young is effective because financial education, reinforced by daily decisions and repeated behaviors, tends to persist over time. Unlike other knowledge areas that may fade, financial literacy skills are practiced and strengthened throughout life (Lusardi et al, 2017).

The Bank of Italy's program for financial education in schools was launched in 2008 in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Merit, when financial education was not yet a mandatory subject. This program targets students from primary to upper secondary schools and adopts a teacher-centered approach. Bank of Italy's experts provide training courses for teachers, who subsequently address economic and financial topics with their students using resources prepared by the Bank of Italy and made available free of charge. Since 2008 the program has reached over 600,000 students.

In 2022-23 the Bank of Italy, in collaboration with Politecnico di Milano and INVALSI, conducted a randomized study to evaluate its program's effectiveness in improving financial literacy among primary and lower secondary students (Agasisti et al, 2024). The findings indicated an approximate 8% improvement in

students' financial literacy level due to the program. In contrast, independent study of the learning resources, without teacher guidance, led to improvements primarily among students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, and only for secondary school students. This underscores the critical role teachers play in delivering financial education and reducing educational inequalities. Another finding was that students learned more effectively when taught by educators with prior experience in economics. Both these latter evidences reinforce the importance of having teachers equipped to tackle financial and economic issues in school.

### **3. TRAINING FUTURE TEACHERS: PRIMARY TEACHER EDUCATION**

The initiative to introduce financial education into universities for future teachers was launched as a pilot program in 2021, stemming from the combined observation of two interrelated phenomena: the low level of financial literacy among the young population and the difficulty in engaging primary school teachers Bank of Italy's program for schools.

The major challenge of the program is to overcome the skepticism often associated with economic and financial topics, which are perceived as overly technical and unappealing for children. Instead, the program demonstrates that these are not subjects reserved for experts but practical and relevant for everyday life, even for young children.

Financial education for students also offers an excellent opportunity to apply hands-on learning and cognitive activation techniques in core subjects (Lamboglia and Stacchini, 2022; Camizzi and Goracci, 2024). Integrated into civic studies, it promotes collaboration, multi-disciplinarity, and active, engaging teaching. This approach empowers students to take ownership of knowledge, apply it in practice, reflect on the surrounding world, and participate in peer discussions. Such experiences are vital for developing both soft and hard skills, which in turn foster autonomy and inclusion, also addressing gender gaps (Di Tommaso et al., 2024; Section 4).

The collaboration between Universities and the Bank of Italy constitutes an ideal laboratory for developing hands-on learning models. These models, developed together with future teachers, could be used by them once they become actual educators and may improve the design of the Bank of Italy Program for schools.

The training path for future teachers in Italy is governed by Law No. 79/2022. A degree in Primary Teacher Education (a five-year program) is required to access the public competition to become a teacher in primary schools. In the academic

year 2024-25, approximately 11,000 spots were available nationwide for enrollment in this program.

The Bank of Italy program for Primary Teacher Education started as a pilot with two universities and, due to the positive feedback from students and teachers, in 2021-22 it was expanded to seven more universities, reaching 1,400 students. In the following academic year, the program grew further, involving 16 universities (half of those offering the degree in Italy) and training 4,000 students.

The collaboration between the Bank of Italy and Universities is governed by a scientific agreement and relies on universities' willingness to integrate financial education into the curricula. A key feature of the project is its adaptability to different University needs.

Financial education is primarily included in the so called indirect internships<sup>1</sup>, leveraging the flexibility to introduce tailored educational activities and multi-year curricula. This approach allows future teachers to build a foundation in financial literacy through repeated and progressive training throughout their studies and to exploit the synergies with hands-on learning that represent one of the strengths of the program.

In 2023-24, about half of seminar participants responded to a survey, showing strong engagement. Ninety percent found the seminars valuable, were willing to recommend it to others, and to participate again. While only a quarter of the University students were skeptical about the usefulness of financial education for primary school children, fewer than 10% found the seminar content unhelpful.

The training seminars are based on the same resources used in primary schools for the Bank of Italy financial education program for schools. The topics covered align with the EU/OECD framework on financial competencies for children and young people, updated in September 2023 (European Commission, 2023), as well as the guidelines for teaching civic education in Italy issued in September 2024 (Ministry of Education and Merit, 2024).

#### **4. FINANCIAL EDUCATIONS AND GENDER GAPS**

In Italy, the gender gap in financial literacy is high in the international comparison, starting at age 15 and continuing into adulthood. Later in life, the

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<sup>1</sup> Structured learning activities that prepare students for teaching through reflective practices, lesson planning, and theoretical exploration, without direct classroom interaction.



gap narrows only for employed or self-employed women. As in most OECD countries, women's scores are lower especially in knowledge questions, while in questions evaluating behaviors and attitudes women tend to have an advantage.

The causes of this disparity, which emerges at an early age, are complex and multifaceted. However, there is evidence that can shed light on the phenomenon and help understanding it. Such insights could, in turn, empower future teachers to recognize gender disparities, starting in primary school, and address them also through active learning methodologies (Di Tommaso et al., 2024).

Some studies highlight psychological and social factors that contribute to boys' greater familiarity with financial topics. Girls often perceive themselves as less capable than boys, even when their skills are comparable, and they are more likely to answer "I don't know" (Furrebøe et al, 2022). Gender stereotypes, both at home and school, can also influence outcomes (Lusardi and Mitchell, 2008). For example, when teachers are implicitly influenced by gender stereotypes, the gap in math performance between boys and girls widens (Carlana, 2019). Conversely, girls with mothers working in finance show higher financial literacy (Lusardi and Bottazzi, 2021).

Moreover, a key aspect for financial education among future female teachers is the influence of role models (de Gendre et al, 2023). Having a female role model, such as a teacher discussing economics and finance in the classroom, could inspire girls to develop financial skills and consider finance in their educational and career choices (Porter and Serra, 2020). This highlights the importance of the effort to train future teachers, especially female teachers that are predominant in the primary school, with the aim of enabling them to serve as more effective role models for their prospective female students.

Finally, the ease of teaching financial education through active and experiential teaching methods can help in disseminating advanced pedagogical techniques within schools, empowering female students to excel and promoting a more inclusive and equitable learning environment

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Looking ahead, the introduction of financial education in the school curricula can be a game changer, addressing in a ubiquitous and permanent manner the financial literacy gap still present in Italy. The Bank of Italy's program aims to equipping teachers with the competences necessary to make them confident to

engage with students on economic and financial topics, starting from the primary school. The objective is to expand its reach by involving more schools and more universities and fostering a stronger sense of community among participants through annual meetings and digital exchanges. In doing this, it is important to continue monitoring the effectiveness of the programs in order to understand what works better and how to achieve long-lasting results for the benefit of all.

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# PROVIDING ACCESS TO ‘POWERFUL’ FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE: A FINANCIAL LITERACY PROGRAMME FOR SCHOOL STUDENTS

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All students have the right to access ‘powerful’ financial knowledge that guides their financial decisions. In this paper, I extend the theory of powerful knowledge to financial literacy by articulating the nature of powerful disciplinary knowledge in the area. Based on the literature and research findings, I propose a financial literacy programme for the secondary school years that includes the ‘powerful’ financial knowledge that can empower students to make decisions in a way that can positively influence their lives. Considering the relationship between financial literacy, powerful knowledge, and threshold concepts assists in the reflection, policy development and practice of financial wisdom.

financial literacy; financial inclusion; powerful knowledge; powerful financial knowledge; school financial literacy programme

Powerful knowledge differs from the everyday knowledge and personal experience that students bring to school: it is specialised, and students can apply their newly earned knowledge to unfamiliar contexts beyond their experience.

Following an approach similar to Mizzi (2023), I propose two ways of conceiving powerful knowledge in financial literacy. The first type is discipline-based and theoretical, outside the student’s direct experience. The second type derives from this first type of powerful knowledge. It gives students the intellectual ability to analyse, evaluate and think about the world in ways that are beyond their experience.

## **1. DISCIPLINE-BASED KNOWLEDGE**

What content in financial literacy is likely to be most powerful? Since financial literacy draws heavily from the discipline of economics (Mizzi, 2021a, 2022), I draw upon the economics threshold concepts proposed by the literature (Davies & Mangan, 2007; Meyer & Land, 2003; Mizzi, 2022; Modig, 2021; Shanahan, 2016). These are essential when deciding what content students need access to, enabling them to understand financial issues. Developed by experts within epistemic communities, they constitute powerful knowledge from a disciplinary perspective. When students grasp economics threshold concepts, they reconfigure ways of classifying and understanding financial phenomena. These conceptual aspects become embedded in their thinking, providing access to a better understanding of financial literacy.

Economics threshold concepts that the literature identifies include opportunity cost, price formation through market interaction, marginality and equilibrium. Opportunity cost is the most emphasised concept (Davies, 2018; Davies & Mangan, 2007; Meyer & Land, 2003; Mizzi, 2022, 2023; Modig, 2021; Shanahan, 2016). It is the foundation of a web of interconnected concepts, such as the production possibility curve, consumer choice, demand schedules, the decision to supply, perfect competition, efficiency, comparative advantage, incentives, price signals and markets.

## **2. EXPRESSIONS OF POWERFUL FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE**

Young defines powerful knowledge as knowledge that provides students with the intellectual ability to analyse the world in ways beyond their personal experience (Young, 2013, 2014). In this section, I discuss expressions of powerful financial knowledge derived directly from this definition, describing the types of financial knowledge that might be considered powerful.

### **2.1. Expression 1: Knowledge that enables a deeper understanding of the financial world**

This knowledge is powerful when it enables students to understand and explain phenomena or events in the financial world, particularly those beyond their personal experience. It is powerful when it provides an explanatory function to help young people better understand financial and economic issues. It gives them a distinctive way of perceiving the world, enabling them to make informed choices as consumers, citizens and workers (Davies & Brant, 2006; Mizzi, 2021a, b, 2023, 2024a, b, c). The threshold concept of price formation through

market interaction, for example, helps students better understand the forces and tendencies of demand and supply that influence prices and the decisions of consumers and firms.

## **2.2. Expression 2: Knowledge that equips students with new ways of thinking about the financial world**

Based on discipline-based knowledge and its application, financial knowledge can empower young people to ‘think in new ways’ (Young, 2014) about financial events. Such knowledge provides them with approaches to analysing financial situations and improving the world in which they live.

‘Powerful financial education’ assists students in exploring the generative mechanisms and tendencies that contribute to the production of some identified financial phenomena. Students proceed from mechanisms at a deeper level of reality, moving from a surface phenomenon to explaining a more profound causal factor (Bhaskar, 2017). They can then propose sound explanations.

I illustrate by referring to the ‘price’ of a commodity. Processes generate this that we do not directly experience but can model through our reasoning. Students are accompanied by their teachers to think critically about the generative mechanisms underlying the ideas of supply, demand and equilibrium. They can understand that the reality that gives rise to these processes lies a step further removed from their experience. However, that does not mean that its nature does not influence us. They can better understand the social structures, powers, mechanisms and tendencies responsible for financial events (Mizzi, 2023, 2024c).

## **2.3. Expression 3: Knowledge that develops the students’ criticality of thought and their participation in financial debates**

Powerful financial knowledge allows those with access to it to question it and the authority on which it is based and gain the sense of freedom that it can offer. It enables students to be independent thinkers who can be critical of the opinions of others, including those of people in authority positions. For example, they become critical of politicians’ claims about financial and economic issues, such as when quoting national income statistics.

Young people can become active participants in their learning, gradually maturing into critiquing financial situations, thinking ‘the unthinkable and the not yet thought’ (Young, 2013). Their criticality of thought is enhanced, and their perspectives about the financial world are broadened. They start asking: “Who

is benefiting from the situation?” For example, situations where students’ knowledge of the banking sector largely depends on the story the industry narrates about itself are not healthy for democracy (Davies, 2015).

Mizzi’s research (2021a, b, 2022) suggests that teachers can educate about this healthy aspect of democracy through their efforts in financial education. In line with relevant literature (e.g., Brant, 2018; Davies, 2015; Davies & Brant, 2006), teachers did attempt to extend their students’ thinking by considering aspects of critical financial literacy. This included being critical of the services offered by financial institutions and their motivation when they attempt to educate the public in financial literacy.

Financial education must be unbiased, educating students to consider alternatives and become critics of financial policy (e.g., Mallia, 2015). Teachers accompany young people to critically judge issues and official statistics while understanding the basis for their judgements. Students can evaluate the decisions of policymakers and voice their opinions. These outcomes can be powerful (Mizzi, 2023).

### **3. A FINANCIAL LITERACY PROGRAMME THAT INCLUDES POWERFUL FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE**

Research suggests that powerful financial knowledge includes distinguishing between a need and a want, scarcity, opportunity cost, market operation, how prices are established, money and banking services (Mizzi, 2021a, b, 2022, 2023, 2024b). This substantive knowledge assists young people in thinking in new ways (ibid.).

The author’s research and that of Farrugia (2021) highlight the importance of educating students to distinguish between their needs and wants (Mizzi, 2021a, b, 2022). Young people need to realise that they cannot have everything they want due to the scarcity of resources, leading them to make choices involving opportunity costs. It is beneficial that the concept of opportunity cost is introduced in the primary years of schooling, assisting students in reflecting on their actions and becoming more responsible citizens.

Learning about the characteristics and functions of money assists young people in appreciating the value of money (Buhagiar, 2018; Farrugia, 2021; Mizzi, 2022). Other relevant aspects include the role of commercial banks, banking services (such as the different types of accounts and pension schemes), the risks involved with various investments, sources of finance available to individuals and businesses, and online banking. Educating students in critical financial

literacy is essential here; criticality in financial issues expresses powerful financial knowledge. For example, when discussing the advantages of banking services used by a customer, teachers need to invite their students to consider the advantages that the bank benefits from, prompting them to reflect on whether financial decisions benefit them or the bank. This reflection can help students make more informed choices, ultimately shaping their financial behaviour. Being aware of the roles of financial regulators and advisory services, such as a country's Stock Exchange, is also essential to enable future generations to make more informed financial decisions.

A financial literacy programme needs to include an understanding of demand and supply and how prices are determined. This enables participants to grasp why prices fluctuate and how to make more informed and sustainable purchasing decisions. The programme also needs to emphasise the importance of knowing one's rights as a consumer. This knowledge equips individuals to navigate the marketplace and make informed financial choices.

Budgeting is vital to be included in the programme because it assists students in managing their finances. Research suggests that young people find creating and sticking to a budget challenging (Amagir et al., 2017; Farrugia, 2021; Mangion, 2023). Investing in human capital by educating students on financial skills related to money management is critical. Knowledge of remuneration systems and how to interpret a payslip is also essential, enabling individuals to account for their earnings when planning their budget.

Digital financial literacy is becoming increasingly essential in today's rapidly evolving financial landscape (e.g., Ciantar, 2024). For example, students struggle to grasp the value of money due to their reliance on electronic wallets, which often diminishes their awareness of spending habits (ibid.). Traditional financial literacy education may not spark interest in blockchain technology, digital assets such as cryptocurrencies, tokens and virtual currencies, and associated management tools. Education in digital financial literacy addresses this gap.

Young people need to be aware of aspects of macroeconomics, enabling them to understand governments' policies that shape the national and international financial environment and equipping them with the tools to be critical citizens who can evaluate politicians' claims, for instance, as regards real and nominal increases in GDP, inflation, taxation and a country's budget (Mizzi, 2023, 2024a, c). This echoes the argument of Davies (2015) about educating young citizens in economic literacy, empowering them to understand the broader context of

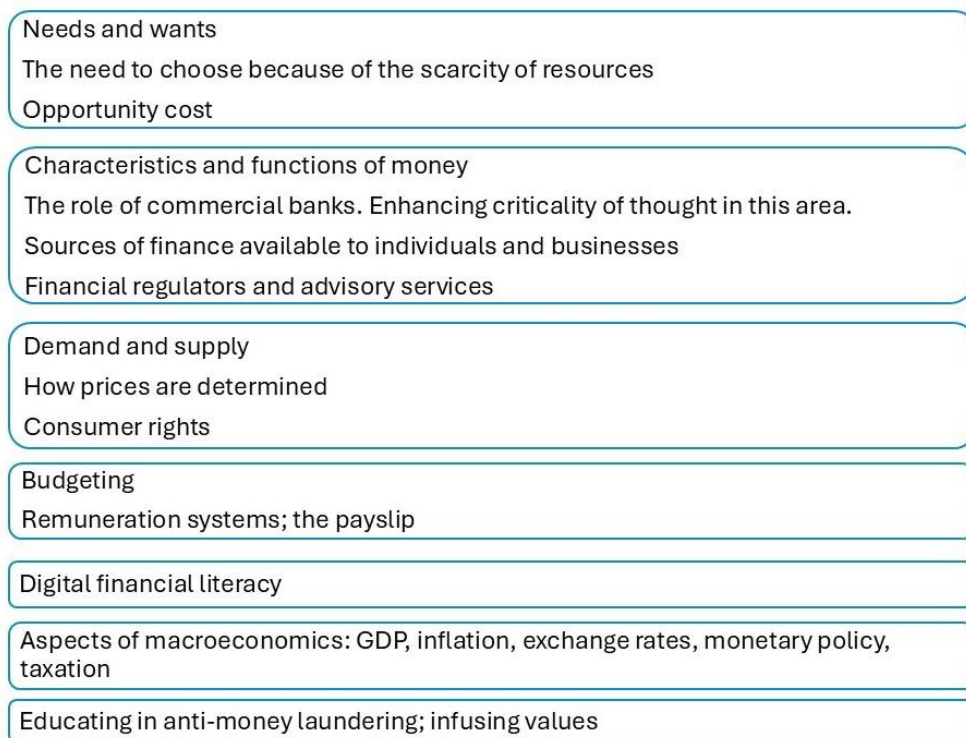


financial decisions better. Research also highlights the need for students, as citizens of the European Union, to possess knowledge related to monetary policy and exchange rates because, very often, the discussion emerging from the news may revolve around these issues (Mizzi, 2021a, b).

There is a lack of education on anti-money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism (Ciantar, 2024). The consequences include irresponsible financial practices, financial loss, reputational damage and psychological distress. A financial literacy programme must incorporate aspects of empowering young people against financial crime<sup>1</sup>, and infuse ethical aspects such as care for the vulnerable, accountability and transparency.

Figure 1 summarises the aspects of the proposed programme.

Figure 1: Outline of the proposed financial literacy programme.



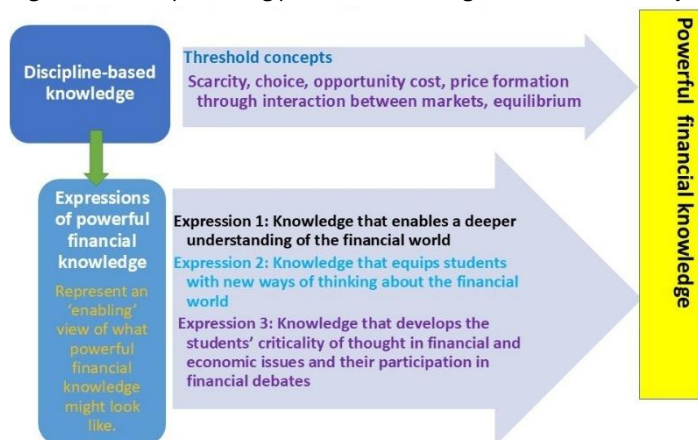
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<sup>1</sup> Ciantar (2024) proposes a valuable resource pack.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I contribute to knowledge by articulating what powerful knowledge in financial literacy looks like. This is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Conceptualising powerful knowledge in financial literacy



The financial literacy programme I propose is based on the powerful financial knowledge conceptualised in this paper. This programme needs to be part of a school's curriculum to satisfy the right of all students to access knowledge that guides their financial decisions.

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# THE RELATION BETWEEN EXPERIENCE, EDUCATION AND AI

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The relationship between A.I. and education is one of the basic issues of contemporary educational research. From this perspective, it is quite evident that learning, within experience, is one of the most important aspects to analyze the relationship between A.I. and education. To clarify this concept, we have tried to focus, first, on the relationship between experience and education, as defined by John Dewey's book *Experience and Education* of 1938, and to focus on some A.I. issues related to education just to understand the relationship between experience, education and A.I.

Experience; Education; AI

## 1. EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION

It should be made clear that learning is based on the student's constructive approach and not passive and receptive. Learning by doing, in fact, is a methodology, which emphasizes practical experience as the main tool to acquire knowledge and skills.

This approach promotes a dynamic and participatory education that prepares students to respond creatively and actively to the real-world challenges.

Education is fundamental to democracy, as Dewey affirms in *Democracy and Education* of 1916 (Spadafora, 2015; Pezzano, 2017) because this relation educates citizens capable of critical thinking and active participation. Dewey considers the teacher's job as the art of orienting students, just to discover the interior talent, which is present in each student.

The theme of experience is closely related to education. It is interesting to note how this theme was mainly developed through the concept of experience clarified, in particular, in the 1938 Dewey's book *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938).

This book is an expression of the complex relationship between experience and education that represents a critical moment to understand the meaning of experience as an educational phenomenon compared with traditional education, which is transmissive. The centrality of progressive education, then, is its relationship with experience.

The relationship between experience and education determines the central issue of the Deweyan theory: the concept of freedom. In this sense, traditional education was tied to the problems of the past, where progressive education determines the future development of the human potential of each student.

Learning through experience implies this possibility. Even traditional education conveys past experiences, but these past experiences have a defective character, because they do not plan what the future experiences are. Experience, in other words, must be considered as a project to the future experiences. These experiences must be considered projects to discover the future possibilities, and this discovery is regarded by Dewey as an experimental continuum (Dewey, 1938, pp. 26-29). Continuity means that growth is necessary in one specific direction rather than another. In this sense, it is quite evident that the growth develops in one direction, but if this direction is negative, it is necessary that this dimension stops. In this sense, the teacher must understand the specificities of the learner's experience linked to the others' experiences (Experience and Education, p. 38)

Indeed, the teacher is a designer of the learning environments and the unique and unrepeatable growth of each student. For this reason, the teacher must keep in mind the situation in which the student's inner dimensions develop in relation to the responses of the environment in which he or she lives. The experience, therefore, can be considered positive and negative. This depends, fundamentally, on the direction this path may take. A negative experience develops in a direction that, in Dewey's view, can not have continuity. A negative experience, in fact, stops insofar as it can have a development.

That is why education can not be considered a preparation for further education, but education is characterized from experience that expresses a clear relationship between the continuity and interaction of the individual with the environment according to the nature of freedom. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 39-42).

Indeed, there is the need to analyze experience as a project of individual development towards the natural and social environment. It is in this perspective that experience epistemologically determines continuous and constructive learning that enhances the freedom of the individual within his or

her environment (Fesmire, 2014). This aspect is central to the reflection on Experience and Education: the freedom is linked to the development of experience that determines a constructive dimension of learning.

The central aspect of the human project is determined, in Dewey's view, in its possibility of having a vision to achieve an end. This is precisely why it is necessary for the curriculum in the schools to insert various dimensions of experience, to highlight the problems and stimulate reflection and meta-reflection (Gardner, 2011).

It is quite evident, from this analysis, that the central issue that determines the democracy in the school is the centrality of experience related to the importance of science and technology to develop the unexpressed potential of each student and, also, to understand the cultural and professional role of the teacher in the school organization (Hickman, 1991).

## **2. EXPERIENCE, EDUCATION AND A.I.**

Digital and Artificial Intelligence represent a technological model that integrates different aspects of human experience (Fabiano, 2018). Experience is the center of various disciplinary dimensions, and the cultural and technological model to understand human learning. In particular, the relationship between Experience, Learning and Artificial Intelligence represents an epistemological and educational issue fundamental to analyze the possibilities of the contemporary inclusive school.

It is necessary to examine what educational applications can determine the curriculum in the school, in particular the individualization and personalization, the various issues of assessment and the new dimensions of the teacher's professionalism.

Artificial intelligence, if used correctly, can become a valuable ally in the transformation of education. Its ability to analyze and interpret data, adapt to students' needs and provide a personalized experience open to new horizons of didactics.

Artificial Intelligence can be used in diverse areas of education, such as creating interactive, stimulating learning materials, personalized assessment of student skills, analysis of student's feedback. (Panciroli, Rivoltella, 2023)

These applications can help to limit the gap in access to education, provide personalized instruction, can help students with disabilities to achieve more inclusive and equitable educational experience (Sibilio, 2023).

However, the introduction of Artificial Intelligence in education raises fundamental ethical questions to improve and defend the citizen's privacy to solve different and fundamental problems for democracy.

It is necessary for democracy to ensure the protection of student's data and to respect the principles of Artificial Intelligence ethics, such as transparency, and human and social control.

If used properly, Artificial Intelligence has the potential to transform the field of education, improving students' learning, supporting teachers and creating a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. However, to take full advantage of the benefits of Artificial Intelligence in education to improve the learning's opportunity, it is necessary that Artificial intelligence should be seen as a complement to human intelligence, a valuable aid to improving the quality and efficiency of education.

In conclusion, Artificial Intelligence represents a powerful resource that can profoundly change the educational processes, helping to create a more inclusive, personalized and effective learning environment.

### **3. EDUCATIONAL APPLICATIONS OF A.I.**

Personalization of learning is one of the main applications of Artificial Intelligence in education. By collecting and analyzing student data, AI systems can develop an individual profile for each student, understanding his or her needs, preferences and abilities.

Based on this information, AI can create personalized learning plans, offering content and activities tailored to each individual's characteristics (Pireddu, Moriggi, 2024).

Personalization of learning can help teachers monitor and assess student progress more accurately, offering the ability to intervene early to provide personalized support. The introduction of Artificial Intelligence in education has also improved the assessment process.

Through the use of Artificial Intelligence algorithms, assessment can be automated, enabling faster and more efficient improvement of students' tasks and activities. Artificial Intelligence can analyze the students' results, evaluating their responses based on predefined criteria and returning immediate feedback.

This approach opens up new perspectives for the enrichment and diversification of educational aspects of building democracy. Artificial intelligence offers numerous benefits in educational processes.



It can increase teachers' efficiency by automating tasks such as assessing student's performance and creating instruction contents. Artificial Intelligence can play a key role in improving student's performance. Through data analysis, Artificial Intelligence can identify students' learning gaps, providing personalized suggestions and study materials tailored to their specific needs.

Despite the many benefits offered by Artificial Intelligence in education, it is also important to consider the possible negative effects on human learning. The introduction of Artificial Intelligence systems could affect students' social interaction and learning, reducing, for example, opportunities for exchange and discussion among classmates.

It is therefore crucial to carefully assess the impact of Artificial Intelligence on human learning and take measures to mitigate any negative effects, such as promoting collaborative activities and cognitive skill development.

With the introduction of Artificial Intelligence in education, the need for appropriate training for teachers arises. In order for them to use smart technologies effectively, teachers need to acquire specific skills in the field of Artificial Intelligence and understand how to integrate them into their teaching approach. The use of Artificial Intelligence in the educational domain has manifested considerable influence. Its implementation, ranging from the personalization of training paths to virtual tutoring, through automated analysis and the production of teaching materials, has contributed to meaningful improvements.

The central issue is that the relationship between educational experience and A.I. demonstrates that the student can develop his or her unexpressed potential, and the teacher can only professionally improve his or her scientific action to improve the educational and inclusive quality of the classroom

In conclusion, only with the hybridization of A.I in education it is possible to enlarge the possibility of human experience and, consequently, improve the student's learning for the inclusive school.

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# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: WHAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALLOPHONE LEARNERS

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European countries are increasingly experiencing multicultural dynamics driven by phenomena such as mobility, migration, wars, political instability, and the resulting economic crises, with significant repercussions on the structure of school systems. In terms of student population composition, schools are multi-ethnic and multicultural realities. This contribution is linked to the Erasmus Allophone Teacher Academy project, led by the pedagogical area group of the University of Basilicata. The project addresses two main issues: initial teacher training from a multicultural and multilingual perspective, and the learning of the language of schooling, with particular attention to the linguistic needs of students from migrant backgrounds. The product that the Basilicata unit will produce is a collection of pedagogical tools and proposals for teaching activities for classes with foreign students. This contribution focuses on the opportunities and advantages that artificial intelligence can offer foreign students in learning the language of schooling. In particular, the contribution reflects on the problems related to intercultural language education and focuses on the possibility offered by enabling technologies to determine an expansion of vocabulary, useful for communicative, relational, and educational exchange, from a multilingual and inclusive perspective.

Teacher Academy, artificial intelligence; foreign students; language learning

## INTRODUCTION

The ALTA project is coordinated by the Académie d'Amiens (France) and involves other French partners, such as the University of Picardie Jules Verne, the University of Lille, the University of Rouen Normandie, the Centre International de Formation et d'Outils à DEstination des Maîtres (CIFODEM) in Paris, along with the University of Basilicata (Italy), the University of Murcia

(Spain), and the University of Veliko Tarnovo (Bulgaria). The main object of the project's investigation is language learning, with particular attention to the needs of students with linguistic vulnerabilities and/or those from migrant backgrounds, for whom the process of acquiring proficiency in the language of schooling can be difficult. The project's objectives are in line with the European Union's priorities in the field of language education. The Council of Europe has long been committed to addressing the issue of educational language policies with a fruitful production of documents that have become an indispensable reference in the context of multilingual and intercultural education (Beacco, Byram, Cavalli, Coste, Cuenat, Goullier & Panthier, 2016; Beacco, Fleming, Goullier, Thürmann, & Vollmer, 2016). In this sense, the Council has established a specific Language Policy Unit engaged in the development and collection of multiple tools that converge into a Platform of resources and references for multilingual and multicultural education. The project is structured in a series of actions planned for the academic triennium 2022-2025. In the first two years, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, four pedagogical training mobilities took place in Amiens (February 2023), Rouen (May 2023), Matera (November 2023), and Lille (February 2024), during which the project partners offered theoretical and practical training workshops for university trainers: tutors, teachers, researchers, and doctoral students. In Italy, the training content was then reworked for students of the Single-Cycle Master's Degree in Primary Education Sciences (SFP) at the University of Basilicata, Matera campus, and subsequently integrated into the teaching activities provided for in the curriculum, particularly in indirect internships. In the 2024-2025 Academic Year, the experimentation of the methodological-didactic guide prototype and the proposed Learning Units designed by the students with the support of internship tutors and teachers of the Course of Study is planned at the Enrico Fermi Comprehensive Institute of Matera, a partner of the project. The Basilicata Unit is engaged in the activities foreseen by work package n. 4 aimed at the experimentation and creation of devices for the inclusion of allophone students. The product that the Basilicata unit will have to produce consists of a collection of Learning Units containing proposals for teaching activities for classes with foreign students.

## **1. LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY**

Language plays a key role in accessing knowledge, understanding it, and co-constructing it thanks to its multiple functions, representation: exposition and dissemination of knowledge established independently of the language;

mediation: transposition, verbalization, allowing one to move from one semiotic system to another; interaction: transforming and allowing exchanges (discussions, debates, disputes) between knowledge producers and between producers and users of knowledge, exchanges that can lead to progress in knowledge; creative: the creation of knowledge, the creation and recording of knowledge in writing, which are two sides of the same process (Beacco et al., 2016). Among the various functions, the one that most clearly highlights the link between language and knowledge is the heuristic function that governs the discovery and development of the comprehension processes involved in learning. The heuristic function thus allows acquiring new knowledge, formulating definitions about it, interpreting it, relating it to prior knowledge and/or other contexts, and reconfiguring the systems of knowledge representation in each domain or semantic field. Language therefore helps to structure thought and reasoning: each of these functions is both linguistic and cognitive because it accompanies the cognitive processes just described with verbalizations, arguments, explanations that highlight the deep interconnections between language and thought (Beacco, Coste, Van De Ven, & Vollmer, 2011). The school has the task of designing paths centered on the three main competences at the base of linguistic mastery to reduce the risks of learning difficulties for foreign students. Pragmatic competence: one of the most urgent needs for the foreign student is to understand and recognize the rules of behavior that govern daily interactions in school; linguistic competence: the second language teacher has the task of promoting, first of all, the development of language for everyday communication; metalinguistic competence: in addition to linguistic competence, the teacher must also promote the metalinguistic and metacognitive dimension, i.e., the development of explicit knowledge about the second language and study skills, which will guarantee access to disciplinary content (Brichese, 2015). Vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental aspect of overall linguistic competence concerning the knowledge and use of the vocabulary of a language: the memorization of words, the understanding of semantic relationships between words (synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, etc.), the ability to infer the meaning of unknown words from elements of the communication context, the mastery of the different meanings that a word can assume depending on the situation and its use. Research has shown a strong correlation between vocabulary and success in language learning: a wide and well-structured vocabulary facilitates reading and listening comprehension and improves the ability to produce fluent and accurate written and oral texts (Cardona, 2008). Studies in the field of

psycholinguistics and applied linguistics have shown that lexical competence is closely related to language comprehension and production skills. Research conducted by Nagy and Herman (1987) highlighted how a wide vocabulary is a significant predictor of text comprehension, positively influencing students' learning performance. The development of lexical competence is described as a complex and incremental process involving multiple dimensions. These include the breadth of vocabulary, i.e., the number of words an individual can recognize and use, the depth of lexical knowledge, which includes aspects such as form, meaning, relationships with other lexical units, and appropriateness of use, automaticity which refers to the speed with which a lexical unit is made accessible and used (Prada, 2024). These dimensions contribute to the development of learning both in terms of the quantity of words known and in terms of depth of knowledge and ability to access each word (De Mauro, 1999). Knowing a word goes beyond the simple referential object-word association and implies a multidimensional understanding that integrates several aspects (Nation, 1990): the form (signifier), the position (grammatical and syntactic role), the function (frequency, contextual appropriateness), and the meaning (semantic relationships with other words, polysemy, synonymy, etc.). Vocabulary acquisition can occur through various processes, including explicit learning, for example through the study of word lists, and implicit learning through exposure to the language in authentic contexts (Ferreri, 2005). Consequently, strategies to improve lexical assets can include explicit learning through the study of vocabulary lists, contextual inference during extensive reading, and the use of mnemonic techniques. Furthermore, repeated exposure to words in different contexts promotes their acquisition and consolidation in long-term memory (Schmitt, 2008). Effective methods for developing lexical competence include extensive reading, listening to authentic material, writing and conversation, using dictionaries and vocabularies, and employing active learning strategies such as creating concept maps and using flashcards (Balboni, 2008).

## **2. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Artificial intelligence can provide valuable support for students from migrant backgrounds in learning the language of schooling. For example, through voice assistants or numerous apps that use artificial intelligence, such as Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, Busuu, Babbel, Memrise, etc. ChatGPT also has applications for language learning and offers support in writing texts and in conversation (Montesano, 2023). Through some functions, such as speech recognition

software and text-to-speech software, artificial intelligence can apply innovative technologies to support the teaching and learning of languages to offer personalized intervention. Learning a new language has always been associated with the possibility of opening new doors to the understanding of different cultures and interacting with people from all over the world. AI can revolutionize language acquisition, offering a simplified and personalized approach to students. Clearly, for this to happen, it is necessary for the teacher to be trained in the construction of an environment that mediates and co-constructs learning processes. Immersive language learning seems to be able to strengthen attention, mental clarity, and promote the approach to a global mentality, therefore open to new cultures and diversity (Alimisis, 2013). AI algorithms can adapt the learning experience to the needs of each student, reducing time, costs, and frustrations. AI-supported language learning platforms can analyze writing, monitor and provide immediate feedback to students, allowing them to correct errors and improve performance. Thanks to AI, students can study at their own pace, set personalized goals, and follow a tailor-made study path. Furthermore, artificial intelligence is able to develop games, quizzes, and activities in line with students' interests, thus improving engagement and participation in the learning process. An important aspect, in enriching the vocabulary, can be provided by robots. AI-supported language learning chatbots provide personalized answers and evaluations, allowing students to practice speaking the language without fear of being judged and relying on the support and feedback best suited to them. This improves their personal experience and allows them to refine their skills regularly. Bots offer conversation exercises, vocabulary improvement, and grammatical explanations to promote a stress-free learning environment (Ioannou & Makridou, 2018; Jung & Won, 2018; Sullivan & Bers, 2018). Teaching Italian to foreigners can have an ally in tools like ChatGPT, a widely used chatbot also thanks to the possibility of free access. The aim of its creators was precisely to reach the public through a technology available to everyone, also in order to increase user feedback. In fact, this type of model continues to learn precisely from the feedback it receives, according to what in technical jargon is defined as the *Reinforcement Learning From Human Feedback method*. In this way, the system can adapt to different interaction styles, offering increasingly consistent and personalized responses. Regarding the teaching of Italian to foreign students, ChatGPT can be useful for generating texts on specific topics, designing activities or exercises (comprehension, vocabulary expansion, grammatical aspects, etc.), for independent study and as a

dictionary/translator. The fields of greatest interest for the use of artificial intelligence in language learning are mainly aimed at: personalizing teaching-learning (Buccini, 2024); identifying and understanding spelling and grammatical errors through timely feedback (Fu et al., 2020); increasing engagement and motivation (Yang et al., 2023); translating texts and acquiring new vocabulary with reference to the situational context (Montesano, 2023); searching for resources and material for self-learning. For example, within a teaching activity on emotions that involves reading the children's book "El Monstruo de Colores" (Llenas, 2012), through ChatGPT it is possible to generate a glossary in Italian and Arabic for Moroccan students, or to translate and listen to the text in Arabic. In this way, teaching practices will be inspired by the principle of intertextuality, which refers to the dynamic implemented by non-native students to understand and produce discourses and texts in Italian, establishing links with the language and culture of origin (Cole, 1996).

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# STORYTELLING WITH AI. A NEW PARADIGM FOR THE SCHOOL OF THE NEXT YEARS

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Self-learning is one of the central aspects of the contemporary inclusive school. Digital storytelling can represent a fundamental moment for the multiple development of unexpressed potential. AI storytelling is a further step that will change the relationship between teaching and learning and will enhance the student ability to solve problem situations developing the creativity of each individual. In this perspective it is more correct to define the learning as an expression of infinite intelligences. My research aims to identify new learning spaces in the inclusion school to raise the qualitative level of the teaching- learning process linked to a possible relation between story-telling and A.I.

Storytelling; Digital Learning Spaces; AI; inclusion

## INTRODUCTION

In our time we are facing a great digital revolution. Because of the spread of the GPT chat, A.I. is becoming fundamental to improve the learning of every student. In this paper I will try to explore the possibility to link traditional teaching tools as Storytelling with new digital technologies and in particular A.I.

An example of this relation is this kind of storytelling, the kamishibai, a very ancient tool that could be associated with digital and Artificial Intelligence since the nursery school. This is because the strengthening of basic skills is possible with a relation between old and new methodology in the classroom.

The relation between old and new methods could permit to develop new visions for the future. Storytelling is a fundamental way of expression of the student. In the contemporary school a new didactic situation is emerging in which the ability to create stories can be shared with the digital and A.I. didactics.

The ability to do storytelling, for example, can be determined by robots which can write newspaper articles, narrative works, film scripts, advertising texts,

political speeches. Artificial digital systems are capable of writing texts of all kinds because they have the ability to receive infinite Big Data. Stephen Hawking, before his death, declared that Artificial Intelligence could destroy our civilization (Moriggi, Pireddu, 2024). The risk and the danger could exist. Due to this it is necessary to analyse and control the use of Artificial Intelligence, especially for the new generations, combining the traditional didactic systems with A.I. The role of the school will be decisive in the coming years.

In fact with the help of Artificial Intelligence, we can project robots as fantastic storytelling assistants, support systems to cooperate with students to develop a creativity to conceive new stories. The contemporary research, then, must be oriented to construct a new paradigm of an A.I. storytelling experience.

## **1. THE IMAGE AS AN INSTRUMENT TO IMPROVE THE STUDENT'S LEARNING**

In our time it is necessary to clarify the possible central role of Artificial Intelligence in the school considering the thoughts of the most important theorists of education of the last century, who intended to give us some guidelines on how school can be suitable for experimenting innovation to improve in the school the educational actions.

John Dewey affirms that technology can change in a good direction the society, only if it is oriented by education and democracy (Spadafora, 2015). More than a century ago, Dewey already analysed the image as essential for the education of every student. In *My Pedagogic Creed* of 1897 he argues that the image is the greatest teaching tool, because the child draws from any topic presented to him different aspects of an image. (Dewey, 1897) He also claims that the teacher must enhance the child's imagination to facilitate his/her own work.

The reference to Dewey's is appropriate if we consider that he was the American philosopher, who established the concept of "laboratory school", linked to democracy and to the centred learning. (Dewey, 1899-1915; Dewey, 1916). In fact Dewey considers education linked to the science's innovation but also to the traditional system of education.

In *The School and Society* of 1899 he affirms that the industrial revolution was the most profound change ever observed in human history and that the school must consider this change connected to the traditional system of education.

Starting from this premise the relation between traditional and innovative technological education has been a focal meaning and is fundamental to open the way towards a specific integrated multi-modality that develops learning. and deuterio-learning (Bateson, 1977).

The image provides a meaning to the textual discourse and, above all, allows us to understand the complexity, particularly in a dynamic visualization dimension. The recognition of the self-image is of great interest from the point of view of developmental psychology, especially to improve the self-awareness in the child.

When the student is invited to describe what he sees in the image, it is fundamental that the adult draws attention to what is depicted in it, just to discover what is important in the image for the student's attention.

The use of the image can also represent an important integrative tool for the educational act of *Philosophy for Children*, as Lipman (Lipman, 2005) intends it, as a teaching method that aims to develop the complex thinking.

Another important example of the relation between image and reading and writing is the Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, in which is fundamental the role of what he calls visuo-spatial intelligence (Gardner, 2013). For this reason, the relation between traditional and innovative didactics has always been present in the modern teaching.

## **2. LEARNING PROCESSES WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. SOME ASPECTS.**

The theme of narration is fundamental as an ancient Jewish saying states. "God created man because He loves stories" (Eli Weisel). This quote contains a concept full of meanings and symbolic implications.

First of all, it must be stated that among all the living organisms, none has ever been able to tell stories before man. Storytelling is a prerogative of the human species.

In our time is emerging a completely new situation in which the ability to create stories can be shared with someone or something else through the A.I.

A.I., in fact, can determine a new possibility to create a new dimension of generative experience, in which creativity is linked to science and technology through a narrative construction. Generative Artificial Intelligences can work for inclusion if well managed, giving the teacher the possibility to develop relationships with students for the education of so-called soft skills, and to form a new role for a responsible student, who must develop a continuous critical reflection on one's own learning process.

The important role of the school will be decisive in the coming years, in which probably will be necessary to create a good balance between old and new aspect of didactics (Lipman, 2018).

In this perspective there are many opportunities for Artificial Intelligence and some authors analyse an important question: How does our memory change? What is the relationship between the memory and the learning? How this relation can be orient by an “A.I. pedagogy”? (Panciroli, Rivoltella, 2023) If we imagine an encyclopaedia, we can think of it as a tool that provides us with instructions and information to decode contexts, an encyclopaedia allows us to select information, exclude unacceptable interpretations despite the indeterminacy of the reading. Even our social memory, collective memory, is therefore based on the selection and deletion of data.

Concerning modern technologies, however, in a sort of epistemic egalitarianism, we tend to record everything that happens, collectively or individually. And this is the real problem. It is necessary to discriminate the data and enhance the possibility of human choices. Otherwise, we could have a memory block due to an excess of digital memory, due to an excess of information.

It is certain that the selection of what should be preserved or discarded is a political responsibility, because it is the selection that decides what information will allow us to orient ourselves in the future. Each historical period has had its own way of spreading knowledge and transmitting it. What’s the historical period of Chat GPT?. It will depend on us.

Tamburrini addresses the ethical dilemmas that emerge from the use of robotics and Artificial Intelligence such as the human responsibility in relation to the decisions and actions of machines, the impact of AI on society, and the ethical challenges that arise from it. All this considers the human responsibility at the centre: to what extent should humans retain control over the decisions made by Artificial Intelligence? (Tamburrini, 2020).

We must be aware of our limits and therefore know how to manage the limitations in our ability to explain and predict the behaviour of robots that learn and interact with other systems.

Floridi raises several specific ethical implications regarding AI. The digital revolution offers extraordinary opportunities, but also doubts and concerns and it is essential to understand the technological transformations to guide them in a sustainable direction.

For example, the importance of transparency and understanding of AI technologies is crucial. Only through an analysis of this phenomenon we avoid mistakes and ethically orient the development of digital technologies. In fact AI can have a meaningful impact not only technologically, but also culturally and

politically.

It is necessary to develop a code of ethics for AI that can guide its responsible use and applications (Floridi, 2022).

It is essential to understand this new paradigm to orient in a direction socially and environmentally sustainable. It is necessary a collective effort of intelligence to face the ethical challenges of AI, sharing ideas and working together to develop a philosophy of our time.

## CONCLUSIONS

I tried to demonstrate that it is necessary to link old and traditional didactic systems to build a new paradigm of a modern school inclusive of high quality. To achieve this aim it is necessary to construct a new didactics based on the relation between old and new methodologies, storytelling and A.I. for example.

For this reason it is fundamental to link the impact of image on the student's learning, a storytelling as kamishbai for example, with the new educational technology as A.I.

I tried also to demonstrate how A.I. can change the traditional aspects of the learning. As many authors have demonstrated, A.I. determines a creative learning in which it is possible to develop the embedded powers of every student. In this perspective it could be very interesting to link the storytelling with A.I. to build a possible didactic new paradigm in the contemporary school.

The storytelling can be enhanced by A.I. and also the creativity of every student can be improved by the relation between the storytelling and A.I. This new didactics can develop a fundamental paradigm to explore the possibility to build a new inclusive school. The future trends of the contemporary school will depend on this profound link between the technology and the human approach.

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# EXPERIENCE, THEATER AND POLITICS FOR AN INCLUSIVE AND DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

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The work offers some criticism on the intertwining of art and democracy, starting from a possible rereading and updating of Deweyan's concepts of art and experience. These concepts today can be studied in light of the changes that affect the way of fruition of performing arts and their renovated pedagogical value in the school and social fields in the age of digital arts and AI applications. Through the analysis and comparison of some fundamental pedagogical and aesthetic theories with contemporary artistic practices, we consider the centrality of theatrical art in the formation, in contemporary society and especially in the school. The theoretical path, which focuses on John Dewey, enhances the educational meaning of the theater by recognizing the subject-person the experiential approach to art, the ability to live in a circular way the encounter with the work and the tension of active and relational participation with other spectators. Theater can significantly contribute to the education of children and adolescents more aware of the values of active citizenship and of social solidarity in an era in which the concepts of community and participation are increasingly undermined by exasperated individualism and by unawareness in the use of digital media.

experience; theater; democracy; inclusive school; AI

## INTRODUCTION

The presentation offers some critical insights into the intertwining of art and democracy, starting from a reinterpretation of the Deweyan concepts of experience and art, previously and mainly discussed by the philosopher in *Experience and Nature* (1925 – 1929) and *Art as Experience* (1934). These concepts can now be revisited, considering the changes affecting new languages and attitudes that belong to artistic fruition. It is to be said that

performing arts reveal a significant, pedagogical value in school and social contexts in the digital technologies and AI applications era. The deep “social” and “political” nature of John Dewey’s thought outlines, nowadays, an adequate general vision for constructing a new educational paradigm based on equality, inclusion, and democracy.

My contribution suggests enhancing the arts, particularly theatre, in the education of 21st-century students in a democratic school setting. The theoretical approach I propose, still under development, highlights the centrality of experiential approaches and imagination in young people’s encounters with performing arts. These arts allow students to experience performances spontaneously, thoroughly, and holistically, fostering active and shared participation in artistic events and a sense of belonging to a community.

Throughout the 20th century, art underwent significant transformations. Analog and digital reproduction technologies revolutionized theatre. Both artists and audiences challenged the performing arts. The contemporary art system had to renew itself to avoid succumbing to producing, reproducing, and disseminating works via streaming platforms. Aspects such as relationality, corporality, interactivity, and multimodal sensory technologies have become central to the aesthetic dimension, renewing the relationship between individuals and art (Balzola and Rosa, 2019). The event’s uniqueness, connection with others, and choral and ritualistic dimensions of theatre have enriched this art form and established new ties and impacts within the educational environment (Costantino, 2015).

The language and strategies of theatre (Fischer-Lichte, 2004) have been shaped and fostered by Relationality, which also suggests significant influences on the education of young people. Even this foundational element is now being questioned or recalibrated considering the changes in contemporary society, transformed by digital technologies and dominated by Big Data and AI (Crawford, 2021). In a democratic school, it is essential, so far, that theatre, as an art of relationships, plays a role in educating social students and active citizens in the complex post-capitalist society and a world subject to the “derealization” of reality (Han, 2021).

## **1. EXPERIENCE, SCHOOL, AND SOCIETY**

In the framework of social pedagogy, theoretical reflection on the relationship between experience and theatre cannot disregard the exceptional changes that have reshaped the social, economic, and political landscapes in which the

school operates. Dewey is so aware of this connection that in Article I of *My Pedagogic Creed*, he states: “With the advent of democracy and modern industrial conditions, it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now” (Dewey, 1897, 6). School is, first and foremost, a social institution (Article II), and it “represent present life” (Ibid., 7). This general premise leads the philosopher to affirm:

If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass (Dewey, 1897, 6).

In the first two articles of his “pedagogical Manifesto” (Pezzano, 2023, 13), Dewey emphasizes two crucial issues: the importance of education as a process of life for the present and the impossibility of predicting the future. Indeed, from the era in which he wrote, in 1897, he pointed out the inability to foresee the transformations that would occur in just twenty years. Thus, the philosopher outlines a system of thought that must consider the relationship between individual and society in education, subjecting it periodically to scientific and technological progress evolutions.

The twenty-year measure of time imagined at the beginning of the twentieth century progressively shrinks over the following century to the point where it is impossible to predict what civilization will look like in just five years. If we reflect on the democratic school of 2024, we must place it in a society profoundly marked by two events:

- The start of Artificial Intelligence technology.
- The Covid-19 pandemic.

These two factors have significantly influenced each other in the educational field and still trigger ongoing reactions. While AI is a technology whose scope, speed, and pervasiveness on a global scale cannot yet be predicted – or its impact measured in terms of environmental and human costs and exploitation – the pandemic, as a relatively circumscribed event, allows us to consider some critical consequences. For instance, it caused an “interruption” in the continuation of established teaching methodologies and educational paths, highlighting critical issues that could serve as an opportunity for a profound rethinking of the school system (Morin, 2020).

These two factors are intertwined in the school environment. Due to specific political measures implemented during the emergency phase, the pandemic, in turn, accelerated the process of school digitalization, legitimized the integration

of AI in the classrooms through guided or independent use of specific applications, and facilitated the normalized use of digital devices in support of teaching.

Dewey's reflection is crucial as it highlights the centrality of experience in relationships with others and the world. Human beings cannot be conceived as detached from the world, as they are "in" and "with" the world they are educated in. Direct experience and sensory engagement with nature are valuable educational tools.

The sensory approach finds its ideal physical setting in Dewey's "Learning by Doing Laboratory," where one can gain experience, resolve the conflict between theory and practice, and build a more natural conception of the individual. Experience, as a tool for relationships, connection, and knowledge of the world, pertains to theoretical and practical, mental and physical, imaginary and material aspects of the whole concept. It is a point of convergence where the fluid boundaries of theoretical speculation meet the sharp and tangible edges of practical realization.

For Dewey, children and adolescents educate themselves through contact with an external environment where they interact and recognize themselves as equal to their peers and unique in their differences. Discovering their belonging to nature and various social institutions through experience leads to a recognition of themselves as part of a community and the discovery of the world as "other than oneself".

## **2. LIVING ART. AESTHETIC AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS**

### **2.1. The Value of Imagination**

Experience serves as the "means" to experience the world, oneself, and the "way" in which this occurs. In experiential tension, not everything is nature, matter, and reality; imagination also plays a vital role. Today, imagination is rarely practiced because everything is given, defined, and generated by digital technologies of audiovisual reproduction. It is also underused due to a lack of opportunities in a society dominated by the myth of efficiency, the rejection of waiting times, the elimination of rest areas in cities, and the removal of any moments of boredom, inactivity, and free play from people's lives (Han, 2015).

For Han, a society driven by the hysteria of "achievement" and by the neurotic obsession of hyperactivity has lost its possibility of contemplation, a spiritual relationship with the world through the calm and slow gaze on things and on others (Picchione, 2023, 8).

All situations where imagination might come into play are disappearing. Empty times and spaces are now filled by scrolling through texts and data on smartphone screens.

As early as 1980, Anna Maria Ortese, reflecting on the importance of creative expression in the relationship between children and adolescents and reality, referred to this phenomenon as an “imaginary amputation” (Ortese, 1997, 61-62), describing how young people enter the world solely through “the possession of market goods” (Ibid., 61). It is as if the writer foresaw the pervasiveness of digital multimedia technology, which offers an “already made” world, leaving no room for invention and creativity. Digital devices, especially smartphones, on which we constantly type, create the illusion of total availability of people, things, and places simply because their image exists and can be managed with a “tap” (Han, 2017).

Art is a precious experience because it opens the door to imagination and beauty in an era where economic policies push us to exclude the aesthetic dimension from daily life, reducing art to mere entertainment. Imagination fosters knowledge and the creation of worlds that, though not real, can become the object of human experience: “Human experience however has also the pathetic longing for truth, beauty and order” (Dewey, 1929, 59). It helps us experience the world beyond the material and the contingent, urging us to open to the “beyond”. The desire to know other situations, worlds, and contexts signals a practice, a proposal for civilization, freedom, and humanity.

In *Art as Experience* (1934) Dewey highlights the nature of aesthetic experience and emphasizes the close relationship between the individual and the world. This relationship begins with the environment and aims not only at discovering reality but also at transcending it. These dimensions become knowable through perception, facilitated by the senses, and amplified by an aesthetic sentiment (Dewey, 1980, 194-195).

Theatre represents the ideal art form for activating this interplay of perception because it does not produce an object but offers a sensory experience open to imagination and creativity. Furthermore, theatre is an inclusive and sustainable art form, requiring only human participation to access and practice it (Brook, 1968; Brook, 1993). Dewey views the complexity of artistic experience without imposing limits on the artist’s creative possibilities or the observer’s interpretative capacities. The birth of a work of art catalyzes layers of meaning from both the artist and the observer.

## **2.2. The Value of Community**

Art is a complete object itself, but it also needs to be completed through the sensitivity of its audience. This makes a work of art a product of human experience, ever renewed in the present yet layered and enriched with past experiences, contexts, and cultures. There is a close connection between art, culture, and the society of previous eras. A work of art inherently contains past experiences and elements drawn from diverse sources. For Dewey, art enables us to penetrate the fundamental attitudes of entire eras and civilizations. Works of art serve as the axis of continuity in a community's life, representing its highest expression due to their imaginative quality, which brings customs, laws, and rituals to life.

Artistic experience enables a transition from the “private” to the “public” and is characterized as an opportunity to communicate with humanity, fostering unity and solidarity. Art becomes a common language for collective action, a chance to engage in an organic experience with the world and nature.

Art possesses an exceptional capacity for communication, overcoming linguistic barriers, and cultural differences among individuals. Experiencing art is an active, vital activity rather than a passive one. Dewey's reflections link experience with knowledge, attributing equal importance to both. Experience is the knowledge through which the world is built; it is an active, direct knowing experience. Dewey's model appears particularly relevant today, showing its inner revolutionary potential. While art may have lost its ritualistic and religious dimensions, it persists as one of the most complete and fulfilling experiences. It considers the complexity of individuals and the educational process.

Dewey's perspective is open, inclusive, and reasonably focused on the future while deeply rooted in the past and firmly grounded in the present. Among its many facets, art emerges as the “most beautiful” and complete, which Dewey approaches naturally, dismantling any separation or distance:

In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulf and walls that limit community of experience (Dewey, 1980, 105).

Today's society has undergone unimaginable transformations compared to Dewey's era, yet his lessons remain relevant. In this new context, dominated by increasingly invasive technologies, individuals must navigate a world where, acting organically, in a continuum with nature and others, is ever more challenging. Through theater, pedagogical and aesthetic experiences can

provide new opportunities for design and implementation in democratic schools. They can contribute to creating a new educational paradigm that is more attuned to and open to the arts (visual, musical, choreographic, etc.) and can make young people's relationship with cultural heritage more varied and inclusive. This approach fosters love, knowledge of one's culture, and respect for others.

Establishing theatre workshops and regular access to live performances can significantly contribute to educating students, to be more aware of the values of active citizenship and social solidarity. This is particularly critical in an era where concepts of community and participation are undermined by excessive individualism and unconscious use of digital media. Efforts must be made on multiple fronts, with strategies encompassing pedagogy, aesthetics, politics, rights, and ethics (Casonato, 2022; Fabris, 2012). These should protect the most vulnerable from the intrusiveness and pervasiveness of the misuse of digital technologies and promote activities that encourage creativity, imagination, spontaneity, and expressive freedom.

As Franco Lorenzoni reminds us, arts – especially theatre, music, and singing – enhance learning and help build democracy (2023, 76-77). Perhaps this is why, even today, the singing of women<sup>1</sup> causes fear in the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to the singing ban towards Afghan women see: <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-vice-virtue-laws-women-9626c24d8d5450d52d36356ebff20c83> (2024/12/10).

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# EDUCATING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO ENHANCE UNIQUENESS

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Creating a school that addresses the diverse needs of all students necessitates implementing inclusive practices that foster participation and enhance the learning experience. The concept of inclusion now focuses not only students with disabilities but also how schools can meet various needs (Demeris, Childs, and Jordan, 2007). The principles of Dewey's democratic school are aligned with this shift, which emphasizes the importance of social progress in the development of constructive learning (Spadafora, 2015). Recently, there has been a push to incorporate digital tools into educational practices (Parra González et al., 2019). The use of robots in education is increasing, with the goal of improving digital skills, computational thinking, and AI education to create inclusive processes for children and young people. Continuous improvement of teaching practices is necessary to integrate the potential of AI into educational processes within this transformative logic. Based on these premises, the aim of this work is to extract specific information about AI education through the voices of key educational stakeholders.

Artificial Intelligence; inclusion; learning by doing; digital competence.

## INTRODUCTION

Establishing a school that aims to address the diverse needs of all students necessitates the implementation of inclusive practices that foster participation and enhance the learning experience. School inclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing organizational, methodological, and didactic dimensions (Cottini, 2017). The complexity of this phenomenon is justified by regulations and official documents from national and international relevant bodies. However, the transformation of the school into an inclusive environment remains a challenge. The logic of inclusion now focuses not only on students

with disabilities but also on the ability of schools to accommodate a variety of needs (Demeris, Childs e Jordan, 2007). This shift aligns with the principles of Dewey's democratic school and emphasizes the centrality of the influence of social progress in the development of constructive learning (Spadafora, 2015). In educational processes, attention has shifted from knowing and doing to the need to read and educate for the complexity of action (Ciappei e Cinque, 2014). In recent years, efforts have been made to integrate digital tools into educational practices (Parra González et al., 2019). Studies have highlighted how extended reality, combining real and virtual environments with human-machine interaction, can promote the development of authentic learning (Ausubel, 2004). A growing trend in education proposes activities using robots for children and young people, introducing themes of digital skills, computational thinking, and education for artificial intelligence (AI) to generate inclusive processes. Beyond the technical aspects of understanding how AI systems work and how algorithms are built, it is essential to introduce students to AI education that includes an active, reflective, and ethical plan. This novel educational approach encourages awareness of being digital citizens (Council of Europe, 2019). To work within this transformative logic, integrating the potential of AI into educational processes requires continuous improvement of teaching action.

## **1. AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL FOR THE VALORIZATION OF UNIQUENESS**

The need to create an inclusive school, with a renewed teaching culture capable of benefiting from the pedagogical principles, leads to reflecting on the need for adapt and regenerate theories, practices and actions in education and training systems.

The model of inclusive education requires that educational systems develop a student-centred pedagogy, responding in a flexible way to the needs of each. This pedagogy, taking up the founding values of the inclusive school manifesto, namely the Declaration of Salamanca (UNESCO, 1994a; 1994b), is based on the idea that differences should be considered as a resource for education. The enhancement of differences requires the ability of education systems to identify and respond appropriately to the diverse educational needs of pupils. The full realization of the inclusive education system, therefore, does not consist in giving a place in school only to those who are representatives of some diversity, it consists in transforming the school system into an organisation suitable for the educational take-up of the different needs that each pupil may encounter

(Lascioli, 2011). It becomes essential to raise cultural awareness of the theme of differences in schools and society, with the aim of promoting awareness of the main obstacles that influence the process of school inclusion at different levels: scientific, technical, social, cultural and political (Vannini, 2019).

Those who really work in an inclusive perspective act on the devices, mechanisms and contexts that must be changed, as inclusive education is a challenge to the normativity typical of the assimilationist paradigm of regular school (Bocci, 2018, p. 21).

The logic of inclusion focuses on the ability of schools to accommodate a variety of needs (Demeris, Childs & Jordan, 2007), recalling the principles of the Dewey's democratic school and the centrality of the influence of social progress in the development of constructive learning (Spadafora, 2015).

Dewey's arguments are still relevant to the current educational situation and the educational needs of a globalized society. In fact, the importance of implementing an active and constructive teaching-learning process, in relation to the social dimension of the subject, is recalled in many national and international educational research and documents. The construction of competence, on which the entire national and international school system is based, refers not only to resources of a cognitive nature, but also to the ability to act, to be able to act and to want to act (Le Boterf, 2008). Another tangible example is taken from the National Guidelines (2018), in which underlines the need to:

- build a learning environment able to value the experience and knowledge of pupils, to anchor new content;
- implement appropriate interventions for diversity, to ensure that it does not become inequality;
- encourage exploration and discovery in order to foster the desire to seek new knowledge; encourage collaborative learning;
- promote awareness of one's own way of learning, in order to learn how to learn and to carry out teaching activities in the form of a workshop.

Dewey proposes, in his various works, a conception of teaching very advanced compared to its time and absolutely in line with current research. Nowadays didactics is no longer considered as a mere operational and/or application discipline but as an education science with its own epistemological status that reflects on the relationship between pedagogical theory and teaching practice, between learning content and the learner's development, between

environmental conditions, space, time, relationships, socialisation and learning processes (Franceschini, 2023).

In the training processes, therefore, it is necessary to understand the current complexity of the teaching action, with the aim of creating a continuum with the daily life of the student in training (Ciappei & Cinque, 2014; Parra González, Segura Robles, Fuentes Cabrera, & López Belmonte, 2019). One aspect that is certainly relevant in the current education system is inherent to the experience of the subjects being taught, and this is given by the digital world. More recently, attention is being drawn to the first literacy on the subject of artificial intelligence (AI) education. The latter should be a priority in any education system. Although the potential of educational robotics is now many, it is also necessary to ask what it means for a teacher to educate AI.

## **2. EDUCATING ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

AI education mediated by the construction of a curriculum design is a theme that must be considered, first of all, with aspects of ethical and social nature. However, as Nan emphasises (2020)

due to the relatively short period of birth of artificial intelligence technology, many teachers still consider it a high-end and very mysterious technology (...). The essence of real artificial intelligence education is no different from that of multimedia and the Internet (p. 1).

The teaching of fundamental AI and computer science subjects at school or pre-school level, nowadays, does not exist or is at an embryonic level. However, it is a priority that pupils are introduced to an AI education that includes an active, reflective and ethical level: an education that stimulates awareness of being digital citizens (Council of Europe, 2019).

Less isolated than a few years ago, the school system is spreading the idea of offering children and young people educational activities based on the use of robots to introduce the topic of digital skills, computational thinking and artificial intelligence (AI). Robotics can be successfully employed and to do this it is necessary to make both teachers and students understand that the robot can only mediate the teaching-learning experience, but they remain active builders of the learning process. Given this, it is possible to identify great potential for the use of robots and AI in education (Cheng, Su & Chen, 2018), such as:

- the ability to reproduce and perform repetitive tasks with precision;
- flexibility, interactivity, humanoid aspect (including body movement);
- simplifying learning through play and hands-on experiences;
- creating an engaging, attractive and interactive learning environment;
- the possibility of increasing student motivation and learning performance.

In addition, learning activities mediated by robot and AI can help develop learning skills such as those related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics teaching (STEM). This type of experience has developed mainly within certain disciplines and in certain age groups of students. In fact, a form of literacy mediated by the use of such mediators from early childhood would be desirable. Literacy is mentioned precisely because it is considered necessary to understand the potentialities and risks. To do this, it is necessary to approach the first form of knowledge. Indeed, in preschool age, robots and AI can be used for educational purposes through the play dimension, but only after a digital literacy by all actors involved in the process.

Before teachers and educators at all levels are hurried to exploit robotics in education, appropriate teaching methods must be formulated and incorporated into the school curriculum, since most schools and teachers not only lack experience and resources, but in most cases, they also have to operate under a school directive that does not encourage educational innovation (Alimisis & Kynigos, p. 1).

What potential does AI offer for the development of cross-cutting skills? What strategies should be adopted in the classroom for its use? What dimensions of learning can be involved? How well trained are the teachers in these subjects from a theoretical-practical point of view? How aware are students of these changes?

Starting from these questions and the theoretical premises described, it is intended to start focus groups in the various preschool and primary schools of the province of Salerno to obtain, through the voice of the main school stakeholders, specific information on the topic of AI education and understand how to act, later, with projects targeted at those needs. The didactic action, only if collegially shared, in terms of practice and culture can generate a formative process of real inclusion: therefore, not the path of the individual compared to class, but the path of the class that values the individuals (Notti, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The educational action, only if collegially shared, in terms of practice and culture can generate a formative process of real inclusion: therefore, not the path of the individual compared to class, but the path of the class that values individuals (Notti, 2021). Collegiality, in fact, remains a fundamental feature for the success of training. Only the collective dimension can make the community become an educational community. The latter must necessarily interact with the cultural and social context and the changes inherent in it to determine a quality, equitable and inclusive training for all. Today the educational challenges are multiple and global, and it is necessary to reverse our visions of knowledge and move our center of observation and action to seek co-constructed paths in terms of teaching practice. The study, still in its embryonic stage, aims to enhance the promotion of research-training courses that actively involve teachers and students as representatives of the essence of the educational process.

The beliefs, attitudes and actions of teachers and students on innovative technologies may in fact be a driving force or barriers to their full implementation (Hew & Brush, 2007) and to provide a meaningful picture of their role within inclusive learning systems.

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# EDUCATION OF THE FUTURE: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH BETWEEN JOHN DEWEY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE. WHAT PERSPECTIVE FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS?

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According to John Dewey, school is the key to understand democracy, conceived as the full realization of the person, a moral and dynamic realization that “must” extend to the entire community (Pezzano, 2014). Therefore, school must represent “the laboratory of democracy”, that is to say a “way of life” towards which every person must naturally tend in their individuality and in their natural tendency to associate (Spadafora, 2018). In the current context emerges the need to reformulate traditional educational paradigms due to rapid changes and global challenges. With his emphasis on experiential learning and the social function of education, John Dewey provides a solid base to develop a fresh outlook for the school (Dewey, 1938). Similarly, the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) in the field of education is a key tool to optimize learning paths (Luckin et al., 2016). The integration of John Dewey’s visions with AI can give life to a sustainable educational model. This helps students not only to face the present challenges but also to design their own future. John Dewey emphasised the values of an education capable of fostering critical inquiry and active learning (Dewey, 1938).

Education; Artificial Intelligence; Special Education

## INTRODUCTION

The use of AI in education has shown significant progress, from personalizing learning paths to assessing skills (Baker & Smith, 2014). This vision finds increasing quality in the potential of AI as capacities of providing personalized learning based on competencies, which meets the individual needs of students (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). However, the integration of AI raises ethical and practical issues, including the need for adequate infrastructure and policies for

data protection (Holmes et al., 2019). An educational model that integrates AI to Deweyan principles requires an holistic approach treating students not only as learners but as active citizens (Selwyn, 2017). Project-based learning, supported by AI, can facilitate rich and engaging educational experiences, promoting collaboration, critical thinking, and the solution of real problems (Zhang et al., 2018). Adopting an educational model inspired by Dewey and enhanced by AI requires a renewal of teaching practices and educational policies. Educators must be trained on how to effectively use AI technologies, while institutions must ensure that such technologies are used ethically and inclusively. In terms of inclusion, AI is able of enhancing learning facilitation processes and better guiding individuals with disabilities to design their life choices (Fabiano, 2022). In conclusion, the integration of Dewey's educational visions with the capabilities of AI offers a unique opportunity to realize an education that is truly sustainable, equitable, and capable of preparing students for the challenges of the future. This requires active cooperations between all the proponents of these practices in order to ensure that technologies are employed in a way that increases the educational experience without replacing the fundamental human interaction for learning (Facer & Selwyn, 2021; Perla, 2023).

## **1. INTELLIGENT TUTORING SYSTEMS (ITS)**

Sleeman and Brown, in 1982, introduced the term “Intelligent Tutoring Systems” (ITS) to describe software designed to facilitate learning through tutorial services that exhibit a certain degree of “intelligence” in their functioning. ITS are computer-based learning environments that use intelligent algorithms to:

- Support students in acquiring knowledge and skills.
- Dynamically adapt their behavior based on the specific needs of each learner, identified during the learning process.

This passage highlights the main advantages of computer-based tutors in education. The key points are:

- Continuous availability: They provide ongoing support, overcoming the time and patience limitations of human tutors.
- Reduced pressure for students: By alleviating the fear of making mistakes compared to interactions with a human tutor, they foster a more relaxed learning experience.

- Personalized activities: They tailor explanations, questions, and practice sessions to the specific needs of the learner, enhancing the effectiveness of individualized learning.
- Constant monitoring: They support personalized instructional programs through their ability to monitor and dynamically adjust to the student's progress.

These aspects make ITS powerful tools for improving the educational process. Research shows that Intelligent Tutoring Systems are comparable to human tutors in terms of effectiveness in one-on-one tutoring, especially in well-defined knowledge domains such as mathematics or physics. Moreover, they are significantly more effective than traditional classroom interactions (Trincherro, 2022).

Despite their theoretical potential and empirical confirmations, ITS (Intelligent Tutoring Systems) are not widely used in education and training. This is mainly due to the difficulty and costs involved in creating comprehensive knowledge bases, which are only economically viable for courses aimed at a large number of learners, such as in military training or basic courses. The situation becomes even more complex if loading the knowledge bases requires programming skills from domain experts or the use of complex interfaces. Furthermore, update costs are significant, as knowledge bases must adapt to the evolution of knowledge, teaching methodologies, learner characteristics, and the technological interfaces used. Therefore, there is a risk of investing significant resources in a product that could become obsolete within a few years (Ritter et al. 2014). To perform its functions, an ITS must manage various elements of knowledge. These range from knowledge of the topics to be taught, to managing the learning objectives and sub-objectives, to understanding the ways in which students process and assimilate information, as well as knowledge of the best teaching and assessment methods. Such knowledge is essential for creating flexible tutoring plans that can identify discrepancies between students' acquisitions and the expected knowledge/skills and define a plan to bridge them. In the traditional architecture, an ITS includes four fundamental components: the domain knowledge model (what is taught, in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies), the student model (who it is taught to, in terms of cognitive, metacognitive, emotional, and motivational characteristics), the tutor model (how it is taught, in terms of tutoring techniques and strategies), and the user interface (how interaction takes place, both between the ITS and the student and between the ITS and the domain expert) (Trincherro, 2021).

The current (and future) challenge is to create a machine capable of:

- “Learning” a specific topic by interacting with various information sources, integrating different perspectives;
- Diagnosing a wide range of student characteristics (cognitive, affective, and motivational) to define optimal learning paths;
- Adapting its tutoring actions to the learner’s needs, presenting information in different ways, optimizing cognitive load, providing personalized feedback, and using “social intelligence” techniques to increase motivation for interaction;
- Promoting exchange and collaboration among learners, encouraging dialogue, shared knowledge construction, and the linking of experiences (Yang, Zhang 2019).

## **2. FROM ITS TO ITR: SOCIAL ROBOTS AS INTELLIGENT TUTORING AND COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS**

The challenge that presents itself today and will extend into the future is to develop a machine capable of:

- “Learning” a specific topic by interacting with a multitude of information sources, gathering, comparing, and integrating different perspectives and opinions in order to gain a deep and multifaceted understanding of the subject;
- Diagnosing a wide range of student characteristics precisely, understanding cognitive, affective, and motivational aspects, in order to design personalized and optimal learning paths for each individual;
- Dynamically adapting its tutoring strategies based on the learner’s needs, presenting content in various formats, minimizing cognitive load, providing specific and targeted feedback, and using forms of “social intelligence” to stimulate motivation and interaction, leveraging a broad repertoire of effective teaching methods and techniques;
- Promoting and encouraging collaboration among learners, fostering dialogue, co-creation of knowledge, and the linking of personal experiences to stimulate a shared and interactive learning environment.

Robotics, combined with artificial intelligence and distributed information processing through high-speed mobile networks, can contribute to the creation of effective ITS (Intelligent Tutoring Systems), evolving them into ITR (Intelligent Tutoring Robots). Specific studies highlight that tutor robots can:

- provide personalized interactions with specific users;
- offer learning paths with gradually and purposefully increasing levels of difficulty;
- leverage the potential of learning analytics and educational data mining. These elements collectively enhance learning outcomes (Trincherò, 2022; Brignone, Grimaldi, Palmieri, 2021).

ITRs can complement traditional ITS by incorporating para-social interaction and the use of surrounding space and objects as learning aids, which is useful for teaching fine motor skills (e.g., handwriting), gross motor skills, rehabilitation, and enhancing specific functions in individuals with disabilities. Research shows that physical interaction with a robot increases engagement compared to a virtual agent and provides positive tutoring effects in various contexts. An intriguing area of application is the use of ITRs to foster self-regulated learning in children, promoting self-monitoring, goal management, and targeted support requests. Research on Interactive Tutoring Systems (ITS) is recent and has several areas for improvement, including:

- Recognition of the learner's mental states: the ability to understand when the student is attentive, motivated, or needs different stimuli.
- Long-term strategic choices: difficulty in guiding the student's actions, similar to human tutors, related to a vision of the future.
- Personalization of interactions: depends on the quality of the student model and its ability to dynamically adapt to the student's progress.
- Optimized management of interactions across multiple sessions: the ability to retain and update information about the user and propose distributed practice and concept revision over time (Trincherò, 2022).

In summary, ITRs (Intelligent Teaching Robots) are advanced robotic systems capable of moving autonomously within defined spaces, such as a classroom during regular educational activities. These robots are able to learn by observing both the teacher and students as they interact and work. They can engage in conversations, ask specific questions to explore topics or concepts, and provide answers enriched with knowledge acquired through quick consultation of online resources.

Such systems could become valuable allies for teachers, offering both cognitive and motivational support, helping to facilitate the learning process and enhance classroom interaction. However, this possibility raises important issues regarding privacy and the ethical aspects of using advanced technologies in

educational settings. Despite the challenges it presents, the introduction of such technologies opens up a broad range of opportunities for future research, inviting in-depth reflections on how to responsibly integrate these resources into the educational world.

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# HOW TO FACE ARTIFICIAL TYRANNY. HOW GOOD THINKING SAVES DEMOC- RACY IN THE IN THE AI ERA

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This paper examines the contemporary relevance of active thinking, to argue for the centrality of critical reflection and free argumentation in fostering democratic processes. Anchored in Arendt's view of individuals as social actors entering the world through actions and discourse, the study underscores the importance of educational environments centred on dialogue and co-construction of knowledge. These environments enable the development of skills complementary to computational thinking, with divergent thinking supporting pluralism and democracy. In the context of AI, the increasing reliance on mathematical models risks prioritising algorithmic cognitive processes, rooted in an erroneous presumption of AI as inherently accurate and infallible. This paper critiques such assumptions and advocates for strengthening debate, critical thinking, and constructive reasoning as tools to safeguard democratic ideals. By rehabilitating dialectics as a mode of engagement, it reaffirms the role of pluralism in problem-solving and social deliberation. The study calls for education that promotes active thinking, dialogue, and free debate, countering the "tyranny of truth". This approach resists delegating responsibility to abstract systems, encourages frame analysis, and democratic processes. Ultimately, it positions debate as an ethical and political practice essential for navigating the complexities of modern society.

Artificial Intelligence; Dewey; Thinking; Ethics; Education

## INTRODUCTION

This paper builds upon John Dewey's conception of thinking as presented in *How We Think* (1933 edition), considering the wide use of AI as a tool to impose mathematical and computational thinking. In the opening pages, Dewey analyzes what should be defined 'good thinking' in relation to reflection activity as a way to return on state of mind or state of facts re-discovering them in a not-biased sense: "The better way of thinking that is to be considered in this book is



called reflective thinking: the kind of thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration” (Dewey, 1933, 3). Dewey’s theory finds references in the epistemological theories of Francis Bacon<sup>1</sup> and John Locke, particularly regarding knowledge and belief. Notably, Dewey associates flawed thinking with what might now be recognized as cognitive bias. Furthermore, Dewey’s discussion of autonomous thought emphasizes a philosophical approach grounded in uncertainty and doubt. To ‘think well’, he argues, one must critically reassess beliefs (including biases) acquired through formal education. This process reveals a paradox inherent in the relationship between education and democracy. Indeed, in the framework of ‘critical ethics’ (Da Re, 2011; Arendt, 1965-66), democracy provides individuals with the freedom to critically evaluate the values and cultural norms that shaped them in the context where they live.

In this sense, for Dewey, ‘good thinking’ constitutes an ethical habit—or attitude—that must be cultivated through education and safeguarded by democratic structures. This intertwining of education, democracy, and ethics underscores the transformative potential of critical reflection in fostering autonomy and intellectual growth.

About the idea of Artificial Intelligence, from Turing’s paper published on *Mind* in 1950 and from Dartmouth Congress in 1956, something started changing. In the beginning, the idea was to develop a computational system which could ‘think’ as a human being. Now, it seems that the best way of thinking matches with the computational one (e. g. HIP model). This inversion – where a good way of thinking conforms itself to a formal-mathematical model – finds its basis on two biases:

The analogy bias. The idea is that individuals could be biased in their representation of AI as scientists started using ‘intelligence’ for machines in an inappropriate way. According to Dewey’s theory, thinking is a way of intelligence that is properly human; and if a machine cannot think – that is the question posed by Turing in 1950 – then it cannot be intelligent with reference to human intelligence.

The second one is the automation bias – the representation of the machine (AI) that cannot fail because it is a model of computation-based thinking. The problem comes moving from the problem-solving logical dominion to the decision-making ethical dominion. Applying the formal-mathematical model in

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<sup>1</sup>Specifically, the reference is to the *Novum Organum* and Bacon’s epistemology, when the philosopher introduces the concept of ‘idola’.

both fields is a sort of mathematical fallacy. Differently from the “is-ought” question opened by David Hume (Hume, 2011) and from *Principia Ethica* (1933) by George Edward Moore, the derivational problem remains the same. In this case, the error is to tail a practical reasoning (thinking) on formal propositions – and they are not the same think considering a frame analysis approach. The fallacy is that Prescription (ethics) cannot be derived from logically correct proposition.

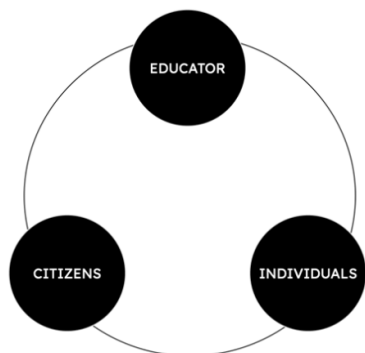
Dewey’s idea of thinking is closer to the activity to criticize bias in a democratic society where decisions are taken through debate, forum and dialectics: “We may recapitulate by saying that the origin of thinking is some perplexity, confusion, or doubt” (Dewey, 1933, 15). This idea of thinking can help in risk prevention about AI pervasive use. The answer to face this risks and challenge is Education of individuals as future citizens and workers who must revision the automation bias in order to avoid the tyranny of truth (Arendt, 2004).

## 1. THINKING, DEBATING AND DEMOCRACY

Greek *Paideia* (Jaeger, 1978) played a significant role as educational model. Its aim was education of individuals as both independent personality and as members of a world built through interactions with others. Therefore, education blended a conformational model based on historical state laws and traditions (heteronomy) with an individuation model grounded on critical thinking (autonomy) (Figure 1).

Education, in the first place, is not an individual affair, but, by its very nature, a matter of the community. The character of the community is imprinted in its individual members, and in man, *zoon politikón*, it is the source of all action and behaviour to an extent that has no parallel in the animal (Jaeger, 1978, 1-2).

Figure 1. Paideia Circle from Educator to Individuals to Citizens



Education is not only an individual issue, but it is about community:

Education, in the first place, is not an individual affair, but, by its very nature, a matter of the community. The character of the community is imprinted in its individual members, and in man, *zoon politikón*, it is the source of all action and behaviour to an extent that has no parallel in the animal (Jaeger, 1978, 1-2).

Education preserves pluralism starting from individual development. In the contemporary era, AI speaks a univocal, mathematical, or ‘aletheic’ language, referencing the formalistic-platonic model (Mubeen, 2023). It can precisely express truth because it is free from any sensory contamination, being a pure mathematical expression. AI is a sort of divine thought (Snell, 2002): disempowering and annihilating every form of dialectics and freedom of argumentation. Entrusting action to the machine easily leads to a scientific-demonstrative model that exceeds the proper domain of ethical and political decisions. From a logical perspective, as Boniolo and Vidali write,

Dialectical argumentation arises from the necessity of addressing, through rational discussion, cognitive domains where the truth of premises is not recognized. It is not just any discussion, therefore, but a confrontation between positions, in which logical principles – first among them the principle of non-contradiction – are respected, and argumentative fallacies are avoided (Boniolo & Vidali, 2011, 15).

The crisis of the neopositivist model of knowledge and science, the crisis of ideologies, which “has reintroduced the need to delve deeper into premises and values otherwise taken for granted or considered beyond rational evaluation” (*ibidem*), the democratization of decision-making processes, “which entails discussion and deliberation based on arguments and opposing theses” (*ibidem*), communicative development, and the globalization “of exchange processes and knowledge” (*ibidem*). All these elements have rehabilitated the value of dialectics. Dialectics should be addressed as an argumentative confrontation/clash over solutions/conclusions that cannot be framed as universal and necessary, but are instead contingent on the specific scenario. The space of democracy is built through dialectical plurality, debate, and free participation via actions and words. This is also Habermas’ perspective about rationality which “concerns not so much knowledge and the acquisition of understanding but rather how language- and action-capable subjects use knowledge” (Habermas, 2022, 53). This notion is also deeply rooted in Arendt’s political conception: “Through words and speech, we insert ourselves into the

human world, and this insertion is akin to a second birth” (Arendt, 2014, 128). Such plural space is threatened by the technocratic degeneration of ‘algorithmic aletheia’ (Sadin 2019). The ethical risk lies, therefore, in entrusting AI with decision-making processes without a critical analysis of the potential dangers to democracy, free debate, and situational analysis (frame analysis): “Statements (...) once perceived as true and declared so, share the characteristic of being beyond agreement, discussion, opinion, or consensus” (Arendt, 2004).

If this formal-mathematical model dominates:

- In Education, the risk is to compromise critical thinking in favor of a computational approach;
- In Politics, the risk is to over-trust AI;
- In Society, the risk is to think that decisions can rely only on rigorous demonstration and not on dialectics;
- In Ontology, the risk is to reduce individual and systemic complexity and to impair truth.
- An example of how truth can be compromised is the reiteration effect, which reinforces bias. The perception of false information as fact often depends on the number of communication channels disseminating it. The greater the repetition and reach of such information, the more likely it is to be accepted as true. Chatbots, such as ChatGPT, contribute to this phenomenon by acting as additional channels. If automation bias is not addressed, this can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of misinformation. While this cycle is facilitated by machines, it is ultimately shaped by human interaction within flawed human-computer interfaces (HCI), resulting in significant ethical implications. By catering to human biases, these systems not only reinforce misinformation but also pose a threat to democratic principles.

## **2. EDUCATION AND CRITICAL THINKING IN THE AI ERA**

In education today, thinking cannot be introduced as a formal model without considering it as genuine human process. Dewey would disagree about this, because such an idea of thinking is only a logical procedure, but not human-centered one.

On this subject, in *How We Think*, Dewey writes:

Because forms are uniform and hospitable to any subject matter whatever, they pay no attention to context. Actual thinking, on the other hand, always has reference to some context. It occurs (...), because of some unsettled situation that itself lies outside of thinking (Dewey, 1933, 72).

As long as we live in a human-tailed world, thinking is thinking about human categories and ideas: “it is evident that education is primarily concerned with thinking as it actually takes place in human beings” (Dewey, 1933, 75). Education through active thinking, dialogue prevents the risk of a tyranny of truth. As Dewey poses, what an educator should do is to teach critical thinking as a habit. Critical Thinking opens to democracy as far as it is assumed as an ethical disposition. In education we can provide some strategies to support a critical approach to AI:

- Inform about the automation bias through a model of AI and Ethics Literacy (Pisano, 2023).
- Empowering Education about critical and lateral thinking in order to promote democratic sharing of ideas and pluralism, even using AI. Every argument can start from premises which are ‘shared by most’ and not only founded as mathematical premises.
- Fact checking rules encouraging lateral reading and divergent solutions.
- Frame analysis to understand that one simple solution cannot be applied in all possible scenarios. Dewey writes: “correct thinking does not limit itself to finding ‘any’ kind of relation, but conducts the search until it has found an accurately defined relation as far as the situation allows” (Dewey, 1933, 80).
- Argumentation skills in decision making processes (Simon, 1987).

Ethics and Education come together in order to save democracy, starting from the risk that we run to conform to a computational model the thinking model of individual student.

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# REFLEXIVITY: LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION

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In the work *How We Think* (1910), Dewey places reflective thinking at the centre of his discussion, which is considered “the best way of thinking” and implemented when we faced with a problematic situation with no certain solution. As a result, the need arises to create new patterns of action, modifying or replacing previous ones. Reflective thinking enables the individual to question the logic behind the interpretation of everyday life experiences, that is, all those actions that are habitually performed following the interpretive canons given by past experiences. Therefore, enhancing the generative drive of thought through the development of critical and reflective thinking is one of the challenges of complexity culture. But how are the characters of reflexivity, freedom and self-awareness (Cambi, Pinto Minerva, 2023) combined with the assumptions of the onlife Era (Floridi, 2015), a new existence within which the real and virtual merge (and blur) and where the speed and instantaneousness of social networks do encourage instantaneous and unthoughtful reactions? Tech-age education calls for a post-human broadening of the field of experience. The very technology that has changed times, liquefying them, and dilated places, even defining them as non-places, can represent a crossroads of new reflexive intentionalities, and the peculiar conjunction of reflexivity and new technologies seems to be an opportunity for authentic educational design. There is a need, therefore, to find that Pirandellian lantern which allows one to illuminate experience and to sift through the fallout it has in the re-elaboration of consciousness, as guarantee of the “proper distance”, wished by Silverstone (2007), which requires the world of education, to reconfigure itself as a promise of generativity, of identity construction and social inclusion also in the era of technics and technology (Bonaiuti et al., 2017). The encroachment thus initiated, mediated by the virtues of the digital (Rivoltella, 2015), builds bridges between the analog and the virtual, the old and the new, the human and the post-human, preserving the all-too-human and ethically set creative act of all cultural artifacts.

## INTRODUCTION

In his work *How We Think* (1910), John Dewey places reflective thought at the center of his discussion, considering it “the best way of thinking” and defining it as a process activated when one faces a problematic situation with no clear solution. This triggers the need to create new action models, modifying or replacing the existing ones. Reflective thought enables individuals to question the logic behind their interpretations of everyday life experiences those actions habitually performed based on interpretive frameworks derived from past experiences. For Dewey, reflective action occurs in problematic situations without a certain solution, prompting the creation of new action models. He describes the function of reflective thought as “to transform a situation in which one has experienced darkness, doubt, conflict, or some disturbance, into a clear, coherent, resolved, harmonious situation” (Dewey, 1910, p. 172).

Dewey contrasts reflective thought with other types of mental processes commonly referred to as “thinking.” The first type is the so-called “stream of consciousness,” characterized as an “uncontrolled course of ideas,” “automatic and ruleless,” a “disorderly meandering of mental images, random reminiscences, pleasant but unfounded hopes, rapid and sketchy impressions” (Dewey, 1910). It consists of a more or less extended sequence of ideas without a particular order, where the ideas are connected but lack a unifying principle to guide the sequence. In contrast, reflective thought is not a chaotic sequence of ideas but a “sequence” of ideas: “an ordered series or chain,” a consecutive order where each idea determines the next as its result, and each result relies on or refers to what precedes it.

The second meaning of thought is limited to “things not directly perceived or felt, things not seen, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted” a purely imaginary construction produced by imagination. In this sense, “a thought or idea is a mental representation of something not currently present, and thinking is the succession of such representations” (Dewey, 1910). Reflective thought, however, aims at a conclusion: the chain of thoughts must lead toward a specific endpoint or conclusion established beyond the mere flow of images.

The third definition of thought aligns with belief, encompassing matters about



which we lack certain knowledge but are sufficiently confident to act upon, as well as matters we currently accept as true or as knowledge but might question in the future. Thinking as synonymous with believing is a decidedly passive operation: it entails adopting ideas from others and accepting them because they are commonly held, not because the individual has examined the issue or actively contributed to forming that belief. Such ideas, often termed prejudices (premature judgments not derived from observation or data analysis), infiltrate the mind and become part of our mental framework without our conscious awareness. Reflective thought, in contrast, involves an active process: “it requires examination, careful inquiry, and personal investigation” and consists of an “active, persistent, and diligent consideration of a belief or hypothetical form of knowledge in light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it leads.”

## **1. REFLEXIVITY AS A POSSIBILITY**

How, then, do the characteristics of reflexivity, freedom, and self-awareness (Cambi, Pinto Minerva, 2023) align with the premises of the “onlife era” (Floridi, 2015) a new existence where the real and virtual merge (and blur) and where the speed and immediacy of social networks encourage unconsidered, instantaneous reactions? Applying Dewey’s mental processes to the digital realm reveals intriguing parallels with the behavior of the “technological” user. The stream of consciousness, for example, can be associated with the torrent of “stories” we share daily on social media—disconnected, illogical glimpses of public and private moments.

Stories, posts, and videos published on social platforms for only a few hours, before disappearing, seem to fulfill other needs and intentions among young people, linked to projecting an image of themselves that is beautiful, happy, or provisional, partial, enigmatic, and challenging to decode without the necessary contextual codes (Lancini, Cirillo, 2022).

Additionally, the rapidity and transience of information encourage decreased focus and the development of fragmented knowledge, as digital culture often prioritizes granularity and fragmentation over length and complexity. Practices like “cut and paste” flatten content into an eternal present (Rivoltella, 2015), reducing knowledge to disjointed, copied, and repurposed fragments.

Imagination, on the other hand, can be situated at the heart of the eternal tension between being and appearing. Concepts like the “society of the image,”

social self-display, and prioritizing appearance over being are increasingly pervasive in digital culture, where young people construct their identities and fulfill their desire for “extimacy” (Tisseron, 2013), driven by a relentless quest for validation and appreciation (Rivoltella, 2015). The imperative is to live under the spotlight, favoring the public sphere over the private, in a never-ending pursuit of followers and likes a phenomenon aligned with the so-called “like addiction” or “digital narcissism.”

Finally, belief can be likened to the frequent habit of being guided by common sense rather than evidence, sharing and posting fake news without verifying their credibility.

Media transformations, evolving communication models, and the intense and continuous use of electronic technologies (...) lead us to believe that knowledge must adapt to the medium, rather than us, as reflective and critical individuals, deciding how to use a particular tool and how it should function (Bocciolosi, 2014).

This is why fostering the generative force of thought through the development of critical and reflective thinking represents one of the challenges of a culture of complexity. In the face of the contemporary world’s fluidity and complexity (Bauman, 2008), the plurality of educational agents, the pervasive use of new technologies, and constant access to information and online interconnections, it is essential to autonomously find ways to access and connect knowledge, maintain a level of critical reflection that enables the development of one’s own perspective, remain flexible to shift viewpoints, and tolerate doubt and uncertainty. Rather than passively absorbing others’ thoughts, we must strive to influence the world actively.

## **2. STONES THROWN AND ARTIFACTS**

A reflection on the age of technology and its governance (Cambi, Pinto Minerva, 2023) must necessarily delve into the relationship between the subject conceived as a thinking human being or, in the case of educators, as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) and their artifacts, including digital products and methodologies. Such an inquiry essentially revisits the nature-culture debate, almost resolving it into the new alliance foreshadowed by Prigogine and Stengers (1981), between human history, knowledge, and societies, and nature’s own exploratory journey. Neuroscience (Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia, 2006; Gallese, 2007) has in recent years advocated overcoming the dualism between realism and constructivism (Rivoltella, Rossi, 2019), as well as the polarity

between nature and culture. Digital technology appears to silence the age-old opposition between knowledge and action, between perception and action (Berthoz, 2009), inaugurating a new infospheric era (Floridi, 2015), perhaps ungovernable, where humans and machines, natural subjects, and cultural objects, merge to create a world in which humans and artifacts are nearly indistinguishable.

To understand how artifacts and subjects can effectively interpenetrate, it is necessary to consider the possibility that artifacts might escape human control, deviating from the ontological-technological-political process of “hominization” (Sloterdijk, 2004). In human evolution, the stone symbolizes a positive relationship and reaction to the environment, allowing humans to transcend the constraints of flight through reflection and the development of mediated solutions. By contemplating the stone and its uses, humanity transforms it into a tool of power. This reflective process leads humans to continually choose between possible actions within their environment. Sloterdijk investigates the human-stone relationship, showing how gestures like striking and cutting prelinguistic and mediatory acts revolve around the physical proximity and manipulability of the stone, an object both from and within the world. However, when the stone is thrown when humans make a technical formalization choice (Sloterdijk, 2004) it becomes an artifact. The stone shifts from being merely an object within the world to an object for the world, creating new spaces and expanding human experience.

If the image of the stone evolving into an artifact, capable of expanding human experience, can serve to illustrate how digital technology blurs the distinction between artifacts and subjects, further reflection is needed on the human activities involved in creating artifacts and the contributions these artifacts can make beyond their practical utility. Norman (1993) reflects on the difference between the stone as a cutting tool and the stone as a projectile between the pragmatic, experiential aspect of the stone-object and the reflective use of the stone-artifact. Similarly, Rabardel (1995) clarifies the distinction between the stone as an object and as an artifact, critiquing technocentrism. Technologies, from stones to learning machines, have always been defined by their function and purpose without adequate consideration of their relationship to context and environment. Rabardel argues that artifacts possess dual natures: they are simultaneously *outil* (physical structures) and *instrument* (relational entities linked to human action, usage patterns, and emerging knowledge). An artifact thus becomes an instrumental entity shaped by and shaping its user (Rivoltella, Rossi, 2019). Vygotsky (1934) similarly recognizes tools’ dual potential to

regulate human conduct and transform the environment, as well as to guide one's behavior and that of others.

### **3. LANTERNS AND PROPER DISTANCES IN THE ERA OF THE INTERNET OF THINGS**

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) has dissolved the marked distinction between subjects, objects, tools, and the environment. AI has disrupted traditional conceptions of technological tools (Panciroli, Rivoltella, 2023): gone are the days of mass media representing mass communication, creating new public spaces (like television and later social networks) analogous to the stone's transformative role for early hominids. Technological objects are no longer central; the era of the materiality of objects be it stone or television is over. The Internet of Things (Za, 2021) has reinvigorated objects, embedding them with connectivity and transforming them into smart entities. For instance, the Internet of Toys (Mascheroni, Holloway, 2019) has redefined childhood toys and caregiving tools, while social robotics has forever changed everyday objects like watches (now smart) and homes (now automated). In this post-media world, human-artifact relations are mediated by AI, which, like the thrown stone, demands ethical decision-making. AI introduces an unprecedented form of world governance that often leaves humanity disoriented. Floridi (2014) describes this as the "information revolution." Platformization and mandatory datafication transform human capital into algorithmic capital (Marangi, 2023), creating a cultural hegemony akin to a new religion (Balbi, 2022; Van Dijk, 2014). Amid the light and shadows of digital innovation, we must rediscover the "proper distance" (Silverstone, 2007). Like modern Mattia Pascals (Pirandello, 2023), we must question whether humans still retain their place in the human-artifact-environment relationship or whether artifacts have wholly consumed their creators. Using the reflective lantern metaphor, we must structure new relational possibilities with the environment, the world, and others, reaffirming humanity's ability to control its creations as a vital, creative act.

### **4. FOR AN ETHICAL FUTURE OF EDUCATION**

Education represents this lantern's beam; it is the luminous projection that illuminates human experience, revealing reality as something to engage with and understand. Cambi and Pinto Minerva (2023) restore to education the role of recovering the lantern's angle of projection. The digital jungle must be reimagined as the wild environment where early humans began shaping their world with stones, now embodied by AI.

The Beijing Consensus (2019), a key international document on AI and education, invites reflection on ethics, safety, and responsibility, advocating for an AI guided by ethical principles and respect for humanity. As an artifact, AI must be designed to avoid consuming its creator, echoing the dystopian visions of body horror in art and cinema. Reflective thinking is thus crucial for promoting knowledge and awareness of tool usage, identifying biases, evaluating risks, and adopting a multisystemic vision rooted in Von Bertalanffy's ideas (2004).

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# ADDED VALUE AND SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

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The analysis of added value has taken on a significant role in the national debate, in relation to the need, expressed by numerous subjects, to innovate the evaluation models in use. In fact, the need to prepare tools for the synthesis of complexity, using the measurement of added value, is emerging. In the scientific community, the debate is important, focused on the models to be adopted, but above all on their didactic use, and the related fields of application, having to consider variables linked to measurement methods and tools. In this essay, therefore, we intend to proceed with the examination of the calque of added value, for the promotion of a school capable of valorizing the personal path of each student.

quality; control; evaluation; added value; student performance

## INTRODUCTION

Evaluation is an integral part of the teaching-learning process; it precedes, accompanies and follows the curricular paths. It activates the actions to be undertaken, regulates those started, promotes the critical assessment of those completed and takes on a prominent formative function, of accompanying the learning processes and of stimulating continuous improvement (MIUR, 2012, p. 13).

Evaluating means “giving value”, or attributing a certain “weight” to everything that happens in the school context in relation to pre-established objectives. The evaluation process takes place by taking into consideration not only the educational event and the context in which it takes place, but is linked to the content and methods of teaching that lead to implementing learning dependent on the quality of teaching and the validity of the training offer. The evaluation of the quality of the school service performed takes into account the outcomes (judgment on the possession of skills and knowledge observable in the

performances) and the processes (consistency between activities carried out and planned training purposes) (Scalcione, 2024).

## **1. VALUE ADDED MEASUREMENT MODELS**

Within the national debate, relating to the definition of an evaluation model of the school system, added value has also assumed a central role in recent years (Silva, 2016, p. 55).

Representing an important indicator that allows pursuing the purpose of measuring and appreciating performance (Montrone, 2000), added value “in recent years is applied in goods whose quality and value is increased by high level of technology and skill in the manufacturing process” (Corsini, 2008, p. 29).

In the educational field, it therefore indicates the ability of school institutions to add value to the development of each student, thanks to the result of the different interactions between the action of the school and the factors external to it (Corsini, 2008), being therefore understood as “estimate of the contribution that a school may have given to the evolution of the skills of its students” (Sestito, 2012, p. 28).

The variability is produced by factors extrinsic to the school and by the educational action, or “exogenous” variables, which influence the results achieved and which cannot be controlled by the school such as: the socio-demographic characteristics of each student or the incoming skills (Kubler, 2012, p. 1). Its use has as its main purpose that of dividing the factors that determine an influence on the learning of students and studying their effect.

An obvious reflection that follows is that it is possible to analyze inputs and outputs within school contexts; characteristic aspects of the added value measurement model thus appear, namely: student performance considered as progress over a period of time; added value as an indicator that allows for the evaluation of effectiveness through student results; the isolation of variables, which through their effect influence the scholastic performance of students. “The added value therefore measures the contribution provided by an institution to the progress of its students net of the factors that affect their performance but which are not attributable to the school’s intervention, such as socioeconomic characteristics or their performance upon entry” (Corsini, 2008, p. 30).



## 2. SCHOOL AND ADDED VALUE

To evaluate the effectiveness of a school, it is necessary to distinguish the effect of the school (intentional management, organizational, didactic and educational processes) on learning from the effect of uncontrollable factors (personal characteristics of students and context) but which still have the power to influence learning (Martini, 2020).

The school effect (added value) can be measured in different ways:

- with the difference between the average raw score of that school and the general average of a certain territory;
- by measuring the average progress that students make in a given period of time (cognitive gains).
- by means of the average difference between the observed scores and the expected scores in relation to the characteristics of the students (socio-economic-cultural condition, aptitudes, etc.).
- by means of the average net cognitive gain with respect to all the contextual factors that are not controlled by the school (Ricci, 2008, p. 4).

From a statistical point of view, the measurement of added value occurs through the study of the effect of the school and the teachers, which represent the independent variables, on the students' performance through the administration of standardized achievement tests that represent the dependent variables. The variables are inserted into an even broader relational context in which there are in turn other variables that determine relationships and influences and this is why these should also be considered and kept under control in the measurement of the school effect.

This relationship is then expressed through the linear equation of the straight line:

$$\hat{Y}_i = \alpha + \beta X_i + \varepsilon_i \text{ (Silva, 2016).}$$

The effect of schools and classes by means of added value will therefore be expressed as the unexplained part of variance, or the sum of the regression residues aggregated at school and class level. If this formula includes the variables detected relating to the socio-cultural level of students, as the literature widely recommends, it will be necessary to refer instead to a form of linear regression called multiple or multivariate:

$$\hat{Y}_i = \alpha + \beta_1 X_{i1} + \beta_2 X_{i2} + \epsilon_i^1 \text{ (Silva, 2016, p. 39).}$$

The two regressors are therefore indicated by  $\beta_1$  and  $\beta_2$ , to indicate the incidence of the two control variables: previous performance and socio-cultural level. At a theoretical level, the added value is defined as the difference between the observed result and the expected result: in this equation, the concept is expressed from a statistical point of view by the difference between  $Y$  and  $\hat{Y}_i$ . This difference is also called the regression residue and therefore represents the part of  $Y$  that cannot be explained by the regressors considered in the model.

## 2.1 Added value as an indicator of school efficiency and effectiveness

If efficiency, as a measure of how an activity achieves its objective by minimizing the use of resources, corresponds, at school level, to the construction of an optimal balance between means and ends, with a positive balance to be achieved in order to activate and use available resources and the identified purposes, effectiveness considers and measures, instead, the degree of impact of educational action and its capacity to transform and increase available resources (Miniello, 2012, p. 216).

The need to report data on school effectiveness, to show how education can influence students' progress beyond their social, cultural and economic background and the need to understand which factors allow determining the influence have allowed the birth of an important line of research: School Effectiveness Research (SER) (Rosa, 2013), today declined through:

- Research on effective schools, which attempts to study the variables related to the school;
- Research on instructional effectiveness, which instead deals with the teaching/learning processes that take place within classrooms.

These are approaches that investigate different effectiveness factors that influence instructional processes but share the objective of highlighting the ability of schools to significantly influence student performance beyond personal and entry characteristics.

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<sup>1</sup> Where:  $\hat{Y}_i$  = expected exit performance of student  $i$ ;  $\alpha$  = intercept or constant (value assumed by  $Y$  when  $X_1$  and  $X_2$  are equal to zero);  $\beta_1$  = first regression coefficient (average change in  $Y$  associated with a unit change in  $X_1$  holding  $X_2$  constant, i.e. net of its effect);  $X_{i1}$  = entry performance of student  $i$ ;  $\beta_2$  = second regression coefficient (average change in  $Y$  associated with a unit change in  $X_2$  holding  $X_1$  constant, i.e. net of its effect);  $X_{i2}$  = socio-cultural level of student  $i$ ;  $\epsilon_i$  = regression residue (difference between  $Y_i$  and  $\hat{Y}_i$ , i.e. between observed performance and expected performance).

It is therefore a question of predicting the use of multilevel regression models, capable of “allowing, unlike classic ones, to take into account the hierarchical nature of the data” (Rosa, 2013, p. 17).

These models are characterized by observing the hierarchical nature of institutions, paying attention to considering students belonging to classes and classes to schools. Furthermore, they consider the effect and influence of the environment on the individual and on their performance, taking into account socioeconomic characteristics (Corsini, 2008).

In multilevel regression models, the “classical” linear regression formula is extended to the case of hierarchically organized data, where student  $i$  is considered a first-level unit and schools  $j$  are considered second-level units:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_0j + \beta_1jX_{ij} + e_{ij} \text{ (Corsini, 2008)}$$

In the hierarchical formulation, a student’s performance is therefore a function of the average performance of the school, the effect of the relationship with the socio-economic status within his school and the residual of the regression.

In this way, multilevel analyses can pursue with greater precision the two fundamental objectives in SER research:

1. Establish the net effects of each of the variables in play, that is, net of the influence exerted by the other variables considered that affect student performance.
2. Attempt to identify, keeping under control the characteristics of the students and those of the context, the school variables (those that we could define as process variables: organization, relational climate, teaching methods, etc.) that have a significant influence on the results.

### **3. REPORTING THROUGH ADDED VALUE FOR A DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL**

The Coleman Report (Rosa, 2013), to measure school effectiveness, when the school’s objective is to lead to reaching the learning levels desired by students, deals with measuring and considering student performance (output) as a fundamental parameter of school effectiveness. When one wants to obtain information on the effect of the school on student performance, then all exogenous variables that determine an influence on the educational processes are taken into consideration (Kubler, 2012).

To determine a measurement of student performance and the quality of educational institutions, one can use added value.

With reference to the issue of school effectiveness and its measurement, added value indicates the specific contribution of the school to the progress of students “net” of other factors that, although “external” to the educational processes, significantly influence such progress (Rosa, 2013, p. 35).

Among the various variables, two types of these have a very important value: the socio-economic-cultural level and previous performance. Research has widely highlighted how the disadvantage that resides in the family environment can influence the performance of students and how previous performance is a predictor of subsequent performance.

These factors within the learning context are intertwined with numerous other variables but to determine the effectiveness of an education and training system, an analysis must be put in place that allows the starting conditions of students to be included and that cannot be limited to considering exclusively the results achieved by students (Capperucci, 2017).

In recent years, greater interest has developed in added value as an indicator of school effectiveness, this aspect has led many States to base their reporting systems on the detection of added value with the production of models that allow the overcoming of those previously mentioned.

Evaluation systems that allow institutions to meet their external reporting needs have been adopted by many countries around the world and have used scientific and methodological results to identify tools and procedures that could lead to a “valid, reliable and fair system evaluation” (Rosa, 2013, p. 22).

As a result, measurements are carried out on different students each time and it is not possible to observe whether changes between one measurement and another determine progress or regression in the school or student performance.

Using the longitudinal approach, students’ progress can be determined using multiple measurements over a period of time, in this way it is possible to adopt the added value and separate its contribution to students’ progress by comparing it with other schools that present important conditions such as entry skills and the socio-cultural background of students (Rosa, Silva, 2014).

The differences between the various accountability measures are represented by a different approach to the evaluation of school effectiveness, but these can use incentives to support self-assessment with a view to improving the institutions (Castellana, Corsini, 2018).

By proceeding in this way, it was intended to obtain results (expected values) relating to the districts or constituencies of the school system; their comparison with real values allows us to detect the effectiveness of each institution, and the possibility of creating tools that allow us to have a more profitable relationship with experience, subjected to empirical control (Dewey, 1959), creating contexts that put users in a position to exercise their own choices.

Over the years, added value has been used to respond to the need to evaluate teachers and managers based on effectiveness and on their ability to determine an additional value to student learning, thus promoting authentically democratic institutions, to the extent that they allow each user to exercise informed choices.

However, this aspect is determined within multi-colored contexts characterized by heterogeneous groups that are influenced by factors that are correlated with each other and that are not included in the models of added value (Corsini, 2012). Finally, another aspect, detectable in the American debate, has highlighted how the measurement of added value does not offer the possibility of knowing the ways in which teachers can make a contribution in terms of learning for their students, since it only records data that allows the school to be classified as effective and ineffective based on the value produced (Covi, Olivero, 2019).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Evaluating the effectiveness of a school allows us to determine how much an educational reality is able to influence the improvement of each individual student. Added value allows us to further clarify this last aspect because it collects information to detect the effectiveness of a school and leads to filtering the results obtained by students from factors over which the school cannot exercise control. The ever-increasing autonomy with which schools are equipped has allowed us to pay greater attention to this type of evaluation, which is why in several countries the systems for evaluating school effectiveness have been based on added value. The aspects outlined above are still alive in the debate that concerns the investigation in educational contexts. Attention is paid to combining the quantitative dimension that is detected by measuring added value with a qualitative dimension determined by the observation of what happens within schools (Corsini, 2008) and which regulates the teaching/learning process.

Added value measures often record untrue values because the rewards or

sanctions stipulated for teachers lead to concentrating the work in the classroom to teach ways to students to face structured tests. Surely in the future, within the debate, there will be new aspects to consider such as: the influence of added value as a means to motivate or on the contrary, not motivate students in achieving objectives.

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# CARING PROFESSIONS IN SUPERDIVERSE SOCIETIES: A STUDY ON SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS WITH MIGRATION BACKGROUND

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This paper presents the preliminary results of a qualitative study on the experiences of students with migration backgrounds enrolled in social work degree programmes at the University of Rome La Sapienza. In the context of an increasing demand for health and social care professionals, which represents a significant pull factor for immigration in many countries, the study explores the motivations that drive and the resources that support the choice to pursue social work education. This decision is influenced by a complex interplay of attitudinal and practical considerations. On the one hand, this is in accordance with the prevailing 'vocational' orientation among second-generation students, due to the programme's professional orientation and open-entry policy. Conversely, in the context of the care sector's expansion and its redefinition as an increasingly intercultural field, this educational path offers significant opportunities for social recognition and inclusion. The migrant background is both an asset and a challenge, as it enhances their ability to empathise with and address the needs of diverse service users, but may also pose difficulties in navigating institutional systems and achieving professional integration. Ultimately, this background profoundly informs their understanding of the profession and their approach to future careers.

second generations; care professions; higher education; social work



## **1. PEOPLE WITH MIGRATION BACKGROUND IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN ITALY**

International migration transforms our social worlds in countless ways, influencing job markets, political systems, material and immaterial cultures, demographics, and educational systems. The increasing number of students with foreign citizenship in Italy has prompted the development of a new area of research, focusing on the so-called “second generation” in the educational system (Azzolini et al., 2019; Cannavò et al., 2019; Ceravolo and Molina, 2013). However, while much has been written about challenges and opportunities that the school system offers for integration (Bertozzi, 2018; Giancola and Salmieri, 2019; Mantovani et al., 2018; Vianello and Toffanin, 2021), significantly less is known about transition pathways from school to university.

Despite the fact that the proportion of tertiary students from abroad in Italy remains considerably below the European average (4.2% in 2022), there has been a gradual increase over the past decade (Giudici et al., 2024). The data, based on legal-formal classification criteria, do not permit the inclusion of the entire population of students with a migration background, nor the accurate distinction between international students (those who have relocated to the country for the purpose of studying) and second-generation students. Nevertheless, their experience represents a field of investigation of significant interest for the comprehension of the transformations that are reconfiguring our education systems and societies. Born and/or raised in Italy, second generations challenge the mechanisms of ‘subaltern integration’ experienced by first-generation immigrants (Ambrosini, 2001).

The transmission of disadvantage across generations has been shown to impact educational choices and achievements. However, students with a migrant background often hold higher expectations regarding education as a critical tool for social mobility (Hadjar and Scharf, 2019). Consequently, their experience in tertiary education represents a valuable area of study for examining new forms of identification and integration, as well as for understanding the underlying mechanisms shaping educational choices and their subsequent impact on specific occupational fields (Bertozzi and Lagomarsino, 2019; Bozzetti, 2021; Crul et al., 2017; Heath et al., 2008).

Against this background, our study focuses on tertiary education for social care work. This choice is motivated by the recognition that the increasing demand for health and social work staff constituted a significant pull factor for immigration in numerous countries (Bartely et al., 2012). Indeed, the so-called ‘care drain’

phenomenon (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Bettio et al., 2006) is gradually changing in the direction of both attracting more qualified professionals from abroad (Schilgen et al., 2017) and stimulating domestic supply. In Italy, care work has traditionally served as an entry point and a key occupational sector for low-skilled, first-generation migrants. More recently, though, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light the long-standing paradox between the growing demand for qualified migrant care workers and the existing barriers to legal and social recognition (Ranci et al., 2021).

## **2. THE CASE OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AT SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY**

This study examines the case of students with a migrant background enrolled in social work degree programs at the Sapienza University of Rome. Students from abroad in the social work bachelors are proportionally less compared to the overall foreign student population at Sapienza (in 2022-23, respectively 4.2 compared to 8.8), but a significant majority of these students, approximately 90%, can be classified as second-generation.

This study's objective is to understand whether, in line with international trends, the care sector represents a preferred choice for children of immigrants enrolled in higher education pathways. Additionally, the study aims to ascertain whether this choice is driven by attitudinal preferences, assessments of employment opportunities, and/or linked to the persistence, even among second generations, of processes of subordinate integration.

To date, fifteen biographical interviews have been collected through snowball sampling strategies. The majority of the interviewees are females (14) hailing from a variety of countries and continents, including Europe, South America, Africa and Asia. They also represent a diverse range of generational statuses. In accordance with Rumbaut's (1997) typology, three interviewees can be classified as first-generation migrants, two as 1.25 (arrived at 13–17), three as 1.5 (arrived at 6–12), four as 1.75 (arrived at 0–6), two as second-generation migrants (born in Italy), and one as 2.5 (one foreign and one Italian parent). Ten students obtained their diploma from *liceo*, three from a vocational school related to the chosen university pathway (eg. *istituto professionale socio-sanitario*), and two from 'unrelated' vocational schools. At the time of the interviews, seven of them declared to work and study, five are full time students and three carry a considerable amount of care work within their household.

### **3. MOTIVATIONS: BETWEEN INSTRUMENTAL AND ATTITUDINAL CHOICES**

The transition to tertiary education for our interviewees is consistent with broader trends in the Italian education system, wherein the majority of high school graduates pursue further studies. When asked about the decision to enroll in a social work bachelor's program, the interviewees primarily highlighted their passion for social and psychological subjects during school and their strong desire to help others, which also represents an opportunity for personal growth and, in many cases, a way to address their own challenges. Upon deeper reflection, they also cited practical factors influencing their choice, such as the program's open-entry policy and its professional orientation, which facilitates employment after graduation. Many admitted they initially aspired to study psychology but either failed the entrance exam or found the prospect of a decade-long academic journey unfeasible.

Consistent with previous research (Azzolini et al., 2019; Bertozzi, 2018), we underscore the persistence of socio-cultural and economic constraints affecting second generations educational choices: limited economic resources, which often compel them to work alongside their studies, as well as perceptions of inadequate school preparation and insufficient linguistic and cultural skills required to succeed in higher education. Families play a twofold role in shaping the educational path of the interviewees. Some reported feeling entirely responsible for their decisions, viewing the lack of guidance from parents or other family members as a disadvantage – especially when compared to their Italian peers, whose parents are usually more actively involved. Nevertheless, the majority acknowledged the support and encouragement they receive from their families, who strongly motivated them to pursue higher education, regardless of the specific career path chosen. Migrant families' belief in education as a pathway to social mobility, a means of ensuring a better life for their children, and a way to justify the sacrifices inherent in the migratory experience is thus confirmed (Curl et al., 2017; Eve, 2015; Hadjar and Scharf, 2019).

Although many parents, particularly mothers, have worked in the care sector, the students do not perceive a direct link between their parents' professional background and their own educational choices. This disconnect underscores the stratification of the care professions and the undervaluation of less qualified positions such as domestic or elder care work (Ranci et al., 2021). Yet, they appreciate the commitment and care their family members exhibit in their daily caregiving tasks and, more broadly, admire the solidarity and compassion their

parents display, particularly in supporting fellow migrants in need. These values have often inspired the interviewees' passion for helping others, which aligns closely with the fundamental principles of social work.

### **3. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITY OF SOCIAL WORK AS AN EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL FIELD**

The interviewed students report high level of satisfaction with their experience in the university. With only one exception, they describe it as a multicultural and inclusive environment, contrasting sharply with their experiences in middle and high school, where racialized students were particularly likely to perceive discrimination as a recurring challenge.

In the positive evaluation of the chosen bachelor's program, they highlight the professors' dedication, the interdisciplinary structure of the curriculum, and the inclusion of practical activities, such as internships, group work, and case study development. These components provide valuable opportunities to engage with professional environments, understand the principles of social intervention and planning, and acquire essential practical skills for their future careers. They also recognize the diversity of context in which social workers can find employment, and approximately half of the interviewees say they would like to work with migrants, while other preferred areas entail gender violence, mental health, and childhood.

They appreciate the helpful and relational features of the profession, but they are aware of the limited social prestige associated with social work and acknowledge a disconnect between societal perceptions and their own understanding of its value. For some students, passion and sense of vocation outweigh concerns about future economic and social rewards. Others, albeit a minority, admit that they do not dare to aspire to more prestigious careers or those requiring significantly greater financial and time investment. This hesitation is linked to their migratory background, which they perceive as a disadvantage, fostering an attitude of 'settling for enough'.

The interviewees express nuanced views on how their migratory background will impact and shape their professional roles in social work. On one hand, they perceive their background as an asset, emphasizing that personal experiences of disadvantage enhance their empathy towards services' beneficiaries, foster openness to diversity, and offer the advantage of multilingualism and intercultural skills in addressing the needs and connecting with increasingly diverse service users. These insights add on research examining the emergence

of a transnational professional space within the social work sector (Bartley et al., 2012), highlighting the presence of professional who, though educated locally thus not entirely 'foreigners', bring with them intercultural values, experiences, and skills. On the other hand, they recognize certain limitations, such as a lack of familiarity with local institutional and territorial systems. Some perceive their limited proficiency in Italian as an issue that impact their confidence, authority with the beneficiaries and professional integration.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNIVERSITY AND THE CARE WORK SECTOR**

Our research reveals that students with migration background's choice to pursue a social work degree program is shaped by a combination of attitudinal preferences, practical considerations, and cross generational values. This interplay makes it difficult to isolate individual factors influencing their choices. Besides the opportunities for integration and social mobility, this decision appears to be in continuity with the vocational choices prevalent among second generation students. They value the professionalizing nature of their degree – highlighting the immediate employability it provides as social workers – and recognize that tertiary education is essential for securing decent employment. Families play a significant role by framing education as the primary pathway for social mobility and by fostering a 'culture of solidarity'. This influence shapes students' perceptions of their migratory background that, in turn, informs their understanding of the profession and their approach to future careers. Overall, our preliminary findings show the enduring processes of 'subaltern integration' (Ambrosini, 2001) that shape the educational and professional expectations of students with a migrant background but, at the same time, they underscore the growing intercultural orientation within the social work sector, a phenomenon that warrants further investigation.

Fostering the inclusion of second-generation students in our universities requires addressing the specific barriers they face. This includes improving access to information, as their social and family networks may not always provide adequate support; providing targeted support for their linguistic challenges; and promoting a more equitable balance between work and study, a challenge that increasingly affects the broader student population.

More knowledge on the experiences of professionals with migrant background is needed to advance policy recommendations for the social work professional sector. Future research could examine how globalization and migration

contribute to the creation of transnational spaces for social workers, shaping their roles, practices, and professional identities across borders. It could also investigate how the diversity of workers' backgrounds interacts with broader social processes, such as bargaining power and the gendered composition of the profession.

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# **INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION: EXPERIENCES AND OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING FOR CULTURAL CHANGE**

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In recent years, the topic of fairness in education has been a major policy issue at supranational and national levels. At the Gothenburg Social Summit (2017), the priority of every person's right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning was reaffirmed, and the following year, the Council of Europe confirmed the need to ensure 'effective equitable access to quality inclusive education for all students as an indispensable factor in achieving more cohesive societies'. The need to reaffirm these principles tells us that political, social, and cultural interventions for an inclusive education, one that promotes cultural change and respects the talents of students, are still struggling to come to fruition. The numerous and diversified emergencies of recent years, from the pandemic to the environmental issue, from war scenarios to the economic crisis, have put the system even more in crisis and strengthened the need to propose and experiment inclusive and innovative teaching and training proposals, aimed at making the school an environment where knowledge and know-how meet social and cultural needs and interested in preventing and combating phenomena of school drop-out, abandonment and educational poverty.

Focusing on creating educational processes rooted in equity, inclusion, and solidarity fosters connections with practices of peaceful coexistence. In line with the 2023 UNESCO Recommendation on education for peace, human rights, international understanding, cooperation, fundamental freedoms, global



citizenship, and sustainable development, it is increasingly necessary—and effective—to engage students in the co-design of sustainable proposals for building environments of peaceful coexistence.

Intervention proposals strongly consistent with the goals of Agenda 2030. These proposals align with the principles of sustainable development and seek to integrate education as a driving force for achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Fostering personal well-being, active citizenship, and the acquisition of the skills necessary to promote sustainable development through human rights, gender equality, the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and the valorization of cultural diversity are not only fundamental democratic values, but also educational practices necessary to deconstruct violent realities that consume us daily.

This approach emphasizes the need to transform education systems to equip individuals with the critical thinking and problem-solving skills necessary to address contemporary challenges, such as climate change, inequality, and technological disruption. For example, integrating human rights education into school curricula fosters a sense of empathy and social responsibility, helping students to engage as active participants in their communities (UNESCO, 2013). Similarly, promoting gender equality in education, as highlighted in SDG 5, ensures that all individuals, regardless of gender, have equal opportunities to thrive and contribute to societal progress.

Goals renewed by the United Nations through Our Common Agenda (2021), which proposes a shift from globalization to multilateralism and from cooperation to solidarity. This agenda underscores the importance of rethinking traditional models of international collaboration to prioritize shared responsibility and collective action. It calls for the education sector to play a pivotal role in fostering global citizenship, where individuals recognize their interconnectedness and are prepared to act in solidarity with others across borders. The valorization of cultural diversity within this framework promotes not only tolerance but also mutual enrichment, laying the groundwork for more cohesive and inclusive societies (United Nations, 2021).

Moreover, educational practices aligned with Agenda 2030 must go beyond traditional classroom settings, leveraging digital technologies and community-based learning to reach marginalized populations. Initiatives like UNESCO's Futures of Education project advocate for the integration of innovative

pedagogies that empower learners to co-create sustainable solutions, reinforcing education as a public and global common good (UNESCO, 2021). By embedding these values into teaching and learning processes, schools become incubators for the social and environmental change envisioned by the global community.

Within this problematic framework, through Service Learning (SL) concepts of social justice can be made practical, linking academic learning with civic engagement so as to develop a culture of peace (Crews & Weigert, 1999), innovating education through the keys of reciprocity and critical reflection (Asghar, 2017), reducing social inequalities and investing knowledge for the benefit of the community. Over the past decades, SL has been extensively studied internationally, both as an educational philosophy (Sheffield, 2005; Butin, 2005) and as a method for educational innovation and regeneration of educational practice (Furco, 1996; Tapia, 2000).

Similarly, the panel ‘Inclusive societies and equity in education: experiences and opportunities through service learning for cultural change’ provided a platform for discussing these themes. The event featured 18 presentations across 3 sessions, representing diverse perspectives from Italy and Europe. Facilitating the development of global citizenship competences (Aramburuzabala et al., 2020), key insights included:

- educational philosophy perspectives,
- pedagogical and didactic methodology across primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels, and
- exploration of links between educational institutions, local organizations, and international educational bodies through SL projects.

The discussion was enriched by references to projects implemented within the European EASHLE association and the ‘Manifesto of Italian Universities Network for Service-Learning’ and highlights the growing interest in SL as an approach to strengthen relationships between educational institutions and communities, with a focus on collective well-being (Di Masi et al. 2023).

This panel represented a significant step in understanding the potential of SL as a framework for educational innovation and regeneration in a democratic context, as well as its role in combating social injustice (Aramburuzabala & Cerrillo, 2023).

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# EMOTIONS ON STAGE: AN INTERNATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN BRAZIL WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS, BASED ON A GLOCAL APPROACH

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‘Emotions on stage’ (*Emoções no Teatro*), a support group for minors in psychological distress in the north-eastern region of Brazil, created by two students from the University of Padua, Italy, was the heart of an international Service-Learning experience with a GloCal approach (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Brown, 2011; Crabtree, 2008; Khoja-Moolji & Karsan, 2015; UNIBO, 2020, Andrian, 2024). This article aims to present a project developed within the Intereurisland exchange and research program (Andrian, 2024) through a bilateral agreement between the University of the State of Bahia and the University of Padua. The project’s focus on emotional literacy through drama aligned with the academic goals of the students’ psychology curriculum, allowing them to apply theoretical knowledge in a real-world setting. The main objective of the support group was to create a safe space in which adolescents could identify, distinguish, understand, share and regulate their emotions. Despite the limitations identified and the short duration, the project demonstrates how SL can be a relevant tool for both academic learning, as well as for supporting emotional development and promoting psychological well-being in children and adolescents (Joronen et al., 2008; Larson and Brown, 2007), as well as for the development of an active and prosocial Global citizenship.

GloCal Service-Learning, emotional development, mental health, adolescents, Intereurisland.

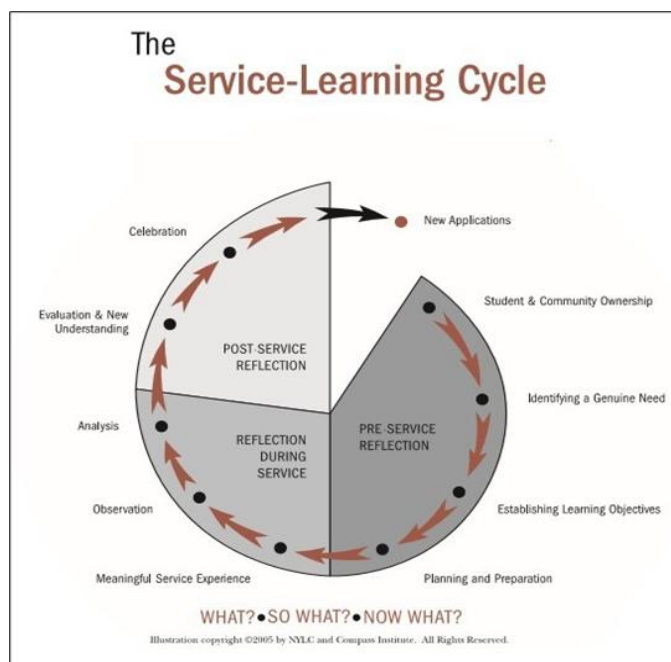
## INTRODUCTION

This article presents an international Service-Learning (SL) experience, 'Emotions on Stage' (*Emoções no Teatro*), developed as part of the Intereuriland exchange and research program (Andrian, 2024). This initiative, conducted by two psychology students and interns from the University of Padua (UNIPD), Italy, was implemented within a bilateral agreement between UNIPD and the University of the State of Bahia (UNEB), specifically with the Department of Human Sciences (DCH), Campus III, in the city of Juazeiro, Bahia, Brazil. The project, as a practical part of the third mission course 'Interpersonal relations and group dynamics', was developed in Petrolina, Pernambuco, Brazil, in a mental health support center for children and adolescents (*Centro de Assistência Psicossocial para Crianças e Adolescentes, CAPS-ij*) who are at psychosocial risk and/or suffer from severe and/or persistent psychiatric and psychological disorders. This initiative led to create an opportunity where students could achieve their academic learning goals, and adolescents could explore, express and regulate their emotions through group activities based on theatre. A 'context' in which, through the relationship between subjects of different ages and cultures, the deep meaning of the SL proposal was expressed, with a GloCal approach.

### 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SERVICE-LEARNING AND GLOCAL APPROACH

SL is a methodology that combines community service with structured learning objectives, enhancing both students' academic experiences and the community's well-being (Furco, 2005; Tapia, 2006; Fiorin, 2016). As defined by Bringle and Hatcher (2011), SL involves a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience" in which students engage in activities that meet identified community needs while reflecting on these experiences to deepen their understanding of academic content.

Figure 1: The Service-Learning Cycle (NYLC, 2005)



The project 'Emotions on Stage' was developed following the SL cycle proposed by the National Youth Leadership Council (2005). It aimed to provide psychological support to adolescents at CAPS-ij while enhancing the educational and social development of the students leading the project. This is in line with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which emphasizes learning through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. The project's focus on emotional literacy through drama aligned with the academic goals of the students' psychology curriculum, allowing them to apply theoretical knowledge in a real-world setting.

The GloCal approach emphasizes the importance of connecting global knowledge with the needs of the local community (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011; Brown, 2011). Through the Intereurisland program, however, in a path of mutual education, mediated by the world (Freire, 1981), the interest is to create "(...) 'Space' and 'Time' for encounter and dialogue between people who belong to different places and carry different cultures, analyzing the relationship can exist between contextualized education and intercultural dialogue (...)" (Andrian, 2024, p. 66).

This cross-cultural exchange is at the heart of SL and encourages students to develop intercultural competencies, including empathy, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability, as advocated by Crabtree (2008) and Khoja-Moolji & Karsan (2015).

## **2. CONTEXT AND PROJECT SETTING**

The SL project was developed within the research of a National Postdoctoral Program (PNPD) of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel Foundation (CAPES), Brazil, approved by the UNEB Ethics Committee, dated 18 October 2018, with protocol no. 2.948.670.

At the time of the project, CAPS-ij primarily offered individual consultations and the distribution of medication, with limited group therapy activities. In line with the needs of the center -as identified by both students and staff- the main objective was to provide a space for emotional support and psycho-educational engagement for adolescents experiencing mental distress.

As psychology trainees, the two students, both master's students in Clinical Psychology, used theatrical propaedeutics and movement as tools for psychological and emotional development to create a support group focused on emotional literacy. The choice to use art was supported by research that shows that role-playing and drama can reduce stress, foster emotional development, and promote psychological well-being, particularly in children and adolescents (Joronen et al., 2008; Larson & Brown, 2007; Keiller et al., 2022).

The sample was defined based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) being already a CAPS-ij patient at the time of recruitment, and (b) being between the ages of 13 and 17. Information about the group was shared via leaflets distributed by healthcare professionals within the center to their patients, as well as through direct phone calls to patients identified as requiring additional support. The final sample consisted of 11 participants, including 7 males and 4 females with varying diagnoses and psychological distress conditions, with a mean age of 15.1 years.

Given that the sample was composed of minors under the care of CAPS-ij, an Informed Consent for project and data collection was obtained from the institution's coordination before the activities were carried out.



### 3. EMOTIONS ON STAGE

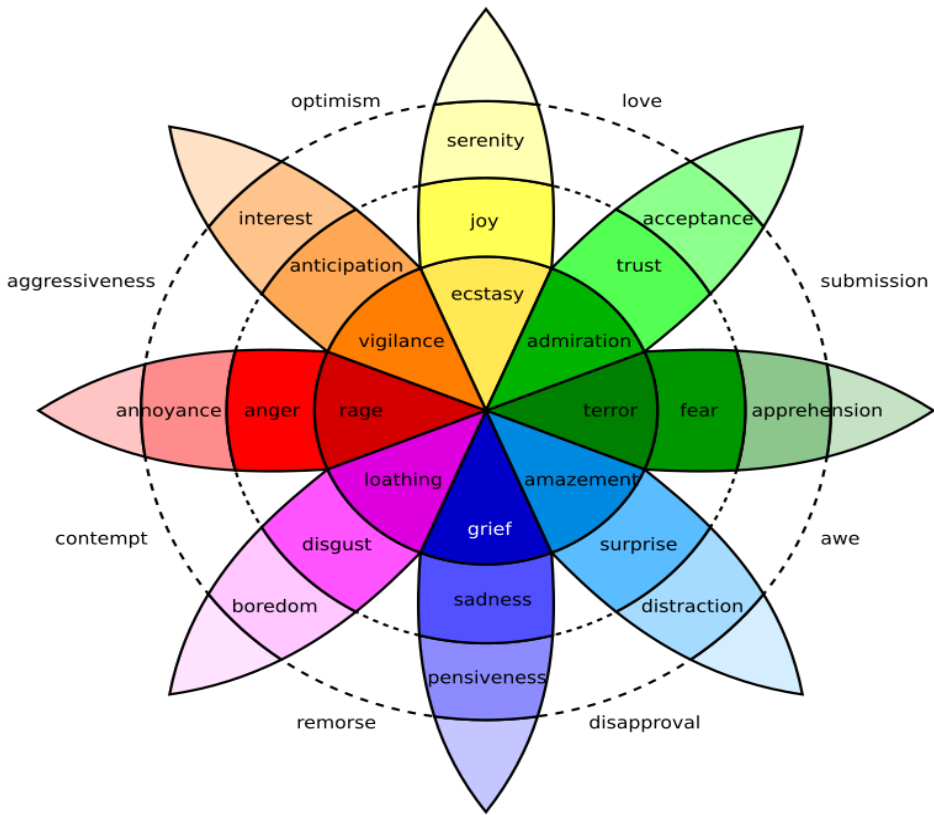
The support group was structured around four two-hour sessions conducted during November and December 2023. Each session followed a clear sequence of activities, designed to build emotional awareness and encourage creative expression.

Each session followed a four-phase structure:

- Ice-breaking and group cohesion: verbal, non-verbal and movement exercises were used to introduce themselves, encourage group bonding and ease participants into the activities.
- Improvisation and creativity: activities aimed at stimulating participants' creativity and preparing them for emotional exploration (i.e. being details of a photograph), which encouraged spontaneity and imagination.
- Theatrical propaedeutics: in this phase, participants engaged in drama exercises focused on identifying, expressing, and regulating emotions. Tools like 'emotion square' or 'crescendo of emotions' were used to help participants explore a wide range of emotions, based on Plutchik's emotional spectrum (Plutchik, 1984) as shown in Figure 2. The exercises aimed to help adolescents distinguish between primary emotions and gain a deeper understanding of their emotional experiences in the present, past and future.
- Reflection: each session concluded with a final moment of reflection, where participants shared their emotional responses and feedback to the activities. These moments could include written open questions to encourage deeper introspection and sharing.

Research diaries, participant observation, audio, photos and video recordings were used from the two students to monitor the progression of the sessions and to gain an in-depth understanding of feedback related to the group's objectives.

Figure 2: Wheel of Emotions (Plutchik, 1984).



## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Impact of the Service-Learning Project

The results of the project demonstrated the reciprocal nature of SL. Despite challenges such as irregular attendance and the overall feedback was positive and the project provided a valuable space for emotional exploration. Several adolescents reported experiencing positive emotions during the sessions, including happiness, surprise, and a sense of relief.

During a group reflection, one participant identified happiness as the predominant emotion during that session, in contrast with sadness as the most experienced emotion in daily life. Another participant, despite challenges with reading and writing, engaged comfortably in the group by using alternative

strategies. In the final session, the same participant shared that anger was the most frequent emotion in his life but reported feeling surprise and happiness as dominant emotions during the group activities.

During the last group reflection, another participant explained:

On the first day of the theater group, it was the day I left the hospital, I was feeling sad, but when I arrived here I felt good. I smiled, I thought about how (...) that was the best day of my life. The emotions (...) I feel the most are, like, fear, when I close my eyes, but I liked everything about this group, from the heart. You are my friends, I trust you.

The same participant showed a significant improvement in mood during the involvement in the group, also confirmed by positive feedback from the CAPS-ij nurse. The coordinator of the center expressed strong appreciation for the use of art as a tool for mental health care and support. During the final professional meeting, he expressed positive surprise at hearing noise in the facility, not from crises, but as a result of patients' creative and emotional expression. The feedback from other project collaborators was also positive, particularly regarding the structure of the sessions and active collaboration of participants. The students' learning experience was also positive, despite some limitations and challenges. Among their predefined academic aims, they reported the development of several professional skills, in line with SL principles (Astin et al, 2000; Salam et al, 2019). First of all, the ability to structure and lead social projects, such as support and prevention groups that involve adolescents with psychological distress. Second, they reported an improvement in their social and interpersonal abilities in creating trusting relationships with the users, teamwork, critical and analytical thinking and problem solving. They also reported an increment of their awareness and active listening skills. Moreover, carrying out the project in an intercultural context allowed them to face linguistic and interpersonal challenges, fostering relationships based on empathy, respect, without judgment or prejudice.

Regarding the specific support group objective (i.e., promoting the understanding, experimentation, and differentiation of emotions among the participants) considering the feedback received and their own learning, the students reported that "The Project constructively responded to the needs of the center, expanding the support and care provided to the patients from a broader and more comprehensive perspective". (Final evaluation focus group, 2023)

## **4.2. Limits and difficulties**

One of the main limitations was the use of Portuguese; while the preference for a GloCal approach facilitates deep immersion within the context (Andrian, 2024), the target group expressed itself with language and slang that, at times, is challenging to fully comprehend for non-native speakers, even with a high level of proficiency.

Participants recruitment also presented several challenges: considering that they were all minors, many parents either refused to participate or were unable and/or unwilling to accompany them to the center. As a consequence, an additional limitation was the inconsistency in participants attendance: only 3 participants out of 11 consistently attended all sessions.

Another potential limitation is that the co-author of this article was also one of the two students who developed the SL Project, which may have influenced its presentation.

## **5. CONCLUSION: LESSONS AND REFLECTIONS**

Despite the limitations identified and the short duration, the project 'Emotions on Stage' demonstrates how SL can be a relevant tool for both academic learning, as well as for the needs of the local community, as well as for the development of an active and prosocial Global citizenship. Through their work at CAPS-ij, the Italian students not only contributed to the emotional well-being of adolescents but also gained intercultural competencies and improved their ability to operate in unfamiliar contexts. This aligns with the goals of the Intereuriland exchange program, which seeks to foster collaboration between academic institutions across different cultural and geographical regions (Andrian, 2024).

The project's use of theatrical propedeutics and movement for emotional expression reflects a broader trend in psychological interventions, where creative arts are increasingly recognized for their therapeutic potential. By using drama as a tool for emotional literacy, the project addressed a critical gap in CAPS-ij's services, providing adolescents new ways to understand and regulate their emotions.

Looking forward, future iterations of international SL projects could benefit from a longer duration and more structured support to maximize both the educational outcome for students and the emotional benefit for participants. Nevertheless, the project demonstrated the potential of SL as a tool to deepen the dialogue between the global and local dimensions, supporting the mental health of

adolescents in need, in Petrolina, Brazil, while fostering critical skills in future psychologists, who will operate in Italy.

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# ENHANCING GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT: INSIGHTS FROM THE FLY PROGRAM IN EUROPEAN INTERUNIVERSITY SERVICE- LEARNING

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Service-learning (SL) combines university engagement with community needs, fostering co-responsibility and solidarity. It supports intercultural growth and integrates local and global perspectives, encouraging collaboration to address societal challenges. This paper focuses on the FLY program, a European inter-university SL initiative involving universities from Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Slovakia. Active since 2021, FLY organizes over 50 annual SL projects across 14 countries, promoting reciprocity, social justice among universities, students and partners. This study evaluates the 2023/2024 program's impact on community partners. The results show that community partners identified significant impacts including increased visibility and networking opportunities, new perspectives, strengthened community interactions, and the educational value for students through hands-on learning and meaningful relationships with the community.

service-learning; global engagement; interuniversity cooperation; higher education

## INTRODUCTION

In the UNESCO Global Report (2021, p. 10), education is described as “the foundation for the renewal and transformation of our societies”, connecting people and providing the knowledge to address challenges for a socially inclusive, just, and sustainable future. Teaching and learning must link to civic

engagement, defined by the APA (2009, paragraph 2) as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern”. Education fostering such engagement helps students connect with reality and build a fairer society where diverse knowledge is valued (UNESCO, 2021).

The purpose of the Service-Learning (SL) pedagogical approach is to bring civic engagement into the curriculum by connecting students and social partners to practise solidarity and cooperation while learning knowledge and developing curricular and extracurricular skills. To be applied, SL needs the whole community because it is based on reciprocity between university and territory in facing common challenges to positively transform the reality. In this process, the curricular and transversal knowledge and skills of the students are the tools for engaging and acting in the real world. In the same way, the knowledge and skills of the community involved in SL, are the educational resources for the students and for the joint action in collaboration with the university.

At the European level, many universities are promoting civic engagement through SL, e.g. through SL based Erasmus + projects, which since 2015 have been more than 25 (Culcasi et al., 2024). This synergy of commitment among universities contributes to a more comprehensive approach to addressing global challenges and offers more opportunities of engagement for students and community partners.

This is the case of FLY, the European inter-university volunteering and Service-Learning program that promotes the co-design of innovative SL pathways by involving students and community partners worldwide.

This contribution presents the impact gathered in the academic year 2023/2024 within the unique FLY program. Specifically, it is intended to present the results of the evaluation and reflection of the community partners they completed after the experience to assess the project and the program’s effectiveness in general. This focus on the community partners is for both because they represent a fundamental building block for the SL to be effectively implemented and to meet a gap in the literature (Compare et al., 2023).

## **1. THE FLY INTERNATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING-BASED PROGRAM**

According to the European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE, 2019):

Service-learning is an experiential educational pedagogy in which students engage in community service, reflect critically on this experience, and learn from it personally, socially and academically. The activities address human,



social and environmental needs from the perspective of social justice and sustainable development, and aim at enriching learning in higher education, fostering civic responsibility and strengthening communities (...).

In international SL, students participate in a structured program in another country. They do community service to meet local needs, learn through interactions and discussions with diverse people, and reflect on the experience. This helps them better understand their course material, appreciate the host country and their field, and feel more responsible as citizens, both in their local area and worldwide. (Bringle and Hatcher, 2011) SL emphasises the importance of shared community and the systemic interdependencies that connect us to address contemporary challenges (Culcasi et al., 2023).

FLY is an International SL based-program focused on reciprocity at personal and institutional levels (students-locals, students-students, university-university, university-social partners, etc.) where the richness of diversity and social justice are core values. The program runs from the 2020-2021 academic year. FLY is coordinated by eight universities in Europe (5 in Spain, 1 in Portugal, 1 in Italy and 1 in Slovakia) and offers more than 50 different SL projects in 14 countries worldwide every year (Brozmanová Gregorová et al., 2024). The SL projects cover 3 main impact areas: “migrants and refugees”, “people at risk of social exclusion”, and “people and community care”; projects vary in duration from one week to two months and take place in the summer period. To date, more than 550 university students have participated in 150 projects in 14 countries.

## **2. THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS IN SL**

SL is only possible with community involvement. Effective and sustainable SL depends on mutually beneficial partnerships between the university and the community. Indeed, community partners play a pivotal role in identifying or assisting students in analysing community needs while serving as the primary point of contact for faculty and students. Community partners are uniquely responsible for helping create a real-world experience for the students. Moreover, they provide essential guidance and opportunities that maximise the experience for the students, the community, and the intended beneficiaries. In the context of SL, community partners are not merely partners, but rather co-educators, actively engaged in the student’s educational journey.

In the FLY program, community partners have a specific role. A partner university recruits them to collaborate and offer SL projects for students. A representative of the university meets with a representative of the community

partner at the time of planning the program, together they clarify expectations and define the needs of the organisation, the workload of the students, their role and the expected learning outcomes and benefits. A representative from a community organization also defines the profile of students suitable for the project and their numbers. In this way, the student's learning experience is co-created with the community partner. The mentors from community organizations are in contact with the students before they arrive in the country, organising independent sessions with them to prepare them for the implementation of the project in another country and life in another country. During the implementation of the SL projects, the partners accompany the students through the whole process, providing them with instruction, feedback, mentoring, supervision, and responses to the questions and needs of the students. In the end, they participate together in an evaluation and reflection of the learners' experience. With the university representative, they reflect on their cooperation, the student's involvement and the benefits for the partner.

Concurring with Rubin and Matthews (2013), comprehensive academic research into education incorporating international experiential components and SL should also prioritise examining the impacts on the host communities of these programs. This broader focus aligns with SL as a reciprocal experience where all stakeholders – students, faculty, and community members – benefit mutually (Celio et al., 2011).

### **3. RESULTS OF FLY COMMUNITY PARTNERS**

In the academic year 2023/2024 17 community partners were involved in the FLY program: 7 partners from Spain, 3 from Slovakia, 2 from Italy, 2 from Brasil, 2 from Africa and 1 from Honduras. All partners had previous experience in community service or SL at the time of evaluation. They assessed the program considering all the parties involved; specifically, they analysed the benefits of collaborating with universities in terms of the impact on their own organizations, the communities they serve, and the students involved.

Figure 1 shows which areas community partners identified as having experienced an impact. The greatest impact is perceived on the organizations participating in the program (33,3% of responses). This impact encompasses various dimensions, including: the fresh perspectives that students bring to the organization, which in turn improves the work environment; the willingness of students to collaborate with the local team, especially during a time of year when volunteers are generally less available due to summer vacations (many

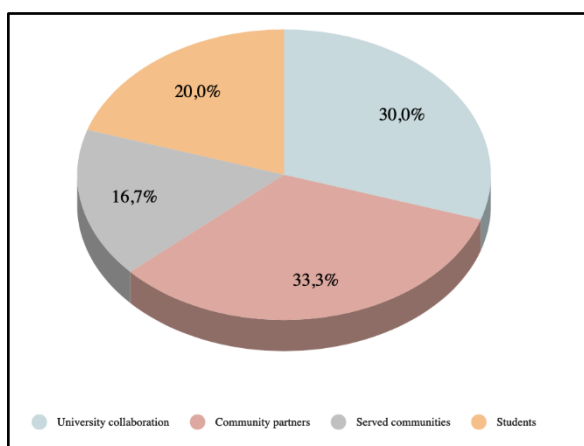
partners emphasized that some activities they propose for the communities they serve during the summer can only take place thanks to the presence of university students); and the adaptability and flexibility of the students, along with their capacity to integrate into the context and with the people served.

A high percentage of the community partners (30%) consider that the university collaboration has positively contribute to: gaining greater visibility as organization and becoming part of a network where the support of universities becomes a pivotal element of fieldwork; increasing visibility for the community served and the projects implemented; expanding opportunities for access to international volunteering and cooperation; gaining new perspectives through partnerships with universities.

Another highly valued aspect is the impact on the communities served (16,7%), particularly in terms of the new forms of interaction developed by beneficiaries through their engagement with university students from different cultures. Additionally, the strong interpersonal connections formed between the students and the broader community ensure that the impact extends beyond the direct beneficiaries to the community as a whole.

Finally, community partners recognize the educational value of the experience for university students, who gain the opportunity to engage in hands-on learning, deepen their awareness of the social issues underlying the activities of the partners they support, and build meaningful relationships with members of the community.

Fig. 1. FLY impact according to community partners



#### 4. CONCLUSION

According to Dorado et al. (2004, p. 26), “Service-learning partnerships can be traveling on at least three qualitatively different paths: tentative, aligned, and committed”. Tentative partnerships are typically newly established and involve instructors and community organizations with little or no prior experience in service-learning. Aligned partnerships, on the other hand, represent a more advanced stage, where participants have successfully navigated the tentative phase and are actively working to refine and adapt the collaboration to better meet the needs of students and the community. Finally, committed partnerships are defined by a deeper, long-term dedication from all parties, extending beyond the scope of individual projects.

This framework offers a valuable lens for understanding the development and sustainability of SL initiatives. Community partners, as co-educators, play a pivotal role in ensuring the relevance and sustainability of SL initiatives. Their feedback underscores the program’s impact on organizational dynamics, community relationships, and the overall quality of services offered. Key contributions include fostering social networks, increasing visibility, and promoting intercultural exchange —outcomes aligned with the core principles of SL. Furthermore, the partnerships forged through FLY emphasize the importance of collaboration across diverse cultural and institutional contexts, enriching all stakeholders involved.

Ultimately, this contribution advocates for a new social contract for education that integrates formal, non-formal, and informal knowledge and skills through SL. By emphasizing mutual respect, cultural diversity, and shared goals, the FLY program advances the vision of education as a tool for social inclusion, justice, and sustainability. Moving forward, fostering deeper commitments among partners and scaling such initiatives will be essential to address global challenges and build a more interconnected and equitable world.

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# INTERSECTIONS AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION, PEACE EDUCATION, SUSTAINABILITY AND SERVICE LEARNING: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

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This article explores Service Learning (SL) as an innovative pedagogical approach and its potential in connecting peace education, sustainability and global citizenship. Through the integration of experiential learning and critical reflection, SL is proposed not only as a tool for the development of professional and transversal skills, but also as a promoter of social justice and civic responsibility. The article highlights how transformative pedagogy, focusing on disorienting experiences and critical thinking, offers a theoretical framework for linking SL to peace education, addressing inequalities and promoting values of cooperation and inclusion. Furthermore, the role of higher education in fostering the institutionalisation of SL and building an educational model that integrates academic knowledge and active engagement in society, contributing to the construction of a more equitable and sustainable society, is discussed.

service learning, transformative learning, higher education, peace education,, interdisciplinary learning, global citizenship education, sustainability.

## INTRODUCTION

The integration of Service Learning, higher education, peace and democracy education is the way that can help shape new consciousnesses for sustainability and the realization of peaceful coexistence<sup>1</sup>.

Several studies and policy documents have emphasized the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education <https://www.easlhe.eu/>  
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overcoming an exclusively nationalist educational model, which is incapable of promoting open-mindedness and an interdisciplinary approach to global issues, as well as contributing to effective social improvement (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021).

Although SL has been present in Italy since the beginning of the 21st century, its insertion within academic courses remains rather limited. In the Italian panorama, several universities have built networks between departments or experimented and then activated interdisciplinary service-learning pathways within their courses in order to implement and consolidate the learning itself, while fostering the construction of social and civic competences in students.

In particular, the School of Higher Education *Educare all’Incontro e alla Solidarietà* (EIS) of the LUMSA<sup>2</sup> University in Rome is an important reference point for the development of projects, research and the sharing of good practices. The school proposes to deepen on different levels, from the theoretical to the projectual, from the methodological to the experimental, from the pre- and in-service training to the dissemination of good practices, the SL pedagogical approach, for the potential that this proposal presents for human, professional, cultural and social growth (Fiorin, 2021).

Over the past few years, other universities have recognized how SL can be increasingly valued as an essential component of higher education and how, within many universities, there are researchers who consider it an integral part of their students’ education. From the sharing of many common experiences, the Italian University Network for Service-Learning (UniSL)<sup>3</sup> was born in 2016, which connects to other international networks of universities such as Uniservitate<sup>4</sup> (Serelli, 2024).

In the “Guidelines for the Institutionalisation of Service-Learning in European Higher Education” (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021), it is clearly highlighted that the implementation of SL is crucial to promote social engagement among students. This educational modality allows an experiential exchange with community partners, contributing to mutual enrichment and increased relevance of university teaching and research missions.

The paper explains that in order to initiate an effective institutionalization process of SL, higher education institutions should be supported in developing

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<sup>2</sup> EIS LUMSA <https://lumsa.it/it/alta-formazione> 20.11.2024

<sup>3</sup> Rete universitaria italiana per il service-learning (UNI SL) <https://eis.lumsa.it/internazionalizzazione/reti-di-service-learning> 20.11.2024

<sup>4</sup> UNIVERSITARE <https://www.uniservitate.org/> 20.11.2024

continuous and systematic evaluations. These evaluations should not only aim at the development of course-specific competences, but also take action to promote transversal competences, which are essential for peace and democracy education. SL integration at all institutional levels is therefore crucial to ensure that students acquire, alongside academic knowledge, a strong sense of civic responsibility.

Furthermore, the guidelines emphasize that SL should be considered an educational approach committed to building a more equitable and sustainable society. This implies continuous improvement and sensitivity to different social contexts, as well as the active involvement of students and teachers in projects that foster peace and democracy (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021).

There is therefore no doubt that the widespread institutionalization of SL in universities may represent a significant and innovative step towards a high-quality education, which is not only aimed at preparing students for professional careers, but also educates them to become active and aware citizens, capable of contributing positively to society.

## **1. THE SL IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' LEARNING AND COMPETENCES**

SL has a significant impact on students' competences, offering numerous benefits that can enhance both their academic training and their personal and professional skills (Scandurra, Laperuta, Sabatino, Simioli & Majello, 2024). By allowing theoretical knowledge to be used in a personal way to design the improvement of living conditions in the community, SL lends an original and creative specificity to the experience. For this reason, the experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) that this approach proposes cannot be reduced to mere internship. The SL differs from an apprenticeship both in its design approach and in its aims. The apprenticeship is essentially aimed at consolidating knowledge through a contextualization of this knowledge in professional contexts. Its purpose is to generate a circularity between knowledge and skills for those who are preparing to enter the world of work. The SL establishes a circularity between knowledge and skills aimed at entering into action with the territory, with social and cultural issues and with the needs of sustainability. Specific is also the interaction that is being built with the communities of the territory that are bearers of historical, new and evolving cultures and knowledge. These are knowledge expressing values, oral traditions, social practices and performing arts of local intangible



heritage that, as UNESCO has affirmed since the 1990s<sup>5</sup> (UNESCO, 2022), are an integral part of cultural heritage.

The search for how to bring together the knowledge, knowledge and relational dynamics of an area, the implementation of engaging and effective improvement actions, also requires the development of sustainable problem-solving skills. A search for possible solutions that fuels the implementation of dynamic communication and action strategies that are suitable, as we shall see later, for peace education as well. Problem solving represents the positive use of contextualized creativity (Proctor, 2021). The possibility of concretely experiencing how and how important it is to have an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach that can foster connections between the various areas of study, the building of relational mindsets and the habit of reading problems through the lens of the complexity of interconnected elements.

As we return to reflect on the two training experiences of the beyond the classroom, we can note that SL and internship training both foster the acquisition of fundamental transversal skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership and time management (Boni, Walker, 2013). These skills are considered essential for success in both the academic and professional worlds. However, SL projects engage students in the personal development of a sense of civic responsibility, through the many facets of society and the ways in which they can better understand the role they can play within these (Howard, 2021). In maintaining a dialogue of reciprocity between formal, non-formal and informal learning, students acquire sensitivity and awareness of social issues and different forms of injustice, marginalization, neglect, discrimination, poverty.

In the university experience, the development of critical reflection allows for a mature and personal reworking of the knowledge learnt in the face of life circumstances, the need for improvement, political choices and individually and socially lived experiences (Scandurra, Laperuta, Sabatino, Simioli & Majello, 2024). By encouraging students to reflect on what they have learnt and how their actions affect the community, they can develop a greater awareness of social and cultural dynamics. In this sense, engagement in community service activities not only develops professional skills, but also promotes personal growth; as found by the fact that students often report increased self-confidence, self-efficacy and personal satisfaction (Cassidy, 2015).

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<sup>5</sup> Intangible Cultural Heritage <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/05361-EN.pdf>

In sum, SL not only enriches students' educational experience, but also contributes to the formation of aware and engaged citizens, equipped with skills that can transform their lives and those of the communities in which they work. Through participation in projects that integrate learning and service, students develop essential skills such as communication, teamwork and leadership, which also prepare them effectively for the world of work. These projects offer them the opportunity to acquire practical skills and an in-depth understanding of human relationships, interconnections between systems and social dynamics. The integration of SL in university research and teaching thus brings significant benefits also for teachers, promoting new perspectives and innovative pedagogical approaches. (Serelli 2004). Designing cooperatively by sharing objectives that lead to wellbeing generates a constructive and professionally capable approach that also influences relational and learning wellbeing. This is an opportunity to promote creative and constructive dialogue between the university and the community, helping to create positive and generative partnerships (Serelli 2024). For these reasons, higher education courses should increasingly promote the inclusion of SL in curricula and build partnerships with communities, so that individuals feel engaged and responsible, ready to contribute to a more just and supportive world.

## **2. TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY AS A CONNECTOR BETWEEN SL AND PEACE EDUCATION**

Before delving into the definition of peace education, it is useful to recall the theoretical reference that significantly connects it to SL. This connection is particularly relevant in light of the latest UNESCO Recommendation on Peace Education (2023), which emphasizes transformative pedagogy as central to promoting change at all levels and in all spheres of society.

Transformative pedagogy is an educational approach focused on profound and meaningful change in students' thinking patterns, perspectives and behaviour. Based primarily on the work of Jack Mezirow (1997), this pedagogy aims to promote greater critical awareness, autonomy and capacity to act for social change. Both SL and peace education interventions find a solid reference in transformative pedagogy, as they accentuate personal and social change generated by critical experience and direct confrontation with reality. Both approaches share the idea that meaningful learning is not limited to the mere acquisition of technical or theoretical knowledge, but also includes the ability to reflect on oneself, one's role in society and the power structures that govern

it (Giunti, Lotti, 2023).

The 21st century is characterized by increasing global interconnectedness, rapid technological change and unprecedented environmental challenges. These factors call for the need to make use of different approaches in promoting education. Moving beyond the practice of imparting knowledge and skills has long been insufficient to prepare students to contribute to a sustainable society. Transformative education and ESD<sup>6</sup> (Education for Sustainable Development) emerge as key approaches to promote a paradigm shift towards a pedagogy that integrates critical thinking, conscious action and commitment to the common good (Bell, 2016).

Although transformative pedagogy can also find links in authors such as Freire (1970) and Galtung (1996), it was above all Mezirow (1997) who defined some foundational concepts that initiated the development of this theoretical reflection. According to the author, it aims, first and foremost, to change individuals' interpretative frameworks through experiences that challenge their beliefs and promote meaningful learning. With the disorienting experience, which involves students in experiences that confront them with real challenges, we enter the first process that initiates the transformative dynamic. The disorienting experience activates a deep and meaningful learning process that leads to the transformation of the individual's beliefs, values and perspectives. This type of experience is characterized by events or situations that challenge pre-existing beliefs, causing a sense of discomfort or cognitive and emotional disorientation. Its transformative power also lies in its ability to disrupt established patterns of thought by questioning what has always been taken for granted, through revisiting the nature and construction of basic beliefs. This stimulates critical thinking because it prompts, first and foremost, reflection on oneself, one's assumptions and the social, cultural or political context in which one lives. At the same time, critical thinking becomes a tool for analyzing and reinterpreting the meaning of lived experience.

It should not be forgotten or underestimated that feelings of insecurity, uneasiness and confusion may be generated during this phase of disorienting experience, as the person is confronted with uncertainty, fragility, insecurity, and the questioning of one's comfort zone. For this reason, it is necessary to involve pupils from the first classes of primary school in experiences that confront them with real challenges.

In the educational context, transformative pedagogy is realized through

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<sup>6</sup> ESD <https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education> 21.11. 2024

methods such as action-based learning, systemic approaches and a holistic integration of disciplines (Milton, 2012). The main objective is not limited to the transmission of knowledge, but to promote the development of critical thinking skills, creativity and collaboration.

These principles find a close connection with SL, which focuses on the critical processing of lived experience. Through reflection, students are encouraged to question self-referential viewpoints, prejudices or attribution errors, fostering forms of self-assessment that are highly effective in transforming perceptions, representations and relationships.

In line with the principles of transformative pedagogy, SL adopts an experiential and reflective approach that emphasizes the use of disorienting experience and structured reflection. This process encourages learners to question their own actions, their ethical implications and the social structures that influence the problems they face, thus transforming experience into meaningful learning.

### **3. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SL AND PEACE EDUCATION: A TRANSFORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

The analysis of how transformative pedagogy relates to peace education has been deepened over the years by Massimiliano Tarozzi (2015), with specific references to intercultural, global and complex contexts. In particular, the importance of global citizenship education as a tool to promote social justice and peace through transformative educational processes emerges. The relationship between global citizenship education and transformative pedagogy is based on a close connection between educational objectives that aim to form individuals who are aware of global challenges and capable of promoting social change. The main aspects that characterize this relationship are described below:

Specifically, Tarozzi (2015) closely links transformative pedagogy to peace education, arguing that the latter should not be limited to the transmission of knowledge, but should promote inner and social transformation. Through critical reflection and dialogue, individuals can develop a deeper understanding of the causes of conflict and injustice, and actively engage in building a culture of peace (Guetta, 2015).

However, it is necessary to translate theory into practical experiences that consolidate both the skills and metacognitive strategies associated with learning, and the moral principles and values of coexistence and dialogue. In order to achieve this transition, we believe it is important to point out the set of

methodological models proposed by Indire, which goes by the name of the Movimento Avanguardie Educative<sup>7</sup>, of which SL is one of the main ones.

A Movement that started from the awareness of the need to start a path of transformation of the school model in relation to critical elements highlighted in the national and international scenario in the comparison between Italy and other European countries (Orlandini, Chipa, Giunti, 2020). In order to promote the transformation of models it is necessary to create interaction with other systems, such as, for example, the social one, or the political and regulatory ones that, through their action, can support the processes promoted with dedicated interventions and with progressive and shared timeframes (Orlandini, Chipa, Giunti, 2020).

The UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development adopted in 2023<sup>8</sup>, emphasizes the importance of educational approaches that promote a profound transformation in the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes of individuals. It also states that peace in the 21st century requires not only the absence of war or armed conflict, but is based on inclusive, participatory and dynamic processes that promote our ability to value human dignity and care for ourselves, others and the planet. This document explains how education in all its forms and dimensions, in and out of school, shapes the way we see the world and relate to others.

Although the term ‘transformative pedagogy’ is not explicitly mentioned, the basic principles of this approach are clearly present in several sections of the document. Thus, peace education and SL share a common vision: education as a tool to promote personal and social change through critical reflection, experiential learning and active engagement. The Recommendation marks the need to design educational proposals that also involve the territory and that go beyond the transmission of knowledge, in order to activate, in a more concrete and real way, a profound transformation of the attitudes of passivity that most of the younger generations are experiencing. This is fully in line with the SL, whose constant commitment is to integrate theory and practice, allowing students to face, in the first person and with their own perceptions, the concrete issues of local communities, contributing to the development of transversal skills and educating a sense of civic responsibility. Both perspectives converge

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<sup>7</sup> Movimento Avanguardie Educative <https://www.indire.it/progetto/avanguardie-educative/> 22.11.2024

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO Recommendation on education for peace <https://www.unesco.org/en/global-citizenship-peace-education/recommendation> 22.11.2024

in promoting participatory education, which uses dialogue and reciprocal actions to create environments of possible alliances for well-being and social growth. Empathic communication allows one to observe the world through the principle that every human being is a system of needs and as such has both the right and the responsibility to choose, within a context of respect, acceptance and coexistence, the path that he or she considers most suitable to meet those needs (Rosenberg, 2003) In this context, the transformative pedagogy of SL represents a concrete bridge between the ideals promoted by the UNESCO Recommendation and educational practices, training individuals capable of acting as agents of peace and sustainable change in their communities and beyond.

As seen, SL is an important educational device in higher education, capable of promoting professional skills, social justice values and active global citizenship. Through involvement in solidarity projects, students not only learn how to put their knowledge into practice, but also develop a greater awareness of social challenges and how to envision positive and sustainable change.

Despite their transformative potential, both SL and peace education remain marginal approaches in the higher education landscape. This low visibility is revealing of an educational model still strongly anchored to traditional paradigms, oriented to the transmission of theoretical knowledge and technical-professional training, rather than to the integral formation of the person (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Freire, 1970).

SL and peace education share a pedagogical vision that transcends the mere acquisition of academic skills and the maintenance of their sectoriality and separation (Ribeiro, Aramburuzabala & Paz-Lourido, 2021). Both refer from an interdisciplinary treatment of knowledge to the implementation of good coexistence practices through experiential learning and civic engagement, to the ability to creatively address the complex challenges of the contemporary world. However, their role is often underestimated in academic institutions, which tend to separate the cognitive dimension from the ethical and social dimension (Kolb, 1984; Galtung, 1996).

A unifying element between SL and peace education is also that of commitment to social justice and improving the living conditions of communities. SL, through active collaboration with local communities, enables students to confront concrete problems of inequality, social exclusion, poverty and conflict. This process fosters the development of transversal skills such as empathy, dialogue skills and sustainable problem solving, all of which are fundamental to building

a culture of peace (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Similarly, peace education provides the tools to understand and address the roots of conflict, promoting values such as non-violence, cooperation and respect for cultural diversity (Capitini, 1955; Bajaj & Hantzopoulos, 2016). It should not be forgotten that peace education and SL also share a critical dimension: they invite questions about power structures and the dynamics of exclusion that perpetuate injustice (Freire, 1970). In academia, this critical approach can stimulate deeper reflection on the role of universities as actors of social change, as well as centres of knowledge production and dissemination.

In order to promote the visibility and integration of these approaches, it is necessary for academic institutions to adopt more inclusive and multidimensional policies, capable of enhancing the contribution of peace education and SL in the formation of conscious and committed students. The integration of the two could be a turning point in making higher education more attentive to the needs of communities and oriented towards a global and sustainable vision of human development. A civic engagement, declined in all those activities oriented to participation in common life and to strengthening the relationship between citizens and institutions capable of promoting and involving in a generative thinking, aimed at preventing that depersonalization that risks emptying relations and flowing into disinterest and hatred.

A deeper connection between these two educational contexts highlights the need to refer to the meanings involved in peace education and the ways in which SL helps to experience the impact of sustainability on the ground, promoting not only environmental awareness but also civic engagement oriented towards social change. In this way, higher education is positioned at the centre of a global education that links sustainable development, personal responsibility, respect for rights and deconstruction of all forms of violence.

In conclusion we quote UNESCO's Recommendation (2023b):

Cooperative work between students, the development of research projects, problem-solving, individual study, seminar dialogue, field study, writing, action research, community projects – these and many other pedagogical forms need to infuse higher education. (...) Values such as respect, empathy, equality, and solidarity must be core to the mission of universities, colleges, and technical institutes in the future. Higher education must foster ethics and support students to be better and more capable citizens with greater awareness of their civic and environmental responsibilities. Higher education must also be socio-culturally relevant. Appreciation of cultural diversity, a commitment to defend human rights, and intolerance for racism,

sexism, classism, ethnocentrism and discrimination in all forms must be key educational objectives. Higher education that advances such values and principles goes beyond the confines of lecture halls and virtual spaces. It is ever evolving in its content as it empowers individuals to become better versions of themselves, to take strong value systems forward, and to transform their environments (UNESCO, 2023, p. 60).

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# THE PENSARE IN GRANDE/THINKING BIG PROJECT: A PARADIGM FOR DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

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The debate to affirm justice in educational spaces in Europe focuses on a democratic education based on some key dimensions: the appreciation of differences, an attitude of openness, a set of skills related to the emotional sphere and a critical knowledge and understanding of oneself and the world. (Council of Europe, 2018). Research has shown that Early Childhood Education and Care is crucial both for the development of the person and for the early detection of difficulties. (Motiejunaite, 2021, Starting Strong VI, 2021). The Pensare IN Grande project focuses on Italian services for children aged 0-6 years and aims to implement their quality to help professionals support every child. This paper summarises the preliminary findings from the main questionnaire, based on the self-reflection tool for kindergarten teachers developed by the European Agency (IECE Environment Self-Reflection Tool, 2017). They reveal positive attitudes towards inclusion, but also a complex landscape where progress towards inclusivity is juxtaposed with persistent systemic barriers. Despite a strong commitment to fostering inclusive environments, educators' efforts are often constrained by structural limitations, including lack of resources, inadequate training and fragmented institutional support. Increased investment in infrastructure, expanded professional development opportunities and stronger cross-sectorial collaboration are needed.

ECEC; integrated system 0-6; inclusion in 0-6; inclusion and democratic education

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Pensare IN Grande (*Thinking Big*) project represents a transformative initiative in early childhood education, addressing systemic inequities in access, quality, and inclusivity for children aged 0–6. This developmental stage is of great consequence, as disparities established during this period often persist throughout life (European Commission, 2021). The project is aligned with European efforts such as the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Parliament, 2017), which emphasises access to quality education for all, building on Italy’s recent legislative reforms that establish an integrated 0–6 education system.

This paper examines the project’s general theoretical foundations, research methodology, and presents preliminary findings, thereby contributing to the ongoing debate on equity and inclusion in early childhood education.

The project’s alignment with the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework of Competence for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018) serves to highlight its democratic underpinnings. The framework is comprised of four elements: values, attitudes, skills and critical understanding. In particular, the framework identifies a number of values, attitudes and skills as being essential for the promotion of inclusive education systems. These include, for example, openness to diversity, respect and tolerance, autonomy, flexibility and empathy, as well as critical understanding of the personal, social and political dimensions. The project’s objective is to dismantle barriers to inclusion for marginalised groups, including children with disabilities and those at risk of social exclusion, by integrating these principles.

These democratic principles are further supported by frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), which emphasises the right to inclusive and equitable education for all children. This alignment serves to illustrate the broader applicability of the Pensare IN Grande model, extending beyond the boundaries of Italy.

## **1. RESEARCH ON ECEC AND INCLUSION**

The existing research evidence indicates that ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) is of significant importance for both the development of the individual and the early identification of potential difficulties. (Motiejunaite, 2021, p. 10). The fourth goal of the 2030 Agenda is to guarantee that all children, youth, and adults, particularly those who are marginalized and vulnerable, have access to education and training that is pertinent to their needs and the context in which

they live. However, the latest OECD data on the participation of children with special educational needs or at risk of social exclusion indicates that only a quarter of these children (27%) are included in early childhood education and care (Council of Europe Recommendation, 2022).

A comprehensive review of the principal documents and laws governing early childhood education from the age of 0 to 6 has recently demonstrated that there has been a paradigm shift in approach. This shift goes beyond the notion of removing barriers and addressing the injustices faced by children in difficulty, towards a holistic understanding of the child. This approach emphasises the harmonisation of the physical, social and cognitive aspects of the child (Macchia & Torri, 2023).

The necessity of early childhood intervention was recently corroborated by an article in *The Lancet*, which underscores the significance of the subsequent 1,000 days of a child's life (ages 2-5) as a pivotal period for consolidating early developmental gains. The report draws attention to the stark disparities in care across regions, with particular concern for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where only 25% of children receive adequate support, leaving millions at risk. Despite evidence indicating that the provision of quality early childhood education and positive parenting can have a significant positive impact on child development, access to early childhood care and interventions remains limited, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In order to address these shortcomings, the article proposes the implementation of multisectoral strategies across the domains of health, education and social protection. The article underscores the imperative of enhancing the quality, equity, and accessibility of early childhood programmes in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.2) and mitigate the risks to global progress and child well-being (Draper et al., 2024). Another similar article in the same journal argues that not investing in the next 1000 days (ages 2-5) results in significant societal costs, including lost developmental opportunities and economic benefits. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes yield benefits 8-19 times their costs, improving long-term outcomes such as education and earnings. Failure to act results in GDP losses of 2-7% for low- and middle-income countries. (Nores et al, 2024).

## **2. THE PENSARE IN GRANDE PROJECT IN DETAIL**

The Italian context offers a particularly fruitful setting for examining the intersections between policy, practice and inclusivity in early childhood

education. The Pensare IN Grande project, a collaborative undertaking among four prominent Italian universities (the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano/Principal Investigator, the Catholic University of Milan, the University of Perugia and the European University of Rome), employs a mixed-methods approach to identify existing best practices while delineating areas necessitating systemic intervention. This comprehensive study targets early educators across a range of settings, including kindergartens, playgroups and family centres, thereby ensuring a holistic understanding of the sector.

The project is informed by three overarching research questions:

- To what extent is the promotion of inclusivity shaped by the prevailing institutional frameworks, as opposed to the actions of individual educators?
- What strategies might be employed to ensure that education extends beyond the mere imparting of basic skills to encompass the integration of values and the promotion of learning outcomes that facilitate personal and intellectual growth?
- What innovative practices and strategies can be employed to overcome the obstacles to inclusivity that are encountered in a variety of contexts?

These questions reflect the project's dual focus on the contributions of systemic and individual factors to the fostering of inclusive education, emphasising the interplay between policy, practice and educator agency.

## **2.1 Methodology**

The research employs the IECE Environment Self-Reflection Tool (Björck-Åkesson et al., 2017), which has been adapted to evaluate eight dimensions of inclusivity: welcoming atmosphere, social environment, child-centred approaches, physical environment, resources, communication, teaching methods, learning environments and family collaboration. The data pertaining to family cooperation are currently undergoing processing. A Likert-scale questionnaire is employed to collect quantitative data, while open-ended questions are used to elicit rich qualitative insights, thereby capturing the nuanced experiences and perspectives of educators. As of May 2024, the survey was completed by 120 educators, representing a diverse range of roles and qualifications. The participants included teachers, playgroup facilitators, and family centre educators, thereby providing a comprehensive view of the sector.

### 3. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The initial analysis of the data has yielded significant insights into the current state of inclusivity in early childhood education. The findings illustrate both the existence of systemic strengths and the persistence of challenges.

The quantitative data derived from the Likert-scale responses indicate a predominantly positive perception of inclusivity across the majority of dimensions. Areas such as a welcoming atmosphere and child-centred approaches were rated highly, reflecting the commitment of educators to the creation of supportive environments. However, specific domains, particularly those pertaining to personalised support for learning and access to external resources, belonging to the area 3, were identified as significant challenges. It is worthy of note that:

- Dimension 3.5: Only 54% of respondents indicated that personalised support was consistently available for children with specific needs.
- Dimension 3.6: A mere 42% of respondents indicated that they had sufficient access to additional resources when needed, thereby underscoring a critical gap in systemic support.

These findings indicate a necessity for the implementation of targeted interventions with the objective of addressing resource constraints and enhancing the capacity of educators in these areas.

The open-ended responses to the question “What would you change?” facilitate a more profound comprehension of the challenges identified in the quantitative data. A number of recurring themes emerged from the data.

The first of these was the physical environment. Educators emphasised the importance of well-designed, inclusive spaces. A significant number of respondents identified a lack of modern infrastructure, inadequate outdoor areas and poorly adapted furniture as key barriers to effective inclusivity. For example, one respondent observed that “our classrooms are not designed with diversity in mind; we lack the space and resources required to accommodate all children comfortably.”

A pervasive theme was the necessity for more comprehensive training in areas such as conflict management, intercultural communication, and individualised instruction. Educators articulated frustration with the dearth of accessible professional development opportunities, with one stating, “We are expected to meet diverse needs, but the training we receive is insufficient for the realities of our classrooms.”

A notable concern was the lack of collaboration among educators, families, and health institutions. The respondents emphasised the necessity for more robust collaborative arrangements to guarantee comprehensive and coherent assistance for children. One educator observed that “without clear communication and collaboration, our efforts often feel fragmented and less effective.”

Financial constraints were frequently referenced, particularly in relation to the procurement of specialised materials and toys. A considerable number of educators conveyed their exasperation with the bureaucratic delays and inadequate funding, which impede their capacity to provide bespoke assistance to children with special needs.

Educators finally identified a need for innovative teaching strategies that prioritise inclusivity. The suggestions included a reduction in class sizes, the incorporation of technology to support diverse learning styles, and the adoption of flexible curricula that cater to individual needs.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings reveal a dichotomy: while educators demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity, their efforts are undermined by systemic barriers such as inadequate training and insufficient resources. These challenges are echoed by international findings that emphasise the necessity for targeted investments and reforms in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Starting Strong IV, 2021).

The qualitative data highlight specific areas for improvement, particularly in relation to enhancing infrastructure, professional development and inter-sectoral collaboration. These insights are in alignment with the objectives of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, which advocates for comprehensive approaches to inclusivity (Björck-Åkesson et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the Pensare IN Grande project offers significant insights into the current state of inclusivity in early childhood education, combining empirical data with practical recommendations. Its findings contribute to an expanding body of research advocating for the establishment of equitable and inclusive education systems. Future efforts should prioritise systemic investments, expanded training opportunities and strengthened partnerships in order to achieve these goals.



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# INTEGRATING OPERA INTO SERVICE LEARNING: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH IN TRAINING FUTURE TEACHERS

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This study explores the implementation of Opera as a key element within a Service Learning (SL) program. This innovative methodology aims to engage students in community service activities while enriching their educational experience and their musical culture. Since 2010, the Degree Course in Primary Education Sciences of University of Palermo has implemented SL to enhance lifelong, meaningful, and responsible learning in students, in order to increase a deep awareness of themselves, their community, and their education. Solidarity, collaboration, and active participation are just some of the dimensions that this activity will promote. SL represents the intersection between theory and practice, between research and experimentation, between culture, values, and life, between learning individual skills and active citizenship skills. In this contribution, in continuity with other activities, we present the design of a SL activity offered to third-year students during a.y. 2024/25. In collaboration with local institutions, a program that integrates Opera with SL projects in at-risk neighborhoods was developed. University students, future teachers, who participated, were trained on how to integrate Opera into curriculum and how to design relevant SL projects. For this purpose, in addition to preparatory meetings specifically on SL, some activities aimed at listening to and understanding Opera were planned.

Service Learning; Musical Education; Innovative Teaching; Citizenship Skills

## **INTRODUCTION**

The University of Palermo has always been committed to offering its students a learning and teaching experience that is stimulating, engaging and innovative. As a demonstration of this mission, numerous Service Learning (SL) activities have been implemented in recent years, which is considered a successful and effective approach to engage actively university students. The effectiveness of Service Learning lies precisely in being able to combine the experiential and value-based learning of the students involved and the solidarity service done towards their community.

From 2020 to 2022, the e-Learning Service project ‘Nobody Left Behind’ was implemented, aimed at designing and implementing educational and empowerment paths for primary school pupils in Palermo. The project involved 869 students enrolled in the LM85bis degree course (303 third year; 293 fourth year; 273 fifth year) in the design and implementation of targeted teaching courses aimed at ‘fragile’ pupils in Palermo. A total of 60,000 hours of DAD activities were delivered. The challenging didactic activities realised thanks to innovative digital resources, favoured cognitive stimulation and the development of pupils’ motivation to learn and the development of the relational and digital skills of the university students who carried out the SL activities (La Marca & Longo, 2022).

Another relevant testimony is the project ‘[PR]A.S.I. Apprendere serve, Servire insegna’, implemented during the academic year 2022-2023, aimed at promoting educational and training activities addressed to minors in the Ballarò – Albergheria neighbourhood of Palermo with a sample of 38 students enrolled in the first year of the primary education science degree course. The project envisaged initial distance learning (4 meetings, for a total of 16 hours) through which the students were able to experiment and acquire operational project models, develop reflective, relational, research skills and civic-social and metacognitive attitudes, exploiting the e-Learning methodology (La Marca, Martino & Zuccaro, 2023).

The latest initiative organized by Palermo University, again involving students of Primary Education, is a project that combines Service Learning and Music Education, specifically, opera.

### **1. SERVICE LEARNING IN FUTURE TEACHER TRAINING**

Why Service Learning as a key element for increasing the skills and capacity of future teachers?

Nowadays, it is essential to have many skills: hard and soft skills, which are useful to be able to live fully and face daily challenges.

Skills have become increasingly fundamental in any fields: work, professional and personal, because they enable us to find alternative solutions to problems (problem solving), to listen actively. They develop digital, communication, creative skills, etc.

It is therefore essential to ensure that teachers have these skills, so that they can pass them on to their pupils and make them prepared for life's challenges.

Nowadays, more and more skills are required from an early age; in 2023, the World Economic Forum drew up a list of the most useful and in-demand skills that are considered essential.

Figure 1. Top 10 skills of 2023, World Economic Forum (2023)



In addition, it is precisely for this reason that the possession of skills proves to be a fundamental requirement, especially for a teacher.

Possessing all these skills, in fact, allows one to reinvent oneself and make one's work original. In the case of teachers, this ability is fundamental: the teaching profession is already very complicated, nowadays it is an even more difficult job.

The teacher must make their lessons interesting, interactive, engaging and stimulating. They must be able to use many different pedagogical methods and

strategies, to invent challenging activities and to use multiple pedagogical approaches.

It is precisely in order to achieve the objective that, as an original and innovative solution, in this contribution we propose Service Learning as an effective tool to support teachers in creating interesting lessons.

To achieve this goal, we propose Service Learning as an original and innovative solution, as an effective tool to support teachers in creating interesting lessons. We choose service learning because it is able to merge both the area of skills and that of values such as solidarity, mutual help and commitment to others and to the community.

In fact, a good teacher must train in life, values, respect and help, not just in theoretical content.

Therefore, equipping future teachers to be able to do this, means laying the foundations for skilled, capable and prepared teachers in the future, and Service Learning represents a transversal and multidisciplinary approach useful in achieve this aim.

## **2. THE PROJECT: THE JOY OF WELL-MADE OPERA WITH SERVICE LEARNING**

During the design phase of this activity, we wondered about the commonalities between service learning and opera.

These are, apparently, two completely distant and different worlds. Upon deeper study, we realised that in truth they have many more points of contact!

Indeed, in both cases, they are pedagogical and didactic approaches, which aim to form values and skills in people. They both develop, in adults and children, ethical behaviours and improve everyone's experiential baggage. Among the values that are most developed in both SL and music are responsibility, collaboration, teamwork, problem solving, creativity and many others. This is why, during the conception phase, we realised that putting these two realities side by side in an initiative could be a winning challenge; in both cases, the main concept is sharing with others.

## **3. AIMS OF THE ACTIVITY**

The present study therefore used the Service Learning approach and music education and involved a number of university students in the development of a product concerning the re-adaptation of an opera addressed to primary school pupils in a disadvantaged neighbourhood of the city of Palermo.

During the first step, students have identified the educational need to be rehabilitated within the community, i.e. that of poverty, school dropouts and crime. Once they identified it, then the plots of various operas were analysed in search of one that was most appropriate and adaptable to the chosen context, with the aim of raising the awareness of young students and pupils to the effectiveness and originality and transversality of education and, of course, of music.

The research, in fact, was conducted with the intention of elaborating a transferable and sharable product for future teachers and equipping them with relevant tools and educational strategies to make the learning-teaching moment an authentic and valuable exchange, meaningful and stimulating.

The initiative involved around 200 students in the third year of the Master's Degree Course in Primary Education at the University of Palermo who, during the first semester of the 2024-2025 academic year, were engaged in designing a Learning Unit to be implemented with their future pupils.

The students were organised into large groups (10-15 members) and randomly, in order to foster their interaction and acquaintance, they independently elected a leader and proceeded to the division of roles and tasks. Each group worked independently and autonomously: some decided to start from the identification of a community need and then, as a result, search for analogies and similarities in the plot that would make it easily re-adaptable to the school context; others, on the other hand, preferred to analyse various plots and then identify a community need.

Each group carried out a screening and selection phase of the best-known operas, studying their plots and learning about their various characters. The opera that each group then decided to deal with was the one that gave them the most ideas, points for reflection, plans for possible activities and links with the identified social need.

One of the objectives that each group set itself was to be able to create a product that was appealing and that could activate curiosity in primary school children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city of Palermo, while at the same time going beyond the commonplace that sees opera as something that tends to be boring and outdated.

The challenge was therefore both a design-didactic one and a social one: to imagine being faced with a class group more prone to dropping out of school and delinquency than to diligent study. Simulating this context, during the conception and design phase, pushed the students to find didactic expedients,

engaging activities and succeed in intriguing a hypothetical class group, with the aim of awakening a healthy desire to attend school. Among the various products realised, here is a rather relevant example, which involved an in-depth study of the needs of a community in Palermo and a heartfelt commitment to designing activities that were first inclusive, fun and innovative.

#### **4. ORGANISATION OF THE ACTIVITY**

The project presented concerns the re-adaptation of the opera ‘Cavalleria Rusticana’ by Pietro Mascagni (first performance 1890), chosen not only for its points of contact with the context of Palermo, as the opera is set in Sicily, but also for its characters, which are easily connected to the city’s folkloristic aspects.

The work of the group followed three major phases:

- Compilation of design tables for Service Learning initiatives (La Marca & Falzone, 2023);
- Drafting of a ‘script’ with plot and adapted characters;
- Designing teaching activities, choosing the most relevant pedagogical approaches, strategies and educational methodologies;
- Creation of a presentation of the finished product.

The first step (compilation of the tables) represented a fundamental step. These tables are made precisely for the planning of service learning interventions and allow the work to be organised very precisely.

The educational issue is identified: the community need to be solved, the human and financial resources to be mobilised, time and place, related disciplines, prerequisites and more. You can plan every aspect of the operation in the most comprehensive manner. In fact, slots are provided where possible obstacles, limitations and benefits can be entered in order to prevent possible difficulties.

The community need identified in this activity was to counter school dropouts resulting from mistrust by families of pupils towards the school. In addition to this need, there is a heavy economic disadvantage and a high level of school dropout.

The main objective is to improve the relationship between school and families in order to renew mutual trust. With this activity, we hope that families will understand the effectiveness of education and schooling, seen as an opportunity to save their children.

The experience encourages the students to develop artistic skills, raises their



motivation and stimulates their creativity, making each of them feel important and fundamental.

We carried out an in-depth study that tried to find points of contact between the plot and Sicilian culture. We inserted folkloristic characters into the revisited plot, in order to make it simpler to understand.

The new plot, in fact, speaks of food, typical dances and cultural aspects specific to Palermo. This is a great pedagogical expedient: something that is apparently very distant became more appealing and closer to one's own culture. Thanks to this strategy, pupils will be more stimulated and intrigued. We edited the main songs of the opera, to bring young people from a disadvantaged neighbourhood even closer to the initiative. One song was completely re-adapted in a rap key, another one was re-written adding some words in English to facilitate learning and yet another was transcribed into Sicilian dialect. The last song, however, was learned in sign language.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES**

Working on this product with the third-year students was very useful and meaningful. They will be the real protagonists of the school in the future, so working with their feedback was effective. We involved the students right from the concept phase, then in the planning and, lastly, in the design. The students were enthusiastic about the initiative because we gave them a new tool they could use to expand their teaching skills. They learned about the transversality of music education and the potential of service learning, and they realised that their role is crucial. They have to know how to invent educational interventions to meet the needs of their class and each individual pupil. This is already, thinking small, a service learning intervention, because each class is a small community.

The potential of this project lies in being so versatile and transferable. It is a product that can be repeated and modified in every context.

The values that emerge from an activity like this will be formative and permanent in the lives of the pupils.

### **Acknowledgements**

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# EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION. BUILDING INCLUSIVE CULTURES AND PROFESSIONALISM THROUGH UNIVERSITY SERVICE LEARNING

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Promoting universities as hubs for fostering citizenship presents a challenge that balances the development of competencies with the need to nurture democratic attitudes. The Service Learning approach (SL) offers a promising response, providing an innovative, philosophically grounded, and socially responsible methodology aligned with universities' commitment to social responsibility. This paper examines the institutionalisation of SL at the University of Palermo, focusing on developing an evaluative framework and implementing SL initiative within the master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences. Integrating theory and practice, SL enables future pedagogists to engage in community service while reflecting on classroom experiences and fostering civic engagement. In this context, SL represents a "pedagogical formula" that bridges university education with societal needs, emphasising inclusion, participation, democracy, and solidarity. For the master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences, this approach provides a unique opportunity to position the university at the forefront of social progress, promoting inclusive processes and active citizenship.

civic engagement; higher education; inclusive processes; pedagogical professionalism; service learning.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to describe a SL programme implemented within the degree programmes at the University of Palermo during the academic year 2023/2024. The initiative forms part of a two-year university project spearheaded by the Centre for Innovation and Improvement of University Teaching (CIMDU). The

overarching objectives of the project are threefold: (a) to enhance the educational effectiveness of degree courses; (b) to foster active student involvement, thereby increasing motivation and promoting autonomy and self-awareness in their academic journeys; and (c) to support marginalised communities within the local area. SL emerges as an innovative pedagogical strategy that seamlessly integrates academic learning with community engagement. This approach directly connects theoretical knowledge with practical application, allowing students to partake in civic initiatives while cultivating reflective and critical thinking skills.

Particular attention will be given to the multilevel and transversal implemented evaluation system, emphasising its application in the master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences focused on ensuring a robust assessment of student performance, on the one hand, and the broader impacts of the SL initiative, on the other, while simultaneously enriching the students' professional preparation.

## **1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The 2021 UNESCO report, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, underscores education's transformative potential. It advocates for a paradigm shift in teaching and learning methodologies, rooted in collaboration, solidarity, and a model centred on care. The report proposes a comprehensive social contract that broadens the concept of citizenship, integrating civil society and fostering interdependence among knowledge systems, societal frameworks, and educational processes (Tarozzi & Milana, 2022). Within this framework, innovative methodologies such as SL play a pivotal role. By linking social and academic competencies, SL fosters active citizenship and addresses educational disparities through cooperative learning practices (Cinque et al., 2021).

In literature, there are more than 200 definitions of SL, each offering a unique nuance to the practice. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) define SL as an educational experience that combines academic learning and community service through a process of critical reflection. This allows students to gain a deeper understanding of disciplinary content, develop civic responsibilities, and appreciate the connection between theory and practice. In this way, the model is recognised for its transformative potential, offering authentic and meaningful learning opportunities that transcend barriers between social classes and cultural contexts. Definitions such as this help distinguish SL from other

experiential learning experiences, focusing on the mutual benefit for both students and communities. Through participatory design, communities become active partners in the educational process, rather than simply recipients of service. As Ferrari and Chapman (2014) point out, SL strengthens students' theoretical understanding by applying it practically, offering a holistic view of learning.

Grounded in experiential learning theories (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), SL fosters the cyclical interplay between concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This dynamic underpins the theoretical frameworks essential for integrating SL into academic curricula, facilitating a holistic development of students' personal, professional, and civic competencies. Additional theoretical lenses, including social-cognitive theory and cultural-historical activity theory, further underscore SL's capacity to merge pedagogical goals with societal needs (Carson & Raguse, 2014).

The multifaceted benefits of SL are evident across its key stakeholders:

- Communities benefit from enhanced social cohesion, targeted interventions, and sustainable problem-solving practices.
- Students develop critical thinking, teamwork, and professional skills, along with a heightened awareness of social responsibility.
- Academic staff and institutions gain opportunities to innovate teaching practices, engage in interdisciplinary research, and strengthen community-university partnerships (Salam et al., 2017).

## **2. REASONS FOR IMPLEMENTING SL AT THE MASTER'S DEGREE IN PEDAGOGICAL SCIENCES**

At the University of Palermo, SL represents a cornerstone of academic innovation, redefining the pedagogical relationship between universities and local communities. This approach is more than an instructional method; it is a transformative framework that reimagines curricula to align with the university's mission of fostering democratic citizenship and addressing societal challenges. Through SL, the university cultivates an environment of empowerment, encouraging students and educators to collaboratively engage in community-driven projects. It answers the call of the University that regards social responsibility as an integral part of its mission. SL, therefore, becomes a reflective practice for all involved, as immersion in the field is guided by an ongoing feedback loop of thought and action. This allows participants to see

themselves as part of a complex and interconnected reality.

This highlights the value dimension of SL, which does not merely interpret the university's third mission as a reciprocal relationship of service but enriches it by creating contexts that foster empowerment and the development of truly democratic cultures and practices.

Specifically for the degrees in Pedagogical Sciences, the literature emphasises the need to train professionals capable of exercising critical judgment and decision-making through complex processes: associating ideas, revisiting perspectives, reframing problems, and changing attitudes or behaviours. In this sense, educational action is always a *praxis*, a transformative knowledge-action aimed at fostering change through the creative implementation of purpose (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1978). This underscores the importance for professional pedagogists to develop reflective and creative competence, allowing them to question their assumptions and modify their approach in an informed and deliberate manner. From this perspective, it is crucial to avoid performance-driven approaches focused solely on technical rationality in the design, management, coordination, and monitoring of university training programmes for pedagogists. Instead, training should be grounded in solid epistemological, theoretical, and methodological foundations that respect the educational nature of their role. This entails moving away from what Biesta (2006) calls *learnification*, which reduces education to an individualistic process focused on producing performers within a competitive system, rather than fostering mutual recognition and promoting an inclusive, democratic society. From this perspective, the question of competence becomes central. Competence, understood as the ability to independently and responsibly manage one's knowledge and skills, must empower pedagogists to think of themselves as true professionals (Fioretti et al., 2023).

The University of Palermo's master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences SL, grounded in the rediscovery of ideas that have shaped pedagogical culture and its core values, offered an opportunity to place the university at the heart of pedagogical services and policies aimed at promoting social progress. It involved teachers and students in a teaching and learning process that challenges academic knowledge, making it more relevant and effective in addressing critical community needs: on the one hand, it integrated the theoretical and practical dimensions of learning through activities closely aligned with disciplinary content; on the other, it addressed a structural gap in the programme, which, in 2023-2024, lacked a mandatory curricular internship.

Fig. 1. An overview of the SL programme for the master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences

Subject	Target	Partner
<b>Special Pedagogy for Inclusion</b> (Prof. F. Pedone)	Design and implementation of socio-pedagogical services and interventions aimed at vulnerable people and those at high risk of marginalisation, especially children and young people with socio-cultural disadvantage, unaccompanied foreign minors and people with disabilities	Social Cooperative 'Libera... mente' (PA) Foudation 'MondoAltro' (AG)
<b>Foundation of educational research</b> (Proff. G. D'Addelfio, L. Romano, F. Alba)	Design and implementation of socio-pedagogical services and interventions aimed at non-EU immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers	'Centro Astalli' (PA)
<b>Teaching Methodology</b> (Prof. A. La Marca)	Design and implementation of services and interventions for the prevention of early school leaving and is aimed at students in schools of the first cycle of disadvantaged neighbourhoods	'Scuole a rischio' (PA)
<b>Family Psychology: Marginality and Deviance</b> (Prof. C. Novara)	Actions in support of the Family Space concerning the tasks of information/education/orientation of the couple to the services of the territory. The beneficiaries are the partners who apply to the court to initiate separation proceedings, to prevent the climate of tensions between the partners, which would also have repercussions on the children.	'Spazio Famiglie', (born from the Agreement between the SPPEFF Department and the Court of Palermo)
<b>Theories, Strategies and Systems of Education</b> (Prof. E. Mignosi)	Reading of picture books in the paediatrics wards of the Polyclinic and the Children's Hospital. hospitalised children between the ages of 2 and 10 who are not long-term patients	Paediatrics departments of the Polyclinic and Children's Hospital UNIPA Library Service

To ensure comprehensive SL implementation, it was adopted Musa and collaborators (2017) three-phase model:

- Project Planning, engaging stakeholders in co-creating objectives and methodologies.
- Service Delivery, facilitating hands-on, community-centred activities aligned with disciplinary content.
- Evaluation and Reflection, employing rigorous assessment tools to measure impact and facilitate continuous improvement.

During the 2023/2024 academic year, the programme encompassed the involvement of 120 students, five academic subjects, and six community stakeholders, underscoring the initiative's collaborative ethos.

### **3. THE EVALUATION SYSTEM**

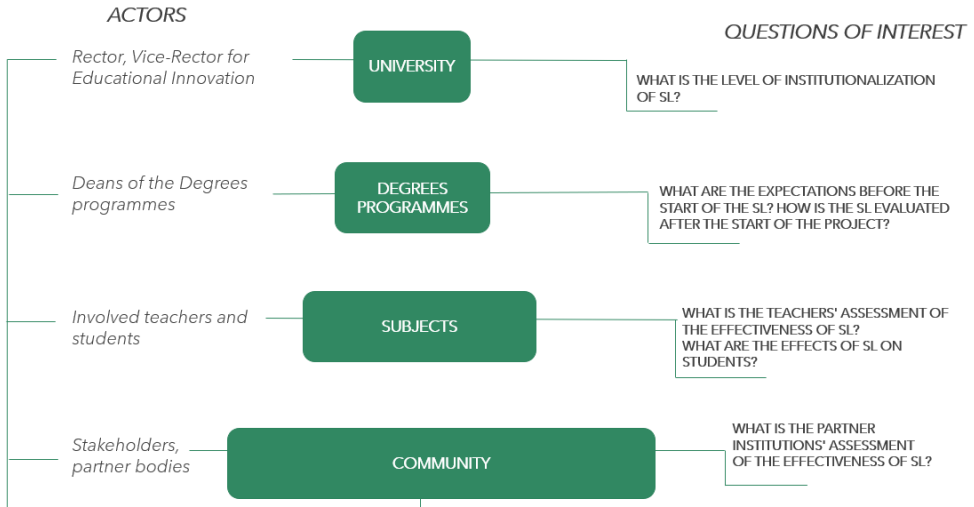
To position SL as a “new model of excellence” in higher education (Zlotkowski, 1998), it must be fully integrated into the university's evaluation processes. The evaluation of SL is crucial in ensuring its meaningful impact, both in terms of achieving learning objectives and contributing to educational innovation and the well-being of the involved communities.

Over two decades of research have shown that high-quality SL enhances student learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler et al., 2001). It is recognised that significant evaluation helps integrate SL into the debate about the quality of university education. It responds to concerns that universities do not adequately focus on skills that guarantee success beyond academia, such as critical thinking, real-world problem-solving, or the ability to transfer theoretical knowledge into practice. Substantial scientific evidence indicates that engaging in effective and rigorous reflection is key to enhancing the impact of SL. Reflections provide valuable insights into what students are learning, the depth of their learning, and how critically they engage with their experiences.

The evaluation system adopted for the entire project is multilevel and transversal: multilevel, as it applies simultaneously to the university, individual degree programmes, professors, students, and community partners; transversal, as it involves and monitors eight SL projects across eight different degree programmes over two years.



Fig. 2. The multilevel evaluation system and its questions of interest



The multilevel and transversal evaluation system employed in this project addresses the complexities of SL integration. At the institutional level, the SL Level Self-Assessment rubric (Furco, 1996) provided a structured analysis across five dimensions, facilitating continuous assessment of SL's institutionalisation:

- Philosophy and Mission of SL.
- Faculty Support and Engagement in SL.
- Student Support and Engagement in SL.
- Community Participation and Partnerships.
- Institutional Support for SL.

For academic staff, reflective journals and narrative notebooks served as tools for documenting pedagogical practices and identifying areas for improvement. Student evaluations combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Core tools included:

- Self-assessment protocols, encompassing the Soft Skills Scale (Lucisano & Rubat du Merac, 2019), the Self-Efficacy Scale (Di Nuovo & Magnano, 2013), and the Civic Commitment Scale (Doolittle & Faul, 2013).
- Reflective reports, guided by the DEAL model (Ash & Clayton, 2009), that structure critical reflection into descriptive, analytical, and interpretive phases.

- Logbooks, optional self-reflection tools facilitating introspection on activities, methodologies, and interpersonal dynamics.

For community partners, semi-structured interviews and collective self-efficacy scales provided insights into the SL initiative's broader impacts.

Collaborative efforts with organisations such as Rai per il Sociale further amplify the initiative's reach, developing a learning machine tool to analyse video reels that students shared on the University's social media to document their experience.

#### **4. IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS**

The analysis of data from the first year of the project is ongoing. The aim is to collect feedback that will improve the quality of SL and enhance student learning. Increasing SL evaluation is expected to focus attention on assessments that better measure competencies needed for success outside the academic environment.

To foster interdisciplinary collaboration and community partner engagement, a SL Working Group (G.L.S.L.) has been established. This group aims to:

- Strengthen communication between project participants and local communities.
- Implement advanced monitoring and evaluation tools.
- Promote interdisciplinary collaboration across different degree programmes.

The G.L.S.L. also aims to create a stable network of community partners and integrate digital technologies for documenting and sharing experiences, facilitating real-time feedback and creating digital archives of activities.

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# IT IS INTERPROFESSIONAL TEAMWORKS IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT: SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS IN THE EMPOLI AREA BETWEEN FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

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This research explored Service-Learning (SL) within Indire’s “Avanguardie Educative” Movement by focusing on the setting up of interprofessional teams in the implementation of SL projects, in order to explore the modes of interaction and understand the added value of collaboration in the school-territory connection through the practice defined by this educational framework. During the period 2020-2023, the Indire team supported SL pathway co-design in schools in the Empoli area, examining impacts on students, teachers, and no-formal educators with qualitative tools used in three project stages – initial, ongoing, final – to collect data for analysis. Findings suggest formal education can benefit from collaboration with non-formal education experts, enhancing professional skills, motivation, and community climate. However, successful implementation requires a shared commitment to didactic and organizational innovation in the school context.

interprofessionalism; service research; research-training; Service-Learning

## INTRODUCTION

The research focused on Service-Learning (SL) within the context of Indire’s “Avanguardie Educative” (AE) Movement. It investigated and analysed educational experiences across the national territory, supported by a comprehensive literature review (Orlandini, Chipa & Giunti, 2020). Since 2014, the enhancement of the Movement’s idea “Dentro/fuori la scuola – Service

learning” has promoted educational and organisational innovation, by the ongoing dialogue between research group and participating schools (Orlandini & Lotti, 2023). Specifically, the evolution of the “Dentro/fuori la scuola – Service Learning” idea has strengthened collaboration between the INDIRE research team and school communities involved in the AE movement. This collaboration adopts a ‘service research’ perspective, utilizing data to inform decision-making processes in educational practice (Mortari, 2017) and aiming for innovation within the SL framework.

During the school years 2020/21 to 2022/23, the Indire research team supported a codesign process of SL pathways in some schools in the Empoli area and explored the perceptions of students, teachers and no-formal educators throughout the design and implementation of SL activities. The main project of which this activity was a part focused on the Service-Learning (SL) approach in the collaboration between schools and the Third Sector, that included both an investigation into interprofessional dialogue and the institutionalization of SL in the schools’ vision. Qualitative instruments used to describe relationship between teachers and no-formal educators were developed from the interprofessional dimensions of the PINCOM-Q framework (Ødegård, 2006; Hynek et al., 2020), from “la forme scolaire” (Maulini & Perrenoud 2005) and from the identity elements of the SL (Furco, 1996; Tapia, 2006; Lotti & Orlandini, 2022). Even if the INDIRE analysis was organized into four thematic areas – Teachers-Educators relationship, School-Territory dialogue, Transformative value of SL and School Governance – this paper presents some reflections on collected data regarding interprofessional dynamics between formal education teachers and no-formal education educators.

The research questions guided this research study include:

- How can Schools and the Third Sector build an educational relationship that goes beyond a utilitarian approach? What is the role of the third sector?
- What is the added value for schools? What expertise can the third sector put at the service of schools to build quality educational pathways?
- How can schools review their organization in relation to constructive dialogue with the local area and the third sector?

## 1. THE PROJECT

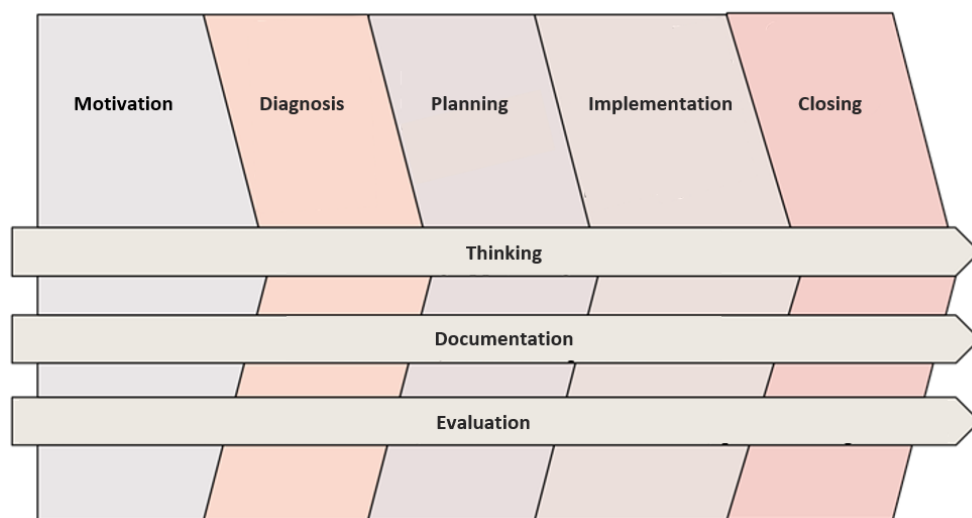
To answer at these questions a research agreement was signed between Indire and CO&SO Empoli, a consortium that aggregates social enterprises from the Empoli-Valdelsa territory, Lower Valdarno and beyond. The research agreement aimed to start a dialogue with the proposing Third Sector towards school institutions by disseminating SL in the territory of reference and creating interprofessional teams that, after an initial training phase on the approach by Indire, implement the projects within the 4 schools involved. The schools involved are IC 'F. Sacchetti' of San Miniato; IC 'Baccio da Montelupo of Montelupo Fiorentino; IC Capraia and Limite; IS 'F. Enriques' of Castelfiorentino. The students involved in the project belonged to primary and secondary school. In these contexts, the INDIRE research group implemented a research-training initiative to test how SL can support teachers in building an intentionally co-designed relationship between schools and their communities. This was achieved through interprofessional teams composed of formal education teachers and no-formal education educators, with active student participation.

Activities began in March 2021 with an initial outreach phase dedicated to schools in the area, following which four educational institutions signed up: three comprehensive schools and one secondary school. Starting in April 2021, INDIRE's team of researchers launched a training activity for no-formal educators from the COeSO Empoli Consortium who would work alongside the schools in designing the SL pathways. Four working groups composed of the schools' teachers, two no-formal educators and an INDIRE researcher were, therefore, structured. The researcher mainly acted as an observer of the relational dynamics within the group and as a guide for both formal education teachers and no-formal education educators, with respect to the identity elements of SL. The initial training actions allowed for the construction of a common vision and shared language on SL, making explicit its values and frameworks that guide its educational action in the 21st century school. At the same time, the research team facilitated the emergence of the training needs of schools, teachers, and no-formal educators in relation to the approach. Beginning in September 2021, training activities involved teachers from participating schools with in-person meetings (common to all schools) and online meetings dedicated to co-design, meetings during which no-formal educators moderated and coordinated interactions, intervening in relation to the needs of individual work groups. No-formal educators also took part in the activities carried out with students, providing teachers with professionalism and

specific skills. During the period December 2021-April 2022, schools were supported by no-formal educators and INDIRE researchers in the implementation of the pathways with online and in-person appointments aimed at guiding the design of the pathways. In addition, at the conclusion of the execution phase, a final event was organized for the presentation to the public of what the schools and no-formal educators had achieved.

The activities and their implementation were planned in accordance with the implementation phases of a SL project. For one to be able to speak of SL furthermore, it is necessary to consider those cross-cutting processes that in the project described here were particularly useful in defining the tools and the timing of administration to those involved (Figure 1).

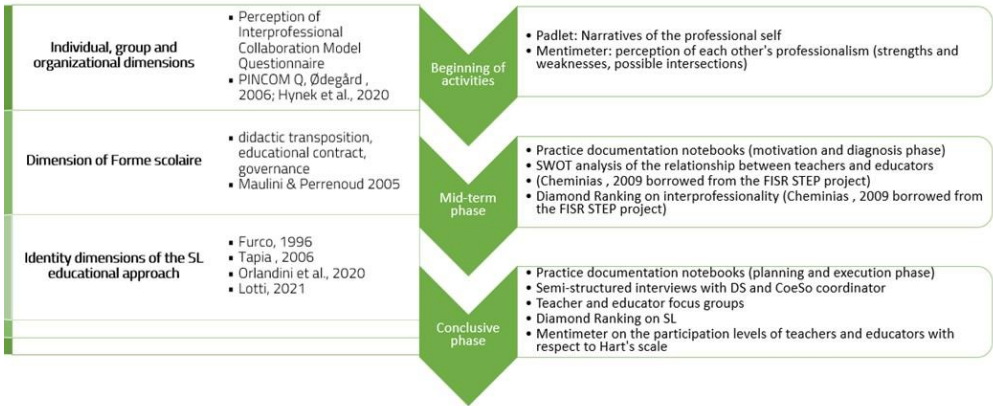
Figure 1 – SL pathway, derived from CLAYSS (Tapia, 2006)



The INDIRE analysis was based on tools designed on several dimensions deduced from specific frameworks. The tools were used at different stages of the research project: initial, ongoing, and final (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Survey programme: tools for stages



For the framework INDIRE recognized substantial importance to the perception of interprofessional collaboration, school transposition, and institutionalization of SL within the school. From the data, information was collected for four thematic areas: teachers-educators relationship, school-territory dialogue, transformative value of SL, and school governance. The framework made it possible to think about and construct tools designed for the professional figures involved in the project, no-formal educators, teachers, and school leaders, but also to investigate the perceptions of students involved in SL activities.

## 2. RESULTS

In this contribution, some results concerning interprofessionalism between teachers and no-formal educators involved in the project are returned. In particular, this work presents the analysis of the instruments submitted in three moments of the SL paths – initial: group training padlet; ongoing: diamond SL; final: SWOT on interprofessionalism – from the results of which it emerges how formal education can benefit from the collaboration with professional figures expert in non-formal education in terms of consolidation of professional skills, motivation and climate in the educating community, but also needs a shared will for didactic and organisational innovation.

The data collected through the instruments used in the three topical moments (start-up phase, intermediate phase, and final phase) allow us to observe the elements qualifying the transformative value of Service Learning both on the individual level of the professionals involved and on the collective level. What emerged from the longitudinal analysis among the data from the instruments of

the three phases allows us to appreciate the transformations initiated in educational practice and in the relationship with other professional figures and with the referents of specific realities present in the territory. On the collective level, there has been a shift from the initial confrontation on the methodological closure and the lack of professional collaboration of teachers (as well as on the lack of knowledge of school organization on the part of no-formal educators) to the professional recognition of the intermediate phase, in which the no-formal educator is seen as a mediator in relations with students and the territory, and finally to the reflection on the transposition of professional skills in the final phase. Reflection on the individual level has also led to greater openness to active methodologies and recognition of the value of soft skills even to the benefit of curricular ones.

Teachers note in their documentation notebooks an effective renewal of teaching and learning practices that allows them to move beyond transmissive teaching, proposing experiences in which students are personally involved, as well as discussions among colleagues and with educators in the active management of class groups. The educators' reflections confirm the change of attitude of teachers who, thanks to the SL pathway, have opened to the active involvement of students and recognized their professionalism in the context of formal education. In addition, in the SL pathways implemented, teachers and educators share experiences, plan activities, confront each other and make available their specificities and skills within the working group, actively building a professional community based on the sharing of the approach's own values, relationship, dialogue and mutual and equal exchange. The development of the projects through inter-professional dialogue in the various phases and transversal processes of the SL pathway has allowed the transition from extemporaneousness, functionality and emergency response to a school-territory connection of a programmatic and systemic type (De Bartolomeis, 1983)

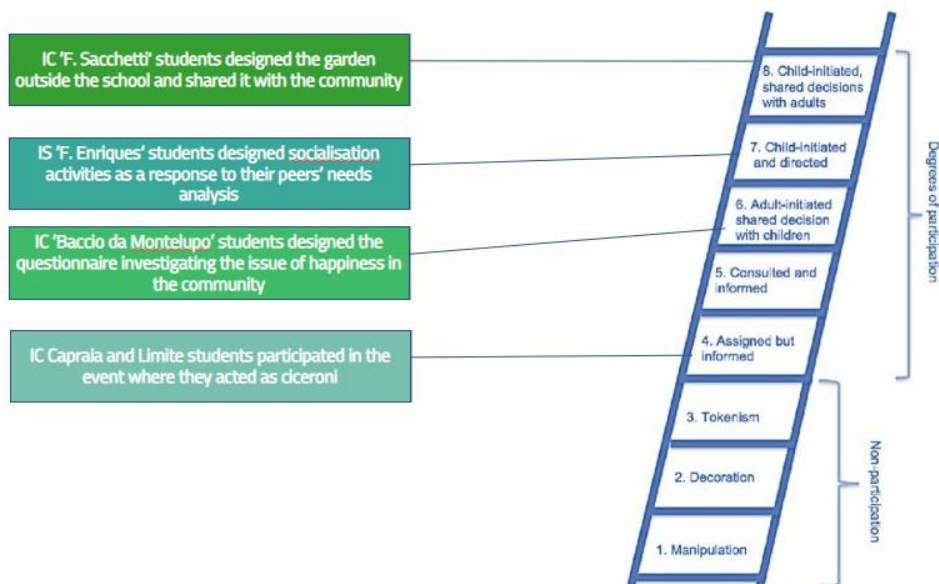
Teachers acknowledged the valuable role of educators in organizing activities that fostered inclusive participation, strengthened interpersonal bonds, and mitigated internal conflicts and frustrations within student groups, as well as among teachers themselves. They support and structure active participation of students such as:

- circle time, drama and brainstorming activities to facilitate the students' reflection process,
- workshop activities (in and out of school) for the realization of artefacts

- administration of interviews and questionnaires in the community,
- participative Agora as places for the exercise of democracy and decision-making on project development.

The informal approach to educational relationships enabled no-formal educators to establish more authentic connections with student groups, thereby facilitating the engagement of students who are typically more insecure or withdrawn. However, the varying degrees of involvement in the interprofessional dialogue of the four groups and, above all, the differing ability or willingness to modify and innovate didactics and the organization of the school context in relation to the territory also led to varying degrees of student protagonism. Referring to the participation scale (Hart, 2008), the analysis of the data reveals a progression from being informed and invested with a role – IC Capraia e Limite – to planning and operational sharing- [IC ‘F. Sacchetti’ – (Figure 3)].

Figure 3 – The paths of the 4 schools in relation to the degree of student participation



## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the no-formal educator initially assumed the role of scaffolding, i.e., supporting and sustaining the teaching staff in approaching and appropriating the identity and distinctive elements of Service Learning (or

Supportive Service Learning, inspired by the pedagogical trends of Place-based education that propose a link between learning and everyday life, tying basic skills with soft skills and ethical values) as a teaching staff previously trained on the educational approach. Despite this difference in roles, during the planning period, both professional groups understood that participation in the project represented an opportunity for growth. It was thus possible to hybridize formal learning paths with modalities and activities from the context more properly related to non-formal and informal learning, mainly managed by educators. The no-formal educators, moreover, stated that the significance of participation in the course is determined by the possibility of understanding the mechanisms of operation of educational institutions (with all the constraints and opportunities that characterize them). At the same time, the experience represents a moment to reflect on the meaning and significance of one's professionalism within a broader professional system, to understand the contribution that each person, in his or her specificity, is able to offer in the construction of meaningful learning paths for students.

### **Acknowledgements**

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# THE CONTRIBUTION OF SERVICE LEARNING TO COUNTER EDUCATIONAL POVERTY. THE EXPERIENCES OF THE “AVANGUARDIE EDUCATIVE” MOVEMENT

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The paper presents some educational experiences in countering educational poverty developed within the Movement “Avanguardie Educative (AE) under the Idea “Inside-Outside-School – Service Learning” (SL). The SL makes it possible to design educational experiences in real-life contexts, fostering participation and motivation to study, the acquisition of knowledge, disciplinary skills, soft skills and active citizenship. The actions are the result of co-design pathways that result in activities aimed at achieving learning and service objectives by fostering participation in the pathways by the school and the external community. In this context, SL experiences contribute to combating educational poverty, a construct defined in this article according to the four dimensions proposed by “Save the Children”.

educational poverty; service learning; school-community relation

## INTRODUCTION

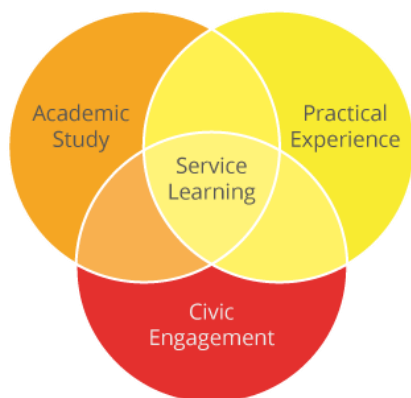
This paper presents some educational experiences in countering educational poverty developed within the “Avanguardie educative” (AE) Movement as part of the Idea “Inside-Outside-School – Service Learning.” The Idea uses the educational approach of Service Learning (SL) as a framework for developing learning pathways that connect the school with the external context and community (Orlandini et al., 2020). AE is a network of innovative schools being researched by INDIRE with the aim of studying how teaching and organizational changes may be implemented within a school and mainstreamed to other schools (Laici & Orlandini, 2016). 1568 Italian Schools involved in AE “adopting” at least 2 of 16 ideas for innovation included in a “Gallery of Ideas for

Innovation”. 241 Italian Schools in AE choose SL as innovative approach to change and innovate education at school.

In the spirit of AE, which promotes bottom-up experiences of innovation and transformation of the traditional school model, SL pathways are instrumental in preventing and combating educational poverty through activities guided by a pedagogical and value-driven vision that enable students to act within the community.

SL enables the design of educational experiences in real-life contexts, fostering participation and motivation for study, the acquisition of knowledge, disciplinary competencies, soft skills, and active citizenship, and allows the community to achieve benefits (McIlrath et al., 2016; Tapia, 2010) in terms of developing services, activities, and solutions to emerging problems (Figure 1).

Figure 1.



The actions are therefore the outcome of co-design pathways that result in activities aimed at achieving learning and service objectives (Tapia, 2006). With respect to the issue of educational poverty (Nuzzacci et al., 2020), SL encourages participation in the pathways by the school (students and teachers) and the external community; in relation to this, this educational approach has been used by some educational institutions (Chipa et al, 2021) as a pedagogy for countering the various emergencies that emerged with the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2022), at a time when conditions of material deprivation have been compounded by cultural deprivation (Save the Children, 2018; 2020) due to school closures and difficult access to educational activities.

According to Save the Children’s (2018) definition, the construct of educational

poverty is represented by four operational dimensions, with respect to which it is possible to identify the contribution of SL as an approach and as a concrete experience through what the AE Movement schools have developed.

The first dimension, Learning to be, highlights the personal development aspect of education, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and resilience. This dimension is strongly linked to SL, as this approach not only fosters intrinsic motivation but also enhances individuals' sense of self-efficacy. Through engaging in real-world problem-solving activities, students learn to navigate and manage difficult and stressful situations effectively, equipping them with the emotional and psychological tools needed for lifelong growth and adaptability (De Pietro, 2019). The second dimension, Learning to understand, focuses on building the cognitive and analytical skills required to grasp the complexities of the modern world. SL connects deeply with this dimension through its foundation as a pedagogy of reality, where learning is rooted in authentic, experiential contexts. This methodology encourages students to develop the competencies needed to address contemporary challenges critically and creatively, fostering a deeper understanding of their environment and society (Lotti & Orlandini, 2022). The third dimension, Learning to live together, underscores the value of social cohesion and collaboration in a diverse and interconnected world. SL corresponds to this dimension by promoting a pedagogy of cooperation and solidarity, where participants actively engage in teamwork, empathetic dialogue, and collective problem-solving. These experiences contribute significantly to the development of soft skills—such as communication, leadership, and adaptability—and social skills, including empathy, cultural sensitivity, and conflict resolution (Mendía, 2017; Gregorová et al., 2016). By fostering meaningful connections with others, SL helps students understand the importance of living harmoniously within diverse communities, while also building a sense of global citizenship (UNESCO, 2022). Finally, the fourth dimension, Learning to lead an autonomous and active life focuses on empowering individuals to take responsibility for their own lives and actively contribute to their communities. SL aligns closely with this dimension by creating opportunities for participants to perceive themselves as agents of change and social improvement. Through collaborative projects addressing the specific needs of target areas, SL cultivates a sense of empowerment and civic responsibility, encouraging individuals to take initiative and actively shape their social and cultural environments (Zlotkowski, 2007). By bridging personal growth with community impact, SL enables learners to lead autonomous,



purpose-driven, and engaged lives.

In this article the four operational dimensions will guide the analysis of the experiences presented, which, moreover, have been developed from the needs of the reference context in continuity with the characterizing elements of SL (Tapia, 2006; Furco, 1996; Orlandini et al., 2020), fostering the “virtuous circle” (Tapia, 2006) between learning and service.

## **1. THE SCHOOLS OF THE AE MOVEMENT AND THE SERVICE LEARNING**

During the last few years, the INDIRE research team has observed and documented some experiences of SL where the didactic actions meet the communities’ needs developing a sense of belonging to the local area and helping students strengthen disciplinary and life skills.

The need to open the school to the territorial context including the weakest elements of the population leads the experiences of ISIS Europa di Pomigliano d’Arco, small town near Naples, and IC Amerigo Vespucci of Vibo Marina.

The socio-economic context, in which ISIS “Europa” in Pomigliano d’Arco is located, is characterized as fragile and the community is characterized by phenomena of deep disaffection and distrust of public operators and, above all, by the deep-rooted belief in the impossibility of changing conditions that are not conducive to the full development of the individual. In this context, the SL experience aimed to strengthen the relationship between schools and institutions by consolidating the role of students as active citizens. The project with the support of Junior Achievement (the world’s largest nonprofit organization that prepares young people for entrepreneurship and their future employment) enabled the creation of the Academy Europa Community Service – a business school organized and self-managed by students in the fifth grades – which, in a learning organization perspective, provides telematics services to citizens of the municipality. The Covid-19 health emergency resulted in a rethinking of the Europa Community Service project by taking the activities of the Public Relations Office from presence to online. Students were able to replace the in-person citizen support function with the programming and implementation of a chatbot, an instant messaging service (the term chatbot comes from the union of two words: chat and robot) that can offer user assistance by providing answers and solutions to users without waiting time. Overall, the experience fostered the development of respect for others and critical thinking, which is essential to counter stereotypes and prejudices. In particular, the SL action has enabled the increase of a sense of social and

democratic responsibility by creating more moments of relationship with others, fostering individual growth and social inclusion through collaboration and sharing experiences.

The SL experience of the IC “Amerigo Vespicci of Vibo Marina (VV) was born from a careful analysis and reading of the territory that is affected by a continuous flow of migrants. The SL paths “Migrants are not a danger, but they are in danger” and “When integration becomes an opportunity and learning” (which involved young people from the secondary school) were born with the aim of forming citizens capable of participating in a conscious way in the construction of complex communities, developing in children curiosity for the world by valuing ‘other’ cultures and creating educational situations in which pupils can be protagonists of their own growth by focusing on educational models different from the traditional ones. The SL experience aimed to educate pupils in the values of active citizenship and the development of the social dimension. The SL action therefore took the form of an intercultural path with the aim of developing respect for the other and critical thinking, the latter being indispensable to counter stereotypes and prejudices. The reception in the school community of young migrants who landed in the port of Vibo Marina, and the recounting of their experiences gave rise to a cultural exchange involving not only students but also families by initiating a path of inclusion of migrants in the social fabric and a reflection by students on cultural differences and similarities. At the same time, the experiences of the schools in Lucca and Acireale (CT) allowed them to consolidate and leverage local knowledge to develop civic and prosocial skills through the creation and management of a tourist information center for the city of Lucca, organized guided tours and developed content for audio guides and websites and a digital InfoPoint to enhance the city and to promote virtuous behavior that respects the environment and cultural traditions.

The “Pertini Tourist InfoPoint” route is configured as an SL experience thanks to which the school opens to the territory by integrating its educational organization for the benefit of visitors, tour operators and citizenship. Since September 2015, students from “Pertini” (address “Tourism”) have been carrying out daily reception activities at the “Pertini Tourist InfoPoint,” the Tourist Information and Reception Office near the train station in Lucca. The goal was to implement a continuous model of SL, not limited only to the times set aside for curricular activities but also extending outside of them (e.g., during holidays or during the summer recess period), to foster learning that – in

addition to being authentic – was permanent. The project also had an important spin-off on the citizenship education plan by fostering education on the value of places and the recognition of Cultural Heritage as the shared heritage of the community by supporting the development of specific skills the active participation of students.

Considering that the city of Acireale did not provide a tourist information service and no information material on artistic heritage was available in the area, the “Giovanni XXIII” Comprehensive Institute started an SL path with all the classes of the Institute in which the area was used as an open-air laboratory. The project created a digital info point capable of providing information material on the city and its artistic and environmental heritage while also promoting ways of using the territory that respect the environment and local traditions. In addition, the school’s website is decent becomes a repository of content and hosts, in a dedicated section, an online shop where it is possible to purchase products of local crafts. In this way, the project has contributed to fostering the active participation of students, families, and the community in the school’s action as an educating community by developing the ability in students to make choices and develop autonomy, awareness, and a sense of responsibility, and ensuring the centrality of the student and teamwork.

The SL opens to the care of weak portions of the population as in the case of the IC “Caniana” di Bergamo in which students collaborated with elderly people and refugees, providing their expertise in developing self-narratives and the activities of the CI of Villa d’Almè (BG) where the school implements SL paths with local voluntary associations, selected based on themes and problems identified by the students.

The IS “Caniana” curriculum includes an educational pathway that allows students to learn about the justice system through the places and specific professionalities, as well as to simulate professional situations related to the world of justice. In this formative context, the students posed the problem of how to help society overcome the cinematic stereotypes and social stigma that characterize the representations of prison reality and incarcerated persons in the social imagination. The students worked on the idea of the narrative of the prison condition made by incarcerated people by translating it into images to create a desire to go beyond the stereotype in people who are unfamiliar with prison environments and “rehabilitation” paths.

In the IC Villa d’Almè, students’ reflection and interests also guided the design and implementation of SL projects. The activities promoted by the school’s

students range from visits to the RSA, to the collection of food, clothing or toys for the association that takes care of families in poverty, from the time bank to be dedicated to adults with disabilities to exhibitions of various products (seedlings grown in recycled pots, ecological cleaning products, various handicrafts...) to raise funds for the activities of associations identified by the pupils, with the support of the Parents' Committee. All these activities offer pupils the opportunity to experience, as protagonists, forms of participation and active citizenship, meeting the needs of the local context.

The focus on social engagement as a guide for service learning activities is also present in the "DopoSocioScuolaPuntoevirgola" project at ISIS in Follonica (GR) where a class from the vocational address composed of subjects with low self-esteem and insufficient sense of self-efficacy set up a dedicated classroom within the school itself an after-school service that would help families in the management of children and young people beyond school hours and support them in studying and homework. The vocational students oversaw every step of the way from setting up the classroom to implementing the after-school service and evaluating the impact on the community and the enjoyment of the activity offered. The project represented an opportunity for the students of the Follonica school to practice the knowledge learned in the classroom and to present themselves to the territory by showing their human and professional skills, to perceive themselves as adequate, prepared, and useful for the community they belong to.

The experience of the "Scialoja-Cortese" primary school in Naples is also located in a peripheral territorial context characterized by degradation and abandonment. The SL project involved pupils in activities to redevelop urban areas and renovate some of the school's environments by focusing on social, inclusive issues and respect for the environment and the historical, artistic and cultural heritage that led to the re-appropriation of their roots.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

If learning articulated around the four directions of UNESCO aims to rethink educational processes, it must prioritize giving students an active role in their own learning journey. This shift is essential for consolidating not only disciplinary competencies but also crucial life skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and adaptability. In this context, Service-Learning (SL) offers a robust theoretical and practical framework to achieve these objectives. By engaging students in co-design processes based on real,

tangible, and felt issues within their communities, SL ensures meaningful involvement and participation. This approach not only strengthens students' connection to their learning but also fosters a deeper sense of belonging to their community and civic identity. This approach is particularly important for tackling educational poverty, as emerge by the experiences, as it provides all students with equitable opportunities to acquire essential skills and to actively engage in their communities, counteracting systemic barriers that limit access to quality education.

A key feature of SL is the integration of constant reflection throughout its various phases—design, planning, implementation, and closure. This reflective practice plays a dual role in enhancing the learning experience. First, it facilitates students' awareness of the specific competency goals they are achieving, enabling them to track their growth in both academic and personal dimensions. Second, it fosters a sense of self-efficacy by helping students recognize their own capacity to make meaningful contributions, both within their educational journey and as active participants in social and civic life.

By intertwining action with reflection, SL cultivates a transformative learning process that goes beyond the classroom. It encourages students to view themselves not merely as recipients of knowledge but as empowered agents of change capable of addressing real-world challenges. This dynamic process bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, reinforcing a holistic development that aligns with UNESCO's vision of education for sustainable development, global citizenship, and lifelong learning. Ultimately, SL equips learners with the tools and mindset to navigate their future roles as informed, engaged, and responsible citizens in a rapidly evolving world.

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# BEST PRACTICES FROM THE ENHANCE PROJECT

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This contribution reports one of the lines of research undertaken by the Erasmus+ project, called “ENHANCE – Enhancing Career and Service Learning in Higher Education”<sup>1</sup>, which involved 6 universities, a research center for career guidance, an IT company specialized in career guidance platforms. Among the various project initiatives, the project investigated the learning impact of Service Learning experiences through a collection of testimonies from university students who had experienced it. In particular, an attempt was made to map some significant SL best practices.

Service Learning; Career Management skills; Third Mission; Student Centered; Didactics.

## CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION CHALLENGES

The 2024 Report on the Status of Implementations of the Bologna Process identifies dropout rates as an unresolved challenge to achieving a fully inclusive and accessible European Higher Education Area. Addressing this problem implies the need to find solutions that ensure the promotion of equity, particularly for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. This challenge opens a deep reflection on the need to increase the flexibility of learning pathways and improve student support services and recognition of learning pathways aiming at the development of recognition and validation systems through micro-credentials. Tirana Communication also stresses the importance of flexible learning pathways and student-centered approaches as key strategies to combat academic disengagement. The Communique pushes

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<sup>1</sup> Erasmus+ project – ENHANCE – Enhancing Career and Service Learning in Higher Education 2021-1-ES01 KA220-HED-000031128



the education system toward innovative teaching methods introduced with digital transformation to address, both structural and individual barriers that contribute to dropout rates. The Bologna Process and the Tirana Communiqué recognize the importance of innovative teaching methodologies and the need for higher education institutions to adapt to the changing demands of the global landscape (Blandford et al., 2015). Both documents reveal a clear direction toward learning frameworks in which academic engagement and interdisciplinary collaboration become essential components in modern curricula. The expected impact of this push in universities points not only to innovation in educational offerings but also to gathering and transferring societal needs into learning processes (Wray-Lake et al., 2017). This alignment aims to prepare students for successful career paths and also promotes a renewed lifelong civic engagement (Zaff et al., 2011). By fostering a sense of belonging and community through service-learning, educational institutions can help mitigate these challenges and promote higher retention rates among students (Hawke et al., 2018). In this context, numerous studies show that students who participate in SL programs are more likely to complete their academic journey (Hope & Jagers, 2014), particularly underrepresented and marginalized groups, who often face additional barriers to academic success (Metzger et al., 2016).

## **THE BENEFITS OF SERVICE LEARNING IN HE**

Service Learning (SL) is an innovative pedagogical paradigm that synergistically integrates academic learning with community service, promoting holistic development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills in university students (Bringle et al., 2016). This methodology is based on the principle of reciprocity, generating a virtuous cycle of learning and social impact that benefits both students and the community. SL transcends traditional dichotomies in educational contexts, overcoming the distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and between curricular and life skills (Felten & Clayton, 2011). Its distinctive features include organic integration with the academic curriculum, structured reflection, systematic collaboration with community partners, significant project duration, and reciprocity between students and community. Effective implementation of SL in the university context requires strategic planning and systematic institutionalization (Jacoby, 2015). SL is situated within the conceptual framework of lifelong learning and lifelong guidance (Barnett, 2018), it contributes to lifelong learning by promoting active and self-directed learning, developing transferable skills, critical reflection on

experiences, and cognitive adaptability. This integration creates a dynamic educational ecosystem that prepares students to face the challenges of an evolving world (Hora et al., 2020). SL offers multiple benefits that extend beyond the academic sphere, positively influencing the personal, professional, and civic development of university students, as well as higher education institutions and the community at large (Holsapple & Brush, 2019). SL plays a crucial role in promoting civic engagement, contributing to the formation of aware and responsible citizens. Benefits include increased social and political awareness, development of a sense of civic responsibility, greater participation in community activities, in-depth understanding of social issues, and advanced ability to critically analyze complex problems (Whitley & Walsh, 2014). SL fosters the development of essential transversal skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving, effective communication, teamwork, leadership, empathy, and adaptability. These skills enrich students' professional profiles and contribute to their personal development (Celio et al., 2011). The adoption of SL in universities catalyzes the creation of innovative relationships with the local community, transforming academic institutions into "Profigurative Centers for Intergenerational Training" (Tapia et al., 2016). This approach generates multiple benefits: more relevant research oriented to community needs, greater visibility and social impact of universities, creation of lasting collaboration networks with local organizations, opportunities for social innovation and entrepreneurship, and improved public perception of higher education (Bringle & Clayton, 2020).

In conclusion, SL represents a transformative educational approach that bridges the gap between academia and community, fostering holistic student development and contributing to social progress. Its implementation requires careful planning and institutional commitment, but the benefits for students, universities, and communities are substantial and far-reaching.

## **IDENTIFYING BEST PRACTICES IN THE ENHANCE PROJECT**

The project "ENHANCE – Enhancing Career and Service Learning in Higher Education" aims to develop an innovative Community Service Learning (CSL) approach through educational tools and digital resources. This system promotes student's self-awareness, empathy, communication skills, and cultural awareness, enabling them to acquire social skills applicable to everyday life. CSL is also seen as a key element in improving career guidance and academic tutoring, as it helps students master the information they learn,

improve their academic performance, and become more involved in academic life. The project aims to integrate CSL into tutoring and career services of the partner universities, using micro-credentials to certify learning outcomes.

### Methodology

The methodology used within the project is based on the participatory action research approach, which allows different theories and perspectives to be brought together with the aim of developing an integrated, practice-oriented learning model. This process actively involved students, universities, and local communities in the planning and implementation of activities. The tools used included moments of reflection based on the storytelling strategy, which enabled the students to develop critical reflection and storytelling skills about their learning experiences. In particular, the project examined the impact of SL on learning through the collection of testimonies of university students from partner universities. The sample analyzed is to be considered a collection of best practices, and was carried out following a snowball approach. The project partners contacted some students who had had SL or similar experiences, and who through peer-to-peer networking contacted other students with similar experiences.

Tab. 1. Interview sample and country of origin. Source: (ENHANCE Project)

Sample	n. Student	Country
	6	Spain
	6	Italy
	6	Turkey
	6	Greece
	6	Romania
Total	32 <sup>2</sup>	

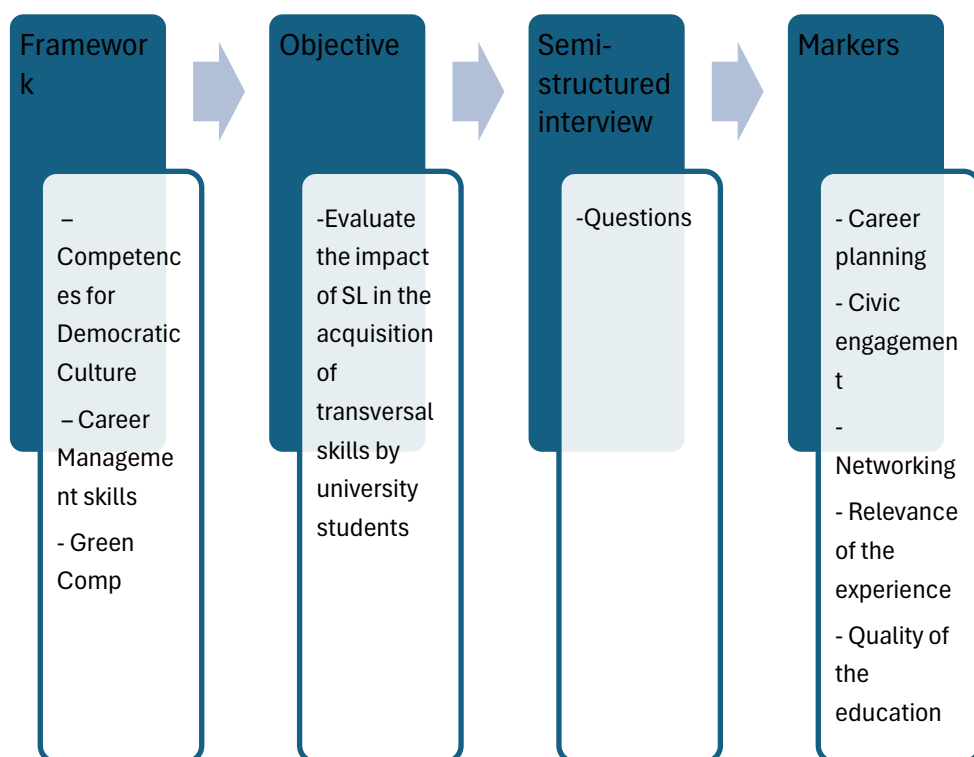
Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews administered to the selected students. The main objective of the investigation was to understand the correlation between SL experiences and student learning outcomes. Therefore, the interviews were structured from the theoretical frameworks such as the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFDCDC)

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<sup>2</sup> The sample analyzed is not to be considered significant.

(Council of Europe, 2013), Career Management Skills (ELPGN, 2015), and the Green Comp (Bianchi, Pisiotis, & Cabrera Giraldez, 2022), with the aim of detecting the transversal competences acquired by the students after their SL experience.

Tab. 2. Process of constructing and analyzing interviews. Source: ENHANCE Project.



The qualitative analysis of the interviews content was carried out with Atlas.it software through document coding, which allows for a set of procedures based on textual data. The indicators that led the analysis process were deduced from the areas investigated and concerned the skills acquired, the value attributed to the experience in terms of career planning, the development of civic engagement and a sustainable mindset, networking opportunities, the significance of the experience in relation to the course of study and the quality of the training offered.

## **SURVEY RESULTS**

The findings indicate that structured SL programs within universities are virtually non-existent. Students reported practices that could potentially be recognised as SL, but these lack a formal framework. The most common activities within the university involve student associations, event committees or similar initiatives. It should be noted that professors themselves often promote these experiences to their students, during classroom lectures, but there is no more structured organisational support for the dissemination and recognition of these experiences. While, as far as experiences outside the university context are concerned, these mainly involve voluntary associations. It is important to note that these activities are not always formally recognised.

Regarding the skills acquired during these experiences, Table 3 presents some testimonies from the interviews. Students reported using these experiences as opportunities to reflect on their professional paths. In some cases, they gained insight into potential workplaces where they could apply their knowledge, while in others, they re-evaluated their academic journey, discovering new interests and professions they had not previously considered. For example, the experience led students to consider the possibility of continuing their studies, to confirm their choice of academic course or to decide further training steps. With regard to the transversal skills acquired, the results mainly highlight interpersonal skills. SL experiences allowed students to challenge themselves in different situations from those they are used to, promoting adaptability and problem-solving skills. Development of these skills is valuable in dealing with the dynamic and ever-changing demands of personal and professional contexts. In addition, results indicate that some students from science and technical fields (STEAM) emphasized how the SL experience enabled them to develop civic commitment skills that they would not otherwise have encountered. In addition, emotional intelligence skills were frequently mentioned, highlighting their pervasive presence in the various SL situations the students encountered. emotional intelligence skills were always at the core, despite different contexts, roles, functions or academic backgrounds. The experiences reported by the students took place in challenging contexts that pushed them into situations of personal and professional challenge. However, these experiences allowed them to experiment, develop new skills and deal with failure in a protected and accessible environment where they could reflect on the experience as a formative moment. In addition, these experiences allowed students to engage with different professionals and working environments. These opportunities facilitated networking, both with peers and with

organizations operating in the local area, even when not directly related to the university context or their specific field of study.

Tab. 3. Main results from the students' interviews. Source: (ENHANCE Project)

Main results	Quotes
Reflection on their professional paths	<p>"I think that if I had not had this experience, I would not have decided to study for a doctorate or to continue with higher studies" (M.M.).</p> <p>"It gave me a lot of strength to continue with special education" (E.A.).</p> <p>"It helped me to choose my master's program" (V.M).</p>
Interpersonal skills	<p>"I improved my ability to communicate effectively with people with autism" (E.).</p> <p>"I improved my organizational and teamwork skills, which are essential for navigating complex and collaborative environments" (M.K.).</p>
Adaptability and problem solving skills	<p>"I initially experienced difficulties in coordinating students", but that this allowed her to "become more adaptable and adept at coming up with creative solutions" (A.N.).</p>
Civic commitment	<p>"It gave me the opportunity to be more social" (D.K.).</p>
Emotional intelligence skills	<p>"The experience of providing psychological support to fire victims helped me to develop self-control and a deeper understanding of others" (D.K.).</p> <p>"This experience influenced my decision to pursue a teaching career, emphasising the transformative impact of cultivating empathy and emotional intelligence" (V.M.S.).</p>

There are two key aspects on which all interviewees agree: i) The community experience prompted them to reflect on their future, their course of study, and their social role; ii) all respondents confirmed they would recommend the experience to their peers as an enriching addition to their educational journey.

The project presented made it possible to integrate theory and practice into an innovative learning model, centered on the development of student's professional in close connection with the local context.

## CONCLUSION

The topics discussed and the results drawn from the interviews, highlight a significant correlation between SL experiences and the acquisition of transversal skills, as well as the effectiveness of this experience as a career guidance tool for university students. Creating structured and formally recognized SL experiences increasingly necessary for universities to build a space in which the university, territory, community continuum is made explicit. By integrating SL into academic programs, universities can offer richer and more holistic learning experiences that better prepare students for the complexities of professional world.

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# EMPOWERING EDUCATION: INTEGRATING DESIGN FOR CHANGE AND SERVICE-LEARNING FOR SOCIALLY COMMITTED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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This study explores the use of Service-Learning (SL) through the Design for Change (DFC) methodology, which is based on design thinking. The initiative facilitated collaboration between pre-service teachers and students with intellectual disabilities, who worked together to update teaching resources for cognitive diversity. By following the DFC phases—feel, imagine, do, evolve, and share—the pre-service teachers' projects cultivated empathy, creativity, teamwork, and critical thinking. Additionally, pre-service teachers documented their process and the project's impact through digital portfolios, offering valuable insights into the transformative potential of this approach. Both the pre-service teachers and the educators working with the students with intellectual disabilities provided highly positive feedback on the experience. The integration of SL and DFC proved effective in promoting social responsibility and experiential learning. This model offers significant value for pre-service teacher preparation programs, equipping future educators to address current educational challenges.

Design For Change; Service-Learning; intellectual disability; pre-service teacher training

## INTRODUCTION

To empower individuals prepared to tackle the pressing challenges of our planetary emergency, education must prioritize student-centered and action-oriented approaches (Williams and Whiteman, 2021). They will need practical tools and realistic strategies to confront personal, social, intellectual, and emotional challenges (Leal, 2009). This vision is well-supported by the Service-

Learning (SL) methodology, which bridges the gap between knowledge acquisition and its practical application (Resch & Schritteser, 2021). SL transforms learning into an engaging process where students not only develop academic and practical competencies but also participate in meaningful contributions that foster their growth while benefiting the wider community (Cervantes & Meaney, 2013).

In this context, while universities are pivotal in generating knowledge through research, their most profound impact lies in the students they cultivate (Aramburuzabala et al., 2015). SL has emerged as an exemplary approach within higher education, enabling the implementation of teaching and learning practices that not only prepare students for their professional futures but also inspire them to embrace active, socially responsible roles within their communities (Francisco and Moliner, 2010; Martínez, 2008).

In light of this, the purpose of this work is to implement the SL methodology in a practical context for pre-service teachers training, i.e., the initiative seeks to empower them to design and carry out tangible actions that align with the academic and professional demands of their future teaching roles.

In addition, the initiative aims to enrich the curriculum by offering a framework for professional development, particularly in supporting specific groups—in this case, students with cognitive diversity. Pre-service teachers engage in collaborative activities with these students, creating a shared learning environment. They also extend their involvement by working with an association to promote social benefits, specifically contributing to the education of students with intellectual disabilities. This effort seeks to enhance their inclusion and active participation in society, reinforcing the pre-service teachers' social responsibility and professional skills.

## **1. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN**

### **1.1. Sample characterization**

The sample comprises 44 pre-service teachers—43 women and 1 man—with an average age of 22. All participants are enrolled in the *Didactics of Natural Sciences* subject at the Faculty of Education, Complutense University of Madrid (UCM), Spain.

### **1.2. Service-Learning design**

The pre-service teachers' projects are aimed at providing service to the Achalay association (<https://www.achalay.es/>), which in collaboration with the UCM,

develops the LICEO Diploma with the aim of assisting in the education of young people with intellectual disabilities. It is a program against educational, social, and economic exclusion. Through this specific two-year program, young people are provided with a training diploma that enables individuals with cognitive diversity to fully develop their human potential, sense of dignity, self-esteem, and reinforces respect for human rights, as well as promoting the maximum development of personality, mental and physical abilities, and effective participation in a free society. Not only does it promote the value of inclusion in the university environment, but it also contributes to destroying stereotypes, promoting values such as solidarity, openness, and flexibility (Izuzquiza, 2012). Specifically, the framework for pre-service teachers' work is to support the aforementioned association in adapting materials and resources for students with intellectual disabilities who are studying the speciality of *Health and Social Attention*.

Regarding the development of activities, it began with a seminar on the main characteristics of SL and Design For Change methodologies, indicating for the latter the various stages necessary to successfully carry out a project based on design thinking; in total, five stages or phases: *Feel, Imagine, Act, Evolve, and Share* (Cantón and Ojeda, 2017). The five stages of DFC were fundamental in guiding the development of the projects, from identifying an initial challenge to reflection and projection for the future. The role of the teacher was limited to being a facilitator of learning situations.

As for the evaluation system, the pre-service teachers prepare a digital portfolio documenting the project's development. Attendance at sessions and this portfolio account for 40% of the final grade for the subject.

## **2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **2.1. Development of activities**

Following the DFC stages, during the *Feel* phase, aimed at generating empathy with students with intellectual disabilities, a representative of the Achalay association introduced the main characteristics of the LICEO Diploma and expressed the needs to be addressed. Additionally, a session of interaction between both groups of students was organized as a source of inspiration to encourage their active participation. Students were even offered the opportunity to visit their classmates' classes with disabilities to better understand their needs and thus adapt their solutions more effectively.

Once the challenge was identified and the action area defined, students

selected the type of solution they preferred to work on. Then, they developed a prototype and designed an action plan (*Imagine* phase), which they subsequently implemented (*Do* phase). Afterwards, an evaluation and reflection on the process and the achieved product were carried out to improve it (*Evolve* phase). Finally, in the *Share* phase, each team presented a video summary of the project to the entire class, with a duration of approximately 5 minutes. Each team received feedback from the teacher, and there was an opportunity for all students to ask questions and expand on aspects of the developed products.

In contrast to the typical linear and logical problem-solving approach, projects based on design thinking focus on intuition and emotional interpretation (Cantón and Ojeda, 2017). Students gain empathy with their environment (in our case, students with cognitive diversity sharing spaces in their faculty), generate ideas as a group, materialize them, and reflect on the process. There are alternating moments of divergent thinking to broaden options and convergent thinking to select the best ones. This combination provides a broad perspective, although it sometimes involves uncertainty, although this is normal. The teacher must promote confidence in the process, and eventually, step by step, this uncertainty dissipates.

## **2.2. Critical reflections of pre-service teachers**

Through the construction of a digital portfolio, students reflected on their learning experiences in order to improve and evolve their projects. From these reflections, a very positive evaluation of the work done has been noted, as well as its impact on their professional development. As an example, a pre-service teacher pointed out:

From the project, we take away real experiences that have made us learn not only curriculum content but also life experiences, emotions, and learnings that we will always carry in our backpacks.

Moreover, they have learned to organize themselves and rework their ideas when they encounter difficulties:

In the *Imagine* phase... the group had certain complications regarding brainstorming, as we were not clear about what we wanted to do or how we would do it... We were mentally blocked. But with patience, speaking frankly, we analysed very well what each member of the group thought. Finally, we were able to organize and make the necessary connections to find and visualize the activity and the resource.

Likewise, they have strengthened their collaboration skills, learning to depend on each other, assuming the corresponding responsibilities to achieve the success of their DFC project:

Working in a team has been another highlight of our academic process. Constant collaboration and organization present in the subject have strengthened our ability to face challenges together and enhance the individual strengths of each team member.

Finally, a change in attitude towards inclusion is highlighted, expressing that adapting materials for students with intellectual disabilities has not only been an educational challenge but also an act of empathy and humanity. They have internalized the importance of inclusion and accessibility in education as can be seen from the following reflection:

We have learned to see differences as opportunities to learn. By working with the kids from *Achalay*, we have realized that people with intellectual disabilities are often undervalued or infantilized and actually have other abilities and potentials.

And to a large extent, the students' motivation towards learning has improved due to the integration of SL and DFC methodologies:

The best way to learn is by carrying out what you learn, and that's exactly what we have done with this project. We always talk about diversity, curriculum adaptations, flexibility, inclusion, etc., but from a theoretical standpoint. In contrast, this time, we have been able to experience these aspects firsthand.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study is part of a series of initiatives implemented in recent academic years with pre-service teachers, aimed at fostering active methodologies that enhance creativity, teamwork, and critical thinking. These experiences also strive to empower future educators by giving them the opportunity to articulate and implement their ideas, contributing to systemic improvements, particularly in their social commitment to supporting vulnerable groups.

Reflections captured in their digital portfolios reveal a profoundly positive impact, particularly in their attitudes toward students with cognitive diversity. Participants describe the experience as deeply enriching, emphasizing the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in meaningful, real-world contexts beyond the traditional academic environment.

The incorporation of the Design for Change (DFC) methodology in the SL framework, despite initial uncertainties, has proven to be transformative. It has fostered critical social and emotional competencies such as active listening, the exchange of personal interests to uncover commonalities and differences, emotional expression, and the cultivation of core values like respect and empathy. All these social and emotional skills are relevant both for personal growth and for the professional development of future teachers and educators.

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# SERVICE-LEARNING IN ITALY AND SPAIN. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE TWO EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

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Service-Learning combines community service with academic learning, fostering critical thinking and active citizenship. This study compares its development in Spain and Italy. In Spain, a bottom-up approach drove its integration, with grassroots initiatives supported by REDAPS and government institutions, leading to mandatory adoption across schools. Spain's mature model offers cohesion and consistency. Italy, on the other hand, blends top-down and bottom-up strategies. INDIRE and programs like *Oltre l'aula* support its spread, but documentation remains fragmented, lacking a unified methodology. While Spain sets a benchmark with robust networks and institutional backing, Italy requires improved coordination to fully realize Service-Learning's potential.

Service-Learning; active citizenship; inclusive society; critical thinking; responsible participation.

## INTRODUCTION

Service-Learning stands as an agent of student emancipation. Through it they are freed from the limitations imposed by certain educational contexts. They experience the learning process as a fully engaging experience, allowing them to be leading actors in their education. Rather than following the conventional separation of theory and practice, this methodology creates a synergistic connection between academic spaces and the concrete reality of communities (Battle, 2013).

The connection with the surrounding community is essential. Service-Learning is not only an act of service, but also an opportunity for active participation that creates genuine relationships. Through this practice, students position themselves as conscious, responsible citizens and builders of a more just and



inclusive society, maturing critical and reflective thinking. It is not just a school/territory collaboration, but a horizontal relationship is created between the giver and the beneficiary (Furco, 1996), a reciprocity, because the two components, service and learning, are equally important and mutually enriching, creating a “virtuous circle” (Tapia, 2015) between knowledge and action: the quality of training and the application of notions improve the quality of service to the community, and service strengthens learning, transversal, prosocial and professional skills.

Analysis of the literature and experiences in Italy and Spain clearly shows that this practice is not just a complement to the curriculum, but a radical change in the way students relate to knowledge and society. From this perspective, Service-Learning represents an inflection point in education, innovating the way education is conceived and implemented.

Achieving this requires collaboration among several institutions: educational institutions, which provide the training to students; social agencies, which offer the service-learning activities to the community; and government institutions, which provide the regulatory and financial support.

## **1. CHARACTERISTICS OF SERVICE-LEARNING**

Service-Learning is an educational methodology that has developed in a variety of historical and cultural contexts, and is loosely defined, with as many as 147 definitions found (Furco, 1996). It manifests itself under various names in different nations, such as “Active learning in the community” in Great Britain, “Civic Internship” in the Netherlands, and “Aprendizaje-servicio” in Spain, but in each case it implies the integration of supportive action with systematic learning. When this combination is present, we can speak of Service Learning, regardless of the name used (Fiorin, 2016).

This practice helps to form aware and critical citizens, promoting values such as active citizenship and participation. Service-Learning education emphasizes the importance of developing a culture of participation and altruism, which goes beyond the individual, creating a sense of collective responsibility and active citizenship. It is essential, therefore, to develop an ethic of mutual care, which forms the basis of a citizenship that cares for each other. Fiorin (2016) summarizes the main features of Service-Learning as follows:

- Curricular: it is integrated into the regular curriculum.
- Research-oriented: arises from real problems and leads to the search for solutions.

- Skills-focused: students apply knowledge and skills in real-world contexts.
- Interdisciplinary: addresses complex problems that require the integration of different disciplines.
- Oriented to meaningful learning: learning is meaningful when it is reframed and responds to personal motivations.
- Collaborative: involves the whole class as a learning community.
- Participatory: students actively collaborate with the beneficiaries of the project.
- Empowering: promotes social and civic responsibility, forming conscious citizens.
- Transformative: social responsibility implies a commitment that leads to personal and social improvements, changing both the doer and the surrounding reality.

## **2. HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF SERVICE-LEARNING IN ITALY**

Service-Learning, as a pedagogical method in Italy, has had a growing impact since 2006, when Maria Nieves Tapia introduced the concept with her book *Educazione e Solidarietà*. This work was instrumental in raising awareness in the Italian educational field of the importance of learning through community service, becoming the first Italian-language reference on the topic. This text represented a “seed” that, finding fertile ground, nurtured a series of practical experiments in schools.

Among the pioneering projects, one of the most significant was *Oltre l’Aula* (2012-2013), a two-year initiative promoted by the Center for Teacher Education of the Autonomous Province of Trento. This project involved a select group of educators, including teachers and school leaders, and focused on exploring the educational potential of Service-Learning, catalyzing attention on its ability to promote active learning and direct involvement in the community.

Another turning point occurred in 2014, with the establishment of the School of Higher Education Educare all’Incontro e alla Solidarietà (EIS) at LUMSA University in Rome. This school represented an epicenter of pedagogical innovation, with the goal of spreading Service-Learning in the university context. LUMSA not only promoted Service-Learning as an educational approach, but also played a dissemination function at the national level, organizing seminars, conferences and publications. Among the most notable contributions was the

publication of the volume *Oltre l'aula. La proposta pedagogica del Service Learning* (Fiorin, 2016), which served as an indispensable theoretical and practical guide for the in-depth study of the methodology. This book was crucial to understanding the theory and practice of Service-Learning, highlighting the origins of the method, its founding principles and modes of operation, and offering numerous examples of experiences implemented in different educational contexts.

Since 2016, the Ministry of Education has undertaken a process of active support for Service-Learning by acting concretely with actions, programs and funding. An experimental path has been launched in some Italian regions (Lombardy, Tuscany and Calabria) aimed at training students and teachers on the potential of Service-Learning. The publication of the ministerial document *Una via italiana per il Service Learning* (2018) marked an important step in this process, highlighting how the introduction of Service-Learning pathways allows curving curricular learning in the direction of community service. At the same time, INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research) recognized the pedagogical innovation of Service-Learning, helping to consolidate it as one of the most promising teaching practices in the Italian educational landscape.

## **2.1. Movimento delle avanguardie educative**

The Avanguardie Educative, born in 2014 as the result of an important research-action promoted by INDIRE, represent a cultural movement that has had a significant impact on the Italian educational landscape. This movement came to life thanks to the collaboration with 22 pioneer schools that, together, drafted and signed a Programmatic Manifesto for Innovation. The Avanguardie Educative set out to go beyond traditional educational models, questioning how to adapt education to the challenges of a rapidly changing world. The movement's goal was not only to test new methodologies, but also to make them easily accessible and transferable so that they could be adopted by a variety of educational settings. Avanguardie Educative has created a major resource called The Ideas, which brings together innovative pathways to inspire and provide practical tools for educators interested in introducing alternative teaching methods. Among them, the *Dentro/fuori la scuola – Service Learning* project represents an emblematic example. It reworks the vision of the school, no longer as a closed place, but as a crossroads of experience, where theory merges with practice in a continuous dialogue with the local area. In this context, the school embraces its surroundings, collaborating with local

authorities, institutions and the world of work to transform the territory into a learning laboratory. Service-Learning practices, within this framework, push schools toward an increasingly outward opening, fostering a culture of collaboration and co-design.

### **3. SERVICE-LEARNING IN THE SPANISH CONTEXT**

The process of Service-Learning diffusion in Spain officially began on April 18, 2002, when, at an event held at the European Parliament in Madrid, the country welcomed Service-Learning as a new pedagogical paradigm. Until then, this methodology had been relegated to a marginal practice within the Spanish educational ecosystem. However, the introduction of this concept represented a true “pedagogical revolution,” a step toward a type of education that would not only transmit content, but also form individuals who were aware of and actively involved in society. Initially, the term “Community Service Learning” was used, which was later replaced by the broader and more recognized term Service-Learning.

Research and debates around this methodology culminated in 2003 with a significant agreement in Catalonia, where the Instituto Superior de Formación del Profesorado collaborated with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports to train teachers in Service-Learning. This collaboration marked the beginning of a series of seminars and training activities that led to the legitimization of Service-Learning as an integral part of school and university curricula.

In order to root the methodology in the Spanish educational context, the support of a number of organizations was crucial. The Asociación Española de Voluntariado (AEVOL), in particular, played a leading function in the initial phase, acting as a catalyst for the spread of SL. Subsequently, the Fórum Cívico Educativo, which took AEVOL’s place, continued to promote it, encouraging teacher training and stimulating the integration of the methodology in schools through outreach activities and training workshops.

In parallel with the spread of Service-Learning in schools, the academic context saw the emergence of important theoretical contributions. A significant example was Dr. Arantzasu Martínez Odría’s doctoral thesis, presented in 2005, which laid the theoretical and conceptual foundations of Service-Learning in Spain. Her research represented one of the first systematic studies on the methodology, providing a solid academic foundation that allowed its more widely recognized dissemination.

In 2005, the Jaume Bofill Foundation in Barcelona, together with representatives of Catalan educational, social and political organizations, created the Centre Promotor d'Aprenentatge Servei, which has played a key role in advancing the methodology in Catalonia. This center has acted as a driving force, producing research, documentation and teaching materials, supporting the dissemination of SL through seminars and training activities aimed at teachers and other social actors. Similarly, the creation of the Fundació Zerbikas in the Basque Country in 2008 and the collaboration with the Fundació Tomillo in Madrid helped create an interterritorial network that united different local realities and facilitated the exchange of practices and knowledge among different autonomous communities.

These developments led to the birth of the Red Española de Aprendizaje-Servicio (REDAPS), a national network that has played a crucial role in the consolidation of SL in Spain. REDAPS acted as a reference point, providing technical support, materials and training for schools and social organizations involved in Service-Learning projects. Its network structure, consisting of 17 territorial groups throughout Spain's Autonomous Communities, has enabled widespread dissemination and consolidation of ApS throughout the country, making it an integral part of the educational system.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the diffusion of Service-Learning in Spain and Italy highlights different approaches in the integration of this methodology in the educational and legislative context. In particular, two approaches were identified: bottom-up and top-down.

The bottom-up approach builds on the experience already present in the territory, starting from the bottom and developing institutional support that accompanies and regulates these experiences, rather than imposing them. In this case, policies are adapted to local needs, with the active participation of the actors involved in the process. The top-down approach, on the other hand, starts from the central level, defining in advance the objectives and policies to be applied, and then implementing them locally.

In Spain, the diffusion of service-learning was mainly driven by a bottom-up approach, with bottom-up initiatives involving local schools and organizations, which then attracted support from institutions. Government policies have followed this thrust, including Service-Learning in school curricula.

In Italy, the approach to Service-Learning diffusion has been a mix of top-down

and bottom-up. Although initially the top-down influence was predominant, especially with the experimentation of the Beyond the Classroom project, autonomous experiences in schools also emerged (bottom-up approach), supported by INDIRE at the institutional level.

The comparative analysis of educational experiences shows a significant disparity in the implementation of Service-Learning. Spain is an advanced and promising model to follow, with a wide network of promoting entities, primarily the Red Española de Aprendizaje-Servicio (REDAPS), together with Editorial Edebé and the Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional. Its established experience has led to the mandatory integration of Service-Learning in all schools of all levels. In addition, the almost ten-year time difference in the field highlights the maturity and solidity of the Spanish model, accumulating a significant wealth of experience and knowledge in the field. Conversely, Italy is still at an intermediate stage, due to the lack of a coordinated network of institutions and a rigorous methodology. It is true that INDIRE has recognized and enhanced the practice of Service-Learning, including it within the Educational Vanguard Movement. However, the search for projects to analyze, conducted by examining official sites that promote Service-Learning projects, such as the School of Higher Education Educare all'Incontro e alla Solidarietà (EIS), revealed fragmented project documentation and haphazard presentation. This indicates the need for greater cohesion and clarity in Italian Service-Learning practices.

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# FOSTERING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND ETHICAL PROFESSIONALISM: A SERVICE-LEARNING PARADIGM FOR TRANSLATOR EDUCATION

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The increasing attention to the professional components of translation competences and the growing emphasis on the social role of translators highlight the need for pedagogical approaches that foster both active citizenship and ethical reflection. Service-learning (SL) has emerged as an effective didactic approach, merging academic learning with community service to cultivate socially engaged professionals. This article introduces a novel SL model for translator education, which integrates civic engagement within academic curricula. Combining Gouadec's socio-constructivist-inspired project-based translation pedagogy (2005) and Dewey's democratic education principles (1916), our model advocates for the potential of translation service-learning (TSL) to bridge academic instruction and community-based professional practice. Through the case study of IN.TRA (Inclusive Translation for Community Engagement), a pro bono language service provider initiated at the University of Bologna in 2021, we analyse the implications of SL for enhancing translator education with global citizenship competences.

service-learning, translator education, active citizenship, ethical professionalism, language diversity, project-based learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, translators play an increasingly important role in addressing global challenges, such as fostering intercultural understanding, promoting social justice, and preserving linguistic diversity. A growing body of literature, including works by scholars such as Wolf, Drugan, Taibi, and Ozolins, has reconceptualized the role of translators, positioning them as proactive



agents of social change rather than passive ambassadors of words. Wolf (2007) underscores the importance of training translators as social agents, emphasizing their role as active participants in the co-construction of meaning. Building on Wolf's views, Drugan and Megone (2011) argue that the ethical dimensions of translation must be integrated into the profession, given the significant societal impacts of translation decisions. Similarly, Taibi and Ozolins (2016) frame translation as a socially engaged practice that actively promotes social transformation beyond linguistic mediation.

Grounded in the principles of university social responsibility (Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña 2017), the expanded understanding of the translator's role calls for both individuals and institutions to actively contribute to societal well-being and sustainability. In the translation field, adopting this perspective involves moving beyond the question of individual motivation—whether translators act out of self-interest or a commitment to the greater good—thus shifting the focus towards broader considerations of how translation can facilitate ethical coexistence (Drugan & Tipton 2017). To achieve this overarching aim, we must transcend the notion of teaching translation as mere transfer of technical skills and best practices, emphasizing instead its role as a bridge that fosters empathy, mutual respect, and understanding across cultural and linguistic divides. By critically engaging with their future professional responsibilities, translation students have the potential to shape discourse and drive social progress, during their studies and beyond.

Service-learning (SL) —a pedagogical approach that integrates community engagement with academic learning (Bringle and Hatcher 1995, Furco 1996)—offers a compelling solution to these evolving demands. Our paper therefore explores the potential of SL to enrich translator education by integrating Gouadec's (2005) project-based pedagogy with Dewey's (1916) democratic ideals. The case of IN.TRA, a student-run translation service agency at the University of Bologna, serves as an example of how SL can create meaningful opportunities for future translators to engage with local and international communities, encouraging them to reflect on their role in shaping intercultural communication and promoting social change.

## **2. TRANSLATOR EDUCATION: CURRENT GAPS AND FUTURE NEEDS**

Over the past two decades, the number of translator education programs has grown significantly, accompanied by extensive reflection on the competences required for translation and the pedagogical approaches necessary to cultivate

them. Initiatives like the European Master's in Translation (EMT) have played a crucial role in fostering collaboration among higher education institutions, contributing to the development of future language professionals. The EMT quality label, currently awarded to 81 university translation programs (8 of which in Italy), ensures that these programs meet professional standards and respond to market demands. According to the EMT Competence Framework (2022), translators are expected to master a wide array of competences, including proficiency in translation, cultural and linguistic expertise, technological skills, and the development of personal and interpersonal abilities. The framework also highlights the importance of service provision skills. These diverse competences reflect the evolving demands placed on translators in a globalized world, where their role extends beyond linguistic mediation to active participation in complex social and professional contexts.

In response to this evolving focus, various pedagogical models have emerged to better prepare translators for the modern profession. Two foundational approaches in translator education are Kiraly's socio-constructivist model (2000) and Gouadec's project-based learning (2005). Kiraly's approach emphasizes collaborative learning, where students construct knowledge through interaction with peers and instructors, applying theoretical skills in realistic contexts. Gouadec's model, on the other hand, allows students to work on real or simulated translation projects (e.g. van Egdom et al. (2020)'s INSTB), linking linguistic, technological, and managerial competences. Together, these approaches encourage critical reflection and active engagement, ensuring that students are not only technically proficient but also well-equipped to navigate the broader challenges they will face.

In this context, one cannot help but question how social responsibility, defined as "a set of prosocial values representing personal commitments to contribute to community and society" (Wray-Lake et al. 2016, p. 130), can be effectively woven into the fabric of translator education. The emphasis on personal and interpersonal competence in the EMT framework, along with the focus on service provision, suggests that social responsibility is not only a relevant component of a translator education, but an essential one. These competences indeed implicitly align with the notion of the translator as a socially aware professional (see section 1), tasked not only with accurate linguistic transfer but with responsible execution of their work.

A curriculum that integrates social responsibility will prepare students for the ethical challenges they will encounter. By fostering critical reflection on the

social and cultural consequences of their work, students will be empowered to act as agents of positive change within the communities they serve, thereby enhancing the overall impact of their professional contributions. This pedagogical shift from a task-oriented approach to a view of translation as a dynamic process founded on active engagement and ethical considerations requires the integration of reflective competences into translator education.

The reflective attitude, referred to here as “ethical professionalism” should in our opinion be distinguished from traditional notions of professional ethics (or deontology), as it encompasses a broader engagement with social responsibility. Professional ethics refers to the codified standards and guidelines that govern the behaviour and responsibilities of translators within their profession, ensuring accuracy, confidentiality, and fairness in their work. While no doubt important, professional ethics primarily focuses on adherence to these transactional norms. On the other hand, ethical professionalism as we conceive it extends beyond compliance with these norms. It entails a deeper engagement with the broader social responsibilities inherent in the translator’s role, prompting individuals to reflect critically on how their work influences and shapes social realities. This approach encourages translators to consider the ethical impact of their decisions on marginalized communities, global justice, and intercultural understanding.

Fostering ethical professionalism in future translators requires thoughtful and deliberate approaches, and one of the most promising methods, in our view, is the integration of service-learning into translation curricula. Service-learning as a pedagogical model that combines academic instruction with meaningful community engagement, offers a renewed socio-constructivist framework (Kiraly 2000) for nurturing both technical proficiency and a heightened sense of social responsibility.

### **3. IN.TRA: A CASE STUDY IN TRANSLATION SERVICE-LEARNING**

To integrate social responsibility into translator education, the Department of Interpretation and Translation at the University of Bologna established IN.TRA, a pro bono translation agency managed by students with the supervision of academic staff. Inspired by the model of simulated translation bureaus (van Egdom et al. 2020), IN.TRA was launched in March 2021 as part of the master’s degree in Specialized Translation. IN.TRA’s pedagogical approach is firmly grounded in service-learning principles, connecting academic instruction with real-world community service. The translation service-learning (TSL) model

represents an innovative fusion of Gouadec’s project-based translation pedagogy (2005) and Dewey’s democratic pedagogy (1916): the first makes it possible to apply and boost the knowledge, skills and abilities acquired in the individual modules of a Master’s degree translation course, rooting them in professional experience; the second enables the development through service-learning of active citizenship skills, by stimulating reflection on the practical civic engagement and solidarity values in the community. By providing interlingual community services, IN.TRA students help non-profit organizations (NPOs) disseminate their activities and share the stories of their members through translation, empowering students to apply their skills to projects that promote social justice and inclusivity. The collaborative effort with community partners contributes to breaking down linguistic and cultural barriers and broadens public access to the work of NPOs, promoting and safeguarding linguistic diversity as outlined in the European Parliament Resolution 2018/2028(INI) on language equality in the digital age.

As a case study of TSL, we provide here the experiences of the IN.TRA students in the SLIT (Service Learning, Innovation, and Translation) project<sup>1</sup>, which represents an attempt to connect two international translation networks by the EMT-affiliated department of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Bologna (Italy) and the PAMCIT-affiliated departments of translation and interpreting of the universities of Nairobi (Kenya) and Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis (Senegal). The aim of the SLIT project was to favour a professional and cultural exchange and the emergence of a cross-continent community of practice (Cadwell et al. 2022).

SLIT brought together students from the three universities in a year-long course in which they shared online classes in translation technologies, localization and sociolinguistics of African languages, and then paired up to carry out projects with NPOs (COMI and Cittadinanza Onlus) active in the two African countries. The project facilitated direct engagement of students across the two continents with communities in Kibera (Nairobi) and Kaffrine (Senegal). They applied their skills in specialised tasks —the translation of health-related interviews from Swahili to English and of milk pasteurisation instruction manuals from Italian to Wolof— thus obtaining first-hand experience of the vital service they are capable of providing to the well-being of society.

At the end of the project, students from the three universities took part in short

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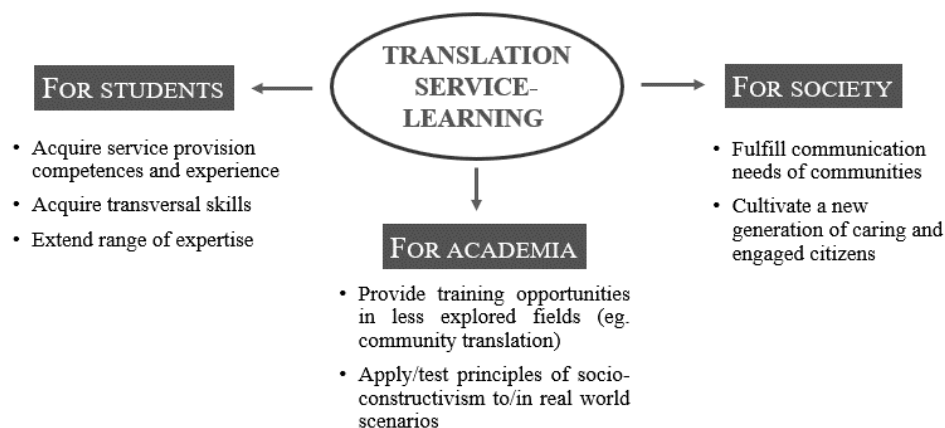
<sup>1</sup> The project was funded by the University of Bologna under a complete scheme for Cooperation Development projects (Global South 2021)

mobility stays in another partner university, where they attended and delivered seminars and got in touch with the local recipient communities. Notwithstanding the difficulties encountered, both cultural and technical, SLIT offered students an opportunity to experience balanced collaboration in which all involved parties contributed to filling a gap that none could fill independently.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The integration of service-learning into translator education offers a transformative approach that bridges the gap between theory and practice, while simultaneously fostering active citizenship and ethical professionalism. The IN.TRA initiative exemplifies how service-learning provides translation students with invaluable real-world experience, enriching both their academic growth and social development. As illustrated in Figure 1, our experience shows how translation service-learning yields benefits for three key stakeholders: students, academia, and society. Our ongoing research seeks to examine its potential impact on specific dimensions of student development, such as the enhancement of translation competences, civic responsibility, and soft skills. Looking forward, the expansion of service-learning within translator education presents an invaluable opportunity to reinforce the connection between academia and society, ultimately addressing immediate communication needs of the communities while fostering long-term social impact, as emphasized in Target 4.7 of the Global Education Agenda 2030. By participating in real-world TSL projects such as SLIT, students are encouraged to reflect critically on their roles as socially responsible citizens, thus embracing ethical professionalism as an integral part of their academic and personal development.

Figure 1. Potential benefits of translation service-learning



Our future research will focus on evaluating the impact of service-learning on both translation-specific competences and transversal skills through structured student questionnaires and content analysis of reflective journals. These instruments will offer valuable insights into how service-learning fosters not only technical proficiency but also civic responsibility and ethical professionalism. By systematically analysing students' reflections and experiences, we aim to further refine the integration of service-learning into translation curricula, ensuring it continues to bridge the gap between theory and practice, while effectively preparing students to navigate the complexities of the translator profession.

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# MEASURING FLEXIBLE FURNITURE IMPACT ON STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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This study investigates Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs), focusing on flexible furniture and its effects on teaching and learning. ILEs, with adaptable spaces and diverse furniture, promote collaboration, creativity, and inclusion. The Italian replication of the “Vasse Study” highlights positive impacts on student engagement, group work, and inquiry-based learning in sample classes. Using mixed-method tools like classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student surveys, the study demonstrates how ILEs foster innovative pedagogy, enhance inclusion, and improve well-being.

innovative learning environment; school furniture; educational innovation

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the concept of innovative learning environments (ILEs), the innovative use of furniture, and how to measure the impact of these phenomena on teaching and learning. By ILEs, we refer to designs that promote a wider interaction of student-to-student, and teacher-to-student learning approaches. ILEs tend to be characterised as the opposite of ‘traditional’ classrooms where 30+ students sit at desks facing the front of a room, where teachers control what is learned and how (Byers et al., 2018). Instead, they have a variety of spaces – small break out rooms, large common learning areas, and a multitude of options between. They are also characterised by ‘changeability’ – that is, spaces can be quickly reconfigured to suit a particular learning task (Dovey & Fisher, 2014). In essence, ILEs allow students and teachers to have at their disposal the ideal space to suit a particular task at hand. Their impact is intended to still support very direct instruction from a teacher but also have the capacity of more student



involvement in their own learning and utilising the teachers as a co-learner or accessible expert (Morris et al., 2024). These qualities meet the demand around the world for graduates who are more creative, can communicate well, can utilise critical thinking, and have collaboration skills that the modern workforce is now requiring (Alterator & Deed, 2018). It is argued that such qualities are difficult to achieve in learning spaces that restrict student interaction and self-exploration. An obvious element of an ILE is the ‘affordances’, the characteristics of an object or space that encourages a particular behaviour (Young et al., 2019), and the more common affordance is the furniture that ILEs house. These, again, differ from ‘traditional’ set-ups that utilise one desk and chair (each the exact same as the others) per student that invariably occupies the majority of space in a typically-sized classroom. Instead, ILEs hold a variety of desk and table types, with a variety of seating arrangements from high and low stools, chairs on wheels, even sofas and ottomans.

The equity issue that such ILEs address is of individual capacity. Studies are now providing evidence that students with all manner of physical, neurological or ‘lived condition’ disabilities find the flexibility of choice contained in ILEs to be of immense value; see, for instance, Dargue et al., (2022) on autism and ILEs, and Morris and Imms (*in press*) on how furniture meets the needs of a variety of disability.

This is the broad context of this paper, but it also focuses on an important issue – how can we gather evidence of the impact of ILEs? This carries international implications; each country owns sets of restrictions on how spaces can be modified – from the political through to the physical. How can we develop measures that span issues such as how heritage overlays that limit physical alterations, as discussed below in the Italian context (Mahat et. al., 2020)? The answer is to replicate successful studies under ‘local’ conditions and select those evaluation techniques that ‘work’. INDIRE has engaged in such a type of replication study with an Australian team who have, for a number of years, developed and trailed a repeated measures design intended to explore the impact of differing furniture arrangements in schools. That study (Morris & Imms, 2020) focused on furniture – one affordance of a ILE that can be utilised in heritage-listed schools – in an attempt to see if its approaches carry similar benefits in an Italian setting.

## **1. WHAT ITALIAN DATA SAYS. THE REPLICATION OF THE “VASSE STUDY”**

The Manifesto of Learning Space of INDIRE led the research group to set up investigations about ILEs which has been defined according to the individuals who inhabit it, and the school context intertwined with the pedagogical-didactic component and with the other aspects that characterize the educational dimension such as comfort, well-being, quality of education, equity and inclusion (Carro, Tosi 2022). The research interest in this field is also due to the condition of many Italian school buildings: 70% of Italian school buildings were constructed before the 1970s, and often not originally designed as schools (Fondazione Agnelli, 2020).

INDIRE research about ILEs focused on research oriented towards evaluating the effectiveness of changing the organisational model of newly constructed learning environments or those subject to renovation. In terms of Post Occupancy Evaluation (Zimring & Reizenstein, 1980, p. 429) is “the examination of the effectiveness for human users of occupied designed environments” (Preiser, 2002 p. 142) “a process of systematically evaluating the performance of buildings after they have been constructed and occupied for a certain time.”

In this research field emerged that small changes in the furniture setting can have positive effects in the learning process and students’ well-being (Imms, Morris, & Grunseit, 2020). Extensive international literature reports on the positive effects of ILEs on student learning and engagement (Imms & Kvan, 2021).

To collect evidence about the effectiveness of the school furniture, a collaboration has been initiated between the University of Melbourne, Edith Cowan University in Perth and INDIRE to allow the international team the opportunity to compare and replicate the research protocol employed in the so-called “Vasse Study.” Observation protocol and related instruments have been adapted to be replicated in Italian context (Imms, 2018). The original design uses a quasi-experimental research method; in addition, the design calls for a repeated measures approach to isolate “school furniture” as the variable responsible for any changes in teaching practices or in student engagement. The research questions were: are students’ levels of perceived engagement in learning related to the types of furniture in their classrooms? Do teaching styles (pedagogies) change with the different arrangement of school furniture?). This research design, Single Subject Research Design, is a type of quantitative research that involves the detailed study of the behavior of a small number of participants, typically two to ten participants.

After a development stage to localise and adapt the research protocol to the Italian context, the observation sample for the first-year research activities was selected in an attainable context. Istituto Comprensivo Coverciano in Florence was selected by INDIRE research team and two classes in primary level were involved in the three phases of the replication of the research.

The project included a moment of reflection (generative workshop) with the teachers of the two primary classes involved in the research. The generative workshop aimed to engage participants to reflect on the physical and experiential elements of ILEs and to design activities to transform their teaching approach by also considering space as an element to be taken into account. The workshop used a design thinking approach to collaborate and create with the group. This technique requires group members to bring their own skills to the table to prompt behavioural evolution and empower teachers to transform their teaching practices.

The information generated from the workshop provided teachers with information on the explicit link between the teaching and learning process in ILEs; tools for soliciting teachers' intrinsic motivation for change; and tools for choosing the furniture configuration best suited to the teaching activities performed. The collected data allowed INDIRE to detect initial data on the effect of flexible furniture on teachers' behaviors. Preliminary results show a noteworthy change in teaching and organizational activities by orienting them toward non-occasional group work and an inquiry-based project approach. Regarding students, the data collected suggest that primary students' express preference for soft furnishings and relaxing spaces.

## **2. THE RESEARCH TOOLS**

The researchers employed tools addressing both teachers and students. The tools had a quanti-qualitative nature (questionnaires, interviews, classroom observation and photo elicitation).

### **2.1. The teachers' questionnaire**

Teacher mind frame is a conceptual tool developed by Hattie (2009) to help teachers reflect on their teaching approach and make evidence-based decisions to improve the quality of education. His 10 Teacher Mind-frames act as a lens through which teachers can examine their practice, and are statistically characteristic of high-impact teaching approaches. They consist of a set of considerations and questions that teachers should ask themselves

while planning, conducting lessons, and analysing the documentation of the implemented lessons. A subsequent Teacher Mindframe Survey (Murphy et al., *in press*) posed questions to teachers based on these “Teacher Mindframes”, made up of 46 items, relating to the 8 mindsets that, according to Hattie (2009) make a difference in the teachers’ thinking and, therefore, teaching practice. The first category is the “focus on learning and learning-related language”. This dimension emphasizes the centrality of student learning in teaching. Teachers should be oriented toward learning objectives and use language that prioritizes student learning (e.g., peer education, game-based learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning, etc.), helping students better understand what they need to learn and why it is important. The second category is “evaluating the effectiveness of one’s teaching”: teachers should consistently reflect on the impact of their teaching practices on students. This involves assessing whether learning objectives have been achieved and whether there has been progress in students’ learning, basing their reflection on a range of indicators, observations, and evaluative practices (not solely relying on summative assessment). The third focus on “assessment as an informative tool for teaching”: assessment should be seen as a means to gather valuable information about students’ learning. Teachers should use assessment to better understand students’ needs and adapt their teaching practices accordingly (assessment for learning/assessment as learning). The fourth considers the focus on “building trusting relationships with others”. Building trusting relationships with students, colleagues and parents is essential for creating a positive learning environment. Teachers should strive to establish trust-based connections that foster learning and collaboration. Another area is the “balance between monologues and dialogues”. Classroom interaction should strike a balance between the time the teacher speaks (monologues) and the time students engage in discussions and dialogues (teacher’s talking time). This balance promotes active student participation and the construction of meaning. The sixth area is “collaboration among teachers”, which is essential for sharing ideas, resources, and experiences to collectively enhance student learning. Working as a team can lead to more effective solutions and the exchange of best practices. The seventh area looks at “providing timely feedback to students and ensuring its understanding”. This feature is crucial for their learning. Teachers should also ensure that students understand the feedback and can apply it to improve their performance. Finally, the eighth area takes into account the “role of innovator”, investigating teachers being willing to experiment with new strategies and approaches in teaching, which is key to

educational innovation. Teachers should remain open to new ideas and ready to adapt their practice based on the latest findings in educational research. In the Italian study, the tool was translated, back translated and adopted with no major changes.

## **2.2. Classroom observation with The LEASA tool and the teacher interview**

LEASA is a tool quantifying the teachers' behaviour across four dimensions: (1) the focus mode. The researcher observing the teacher had to select one or more of the modes being in place at a certain moment (i.e. teacher-centred, student-centred, informal, outside classroom) based on the control being played by one of the actors; (2) the pedagogies in action. The researcher observing the classroom dynamics had to select one or more of the pedagogies listed (i.e. facilitating, providing feedback, class discussion, etc.); (3) the learning community arranged in that moment, whether the focus was on individual, small group learning or the whole classroom; (4) the learning activities, meaning the kind of task being performed in that moment (i.e. assessment, application, creative activities, etc.). LEASA times the duration of each action within the modes, producing a set of descriptive statistics that characterised the nature of that learning activity. The four dimensions and the related vocabulary were the focus of face-to-face sessions among Australian and Italian researchers in order to share a common understanding of what each item would describe and what was to be expected.

A connected tool to the classroom observation was the structured interview. At the end of each term, teachers were interviewed on various areas related to the recently concluded period, by showing them histograms of their activities gathered by the LEASA tool. The areas taken into account were their self-assessment of teaching performance, their views on students' behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement, and their approaches to arranging and utilising classroom furniture.

## **2.3. The tools investigating students perceptions: the photo elicitation and the questionnaire**

Photo elicitation is a qualitative research method that involves using photographs to evoke deeper discussions and reflections during interviews or group discussions. By incorporating visual stimuli, this technique helps participants recall memories, express emotions, and share perspectives that might not emerge through verbal questions alone. The photos can be taken by the researcher, the participants, or sourced from other relevant materials. In the

Italian study, the pictures were taken from the researchers according to the preferences of furniture expressed by students on sticky notes. Students had to write on a sticky note their preferred piece of furniture, say why they had chosen that one and in what way they considered it a support in learning. Then, they had to stick the sticky note on the piece and researchers would take pictures of their choices. The photo elicitation was used in the B-mode only, when the innovation setting was in place.

Students were also asked to fill in a questionnaire in the three terms (traditional-innovative-traditional) focussing on their engagement in the classrooms. Two areas of the questionnaire were based on previously validated tools investigating engagement and student self-regulation (Maes & Gebhardt, 2021). One area focussed on their perception of furniture and was specifically added during the Vasse study (Imms, Morris & Grunseit, 2020). In the Italian replication study, INDIRE adopted the tool as it was.

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# THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL FURNITURE ON STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT. AN INTERNATIONAL SINGLE SUBJECT RESEARCH STUDY

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The research hypothesis derived from the literature that this contribution seeks to address is that *small changes in the furniture setting can have positive effects on the learning process and students' well-being*. Most Italian school buildings were constructed before the 1970s and often were not originally designed as schools. Most students learn in small spaces with limited structural flexibility. INDIRE, the Italian National Institute for Educational Research, is working on a three-year research study together with the University of Melbourne and Edith Cowan University in Perth to explore the role of the school furniture in changing teachers' practices and students' engagement. The research used a quasi-experimental method with a repeated measures approach to isolate school furniture and understand how it impacts on student engagement and teachers' mindsets. In this contribution, we will focus on analysing the data obtained from photo elicitation and Classrooms observations through a digital tool called LEASA to understand whether the degree of student participation in classroom activities can change in the presence of an innovative setting compared to a traditional setting.

innovative learning environments, school furniture, post occupancy evaluation, single subject research, student engagement.



## **INTRODUCTION**

The research contribution falls within the realm of reflection internationally identified as Post Occupancy Evaluation (POE), defined as the “examination of the effectiveness for human users of occupied designed environments” (Zimring and Reizenstein, 1980, p. 429).

Extensive international literature reports on the positive effects that Innovative Learning Environments (ILE) have on both student learning and engagement and teaching practices (Imms, Kvan, 2021).

Most Italian school buildings were constructed before the 1970s and often were not originally designed as schools (Fondazione Agnelli, 2020). Most students learn in small spaces with limited structural flexibility.

INDIRE, the Italian National Institute for Educational Research, is working on a three-year research study together with the University of Melbourne and Cowan University in Perth to explore the role of the school furniture in changing teachers’ practices and students’ engagement. The study was conducted during the 2022/23 school year in two primary school classes (a fourth and a fifth grade) from two different buildings of the Istituto Comprensivo Coverciano in Florence.

As for the students, the following research questions guided the research:

- RQ1: Are levels of student engagement perception in learning correlated with the types of furniture present in their classrooms?
- RQ2: Does the time dedicated to student-centred pedagogies change in the presence of innovative furnishings?

## **1. METHODOLOGY**

The research used a quasi-experimental methodology with a repeated measures approach to isolate school furniture and understand how it impacts on student engagement and teachers’ mindsets. It is a single subject research (Fraenkel, Wallen, 2006) where participants serve as both the control and treatment group following an A-B-A design where A is the baseline (the traditional setting), B the situation changed (the innovative setting), and A is the returning to a nontreatment condition (the traditional setting).

The research employed research tools already validated in the context of primary schools in Australia: (1) Student Survey, (2) Photo Elicitation, (3) Classrooms observations through a digital tool called LEASA which measures the time dedicated to four dimensions (Focus mode, Pedagogies, Learning

Activities, Learning Communities); (4) The Teacher Mindframes questionnaire; (5) the Teacher interview.

Two classes from the fourth and fifth grades of an Italian primary school were involved as an instrumental case study.

Throughout the year, repeated tri-weekly measurements were taken to assess: (1) students' perceptions of their cognitive and behavioural engagement, (2) actions of the teachers in these classrooms (3) Photographs taken by students of the furniture they preferred, with annotations explaining their preferences; (4) the shift in the teachers' mindset due to furniture changes.

## **2. OUTCOMES**

### **2.1. Photoelicitation**

In this contribution, we will focus on analysing the data obtained from photo elicitation and LEASA to understand whether the degree of student participation in classroom activities can change in the presence of an innovative setting compared to a traditional setting. The photo elicitation was preferred as a tool to measure students' perceptions of their engagement. It is a visual method that engages the subjects more than the conventional interview. It was submitted during the innovative setting, five times, once at the end of each. Students were asked to choose an innovative piece of furniture, put a post-it note on it and write down their answers to two questions: 1) What did you like most about this piece of furniture? 2) How does this object help you learn more effectively? The researchers took the picture of the piece of furniture with the post it on it. The two questions had the goal to stimulate the students to reason around three aspects: 1) furniture choice; 2) the reason behind the choice; 3) the learning link, that is, how that furniture helped them learn better.

Fifth-grade students identified the relax area with soft seating (poufs) as the piece of furniture they found most conducive to learning. The bar table ranked second, followed by the niche in third place. In fourth place was the high desk with a stool; it is noteworthy how desks with a height greater than the standard (bar table and high desk) were highly appreciated by the students. Similarly, fourth-grade students also selected the relaxation area with soft seating (poufs) as the most favoured furniture element to support learning. Modular desks came in second place. The interactive whiteboard, despite already being present in the traditional setting, was the third most chosen element, perhaps confirming that this tool is perceived by students as facilitating learning. In fourth place, with an equal number of preferences, were the plant wall,

ergonomic chairs, and bookshelves.

The reasons expressed by fourth and fifth-grade students differed: for fourth-grade students, the primary reason was the possibility to relax (32% of responses), while for fifth-grade students, comfort prevailed (28%), closely followed by the affordance for learning (24%), which was also the second choice expressed by fourth-grade students, with 21% of responses.

Regarding the learning link, the one most frequently mentioned by fourth-grade students was 'supports different learning needs', followed by 'helps with reading' and 'helps with relaxation'. The types of furniture that students identified as best supporting diverse learning needs were poufs and desks. These furnishings:

- Promote well-being at school: "They help me learn better because I can relax and then feel more energized for lessons"
- Support cooperation: "The desks help me learn better because you can work together"

In fifth grade, the primary motivation was different: 'comfort and safety'. As with fourth grade, the second and third motivations were 'helps with reading' and 'helps with relaxation'.

The types of furniture that students found most comfortable and safe were the reading area and the sofa, because:

- It's comfortable and spacious: "The reading area is my favourite because it's comfortable and spacious, and it helps me read more like we used to in the old classroom, but above all, it makes me feel eager to read".
- Supports concentration: "The place where I can concentrate the most is the sofa because it's very comfortable and helps me read well".

'Helps with reading' was the second most cited motivation for both grades and was linked to poufs and the soft area. Students particularly appreciated the presence of this space because it is:

- Quiet: "The reading area is very useful for me to read, not only because it's very comfortable but also because it's the only quiet place".
- Useful for relaxing between activities: "I choose the reading area because when we need to wait for someone to finish something, we can go and read"
- Comfortable: "It helps me learn better because it's very comfortable for reading".

## **2.2. Class observation**

During the school year, 11 observations were conducted in the classes under study, divided as follows: 3 observations in phase A (traditional setting, Term 1), 5 observations in phase B (presence of innovative furniture, Term 2), and 3 observations in phase A, representing the return to the initial situation (Term 3). In this case, the furniture was the only independent variable. Each observation involved the presence of two researchers who tracked the duration of specific actions observed during lessons using a platform called Learning Environments Analysis Survey App (LEASA), developed by project partners (and adapted from Byers, 2016). The presence of two researchers aimed to compare their respective recordings and reach a consensus. The platform collects quantitative data on 4 dimensions (Focus Mode, Pedagogies, Learning Activities, Learning Communities), each organized into sub-items that were activated on the platform as soon as observed by the researchers and stopped at their conclusion, even recursively, as they occurred during the lesson. Naturally, before this observation phase, trials were conducted with the same classes to acclimate students to the presence of silent, non-intrusive observers and to establish interpretive agreement among researchers in coding the observed actions.

In this study, the significant results of the “Focus Mode” and “Learning Communities” dimensions are analyzed.

The first dimension, Focus Mode, highlights the amount of time dedicated to teacher-centered and student-centered activities. In the fourth grade, there is only a slight negative decline in teacher time during phase B (innovative setting, Term 2), with an average time of about 25 minutes per lesson (averaged across the three phases). The student-centered mode consistently remains at very high levels in Term 1, Term 2, and Term 3 (about 55 minutes per lesson, average across the three phases) with a slight increase in phase 2, the “innovative setting.”

The data for the fifth grade is much more dynamic. The time dedicated to teacher-centered activities significantly decreases from Term 1 (over 43 minutes) to Term 2 (about 21 minutes), only to rise again during the restoration of the traditional setting in Term 3 (about 42 minutes). Similarly, student-centered activities show a significant increase in Term 2 (about 43 minutes, compared to 36 in Term 1 and 20 in Term 3).

The Learning Communities dimension records class time based on the organization of students into individual work, small group work, whole-class

activities, or mixed groups. In the fourth grade, there is an increase in group work time at the expense of individual work, which decreases in Term 2. Group work time remains consistent in Term 3, even after restoring the traditional setting. This enhancement of group work can be attributed to a greater use of active teaching methods that focus on student-centered learning, as consistently observed in the “Pedagogies” dimension.

The fifth grade exhibits a different teaching behavior. The averages of the time dedicated to whole-class or individual activities indicate that these were the teacher’s predominant methods of instruction (the time averages remain constant across the three terms, at about 12 minutes for individual work and 40 minutes for whole-class activities). Interestingly, small group work, which was completely absent in Term 1, appeared for the first time in Term 2 with an average of over 28 minutes, and then decreased (without disappearing entirely) in Term 3 (about 5 minutes).

These initial results highlight how the mere introduction of innovative furniture in the classroom created a discontinuity in some previously established teaching activities and reduced the teacher-centered time in favor of activities that promote student agency. This suggests a transition towards more participative and less frontal teaching methodologies.

### **3. CONSIDERATIONS**

The main results of the research activity are:

- Students believed that their learning had improved due to innovative furniture.
- While measurements of student engagement levels did not change significantly in the presence of innovative furniture, students perceived that furniture had an impact on their learning.
- Students reported they tend to spend more time in readings and decreased levels of anxiety and stress in the presence of innovative furniture since concentration and focussing was scaffolded thanks to the new furniture.

As for the LEASA observations:

- Students-centered pedagogies increased in presence of innovative furniture
- The observations reflect a progressive reduction in the central role of the teacher, in line with the goal of shifting the focus to the students.

The use of internationally validated research tools permits the results obtained in the Italian context to be compared internationally.

#### **4. COMPARING ITALIAN DATA TO PREVIOUS AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH**

This study replicated research previously conducted in Australia (Morris & Imms, 2020, 2023). Despite significant contextual differences in infrastructure, policy and curriculum, we found very similar results in the Australian study when compared to the Italian data presented in this paper. The Italian data show how students perceive flexible furniture to have a positive impact on their learning. Their photographic data showed there are a range of furniture that students prefer, suggesting that choice of furniture give students agency to meet their personal preferences. This was similar to the Australian study, where students selected furniture to meet a range of physiological and behavioural needs (Morris & Imms, 2020, 2023). The Italian students also closely linked furniture to learning, particularly evidenced by the reading corner having a perceived positive impact on their reading habits and literacy skills. The specificity of this finding (i.e., a direct influence on reading habits) was not found in the Australian study, but could be a result of the Italian furniture intervention specifically including a reading corner which was not part of the flexible furniture arrangement in the Australian classrooms. It might also be the result of contextual differences in terms of focus areas for primary aged students across the two countries. There were other positive benefits to individuals too, with students explaining they like the flexible furniture as they perceived it decreased levels of anxiety and stress. Focus was also perceived to increase when working in more flexible environments. While stress was not mentioned in the Australian study, Australian students also reported they chose specific items of flexible furniture to support their concentration and focus (Morris & Imms, 2020, 2023). Teachers clearly changed their practices when working in flexible furniture arrangements. They were seen to engage in more student-centred pedagogies when working with innovative furniture, consistent with the Australian findings (Morris & Imms, 2020, 2023). While other patterns were found in the Italian data, such as flexible furniture seeming to support a move towards more collaborative activities, the move towards student-centred pedagogies remains a clear and consistent result that requires further exploration across both Italian and Australian contexts.

This snapshot of results from our study suggests there is a rationale for continuing to explore the influence of furniture on teaching and learning, and

how it supports the needs of all students, and this is work we are continuing to collaborate on. We must ensure that our spaces meet the needs of all students, and these data are evidence of the capacity of furniture to contribute to improving the experiences of students while they are at school.

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# CAN INNOVATION AND INCLUSION CO-EXIST?

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The main international organisations and institutions are reshaping the educational system to facilitate the acquisition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Thirty years after the Salamanca Declaration this research aims to explore if, according to the perception of school staff and students of four innovative high schools in Italy and Finland, ILEs can promote inclusive process for all

inclusion; innovative learning environments; high schools

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades the main international organisations and institutions are debating the necessity to rethink, in a lifelong learning perspective, educational systems. According to their recommendations introducing Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs) can foster active and learner centred pedagogies, the use of new technology (ICT), and the acquisition of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Schleicher, 2020) that respond to the needs of the job market and have citizens who are protagonists in their communities.

Thirty years after the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994) this research, carried out in four high schools in Italy and Finland, is designed to explore if, according to the perceptions of school staff and students, ILEs can foster school inclusion for students, also those with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

OECD (2013, 2017) defines ILEs as flexible, technological and multimedia, able to answer students' 21st century needs. They do not refer only to physical aspects: it is not possible to separate learning from context, as it is not just a matter of organizing space but also taking care of, for example, relations,



contents, teaching strategies and time. Spaces are not just empty boxes, but produce and shape social relations, and in turn social praxis influence the use and experience of space (Benade, 2019).

According to the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) of the World Health Organization (2001) space is one of the factors that can limit or favour participation in different activities or constitute a barrier to full utilisation of educational opportunities.

Universal Design for Learning principles (Meyer et al., 2014) underline that diversity is normality and that each person has different characteristics: a generic approach may not necessarily meet the needs of those with SEN. Some need individualised programmes and resources, or quiet zones within traditional classrooms to recover from anxiety or overstimulation (Sandri & Marcarini, 2019).

For the success of innovative projects it is crucial to involve students and school staff in the design phase: this gives designers a better pedagogical understanding (Blackmore et al., 2011; Clarke, 2017), facilitates a positive change in school culture, the development of new skills in teachers and students, and the application of learner-centred teaching (Flutter, 2006).

### **1.1. ILEs in Italy and Finland**

In 2014 INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation Innovation and Educational Research) established “Avanguardie Educative”, a movement of innovative schools based on rethinking the organization of space and time, didactic methods, and relations with the community. Unfortunately the landscape of Italian schools is far from being innovative, as the Legambiente report<sup>1</sup> shows school buildings: old, falling short of safety standards, with seismic hydrogeological risks, low hygiene and health standards, in particular in the south where many students do not have the opportunity to study in a safe and accessible environment.

In 2014 Finland started a transformation plan aimed at building more than 100 new schools. According to Tapaninen it will be possible to see “ (...) lots of different kinds of furniture, lots of colours and, I would say, a lot of happy people” (O’Sullivan, 2017). The outdated vision of schools built as barracks with classrooms located along corridors and desks aligned in rows has been overtaken by more flexible, multifunctional, and informal spaces, resulting in

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.legambiente.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/rapporto-Ecosistema-Scuola\\_2021.pdf](https://www.legambiente.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/rapporto-Ecosistema-Scuola_2021.pdf) (accessed on 09/09/24)

welcoming, safe, and comfortable environments, conveying a sense of inclusion and well-being.

## 2. THE RESEARCH

This exploratory research was carried out with a qualitative and interpretative approach (Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2005). It is formed of four case studies of innovative high schools in Italy and Finland, aimed at understanding, according to the perceptions of students and school staff, if ILEs facilitate the use of active and learner-centred didactics and ICT, whilst promoting the inclusion and well-being of all the students, especially those with SEN. In Italy I selected two high schools (Licei) from the “Avanguardie Educative” of INDIRE as their Manifesto<sup>2</sup> includes some elements that characterise my research.

In Finland I selected two general upper secondary schools (Lukio)<sup>3</sup>. First, to define the parameters of my fieldwork I conducted:

- 5 focus groups with teachers (Italy);
- 27 semi-structured interviews with Head teachers, teachers and students (8 in Italy, 19 in Finland).

After this phase I observed how spaces were organised and whether they were conducive to student inclusion (e.g. placement of SEN students); if the spaces were functional for active teaching methods and how teachers related to them.

- In Italy: 70 lessons (4180 minutes)
- In Finland: 20 lessons (1500 minutes)

Finally, I administered (online) two questionnaires: one for the teachers, ‘Inclusive Processes Evaluation Scale’ (Cottini et al., 2016) on inclusive teaching and organisation of the school; one for the students, inspired by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare<sup>4</sup> questionnaire.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://innovazione.indire.it/avanguardieeducative/il-manifesto> (accessed on 09/09/24)

<sup>3</sup> I chose Finland for my fieldwork because its school system is considered one of the best in the world, based on inclusion and well-being, with schools characterised by innovative learning spaces, learner-centred methodologies and the recognition of non-formal learning (Finnish Government, 2021; Karhu, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> <https://thl.fi/en/web/thlfi-en/research-and-development/research-and-projects/school-health-promotion-study?redirect=%2Fen%2Fweb%2Fthlfi-en%2Fresearch-and-development%2Fresearch-and-projects%2Fcurrent-research-and-projects> (accessed on 09/09/24).

## **2.1. Data analysis**

According to the perceptions collected it seems ILEs facilitate the use of learner-centred didactics and ICT, fostering both inclusion and well-being of students (and teachers). Following the architect Herman Hertzberg's vision of Learning Landscapes (2008) the four schools (especially in Finland) go beyond the traditional model in favour of a school designed as a city with squares, streets, and meeting points; spaces are welcoming, rooms are brightly coloured, halls and corridors are no longer mere places of passage but learning streets with sofas where it is possible to study alone or in groups, or to socialize with friends. The two Italian schools create innovative learning spaces by rethinking the traditional organization of furniture, making classrooms more functional for learner-centred didactics that in turn favour inclusion for all, for example through cooperative and experiential learning.

From the data it emerges that in the Italian school where desks are arranged as "learning islands" the use of cooperative learning and group work was more frequent, as well the inclusion and participation of all students (including the one with severe disabilities) in learning processes, as opposed to the classic classroom with desks in rows.

In the first case the student with disabilities sat with his classmates, taking part actively in classwork. In the second case the student with disabilities sat at the front of the classroom, with his SEN teacher at his side, with little opportunity to interact or participate fully in the lesson.

In the two Lukio the analysis of the data confirmed that ILEs facilitate the use of learner-centred teaching and ICT, encouraging higher levels of participation and inclusion in lessons, including of students with SEN.

Fig. 1. Desks in learning islands (Italy)



## 2.2. Some critical issues

Despite the positive impact of ILEs, several critical issues emerged that threaten to undermine their potential.

In recent years the trend is to merge small schools and build larger buildings. In Finland students and teachers believe that bigger schools can offer more educational opportunities; but this threatens the characteristics of the Finnish system<sup>5</sup>. Having a high student population risks undermining the “subject based classroom” system<sup>6</sup> and making it difficult to apply active and learner-centred teaching: the student questionnaire showed that it is not so rare (albeit less frequently than in Italy) to come across passive and boring lessons. Moreover this also makes it difficult to work well and give meaningful and lasting support, considering that each school has only one SEN teacher.

Another critical element is the increasing digitalisation of the learning environment. In the four schools students regularly use computers in class and in Finland e-books have replaced paper books. Technology can help teachers present and supplement their lessons (e.g. videos, images and diagrams), it can facilitate more interactive lessons improving the participation also of SEN students, offering different communication channels and learning paths.

However I found that the use of digital tools reduces teacher movement through

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<sup>5</sup> The success of the Finnish system is based on a high quality curriculum, equity in education access, and the small size of schools. Most of them have less than 300 students, favouring strong inclusion and relations between teachers, students, families, and other institutions and organizations (O’Sullivan, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> In “subject based classrooms” systems each classroom is dedicated to a specific subject and subject teacher. Students move from one classroom to another according to scheduled lessons.

the classroom. This affects the quality of relationships, engagement, and opportunity to interact with students: the result is that students, especially those in the back row, spend most of their time playing video games, watching videos, or on social media.

As observed during online learning in the pandemic, relationships, physical contact and proximity remain irreplaceable in educational practice (Sandri & Di Pietrantonio, 2021).

According to teachers e-books are difficult to use due to their many inputs and distractions, have a negative impact on students' ability to concentrate, and on the quality of their learning. This makes reading less effective and creates cognitive overload, distracting rather than facilitating comprehension.

Other issues relate to the one size fits all approach of ICT: designed for standard users and does not take into account the differences of individual learners, particularly those with SEN. The risk is that of standardising teaching, and adapting student responses to the characteristics of programmes and not the other way round (Starks & Reich, 2023).

Smardon et al. (2015) point out that many innovative elements are promoted by the OECD, who pursue global economic interests. It is important to understand who is driving innovation and to what ends, and whether educational goals are still driven by pedagogical theories or are determined by market needs and interests. Ensuring quality education for the younger generation can contribute to the development and progress of society, but we must ask whether we all share the same idea of progress, and what this means for those that live on the margins of society.

Last but not least: ILEs can foster teaching that facilitates cognitive, metacognitive, and collaborative learning experiences as well as deeper learning (Imms & Kvan, 2021) but, as Hattie argues, "changing the shape of buildings does not lead to teachers teaching differently" (Page & Davis, 2016, p. 89).

Until last year it was not necessary to have pedagogical training to teach in secondary schools in Italy, so teachers often lack pedagogical, psychological and relational skills. Also SEN teachers often do not have specific training, as confirmed by the research (only 50% in the two schools investigated), making it difficult to realize a real inclusion for all.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

To conclude, it can be argued that, according to the perceptions of head teachers, teachers, and students, the four schools monitored are both inclusive and innovative: ILEs foster student inclusion and well-being. They are accessible, flexible, safe, beautiful, welcoming, and facilitate a learner-centred approach that actively engages students, including those with SEN.

Despite these positive impacts, the four schools are unable to ensure a real inclusion for all without a global rethink of the whole educational system. Italy has one of the most inclusive school models, which includes even students with severe disabilities in the mainstream system, ensuring co-evolutionary processes (Canevaro, 2015). However this is often a “theoretical inclusion” which struggles to activate truly inclusive and meaningful processes for students with SEN.

In Finland, despite pedagogical innovation and highly qualified teachers, the mainstream system is highly selective and competitive, resulting in a kind of ‘exclusive inclusion’. After comprehensive school the best students access Lukio, those with SEN end up in vocational schools where the students receive more individual attention, or in special schools, resulting in their marginalisation. Although the data cannot be generalized, 30 years after the Salamanca Declaration and subsequent recommendations on the subject, despite efforts, discriminatory mechanisms are still in place that make it difficult to realise inclusive rights for students with disabilities and access to quality education within mainstream schools.

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## **THE “STUDENT VOICE” FROM “DANTE-CARDUCCI” SCHOOL IN PIACENZA (ITALY). WELL-BEING, INCLUSION AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: WHAT THE STUDENTS THINK, LIKE AND DISLIKE?**

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Dante-Carducci schools are in Piacenza (North-Italy) in two different buildings: Dante has all the classrooms occupied and there is mainly a “traditional teaching” methodology, but some teachers try as much as possible to use more innovative teaching, while the Carducci has fewer classrooms, large corridors, a large gym and a garden surrounding. The teachers, after a training, implemented a new organization: disciplinary/subject/thematic classrooms were created and assigned to the teachers, so the students reach them at the change of lessons instead of the reverse. This new organization methodology and didactic change aimed at responding to the many students with SEN (Special Educational



Needs) to guarantee person's centrality, developing an ethic of responsibility and building a sense of democracy, wellbeing, inclusion, and learning that are fundamental for the academic and educational success of all students in a multicultural vision (Garcia, 2018). The research is qualitative-quantitative, a questionnaire was given to the students in both schools and aimed to understand students' vision regarding Carducci school, how the students experienced this change, the positive and critical aspects. Regarding Dante school how they would like to reorganize and/or redesign school spaces (Woolner, 2015; Weyland, 2015).

Student voice; disciplinary/subject/thematic classrooms; innovative learning environments.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Dante-Carducci schools are in Piacenza (North-Italy), a city with 102,660 inhabitants and capital of the province of Emilia-Romagna region and they are located in two different buildings very close, in a residential neighborhood with public gardens and cycle paths frequented by the students of the institute even during school hours for nature observations or gym activities.

The students' families are characterized by good housing stability, the socio-economic physiognomy is heterogeneous: families with a high cultural level, situations of medium well-being and growing cases of marginality due to high immigration with reflection in the students' classes formation.

Dante-Carducci schools have common priorities and macro-objectives but referring to the building location characteristics and their catchment areas are different.

Dante school is in a more central position and is organized on three floors plus a basement, and has 26 classrooms all occupied, but it does not have other spaces and this partially precludes the possibility of testing new approaches teaching, so in this school there is mainly a "traditional teaching" methodology, but some teachers try as much as possible to use innovative teaching and didactic methodologies.

Carducci school is in a less central position, and it is organized on two floors plus a basement. It has fewer classrooms and large corridors, a wide gym and a garden surrounding the school. For several years the teachers have developed research for methodological inclusive solutions aimed at teaching differentiation to respond to the high number of students with SEN, especially NAI (New Arrival in Italy) students and students with heavy disability (Sandri, 2019).

### **1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

New challenges have led new responses: in the Carducci school the teachers decided to design "new school organization" and, after a training, disciplinary/subject/thematic classrooms were created and assigned to the teachers so the students reach them at the change of lessons instead of the reverse and also new "learning environments" (Armenakis, et al., 1993; Biondi, Borri, Tosi, 2016; Marcarini, 2016).

Gradual methodological and didactic changes have led to a reflection among teachers and students to the "Vision of the Institute": centrality of the person, development of an ethic of responsibility and construction of a sense of legality

and democracy (Alexander, 2008). Well-being, inclusion and innovative learning environments are the fundamental aspects for the academic and formative success of all students, without exceptions to improve aspects related to learning (Barrett et al. 2015, Barret, 2022; Bannister, 2017; Baker, 2019).

It was decided to also involve Dante school's students in the research to understand what vision of their school they have and what their expectations and desires are.

This research investigates how to overcome the rigidity of the traditional learning environment (Morris, Imms, 2023b), how students adapt to a new organization of learning of their school spaces and what impact from the point of view of students' perception the new educational spaces have; the "student voice" (Grion, Cook-Sather, 2013; Quaglia, Corso, 2014) is at the center of this research and gives them the opportunity to explain their vision of school.

In fact, the objectives of the research are:

- The students "voice" to explain their vision on learning spaces, well-being, inclusion and how they learn.
- Their perception of being considered and respected as a "person" with their own unique characteristics.
- Understand how Carducci school students experienced the new organization and what they think about it.
- Understand how Dante school students think about their school, their expectations and desires.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The research has a qualitative-quantitative approach (Mertens, 2014; Trincherro, 2015; Jones, Smith (2016).

Based on previous reflections and starting from the analysis of the most recent literature, the data collecting strategies used are:

- Questionnaire to Carducci and Dante students.
- Focus group between Carducci teachers and students and final debate.
- Carducci teachers' considerations (Professor Lucia Tagliaferri and Professor Filippo Rebecchi).
- Dante teacher considerations (Professor Francesca Lunardini).

In particular:

- Dante school:
  - Total students: 621.
  - Students who answered to the questionnaire: 471; 75,85%.
  - Total students with SEN (Disability, Law n.104/92<sup>1</sup>, ADHD, SLD, NAI): 173; 27,85%.
  - Students with disability (Law n.104/92: people with Autistic Syndrome; Down Syndrome, ADHD, Intellectual, Sensorial and Physical disability, etc.): 31.
  - Students with SLD (Specific Learning Disorder): 70.
  - Students NAI: 33.
  - Students with other SEN: 39.
- Carducci school:
  - Total students: 374.
  - Students who answered to the questionnaire: 347; 92,78%.
  - Total students with SEN: 130; 34,75%.
  - Students with disability (Law n. 104/92): 37.
  - Students with SLD: 44.
  - Students NAI: 12.
  - Students with other SEN: 37.

The questionnaire has 18 questions, and it is divided into four parts.

*1<sup>st</sup> – My vision of school* (7 questions). The questions are about the vision of the school building, if the students like their classroom, which spaces they think are most necessary to increase the involvement and interest during didactic activity and if the physical spaces, the objects, the furnishings can influence and improve their learning and their well-being at school, and if keeping the desk for the professors is important for their prestige.

*2<sup>nd</sup> – School well-being* (2 questions). The questions are about the student's well-being, if they feel well or they don't at school and why, maybe for unwelcoming and inadequate school spaces, difficulties in socializing with

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<sup>1</sup>Law n. 104, 5 February 1992, concerns the rights of social integration and assistance of the person with disability.

classmates, teaching methodologies that do not reflect their way of learning, difficult empathetic relationship with some teachers, poor interest in the study.

*3<sup>rd</sup> – The school and I, studying and learning* (3 questions). The questions asked if the students find school lesson boring and in which way they prefer teachers to do lessons: with oral explanations only, with group work, with oral explanations and with images and videos, in addition to explanations also involve the carrying out of some practical and real tasks, outside the school in various places in the city (museums, libraries, parks, offices, shops, artisans...) (Mottana, Campagnoli, 2020; Morris, Imms; 2023a).

*4<sup>th</sup> – Disciplinary/subject/thematic classrooms* (6 questions). These questions are a bit different because Carducci school changed organization, while Dante school have traditional organization. The questions are about what the students think about the school organization with this type of classrooms assigned to the teachers and if changing classrooms when lessons change would allow to have a moment of breakout and decompression; if they believe that this innovation could be more or less useful for improving their learning; if their well-being at school could be improved by the disciplinary/subject/thematic classrooms, if it could be possible to improve collaboration and socialization with their classmates, finally if they think that this organization could facilitate the inclusion of all their classmates, no one excluded.

## **CONCLUSION**

Regarding the results, the students' answers in the 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> parts of the questionnaire are very similar. In particular in the 1<sup>st</sup> part (Figure n. 1) the students of both schools believe that spaces influence both learning and well-being, it is important to have green spaces both inside and outside the school and the flexibility of the spaces with multimedia equipment is important. However, the answers regarding the teachers' desk are different: at the Carducci school they consider it important, at the Dante school they do not consider it necessary for the teachers' authority.

Figure 1. 1<sup>st</sup> part: My vision of school.

RESULTS QUESTIONNAIRE 1 <sup>st</sup> PART: MY VISION OF SCHOOL	
1. THE SCHOOL BUILDING; WHICH (SYMBOLIC) IMAGE DOES REPRESENTS YOUR DANTE SCHOOL?	ANSWERS: AGGREGATION CENTRE (1 <sup>st</sup> BOTH SCHOOL); HOSPITAL; HOME (3 <sup>rd</sup> FOR BOTH); PRISON (2 <sup>nd</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS); LABYRINTH
2. THE WORD THAT MOST REPRESENTS YOUR IDEA OF SCHOOL:	ANSWERS: FAMILIARITY(2 <sup>nd</sup> FOR BOTH SCHOOLS), BRIGHTNESS; WELL-BEING (1 <sup>st</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS); BEAUTY; FLEXIBILITY (3 <sup>rd</sup> FOR BOTH SCHOOLS)
3. I LIKE THE CLASSROOMS OF MY SCHOOL	ANSWERS: • ABSOLUTELY NOT; • NOT; • NEITHER YES NOR NO(1 <sup>st</sup> FOR DANTE); • YES (1 <sup>st</sup> FOR CARDUCCI); • ABSOLUTELY YES
4. WHICH SPACES DO YOU BELIEVE ARE MOST NECESSARY?	ANSWERS: • GREEN SPACES EQUIPPED FOR RELAXATION (1 <sup>st</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS); • SPACES OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM WITH STATION FOR WORK GROUP; FLEXIBLE CLASSROOMS WITH MULTIMEDIA EQUIPMENT; • SPACES OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM WITH STATION FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY (2 <sup>nd</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS); • PERSONAL LOCKERS; • LIBRARY; • CAFETERIA/CANTEEN
5. DO YOU THINK THAT TO INCREASE YOUR INVOLVEMENT AND INTEREST DURING YOUR EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY, IT IS NECESSARY TO HAVE:	ANSWERS: • CLASSROOMS WITH FLEXIBLE SPACES (AND MULTIMEDIA EQUIPMENT (1 <sup>st</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS); • MULTIMEDIA EQUIPMENT ONLY; • NONE OR ALL THAT BEFORE, ENOUGH FOR THE TEACHER TO KNOW HOW TO INTEREST THE STUDENTS
6. DO YOU THINK THAT THE PHYSICAL SPACES, THE OBJECTS, THE FURNISHINGS CAN INFLUENCE AND IMPROVE YOUR LEARNING AND YOUR WELL-BEING AT SCHOOL?	ANSWERS: • YES (1 <sup>st</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS); • NOT; • I DON'T KNOW
7. DO YOU THINK THAT KEEPING THE CHAIR FOR THE PROFESSOR IS:	ANSWERS: • NECESSARY TO DISTINGUISH THE TEACHER'S AUTHORITATIVE ROLE (1 <sup>st</sup> FOR CARDUCCI); • NOT NECESSARY BECAUSE THE TEACHER'S AUTHORITY CAN ALSO EXPRESS IN OTHER WAY (1 <sup>st</sup> FOR DANTE)

Figure 2. 2<sup>nd</sup> part: School well-being.

RESULT QUESTIONNAIRE 2 <sup>nd</sup> PART: SCHOOL WELL-BEING	
8. DO YOU THINK THAT TO FEEL WELL AT SCHOOL OR DO NOT FEELING WELL AT SCHOOL OR SOMETIMES FEELING WELL BUT SOMETIMES NOT FEELING WELL?	ANSWERS: • FEELING WELL AT SCHOOL (2 <sup>nd</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS: 137 CARDUCCI; 179 DANTE); • NOT FEELING WELL AT SCHOOL • SOMETIMES FEELING WELL AND SOMETIMES NOT FEELING WELL (1 <sup>st</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS: 190 CARDUCCI; 245 DANTE)
9. IF YOU DO NOT FEEL WELL IN SCHOOL, CAN YOU SAY WHY?	ANSWERS: • UNWELCOMING AND INADEQUATE SCHOOL SPACES (2 <sup>nd</sup> DANTE 4 <sup>th</sup> CARDUCCI); • DIFFICULTIES IN SOCIALISING WITH PEOPLE (ARGUMENTS, MISUNDERSTANDINGS, ISOLATION...) (1 <sup>st</sup> CARDUCCI; 1 <sup>st</sup> DANTE); • TEACHING METHODOLOGIES THAT DO NOT REFLECT YOUR WAY OF LEARNING (UNDERSTANDING (3 <sup>rd</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS); • DIFFICULT EMPATHETIC RELATIONSHIP (OF SYMPATHY--CONFIDENCE) WITH SOME TEACHERS (1 <sup>st</sup> DANTE; 2 <sup>nd</sup> CARDUCCI); • POOR INTEREST IN THE STUDY

Figure 3. 3<sup>rd</sup> part: I and school, studying and learning.

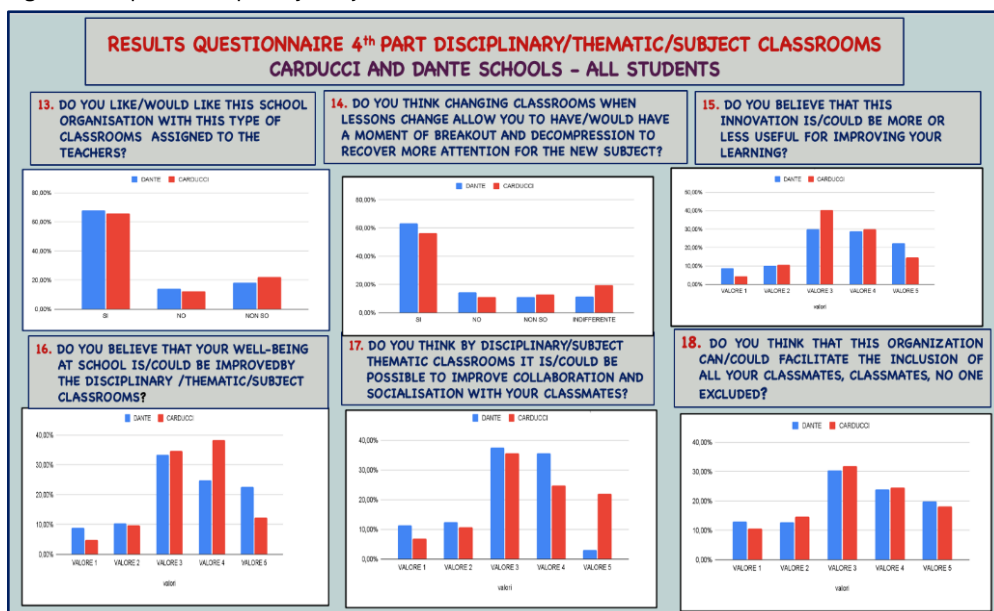
RESULTS QUESTIONNAIRE 3 <sup>rd</sup> PART: I AND SCHOOL, STUDYING AND LEARNING	
10. YOU GET TIRED AND FIND SCHOOL LESSONS BORING	ANSWERS: • VERY OFTEN (3 <sup>rd</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS); • OFTEN (2 <sup>nd</sup> DANTE); • SOMETIMES (1 <sup>st</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS); • RARELY (2 <sup>nd</sup> CARDUCCI); • NEVER
11. DURING LESSONS I GET CURIOUS AND I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW MORE THINGS	ANSWERS: • ABSOLUTELY NOT; • NOT; NEITHER YES NOR NO (1 <sup>st</sup> BOTH SCHOOL); • YES (2 <sup>nd</sup> BOTH SCHOOLS); • ABSOLUTELY YES.
12. DO YOU PREFER TEACHERS TO DO LESSONS:	ANSWERS: • WITH ORAL EXPLANATIONS ONLY (CLASSROOM-TAUGHT LESSON) • WITH GROUP WORK PROPOSAL (2 <sup>nd</sup> FOR BOTH SCHOOLS) • WITH ORAL EXPLANATIONS AND WITH IMAGES AND VIDEOS (3 <sup>rd</sup> FOR BOTH SCHOOLS) • WHICH IN ADDITION TO EXPLANATIONS ALSO INVOLVE THE CARRYING OUT OF SOME PRACTICAL AND REAL TASKS • OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL IN VARIOUS PLACES IN THE CITY (MUSEUMS, LIBRARIES, PARKS, OFFICES, SHOPS, ARTISANS...) (1 <sup>st</sup> FOR BOTH SCHOOLS)

Regarding the 2<sup>nd</sup> part (Figure 2) relating to well-being at school, the students of both schools believe that the discomfort at school is mainly due to difficulties in socializing, for the Dante school also for unwelcoming and inadequate school spaces and for the students of both schools, as a third important aspect, the teaching methodologies do not reflect their way of learning; for the students of the Dante school the difficult empathetic relationship with some teachers.

As regards the 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the questionnaire (Figure n. 3) in both schools the students do not consider the lessons too boring, however regarding the teaching methodologies, they would prefer lessons outside the school in various places in the city (museums, libraries, parks, offices, shops, artisans...) or group work proposal with oral explanations and with images and videos, also involve the carrying out of some practical and real tasks, so it is important the teacher transition to innovative teaching and didactic methodology (Imms, Kvan; 2022).

Finally, in the fourth part of the questionnaire, regarding the new organization implemented in the Carducci school, therefore for the students who are experimenting with it, as well as for the students of the Dante school, who are not experimenting with it but were asked to think about it, from the answers given by the students (Figure 4,) the results to the questions are very similar in both schools.

Figure 4. 4<sup>th</sup> part: Disciplinary/subject/thematic classrooms



In question n. 13, the majority of students like the organization of the classrooms assigned to the teachers and also agree (question n.14) in believing that with this organization they would have a moment of breakout and decompression to recover the attention for the new subject.

Regarding questions no. 15-16-17-18 (values are provided in ascending order from 1 to 5) the students of both schools believe (the most values are in 3-4-5):

- this innovation could be useful for improving the learning;
- their well-being at school could be improved by the disciplinary/thematic/subject classrooms;
- this organization could improve collaboration and socialization with their classmates:
- this organization could facilitate the inclusion of all your classmates, no one excluded.

### **Carducci teachers' considerations**

- Positive aspects:
  - new organization has stimulated teachers to use new teaching methodologies, in order to differentiate teaching also due to the presence of many students with SEN.
  - this made it possible to consider each student as a unique person, in his unrepeatability so that no one could be excluded;
  - moving from one classroom to another led students to develop a sense of responsibility and autonomy;
  - for each movement there was, in turn, a student who opened and one who closed the queue, with the responsibility of leading the class group, this made him feel important even if sometimes some difficulties emerged in managing the group;
  - during the path, students could have a break to focus their attention on the new subject;
  - this new organization has allowed to involve all students in a democratic vision of school and active citizenship.
- Critical issues:
  - some teachers who were not very responsible when changing space remained in the classroom and not in the corridor to check students;



- open and close lines do not have always respected by students but they learn the school rules
- cleaning of classrooms: janitors sometimes critical but after they explained to the classes the situation improved.

#### **Carducci students' considerations**

- they have more friendship because they meet more, with all the schoolmates so they could socialize much more;
- they don't have always respected the rule as group responsible, but at the same time, they felt important;
- backpacks is too heavy when moving from one classroom to another, especially on the stairs but the teachers then lightened our load;
- more control of timings: the lessons closes at the correct times to allow for movement;
- changing the classroom allows to refresh and return attention to the new subject;
- they learned the school rules and they became more responsible and conscientious.

#### **Dante teacher considerations:**

- Dante school is still a traditional school, but the feedback from students in the various areas (didactic-educational and well-being) is substantially positive;
- however, the majority of students would like to see a renewal of the spaces and teaching methodology;
- the Dante-Carducci comparison shows that the students of the Carducci school who were able to experience the new setting of the school gave decidedly positive feedback, especially from the point of view of well-being and socialization;
- the data from the two schools, however, are similar in the learning aspect.

Thanks to the training in which were involved almost all teachers and janitors of the Carducci school, the bridge-culture has developed (Sandrone, 2007), so it has been possible to implement this new organization: in the school there is a pedagogical vision shared among the teachers who characterize the school.

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# WALL-LESS SCHOOLING AS A DEVICE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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This article explores the educational and social potential of an innovative “wall-less” schooling project called Strade Maestre, where a regular school year is transformed into a nine-month, thousand-kilometer group walking journey. This contribution explores how Strade Maestre addresses three key dimensions of learning environments that promote social justice: appropriation, flexibility and inclusion. This exploratory investigation suggests that Strade Maestre promotes appropriation through symbolic rather than physical transformations, achieves flexibility through temporal management rather than spatial reconfiguration, and pursues inclusion through intentional biographical diversity and systematic observation of communication patterns. The analysis argues that these dimensions can simultaneously serve as design objectives for educational environments and as strategies for developing social justice competencies among participants. This theoretical contribution opens questions about how innovative learning environments like Strade Maestre can serve as devices to promote educational equity, suggesting the need for empirical research to understand their transformative potential.

innovative learning environments; social justice; outdoor learning; learning walks

## INTRODUCTION

Strade Maestre<sup>1</sup> is an innovative educational project that challenges traditional notions of schooling by replacing the school building with a long-journey itinerary. This “wall-less” school launched its pilot year (Year 0) on September 16, 2024, taking a cohort of 8 students (11th and 12th grade) from diverse

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.strademaestre.org/>

backgrounds<sup>2</sup> on a nine-month, thousand-kilometer journey across Italy, scheduled to conclude in June 2025. The students are engaged in group walking immersive experiences and a variety of pedagogical approaches including blended learning, service learning, outdoor education and project-based learning.

“Learning Walks” has already been described as walking-based approaches to socio-educational intervention. As implemented in several European countries, these walks represent short-term therapeutic interventions designed specifically for young offenders and at-risk youth, typically lasting from five days to three months (Koenig & Knospe, 2021). They feature either a one-to-one relationship between a youth and mentor or small groups with professional supervision, focusing primarily on behavioral change and social reintegration. In contrast, Strade Maestre emerges as a fundamentally different educational paradigm – a nine-month itinerant school project where walking serves as the primary pedagogical framework for a diverse group of mainstream high school students. While learning walks are conceived as targeted interventions for specific at-risk conditions, often featuring solitary journeys with individual mentorship (Koenig & Knospe, 2021), Strade Maestre represents a comprehensive educational program that integrates walking into a broader curriculum design. The temporal scope (days or months versus an academic year), participant profile (at-risk youth versus diverse student cohort), and fundamental objectives (therapeutic intervention versus holistic education) mark the key distinctions between these two walking-based approaches.

The journey-school traverses both urban and rural landscapes, with the learning community being hosted in a diverse array of settings including cultural and educational centers, municipal facilities, scout bases, hostels, and networks of diffused hospitality. The curricular activities are complemented by an extensive array of geographically-anchored extracurricular activities, where the specific locations along the itinerary provide unique learning opportunities tied to local contexts, resources and expertise. These place-based learning experiences are strategically integrated into the journey’s progression, creating a dynamic interplay between formal curriculum requirements and territorially-embedded

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<sup>2</sup> In the Italian secondary school system (ages 14-19), students attend specialized upper secondary schools that offer distinct tracks: licei (academic high schools specializing in humanities, sciences, arts) and technical institutes (focusing on economics, technology). Strade Maestre participants come from different types of these schools, diverse geographical areas of Italy, and varied socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, creating a heterogeneous learning community

educational opportunities.

Ultimately, Strade Maestre aspires to be a transformative experience that extends beyond its immediate participants to influence broader educational systems. By having both students and teachers leave their home schools for a year-long journey, the project creates what can be termed a “biographical break” (Koenig & Knospe, 2021) – an opportunity for profound personal and professional transformation. Upon returning to their original educational communities, participants bring back new and renewed competencies but also practical experience in innovative pedagogical approaches. This circular movement – from local schools to the journey and back – positions Strade Maestre as a potential catalyst for systemic change, where individual transformative experiences can contribute to the evolution of more inclusive educational practices within traditional school settings. The effectiveness of this ambitious approach in generating lasting institutional change remains to be empirically evaluated through longitudinal research.

This article aims to explore the educational and social possibilities, as well as the limitations, of Strade Maestre as an innovative learning environments, focusing on three key dimensions:

- appropriation: how does the dynamic succession of places in an itinerant school enable processes of appropriation?
- flexibility: what forms of flexibility are possible within an itinerant school structure?
- inclusion: how can inclusion be promoted within such unorthodox learning environments?

This exploratory study examines how Strade Maestre’s innovative learning environment offers insights for reimagining educational spaces through a social justice lens.

## **1. EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND LEXICAL PREMISES**

Drawing upon the Italian interactionist tradition and its epistemology of levels of reality (Salvini, 1998; Salvini, 2004; Salvini & Dondoni, 2011), this analysis establishes crucial distinctions between key concepts that shape our understanding of learning environments. Most fundamentally, from this perspective we can distinguish between “space” and “place” situating them on different epistemological planes.

Space can be considered as a collection of entities situated in monistic realism

(where reality is ontologically given regardless of the observer's cognitive categories) or hypothetical realism (where reality, although postulated as ontologically existing, remains unknowable). Places, on the other hand, are situated in conceptual realism, where reality does not exist ontologically but is constructed based on the categories of knowledge used to describe it as such. (Turchi & Della Torre, 2007)

This conceptual framework highlights both the relationship and the incommensurability between space and place – while they are interconnected, they exist on distinct epistemological planes that cannot be directly compared or reduced to one another. Furthermore, this perspective emphasizes that any space, regardless of its physical characteristics or intended purpose, has the potential to be transformed into a place through processes of social interaction and meaning-making.

Turning to Strade Maestre, this project necessitates specific lexical distinctions. In Strade Maestre, the traditional “school-building” is replaced by the “school-itinerary”. Spaces in Strade Maestre can be differentiated into two categories: “mobile-space” referring to all spatial elements that the walking group always carries with them (backpacks, their contents, and the services and tools accessed through their digital devices) and the spaces of the school-itinerary that the walking group traverses. I will employ these spatial distinctions in the analysis that follows.

## **2. APPROPRIATION**

Rioux et al. (2017) conceptualize appropriation as the process through which space is transformed into place. Their findings suggest that time spent in a setting alone does not lead to attachment; rather, it is these appropriating behaviors that mediate the relationship between time and place attachment.

Their research implicitly addresses appropriation within a defined space that is frequented recurrently over time. The *mobile-space* is the closest approximation to the space investigated by Rioux et al. (2017). Strade Maestre allows minimal but significant appropriating behaviors of the *mobile-space*, such as adding a patch to the backpack or choosing to leave behind something that is a burden to continue the journey. With respect to the spatial dimensions of the school-itinerary Strade Maestre promotes appropriation introducing rituals and recurring practices and by providing tools that enable the walking learning community to change them. The symbolic power of the school building is replaced by rituals and practices—such as morning briefings, school

assemblies, and notes on the shared virtual bulletin board. A cooperative approach both legitimizes and facilitates participation in and modification of these practices, thereby transforming the ever-changing space into place. This arrangement could promote equality by fostering acts of appropriation, but it could also fail by neglecting the materiality of this process. Documentation and analysis of this peculiar configuration could shed light on the dynamics of appropriation and its relative cultural value.

Strade Maestre invites reflection on the opportunity to distinguish between the appropriation of space as an instrument of social justice in education and the governance of appropriation experiences as an occasion to promote “appropriation competencies.” Walking could be described as a movement through a succession of spaces and places, the succession of spaces and places could be described as a succession of different appropriation experiences. Analyzing this process could promote a new perspective on appropriation that frames it also as a strategy aimed at promoting “appropriation competence”.

### **3. FLEXIBILITY**

The Strade Maestre school-itinerary configuration allows for ample time availability and relative flexibility of material resources (belonging to the “space”) as they depend on the location within the territory. This aspect is addressed by shifting the focus of flexibility from the construction of reconfigurable and redesignable space to designing a viable path for the learning communities. In other words, the walking group works in anticipation of the resources expected to be found in a given territory, using the available time as a tool to balance the potential rigidity of a certain “place”. By placing emphasis on the collective needs and the unique characteristics of each location, Strade Maestre challenges traditional notions of educational resources and invites to consider how flexibility can be achieved through proactive planning and adaptability.

In this case, documenting and analyzing these processes could be useful for identifying best practices to nurture flexibility, rethinking the relevance of school resources in favor of the relevance of the group’s resources and the territory opening to cost-effective solutions.



#### 4. INCLUSION

Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) conceptualize inclusion and exclusion as continuous, interconnected processes constructed through communication at different societal levels. Drawing from Luhmann's systems theory, they argue that these processes operate through multiple social sub-systems within educational settings, where both formal institutional mechanisms and informal interactions create patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Their framework emphasizes how students can be simultaneously included in some contexts while excluded from others, as these processes are socially constructed through "binary codes that determine whether someone is inside or outside the system" (p. 10). This suggests that effective inclusive education requires continuous attention to communication patterns across multiple institutional levels.

Strade Maestre seeks inclusion through the construction of groups of students with significantly different biographies and through a strict program of observation by trained educators, supervised collective analysis of the social construction of inclusion and exclusion processes (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021), and the design of ad-hoc interventions informed also by the restorative justice tradition.

The diverse composition of the student cohort, coupled with the immersive nature of the learning experience, provides a unique opportunity for fostering inclusion and promoting social justice competencies. At the same time, despite intentional biographical diversity, pre-existing differences in cultural and social capital among participants may be exacerbated during the journey. This could lead to what Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) identify as "persistent exclusion" (p. 2).

Just as with appropriation, flexibility and inclusivity can simultaneously be objectives in the design of a certain educational space and strategies for promoting social justice competencies. This perspective questions the evaluation of innovative learning environments with a set of dimensions to describe how much they foster social justice, broadening this evaluation to the ability of a certain learning environment to "promote social justice competences". Using 'appropriation' as an example, this perspective invites us to investigate the relationship between two distinct aspects. The first is appropriation as a dimension to fulfill (addressing questions like 'to what extent has a specific cohort of students appropriated a given educational environment?' or 'to what degree does a certain educational environment

enable appropriation?'), while the second is appropriation as a vector to promote social justice competencies (examining questions such as 'to what extent does a certain educational environment promote the ability to transform space into place informed by social justice values?'). This relationship has particular significance for Strade Maestre and analogous educational initiatives characterized by temporal discontinuity, such as academic mobility programs, given their inherently episodic nature in terms of spatial and social engagement and transformative ambitions. Moreover, this perspective holds broader relevance for all educational projects, as every educational endeavor inherently encompasses transformative objectives (Biesta, 2022).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Research-based documentation of Strade Maestre is warranted to better understand how to innovate learning environments as social justice devices. This exploratory contribute has outlined the potential for this unorthodox educational project to promote appropriation, flexibility, and inclusion, while also highlighting the need for further research to assess its outcomes and limitations.

As educational institutions worldwide grapple with the challenges of preparing students for an increasingly complex and interconnected world, projects like Strade Maestre serve as valuable case studies for exploring innovative approaches to education. By documenting and analyzing the experiences of the students, educators, and communities involved in this unique learning journey, researchers can contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the design and implementation of transformative educational experiences that prioritize social justice and equity.

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# DOING RESEARCH WITH SCHOOLS, BRIDGING SPACE AND EDUCATION

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This paper examines the evaluation methods for participatory research projects in educational settings, with a focus on the EDENLAB research group's initiatives. The research integrates nature into school environments, enhancing pedagogical practices through the inclusion of plants in learning spaces. Utilizing a participatory approach, teachers and school communities actively engage in the research, ensuring the relevance and applicability of the findings. The study presents a comprehensive model for evaluating the impact of these interventions, categorizing outcomes into inclusive physical environments, personal resources, and social environments conducive to change. By employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including questionnaires and reflective logs, the evaluation captures the nuanced effects of these projects on educational practices and school communities. The findings demonstrate significant improvements in spatial use, professional development, and community engagement, highlighting the transformative potential of participatory research in fostering innovative educational environments.

participatory research, evaluation research, learning environments, pedagogical innovation

## RETHINKING THE SCHOOL AND ITS SPACES TOGETHER

A building always tells a story: the story of those who designed it and the story of those who live or will live in it. Especially when thinking about buildings used for education, the relationship between design and life is enriched by two disciplinary fields of reference: Architecture and Pedagogy. When the sciences of design and the sciences of the development of human potential enter into a dialogue with each other, the resulting buildings are more coherent, more generous and capable of absorbing the changes of the times. They are buildings

in which architecture can create spaces for educational life (Weyland & Attia 2015).

When designing a building, especially an educational building, two dimensions are always taken into account: the technical-functional aspect and the value and cultural dimension.

By ‘pedagogical living’ we mean projects in which the synthesis of the technical and cultural aspects enables the creation of spaces that welcome and empower the individual, places that open the eye to the appreciation of the surrounding landscapes and contexts. Pedagogical living is the pedagogical-architectural dialogue that gives rise to spaces that are both strong and discreet, capable of disciplining action and stimulating it at the same time. Combining the concept of living with pedagogy means, above all, combining the spontaneity of human action with intentionality, the spiritual dimension with the rational. According to Cesare Scurati’s thinking (1997), each discipline carries out the critical exercise of reason on reality under its own profile and the school adopts its perspectives aimed at the realisation of the integral human being.

Pedagogy and architecture are disciplines that not only observe the reality of the educational universe from different perspectives (abstract vs. material) but also share a common peculiarity: they have a heuristic and propositional soul. Both interpret and model reality and both formulate proposals for the development of human potential: being, doing, living and staying. Pedagogy to guarantee the conditions for an effective and authentic education, architecture to go beyond function. Both disciplines strive in different ways to offer scenarios of possible living, possible relating, possible learning.

In the landscape of this field of study (Weyland, 2024; Woolner et al., 2018; Zuccoli et al., 2021) a consensus is emerging on the idea that the design or rethinking of spaces can be an opportunity to promote the “development of the school” as a particular type of “learning organisation” (Schratz & Steiner Löffler, 1999/2001). On the other hand, it cannot be assumed that changes in the built environment can in themselves bring about a positive change in teaching and learning (Woolner & Stadler-Altman, 2021). This potential can be realised under certain conditions; above all, this includes choosing a participatory approach (Woolner et al., 2012; Weyland & Stadler-Altman, 2019).

Since 2019, several schools have joined action-research projects with the interdisciplinary research group converging on the EDENLAB laboratory (EDucational ENviroments with Nature – edenlab.unibz.it) with the aim of creating more comfortable environments that support an open, exploratory and

collaborative didactics focused on the development of human potential. In this projects, pedagogical living has been enriched by a form of closer micro-relationship with nature, in which plants become facilitators in the exploration of spaces and didactics (Weyland, 2022).

### **RESEARCH, ACTION AND TRAINING**

The EDEN LAB's "joint research" approach falls within the spectrum of participatory research, and integrates the components of research, action and training.

After initial exploratory experiences, the design of these projects becomes more structured with recurring phases. Before starting, external experts and agreements are presented to the school community, outlining objectives and activity plans. The process begins with forming research groups and defining the initial problem through contextualization and training activities, such as seminars and specific materials. Semi-structured tools like an online noticeboard and a questionnaire survey are used to gather participant characteristics and motivations. Researchers then support project development through regular meetings, facilitating group reflection and documenting processes with tools like participant logbooks. The final phase involves presenting and analyzing results, incorporating a second questionnaire, and considering the project's ongoing development.

There is a clear distinction between the active and reflective role of "practitioners" within their own context and the role of external researchers, which in participatory approaches is twofold: on one hand, acting as facilitators of the teachers' reflection and training process, and on the other, as researchers committed to producing knowledge both on the topics of shared research with the teachers and on their own training strategies (Losito, 2018, p. 67). This duality of roles and research agendas becomes particularly important when defining what constitutes a result of the research itself.

### **MEASURING AND APPRECIATING RESULTS**

The researchers who have joined forces in the EDEN lab aim to develop models and tools to recognise and examine the outcomes of different projects (Weyland & Zini, 2023). Methodological issues related to evaluating outcomes in participatory research have been explored (Agrusti & Dodman, 2021), focusing on the potential and limitations of evaluation approaches using indicators. Results are defined in terms of learning that "is not limited to the innovation

achieved but involves a transformation of the context and a change in the ways of doing and thinking of the actors” (Cardarello, 2018, p. 61).

A model was developed for classifying results (Zini & Weyland, in press, Zini, in press), which aims to evaluate effects by tracking changes in three critical factors: the physical environment, personal resources, and social environment. The model includes sixteen outcome categories and allows for relationships and feedback effects between different categories. It provides a framework for selecting appropriate indicators to measure outcomes without prescribing specific methods or tools.

Tab. 1. Factors and outcome categories.

F1. Inclusive physical environment that promotes active learning and well-being	
R1.1	Negotiation quality of spatial interventions
R1.2	Aesthetic quality and accessibility
R1.3	Perceptible and symbolic quality of spaces
R1.4	Pedagogical quality of spaces for learning purposes
R1.5	Pedagogical quality of spaces for teaching purposes
R1.6	Access and utilisation
F2. Personal resources, attitudes and behaviours conducive to educational innovation	
R2.1	Professional development
R2.2	Practices
F3 Social environment conducive to change in the school	
R3.1	Multiplication, implementation of further coherent measures
R3.2	Interpersonal transfer and broadening of the stakeholder base
R3.3	Training and design
R3.4	Organisation and Curriculum
R4.1	Building networks to support change
R4.2	Interaction with the local community
R4.3	Involvement of parents
R4.4	Involvement of technical staff

## CONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUMENTS AND FIRST APPLICATIONS

An initial data collection instrument was constructed in the form of questionnaire that was administered to a group of teachers in the final stages of one of the most recent EDEN LAB projects. Beate Weyland and Giusi Boaretto collaborated with the Monini kindergarten in Umbertide (Perugia) to appropriate the spaces of a new kindergarten in which two exploratory classrooms dedicated to the encounter with plants were to be created. Before the final meeting, a questionnaire was distributed in order to carry out a joint analysis of the data collected and derive indications on the sustainability of the process. Examples of open questions and structured questions can be found in Table 2.

Tab. 2. Examples of questions from the final questionnaire.

Examples of dichotomous and open questions.
Did the presence of the plants in the classrooms lead to teaching/educational activities or unexpected actions? (Yes/No) If yes, can you briefly list which ones or give an example? Have changes been made to the organisation and/or the pedagogical/didactic project? (Yes/No) If yes, can you specify which changes or give an example? Can you say how parents or other stakeholders in the area have frequented the spaces and/or supported the initiative?
Examples of questions on a four-point agreement scale with defined extremes (1. strongly disagree – 4. strongly agree).
The environments are easily accessible for all types of users. Teachers find the spaces and the design with plants helpful in planning and carrying out classroom activities. Children have a positive attitude towards the place (nurturing, bonding). I have enriched my repertoire of teaching strategies. I have observed changes in the attitude or practise of teachers who were initially less engaged (...). More interventions have been carried out in the school environment that are consistent with those carried out during the collaboration with EDENLAB. There was an exchange of experiences and thematic projects between the teachers of the school. Parents were involved in activities held in the spaces concerned in the EDEN project. Organisations or associations in the area actively supported the activities.



To obtain not only information on the individual indicators but also a summarised overview of the project's impact on the determinants, an internal consistency test (thresholds:  $\alpha > 0.70$ ; item-scale correlation  $> 0.40$ ) was performed on the item sets associated with the three factors according to the theoretical model, making it possible to construct reliable efficacy indices.

In a later study conducted with the kindergartens and primary schools of the Direzione Didattica "Aldo Moro" in Terni (Weyland, Ruzzante, & Zini, 2024), a series of questions were proposed in both the initial and final questionnaires to test the changes in teachers' beliefs regarding the presence of indoor plants in the school space and their potential in relation to different pedagogical intentions. Furthermore, to test the hypothesis that this element of innovation can trigger processes that lead to a general questioning of the quality of the educational space, a small number of indicators were selected from the literature on the assessment and improvement of the pedagogical quality of learning environments in early childhood educational institutions (Bondioli & Savio, 2018) and used with adaptations. In particular, a significant difference (measured with the non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test) was found between the distributions of scores for two items in the data collected at the beginning and at the end of the project:

- (1) Organisation of the school's spaces is the result of teachers' recent joint planning ( $p = 0.001$ );
- (2) The teachers observe how the children use the rooms in order to reorganise them ( $p = 0.012$ ).

## CONCLUSIONS

During the meetings and exchanges, the teachers show that they appreciate the path they have taken and recognise that they are developing skills both in the process of appropriating and transforming the spaces and teaching methods and in their relationship with the plants. The survey instrument was developed to make these changes visible with statistical data, which is also useful for objectively "measuring" the changes that are actually taking place. The presence of open-ended questions qualifies the instrument and provides important insights, both to validate the interpretation of certain structured questions and to gather further information on unexpected outcomes (positive or negative), obstacles or factors that facilitated the path.

In summary, the proposed model seems to provide an appropriate framework to reflect on the outcomes of each intervention at different levels (micro –

individual change, meso – change in organisations, macro – change in communities) and to bring together the data collected from the different experiences in a common research plan that the EDEN LAB will implement with the schools. The direct involvement of participants is in line with the participatory research model and the prominent formative function of evaluation, which aims to further develop the activated processes, even more than reporting.

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# NONVIOLENCE IN EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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## INTRODUCTION

Social justice is today increasingly undermined by inequalities, conflicts, climate change and economic crises. Within this context of polycrises, education could be a democratic tool for social emancipation and improvement of life chances. But education can take on different meanings by virtue of the symbolic universes that fuel it by attributing specific purposes to the educational action. This panel intends to explore the close link between education and nonviolence (Capitini, 1967-68; Muller, 2002; Falcicchio, 2022). The emphasis on competition and individualism has repercussions in social life. Solidarity, cooperation, community are placed on the margins. Nonviolence is a concrete possibility of achieving coexistence with others, making peace among humans and with the planet (Langer, 2005). Listening, dialogue and mutual understanding temper opposing fundamentalisms, stereotypes and prejudicial closures. In our relationship with others, we can get involved or close ourselves into defensive approaches fostering polarization or doing something else to break the circle of violence.

Governance disposals in education tend to separate deserving and undeserving minors, to be rewarded or punished, ending up reproducing educational inequalities and recognizing rights to some while depriving others of opportunities and trust. Surveillance and punish or educate about rights, freedom, nonviolence? Freedom does not have the same meaning for all men if to have rights it is necessary to be strong (Resta, 1996; Rodotà, 2013).

While the war grammar and propaganda invade the media and influence policies, any alternative and non-dichotomous point of view is silenced, reduced to ridicule and marginality. It is precisely at this moment that a choral reflection on how to change the rules of language, of domination, of success, and to resume considering as values what the dominant thought continues to consider as waste, collateral victims, minor damage, becomes urgent (Butler,

2020). Expulsions, stigmatisation, rejections, deaths caused by retaliation, violence, cannot be justified and normalised. The world we know has shown its faults and responsibilities that urge us to new rules and new meanings and alternative possibilities of life for all, including the possibility of nonviolent struggle against social injustice and discrimination (Falcicchio, Taurino, 2023). The panel therefore sets out to add its collective contribution to this reflection, going to the roots of the interconnections between education to and for nonviolence with the foundations of justice, democracy, power, ecology (Langer, 1996) and civil defence (Langer, Gülcher, 1995; Lawson, 2022).

## **EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

What does it mean to educate? Behind every conscious educational action there should be a conception of it. I tried to formulate a nonviolent idea of education.

Educating is the necessary awareness of the limit that allows us to coexist with the other. Education helps us not to hurt the other, to respect diversity and sensitivities. Education works for peace. Education opens up horizons of realization for people who can positively represent themselves through it. Positive self-representation is possible when others give us a positive image of ourselves. (Luhmann, 2002) Deviant careers are born with labeling that starts a path in which negative self-representations follow one another and build negative identities, limiting social contacts to those equally stigmatized subjects who can offer recognition in deviant subcultures. How can we offer young people paths of inclusion and recognition that do not push them to distance themselves from society by choosing not to study, not to work and to withdraw from a one-dimensional life, which imposes only one possibility and grammar of integration based on a meritocratic ideology, individualism, competition and the fight for self-affirmation at all costs?

The school does not always work on the construction of subjects but is too worried about schedules or discipline. It has a finalistic conception of security, which is not seen as a means but ends up becoming an end in itself.

Young people are sometimes not considered citizens of the present but citizen of the future, this determines their lack of responsibility as young people, and creates golden reserves but also segregations which widen the distances among generations and among youth and institutions. The scarce habit of participating causes one to lose the taste for participation and distances one from politics.

Education is a channel of communication between generations when it works. Education can only be active; one cannot teach those who do not want to learn. It is not control, threat, humiliation, punishment, but attention, openness, illumination, creative power.

However, in reality, educational action is not always nonviolent. The disparity of power between those who judge and those who are judged, the power of the teacher to define reality, conditions young men and women who are formed differently in relation to their learning experiences. Symbolic violence places them in a social position and sometimes forces them into marginal roles. School is the privileged place of socialization in which a society can educate subjects in minority conditions to participate and to be fully citizens, but it is also the place in which power is exercised by stigmatizing behaviors that are not desired or socially approved.

Today we witness many forms of aggression and violence. The relationship with otherness is often exasperated, identities are sometimes shielded and polarized. Hate narratives dominate social media and television or film productions, video games, the cultural industry. The relationship with otherness is not studied and cultivated enough. Information irritates the viewer with high-sounding headlines capable of attracting their attention. The angry citizen becomes a resource for the political consensus of populist parties and new moral entrepreneurs who use moral panic to propose themselves as a reassuring response to growing fears. Violence, even institutional, sometimes attacks defenseless subjects who give life to movements to reaffirm the rights of minorities (*Black Lives Matter*). Citizens attack teachers and doctors, venting their resentment and putting at risk the relationship of trust that is the basis of the teaching or care relationship.

Violence is only possible when the other is dehumanized, for this reason we believe that an education that is a vehicle of social justice must pass from an education to a nonviolent relationship with otherness. Must identity necessarily be based on sacrifice, on the exclusion and sacrificial killing of the different? Or is an identity free from the anxiety of differentiation and demonstration of one's superiority possible? We could practice knowing the other and his symbolic universe rather than demonizing, labeling, caricaturing him. The evaluation applies the judgment criteria of the person who evaluates or of the institutions to which the evaluation system refers. The democratic school must be aimed at the participation of all, avoiding reproducing social distances, hierarchies and power relations. Working in a circle, giving everyone a say, asking many

questions reverses the frontal and hierarchical relationship between those who teach and those who learn and provides for a situation of mutual learning. The maieutic method helps to find the answers within oneself, to express them, to activate oneself.

The proposal that Martha Nussbaum advances for the benefit of a truly democratic political and social system starts from a rereading of the figure of Socrates, recognizing how the development of certain abilities is fundamental for the maintenance of democracy, first and foremost the ability to critically judge oneself and one's own beliefs. The dialogical practice, is crucial at an educational level.

My educational experience in primary school and University has allowed me to experiment with non-authoritarian approaches and nonviolence in school and higher education. Franco Cassano, Eligio Resta, Maria Solimini led us to learn about the nonviolent approach by reversing the dynamics of power and making us protagonists of "exercises of approximation of the other" through the use of maieutics during the lessons that often went on well beyond the time dedicated to this to open up to discussions and walks that prolonged the reflection indefinitely. Teaching became a journey based on the deconstruction of stereotypes and mutual listening, in which the teacher who asked was so attentive to our point of view that he or she ran the risk of changing his or her mind.

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# NONVIOLENT RELATIONSHIPS TO CHANGE THE CULTURE OF VICTORY AND DOMINATION: EXPERIENCES AND PRACTICES AT SCHOOL

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Rete EDUMANA – Educazione Umanista alla Nonviolenza Attiva

The educational context, both formal and informal, plays a crucial role in perpetuating a violent culture rooted in patriarchal, vindictive, individualistic, and dichotomous elements, causing widespread suffering. Adult education often unknowingly legitimizes domination as a relational mode, maintaining rigid, asymmetrical patterns. Education is commonly seen as guiding children toward predefined goals (Dolci, 1987), leading adults to impose their vision, which reinforces violence as a norm. Awareness of these dynamics is essential for establishing nonviolent educational relationships (Patfoort, 2012). This article explores authoritarian modes in education, contrasting them with nonviolent alternatives. It reports on experiences of elementary school teachers in the Edumana network, following a three-year action research evaluated by the University of Milan-Bicocca. The activities focus on cultivating nonviolence at personal, interpersonal, and social levels (Muller, 1980), helping adults explore implicit violence in educator-educand relationships. Practices include replacing punishment with dialogue and promoting reciprocity and interdependence among human beings (Morin, 2020). Participation is emphasized, involving pupils in decision-making and fostering circular communication among teachers, parents, and children. This creates a welcoming, dialogic environment that offers children a daily experience intended to be a reference for envisioning a possible equitable society and manage conflicts, at all levels, with nonviolence.

dialogue; relationship; nonviolent education; awareness; practices

## INTRODUCTION

The culture of victory and domination, deeply embedded in educational systems, reflects and sustains broader societal structures rooted in patriarchy, hierarchical power dynamics, and vindictiveness. This culture often manifests in schools through implicit forms of coercion and control, prioritizing compliance over participation and stifling the development of egalitarian relationships. A nonviolent approach to education offers an alternative paradigm, seeking to replace these dynamics with practices that promote equality, cooperation, and inclusivity, as outlined by Law 107/2015, UNESCO, and the UN 2030 Agenda. Education often functions as a mechanism for perpetuating societal hierarchies, sustaining implicit violence through asymmetrical relationships between educators and students (Patfoort, 2012). Vigilante (2014) critiques conventional pedagogical practices for unintentionally reinforcing domination, presenting adults as authoritative figures and students as passive recipients. Similarly, Dolci (1987) highlights how traditional teaching approaches promote a singular worldview, undermining the plurality of perspectives necessary for critical thinking. According to Adorno (1969), the prevention of violence represents a primary goal of education. However, despite this perspective, a systematic strategy remains absent: education for nonviolence is often relegated to the personal initiative of a few individuals. It is crucial to overcome the fragmentation of educational practices by integrating anti-violence measures comprehensively into curricula.

The ED.UMA.NA (Educazione Umanista alla Nonviolenza Attiva) experimentation is grounded in active nonviolence, extending beyond merely fostering a violence-free school environment to transforming the culture of violence into a humanist perspective (Silo, 2000). This approach necessitates the development of creative and cooperative personalities, essential for peace and psychosocial well-being. As noted by Dewey (1916), the continuity between micro-social and macro-social behaviours underscores the importance of intervening in children's daily relationships, offering educational experiences that model a complete rejection of violence.

Nonviolent education requires concrete experiences that foster listening, communication and dialogue (Montessori, 1949; Dolci, 1988; Capitini, 1967). Nonetheless, there is still a lack of widespread awareness capable of generating a repudiation of violence comparable to that developed around environmental issues. Cultural transformation hinges on adopting methods that promote

egalitarian and cooperative relationships, encouraging teachers, parents, and students to explore a nonviolent dimension. The adopted educational model emphasizes direct experience and the appreciation of cultural diversity, tracing connections between *Ubuntu*, new humanism, and contemporary pedagogical movements (Freire, 2014; Morin, 2020; Aguillar & Bize, 2018). Violence is a cultural construct, not a biological inevitability (Adams, 1989), and education can play a central role in developing a “relational grammar” of nonviolence necessary to transcend coercive models unconsciously perpetuated. Thus, the school becomes a microcosm of sustainable citizenship, where students can engage in experiences of cooperation and nonviolent coexistence, cultivating personal and social competencies vital for safeguarding the planet’s future, nurturing an environment where students can grow as active citizens capable of enacting social change. The ED.UMA.NA project embodies these principles by introducing nonviolent practices into schools through dialogic methods, participatory decision-making, and circular communication between teachers, parents, and students.

## **2. THE ED.UMA.NA PROJECT: IMPLEMENTATION AND EXPERIENCES**

### **2.1 A Participatory Approach to Educational Change**

The construction of the project started with the involvement of a diverse team of educators, psychologists, pedagogists, parents, and activists to collaboratively design and implement nonviolent practices in schools. Supported by the Municipality of Milan, the initiative created a citywide network of stakeholders, developing a shared framework for integrating nonviolence into everyday educational practices. The project’s participatory process addressed challenges such as entrenched cultural norms and resistance to change, demonstrating the feasibility of nonviolence in diverse school settings. At the end of the first year of studying and sharing practices, a network of schools willing to undertake the experimentation was formed (the network was called ED.UMA.NA). Participation was planned for first classes only for a 3-year cycle; class councils were identified among those who joined with 75% of the teachers. Six classes out of 12 joined.

### **2.2 The classroom as a microcosm of Nonviolence**

The project reimagined the classroom as a microcosm of an inclusive, nonviolent society (Dewey, 1916). Activities were designed to enhance socio-relational skills, encourage cooperative learning, and empower students to actively engage in decision-making processes. The focus on dialogue and

shared responsibility not only transformed classroom dynamics but also extended to interactions with parents and the wider community. The physical and social organization of classrooms was adapted to promote collaboration and autonomy. Educational practices emphasized conflict resolution, self-assessment, and participatory problem-solving, demonstrating the interconnectedness of personal, interpersonal, and societal dimensions of nonviolence (Muller, 1980).

### **2.3 Challenges and transformations in educational relationships**

One of the primary objectives of ED.UMA.NA was to identify and address implicit violence within traditional educational relationships. Adults were encouraged to reflect on their behavioural patterns and recognize how punitive or judgmental actions undermined nonviolent principles. This reflection fostered a shift toward dialogic and reciprocal interactions. Teachers played a pivotal role, undergoing extensive training to adopt nonviolent methodologies in their classrooms. The training programs equipped teachers, parents, and school staff with practical tools for implementing nonviolent practices. These included role-playing exercises, cooperative learning techniques, and conflict resolution strategies (Galtung, 2000). Such competencies were essential in transforming educational relationships from hierarchical to collaborative (Cambi, 2021; Coiro & Gallotta, 2024; Sclavi, 2020). Despite these successes, challenges persisted. Resistance from some educators and parents, structural barriers, and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the complexity of cultural change within schools.

### **2.4 Evaluating impact: achievements and challenges**

The University of Milan-Bicocca<sup>1</sup> conducted a qualitative evaluation of the ED.UMA.NA project, identifying several positive outcomes:

- Enhanced teacher competence: educators reported increased confidence and skill in implementing nonviolent methodologies.
- Transformation of the educational relationship: an element of constant concern is the recognition of children's active role and autonomy in the educational space
- The strength of the training group: teachers recognized the strength of the training group and of sharing experiences among different schools

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<sup>1</sup> Cristina De Michele, Doris Ginevra Valente, *Report di valutazione 2020 progetto ED.UMA.NA.*, Dipartimento di Scienze della Formazione dell'Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca

- However, the evaluation also highlighted persistent challenges, including:
- Relational barriers among adults: difficulty fostering genuine collaboration between educators and parents.
- Resistance to change: structural and cultural barriers often impeded efforts to shift power dynamics within classrooms.
- Time constraints: limited time for training and collaboration was a recurring issue.

### **3. EXPANDING AND IMPLEMENTING NONVIOLENT PRACTICES**

#### **3.1. Adaptations in implementation**

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the project, disrupting in-person activities and exacerbating stress within school communities. However, these challenges spurred innovative adaptations, including:

- Class Tutors: introducing a class tutor to facilitate generative relationships and improve communication during formal meetings between teachers and parents.
- Collaborative training: peer-to-peer training sessions among educators and workshops for parents during class assemblies.
- Community building: organizing inclusive meetings involving teachers, students, and parents to foster mutual understanding and collaboration (Fig. 1).
- Enhancing training content: the content of training programs evolved to emphasize the importance of cultivating a nonviolent mindset among adults; this included practices for group facilitation, tools for conflict resolution, and self-assessment frameworks co-designed with students; the production of practical resources, including classroom materials and self-assessment tools, further supported the integration of nonviolent practices.

Fig. 1. Parents, teachers and children during a community meeting. Massaua Primary School in Milan, Italy. Source: Network EDUMANA (2018)



### 3.2. Key Areas for research and development

- The role of educators in nonviolent transformation. Teachers play a central role in fostering a culture of nonviolence within classrooms. Training programs emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing implicit violence, developing skills in observation and dialogue, and rejecting punitive disciplinary methods. These strategies aimed to create an environment of trust and respect that empowers both educators and students.
- Improving communication among educating adults. Long-term training for teachers and parents aimed to build a shared understanding of nonviolence. While structural difficulties occasionally hindered progress, trust gradually developed through collaborative practices. Class tutors facilitated circular communication, addressing ingrained habits of top-down interaction.
- Innovative pedagogical approaches. Nonviolent pedagogical methods played a critical role in community-building and the development of transversal skills. Cooperative learning, reciprocal maieutic, and self-assessment practices were implemented to promote critical thinking, creativity, and resilience against a culture of domination.
- Children's participation in decision-making. Children's participation, a core principle of nonviolence, was emphasized in alignment with Article

12 of the CRC and Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation. Participation was understood not as tokenistic inclusion but as genuine involvement in decision-making processes. Starting in third grade, students engaged in initiatives aimed at transforming their environments, involving parents and community members in realizing their visions (Bordin et al., 2021).

Looking forward, the ED.UMA.NA project seeks to institutionalize nonviolent practices within educational systems, integrating them into curricula, policies, and teacher training programs. Achieving this requires sustained investment in professional development, parent engagement, and systemic support to overcome logistical and cultural barriers.

## CONCLUSION

The ED.UMA.NA project illustrates the transformative potential of nonviolence in education, offering a viable alternative to traditional hierarchical models. By fostering awareness, empathy, and cooperation, it equips students, educators, and communities with the tools to challenge the culture of domination and envision a more equitable society. As global crises and polarization intensify, the principles and practices of nonviolence gain renewed relevance.

Education, as a cornerstone of societal development, holds the potential not only to grow the knowledge but to cultivate critical thinking and democracy.

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# NONVIOLENT THEORY AND PRACTICE IN ALDO CAPITINI: THE INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON NONVIOLENT TECHNIQUES (PERUGIA, 1963)

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This paper examines Aldo Capitini's pedagogical theory of nonviolence, particularly as it was practiced and discussed during the "International Seminar on Nonviolent Techniques" held in Perugia in 1963. Contrary to the common misconception that nonviolence merely implies the absence of violence, Capitini conceptualized it as a dynamic and continuous struggle against social and personal injustices. His idea of nonviolence encompassed a deep commitment to social transformation, requiring both inner and collective struggles for freedom, truth, and openness. This paper explores Capitini's philosophy, focusing on his application of nonviolent principles through various actions, such as promoting conscientious objection, supporting religious freedom, and advocating for democratic participation. The Seminar, which hosted theorists and activists like Danilo Dolci and Peter Cadogan, addressed themes that anticipated some of the social movements of the late 1960s, such as civil disobedience, respect for the animal world, and peace-oriented education. Following the Seminar's success, Capitini dedicated himself to the Italian Movimento Nonviolento, aiming to create a legacy that persists in educational and activist circles today.

nonviolence, Aldo Capitini, conscientious objection, democratic participation, peace education

## INTRODUCTION

Aldo Capitini, often called the Italian pioneer of nonviolence, brought Gandhi's principles into an Italian context, establishing a distinct framework for nonviolent action. Capitini was a multifaceted figure: a philosopher, educator, activist, and, crucially, an advocate of "open religion" and a political theorist of

nonviolence. His work often challenged the entrenched values of Italian society, particularly the culture of political “Machiavellianism” and authoritarianism. Inspired by the principles of nonviolence, Capitini sought to establish nonviolent practices in Italy, organizing the first Perugia-Assisi March for peace and creating the Italian Movimento Nonviolento<sup>1</sup>.

The 1963 seminar, held in Perugia from August 1st to August 10th, marked a defining moment in this effort. By gathering national and international pacifists and thinkers to discuss and refine nonviolent strategies, Capitini created a platform for a profound and enduring exchange of ideas that would influence Italian and global peace movements.

This analysis employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on historical, pedagogical, and theoretical perspectives to understand Capitini’s contributions to nonviolent thought. Primary sources include archival materials from Movimento Nonviolento, along with audio recordings and transcriptions of seminar sessions, which provide a window into the discussions held in 1963.

This study also integrates pedagogical theories of nonviolence and nonviolent political theory to explore how Capitini’s philosophy influenced the development of Italian social movements. By examining both Capitini’s writings and secondary sources on nonviolence, this paper underscores his enduring impact on peace education, civil rights, and democratic participation.

## **1. ANALYSIS OF CAPITINI’S NONVIOLENT THEORY**

Aldo Capitini’s nonviolent theory offers a radical rethinking of social and political structures, reimagining them in terms of inclusivity, ethical responsibility, and shared agency. Capitini’s vision of nonviolence extends beyond the mere avoidance of conflict; it embodies a continuous struggle against injustice, both within society and within the self. His philosophy, as stated in *Il problema religioso attuale*, interprets nonviolence as a “continuous struggle against existing circumstances, laws, others’ habits, and one’s own tendencies” (Capitini, 1948, pp. 57-58). This profound commitment to ethical transformation reflects his belief that true nonviolence requires active engagement and personal sacrifice.

A central element in Capitini’s philosophy is “compresenza”, or spiritual co-

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<sup>1</sup> Founded on January 10, 1962, established alongside a group of sympathizers who had accompanied Capitini on his path toward nonviolence, the movement would occupy a position of utmost importance in the philosopher’s activism, especially following the Seminar, when he fully dedicated himself to it.

presence, which expands the notion of community to include not only the living but also the dead, future generations, and non-human beings. This concept underpins his vision of a “reality of all” (*la realtà di tutti*), in which every life form is seen as part of an interconnected moral and social web. Capitini’s emphasis on *compresenza* aligns with his commitment to fostering a society where every individual is valued and empowered to participate in shaping communal life.

Capitini’s theory of nonviolence is inseparable from his educational philosophy, which he saw as essential to the development of a just society. As described in *L’atto di educare* (1951), Capitini viewed education as a transformative force that enables individuals to develop autonomy, empathy, and critical thinking (Capitini, 2022b, p. 129). His educational model emphasized open discussion and critical engagement, contrasting with authoritarian teaching methods and encouraging students to become active participants in society. By fostering ethical awareness and civic responsibility in young people, Capitini sought to lay the groundwork for a new generation committed to nonviolent change.

The 1963 International Seminar on Nonviolent Techniques held in Perugia provided a concrete setting to explore these principles with other thinkers and activists. This seminar brought together individuals committed to examining practical applications of nonviolent strategies, allowing Capitini to present his ideas on localized empowerment and democratic engagement. At the seminar, his emphasis on “power from below” was evident in discussions about his Centres for Social Orientation (C.O.S.), which served as experimental spaces for civic engagement and grassroots governance<sup>2</sup>.

Later in his life, Capitini further articulated these ideas in the concept of “omnicrazia”, or “the power of all.” Coined from the Greek *kratos* (power) and Latin *omnis* (all), “omnicrazia” envisions a system where power is shared among all citizens, transcending hierarchical structures and promoting decentralized, direct democracy. This idea, introduced in *Il potere di tutti*

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<sup>2</sup> After the liberation of Perugia on July 17, 1944, Aldo Capitini launched his first major political experiment: the Centre for Social Orientation (Centro di Orientamento Sociale, C.O.S.). This was conceived as a forum for the “free and periodic examination on administrative, social, political, cultural, and educational issues,” functioning as a laboratory for grassroots and direct democracy. Within the C.O.S., public authorities and citizens engaged in dialogue on social and cultural matters and collaborated to secure essential goods in the context of post-war poverty and reconstruction. The C.O.S. represented Capitini’s concrete response to two decades of dictatorship, embodying a sense of hope and enthusiasm for the future amidst severe economic and social emergencies. The project was successful and was soon replicated in other Italian cities, such as Bologna, Florence, and Ferrara, through the efforts of Capitini’s friends and collaborators. These open assemblies were held twice a week: one session focused on political and administrative issues, while the other addressed ideological and cultural topics.

(1969), reflects Capitini's belief that democracy must continually evolve toward inclusivity and grassroots participation (Capitini, 1999, pp. 160-162). His notion of power from below, exercised through localized institutions such as the C.O.S., provided a practical framework for engaging citizens in the governance process, allowing them to exercise "accurate information, constructive criticism, and progressive planning" (Capitini, 1999, p. 160).

Another important dimension of Capitini's thought is his ecological and ethical awareness, which emphasizes respect for all life forms. As outlined in *Educazione aperta*, he advocated for a society that values non-human life, recognizing the interconnectedness of environmental and social justice issues (Capitini, 2019, I, p. 55). This ecological consciousness was a forward-thinking component of his nonviolent philosophy, anticipating contemporary movements for animal rights and environmental sustainability<sup>3</sup>.

Capitini's contributions to nonviolence culminate in his belief in "liberated reality", a concept that transcends individualistic or static social models. For Capitini, liberation is achieved through practical actions directed toward value creation and ethical engagement with others (Capitini, 2022b, pp. 76-78). This liberated reality reflects his ideal of a society that actively works to overcome violence, exclusion, and injustice, moving toward a vision of communal well-being and spiritual openness.

Through these concepts—*compresenza*, open education, *omnicrazia* and the liberated reality—Capitini's nonviolent theory offers a holistic and visionary approach to social transformation. His work remains an enduring challenge to the status quo, calling for continuous personal and communal efforts to build a world grounded in justice, compassion, and interconnection.

## 2. CAPITINI'S INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

### 2.1. The impact of 1963 Seminar

Aldo Capitini's influence on social and political movements also extended beyond Italy, but his impact was felt most acutely in the nonviolent activism that developed domestically through his initiatives. The 1963 International Seminar

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<sup>3</sup> The third day of the seminar focused on the connection between nonviolence and love, exploring whether love is an innate human trait or shaped by education. Discussions addressed embracing diversity—cultural, political, or religious—and the ethical limits of care for animals and plants. Vegetarianism was highlighted as a potential nonviolent technique, with Edmondo Marcucci, a pioneer in Italy, contributing insights on its theoretical foundations and international practices, as well as its prominence among War Resisters' International (WRI) activists (Follenti, 2023, pp. 139-146).

on Nonviolent Techniques in Perugia stands as a critical moment of engagement for Italian and international leaders and thinkers. Capitini meticulously organized the Seminar to facilitate a dynamic exchange of ideas and practical strategies, combining theoretical discussions with sessions on specific nonviolent techniques. The Seminar was attended by prominent activists, including Danilo Dolci, who was recognized for his social activism in Sicily, and Peter Cadogan from the UK, among others who were drawn to Capitini's vision of nonviolent social change (Follenti, 2023, pp. 86-93).

Each day of the seminar was structured to address both philosophical underpinnings and practical applications of nonviolence. Capitini opened the sessions with discussions on *compresenza* and "reality of all", emphasizing the need for nonviolence to recognize the interconnectedness of all beings. Participants then explored nonviolence as a tool for social reform, delving into topics such as conscientious objection, civil disobedience, and community organization. Capitini used examples from C.O.S., describing how they functioned as grassroots hubs for civic engagement, where individuals could directly participate in decision-making processes that affected their communities. This model of "control from below" underscored the seminar's theme of democratizing power, inspiring attendees to consider similar structures in their own contexts (Follenti, 2023, pp. 27-28).

One of the seminar's distinctive features was its format, which encouraged participant interaction and collaborative problem-solving. Capitini intentionally avoided a hierarchical structure, instead fostering an open forum where all voices were equally valued. This structure reflected his commitment to *omnicrazia*, the "power of all," and aimed to model the inclusive society he envisioned (Follenti, 2023, pp. 192-194). Through group discussions, workshops, and role-playing exercises, attendees experimented with techniques of non-cooperation and peaceful resistance, examining scenarios ranging from protests against oppressive policies to everyday acts of moral integrity. For Capitini, these sessions were not only educational but also spiritually significant, as he viewed nonviolent action as a form of ethical and moral expression that connected individuals to a higher purpose of unity and justice.

## **2.2. The Seminar's Lasting Legacy and Relevance**

The 1963 Seminar in Perugia left a profound legacy on both Italian and international movements for peace and nonviolent resistance. In fact, the seminar marked a shift in the Italian Movimento Nonviolento by creating a space

for collaborative learning and international solidarity (Follenti, 2023, pp. 161-165). Participants carried Capitini's principles of nonviolent activism and community-based action into their work, applying these methods across various social movements. The Seminar's focus on civil disobedience, conscientious objection, and local governance resonated particularly with young activists, who viewed these strategies as effective responses to the political tensions of the 1960s.

In Italy, Capitini's Seminar reinforced the importance of integrating ethical education and civic responsibility into nonviolent practices. The discussions on "compresenza" and the "reality of all" inspired Italian educators and activists to incorporate these ideas into schools and community programs, creating a foundation for peace education that has influenced subsequent generations (Follenti, 2023, p. 175-186). Internationally, the seminar strengthened ties among nonviolent movements, fostering cross-cultural exchanges that enriched the theoretical and practical approaches to activism.

The seminar's legacy also extends into contemporary discussions on environmental ethics and social justice. Capitini's ecological perspective, emphasized during the seminar as an essential aspect of nonviolent philosophy, anticipated modern concerns about sustainability and intergenerational justice. By viewing all forms of life as interconnected, Capitini's approach to nonviolence laid the groundwork for an inclusive environmental ethic that aligns with current global movements advocating for animal rights and environmental protection.

## **CONCLUSION**

Aldo Capitini's 1963 International Seminar on Nonviolent Techniques was a significant event for the development of an independent Italian nonviolent movement and for the dissemination of nonviolent theory, demonstrating the transformative potential of ethical engagement and inclusive social structures. Through his emphasis on compresenza, omnicrazia, and grassroots empowerment, Capitini articulated a vision of society that transcends traditional hierarchies and advocates for shared agency among all individuals. The seminar's impact can still be seen in the continued influence of Capitini's ideas on peace education, environmental consciousness, and democratic participation.

Today, Capitini's legacy endures as a powerful reminder of the ethical and communal foundations of nonviolent action. His principles of

interconnectedness and collective responsibility challenge contemporary movements to pursue justice in ways that honour the dignity and contributions of every being. The Seminar in Perugia stands as a testament to Capitini's lifelong commitment to creating a "reality of all", inspiring future generations to build a compassionate and inclusive world grounded in the principles of nonviolence and democratic empowerment.

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# CIVIC EDUCATION TO SUPPORT NONVIOLENCE AND DEMOCRACY

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A nonviolent, democratic approach could shape the classroom environment, promoting peaceful coexistence among individuals. However, school dynamics often tend to be competitive and hierarchical, mirroring the broader societal interactions. In Italy, civic education has recently been reintroduced (Law 92/2019) to foster active citizenship and encourage full participation. The author views this as an opportunity for pedagogical innovation, adopting a democratic, nonviolent, transformative, and participatory approach. Consequently, a prototype curriculum was constructed, using Educational Design Research, and implemented in three middle school classes in Northern Italy. To shift from a traditional, transmission-based model to a dialogic one, the curriculum incorporates talking circles and role assignments. This article will highlight how classroom dynamics have become more democratic and nonviolent, as well as the challenges faced during implementation. The conclusions emphasize the need for greater support for teachers to ensure that nonviolent, democratic methods take root in schools, fostering participation and active citizenship.

civic education; nonviolence; democracy; participation

## INTRODUCTION

Children and teens have the right to participate, the right to express their opinions on matters that concern them (UN Convention, 1989; Hart, 1992). Consequently, adults have the responsibility to listen to these perspectives and give them due consideration (Lundy, 2007). Despite the existence of national and international frameworks (e.g., Agenda 2030, 2015; Indicazioni Nazionali, 2012), children and teens are consistently marginalized in decision-making



processes, even though they demonstrate significant interest and competence in addressing systemic crises, as evidenced by *FridaysForFuture* and anti-war protests offering alternative viewpoints to contemporary systemic challenges.

A nonviolent, democratic approach could characterize the classroom and thus foster peaceful coexistence between people of different cultures, genders, social backgrounds, ages... Pupils could experience nonviolent decision making and grow as “mediators, bridge builders, wall jumpers, border explorers” (Langer, 1994). However, usually the dynamics at school are competitive and prevaricating, reflecting the typical interactions of our society.

The introduction of civic education through Law No. 92 of 20 August 2019 (hereafter Law 92/2019) has reignited the debate in Italy concerning the role of schools within society. Adopting a democratic (Dewey, 1916), nonviolent (Dolci, 1988), transformative (Freire, 1970), and engaged (hooks, 1994) pedagogical framework, the author posits that schools bear a political responsibility to contribute to the creation of a more peaceful and democratic society. In line with this perspective, she has devoted her PhD research to develop a civic education curriculum for middle schools, aimed at fostering democracy and participation. The classroom is thus conceptualized as a laboratory for participatory democracy, empowering children to become “radical agents of change” (Fielding, 2001).

Following a brief overview of the research (Section 1), this paper will focus on how the use of talking circles and assigned roles can support the principles of democracy and nonviolence (Section 2), and it will conclude with reflections on the necessity of increased teacher training.

## **1. THE RESEARCH AND THE CURRICULUM DIRE FARE PARTECIPARE**

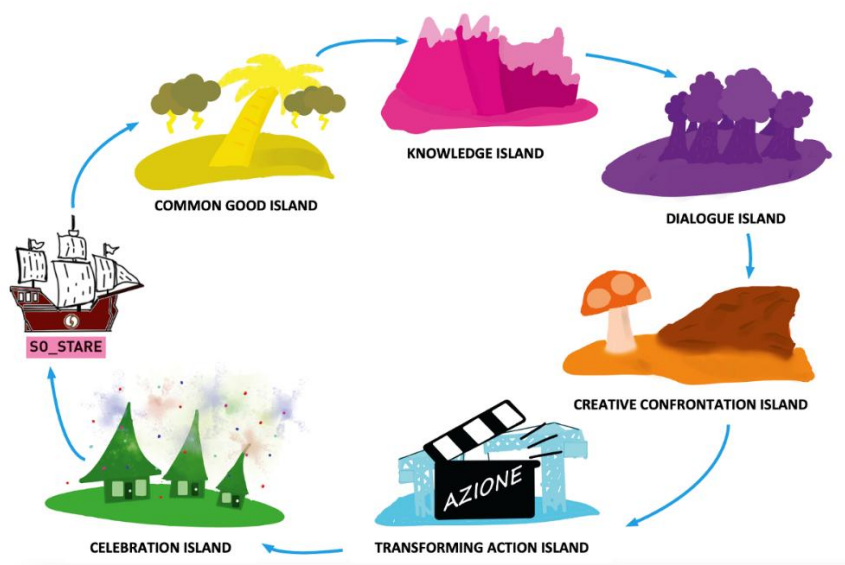
The Law 92/2019 mandates that civic education in Italy be developed through cross-disciplinary pathways, comprising at least 33 hours per year, jointly managed by teachers in a class council. The author’s PhD research (Langer, 2024 a/b/c) sought to position dialogue and shared decision-making as both a means and an aim, supporting the development of a nonviolent and democratic society, starting from the classroom.

This research is grounded in Educational Design Research (EDR), which has the dual objective of improving educational contexts and producing generalizable theoretical knowledge (McKenney & Reeves, 2019). In the first phase of EDR—*Analysis & Exploration*—the state of the art was outlined, and the design requirements for a democratic civic education curriculum for middle schools (in

alignment with Law 92/2019) were developed. These requirements include: centering democratic competencies, promoting co-design among teachers and between teachers and students, and fostering reciprocal, dialogic learning.

In the second phase—*Design & Construction*—the first prototype was developed with three key elements: (1) meetings with/among teachers (initial training and ongoing meetings); (2) nonviolent and democratic practices aimed at making peer and intergenerational dynamics more equitable, with the goal of turning teachers and students into the crew of the *Nonviolence Ship*; and (3) the *Dire Fare Partecipare* pathway, comprised of an archipelago of six islands (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. The archipelago *Dire Fare Partecipare* illustrated by Jan Torrani.



In the third phase of the research—*Evaluation & Reflection*—the curriculum was piloted and formatively evaluated. Three classes from a middle school in the outskirts of a large city in Northern Italy were involved. To ensure that formative evaluation was both inclusive and democratic, both student and teacher voices were collected through structured forms, completed during the process by pairs of students and by teacher teams. Midway and at the end of the process, students and teachers participated in semi-structured focus groups. These tools were designed to gather data on the curriculum, the practices being tested, and the expected enactment processes (peer dialogue, participation,

teacher-student dialogue and co-design, and teacher collaboration). This large amount of data was systematically organized, described, and analysed using a system of categories (concept-driven and data-driven) constructed through Qualitative Content Analysis (Schreier, 2012).

## **2. TALKING CIRCLE AND ROLES: TWO NONVIOLENT AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES**

In each class, students and teachers became the crew of the *Nonviolence Ship* and explored each island of the *Dire Fare Partecipare* archipelago to develop a shared and participatory pathway through pair, group, and class activities. The crew had to learn new relational modalities: departing from traditional setting, they arranged in a circle, engaging in a “humanizing dialogic practice” (Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014) that fosters horizontal relationships. Furthermore, each participant assumed a role to enhance group belonging and ownership of the common endeavour.

The following paragraphs briefly summarise the findings of the data analysis of the categories related to these practices.

### **2.1 Findings Concerning the Talking Circle**

The talking circle is designed to enhance mutual listening and promote participation, as well as to challenge the dynamics of traditional frontal lessons. The data analysis revealed the following findings.

Initially, both teachers and students perceived as significant changes even the act of physically forming a circle (instead of using desks and chairs arranged by someone else), sitting in a circle, and the possibility of making eye contact with everyone. This new setting, characterized by agitation the first meetings. However, slowly the confusion diminished, and a sense of well-being increased. The students began to develop a positive and proactive attitude (e.g., Tew et al., 2007). The groups required nearly the same amount of time to learn how to efficiently rearrange desks and chairs as they did to understand how the circle facilitated more egalitarian relationships, and a more democratic dialogue (Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014).

The participants experienced how, everyone can interact, be seen, and see others (instead of only seeing the teacher and mostly the backs of mates). The circle also facilitates classroom management and ensures everyone’s involvement: students discovered that sitting in a circle helps overcome shyness, encourages them to speak up, and helps to feel comfortable with their

peers. The circle promotes also collaborative knowledge-building, and the exchange of ideas (Dolci, 1988): each group went through several moments of shared decision-making and knowledge exchange, and the circle facilitated to consider the opinions of others (expressed verbally or through posture and facial expressions).

## **2.2 Findings Concerning the Roles**

In line with the literature (e.g. Johnson & Johnson, 2013; Matini, 2019), the roles served to facilitate the sharing of responsibilities. Both students and teachers experienced interdependence, collaboration. Furthermore, while typically in school the teacher sets the pace, according to the students, the roles made them feel more responsible, they collaborated and organized better, and they felt useful. However, in some cases, particularly due to a lack of conviction among the teachers, the roles were superficial (“tokenism” – Hart; 1992). In the final focus groups, the teachers stated that it is better not to adopt the roles at all if there is no intention to initiate (and sustain!) a process of sharing, empowerment, and coexistence.

## **2.3 Group Dynamics in the Classroom Become More Democratic**

According to both teachers and students, thanks to the talking circle and the roles (in addition to the overall process), a climate of mutual understanding gradually developed. Teachers learned to listen more and to see each student as an individual: they humanized each other.

At first, the teachers were too much like teachers. They were too tied to the role of being teachers, and we, too, were too much like students and only saw them as teachers. (M., 12 years old)

The dynamics became less judgmental, allowing students to feel freer to speak up and express their opinions.

When we are in regular classes, we don't talk as much; we can't do what we think is right. We talk and do more in civic education. We speak freely and share our opinions. (Y., 12 years old)

Through dialogue and the sharing of decision-making processes, the power relations in the classroom changed (at least within the context of the civics education project).

Before, we were like subjects and the emperor; now, we are more like sitting at the round table... Or even better: we have gone from being subjects to

becoming parliamentarians. The emperor gives orders, but in a parliament, things are discussed. (F., 13 years old)

## **CONCLUSIONS: SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN THE PARADIGM SHIFT**

It can be argued that the practices described facilitate more democratic and nonviolent dynamics, but it is important to consider how to pursue this change. As part of the curriculum's prototype, an initial teacher training is planned, alongside a toolkit of practices and activities. However, during the experimental phase, and for the purpose of data collection, the researcher accompanied the processes with initial teacher training, ongoing meetings, and in-class support. So she could observe, how teachers, and consequently students, struggled to ritualize the practices, to establish a fixed structure for the circle, and to consistently use assigned roles. It was not easy for the teachers to find a balance between guiding the students to perform their roles with dedication and consistency and giving them space and time to learn through trial and error together.

The rules of the circle and the roles' tasks were also not always clear and shared between teachers and pupils. The discussion and sharing of the rules are an exercise in democracy, and thus in citizenship. In fact, in a community based on pluralism and democracy, dialogue is essential for recognizing common rules that enable collaboration and reciprocity (Cambi, 2010).

Another recurring challenge for teachers was remembering that the teacher is also part of the circle, holding an important role but not a central one: the circle is egalitarian, and the teacher is one person among others, though tasked with facilitating the circle.

Therefore—at least at the beginning—teachers should be supported with ongoing supervision to facilitate the paradigm shift, moving from a transmissive form of education to a dialogical one, fostering generative relationships and creating a democratic environment in the classroom.

During the prototyping phase, the initial training was considered sufficient to provide an understanding of the curriculum and its features (functional to co-designing among teachers and between teachers and students), in order to achieve what Habermas (1981) calls “instrumental learning”, aimed at improving the effectiveness of one's actions and addressing short-term needs. However, teachers were not yet fully proficient in dialogical practices and interactive, horizontal teaching methods; a deeper level of learning was required to enable co-designing among colleagues, activate dialogical teaching, and co-

design with students. The foundations needed to be laid for more dialogical and egalitarian relationships, which are uncommon in Italian secondary education (both lower and upper levels). A “communicative learning” was needed, aimed at understanding others to reach consensus and address long-term needs. Consequently, the co-design and sharing meetings planned among teachers effectively became moments of training and supervision (both educational and instructional), based on discussions of the classroom experiences. For some teachers, this led to “transformative learning” (Mezirow, 1991), a change within the frames of reference through which they were accustomed to constructing meanings, understanding experiences, and guiding their actions. Those frames of meaning were no longer valid and needed to be transformed to make them more inclusive and suited to the new co-designing requirements, to create contexts for (intergenerational) dialogue where participation is supported, and to begin to see students as people with whom shared solutions can be found (Laffi et al., 2021).

The implementation of the curriculum during the research shows the relevance of supporting teachers in the paradigm shift by adding ongoing supervision to the initial training. Such support is useful not only for the curriculum’s implementation but also, and most importantly, for the democratization of intergenerational dynamics.

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# SCHOOL DROPOUT IN THE PERSPECTIVES OF PARENTS: INSIGHTS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN A PERIPHERAL NEIGHBOURHOOD IN MILAN

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School dropout is a multidimensional and multifactorial phenomenon, influenced by endogenous and exogenous factors. Addressing this issue therefore urges a holistic, multidisciplinary and systemic approach, involving multiple stakeholders. In increasingly super-diverse educational contexts, a lack of effective communication and collaboration between schools and families often undermines the quality of young people's educational experiences. This impact is particularly pronounced for vulnerable families with migratory backgrounds, whose children may face an elevated risk of dropout. The paper draws on the results of a study inside the AFIM 3867 project: Reinventing Citizenship: Paths of Empowerment for Networks and Social Groups in the San Siro Neighbourhood<sup>1</sup>. The study explored families' perspectives on their children's schooling experiences, focusing on a specific secondary school in the San Siro neighbourhood of Milan, Italy. Data were collected through two focus groups and four in-depth interviews, involving a total of 36 parents. Thematic analysis of the data highlights parents' perceptions of school dropout, school-family relationships, and intercultural dynamics.

school-family relationship; students' wellbeing; intergenerational dialogue; Super-diversity

## INTRODUCTION

School dropout is a multidimensional and multifactorial phenomenon (Colombo, 2010), requiring a holistic (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), multidisciplinary and systemic approach (AGIA, 2022). Particularly urgent is the need to centre

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<sup>1</sup> You can read the complementary paper by V. Cotza, *Peer Tutoring to Prevent School Dropout: The Case of a High School in San Siro*, which was developed based on the same research project.

the perspectives of migrant families, whose voices are frequently marginalised or misunderstood within educational institutions. By amplifying these narratives, researchers can more deeply comprehend the exogenous factors influencing educational trajectories and disengagement.

Our paper draws on the results of a study conducted within the AFIM 3867 project: Reinventing Citizenship: Paths of Empowerment for Networks and Social Groups in the San Siro Neighbourhood. The study tried to shed light on the perspectives of families in relation to their children's schooling experiences, with reference to a specific pilot secondary school within the multicultural neighbourhood of San Siro in Milan, Italy.

## **1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Family involvement and participation are crucial factors in children's school experience since the ECEC settings. As exemplified by Epstein (2001)'s Overlapping Spheres of Influence Model, the greater the overlap between the spheres, from a shared-responsibilities perspective, the greater the likelihood of building strong relationships and coherent educational projects. Such collaboration is essential for promoting both children's wellbeing and academic success. However, there is no singular model or uniform approach to parenting in relation to the school experience. They are influenced by a complex interplay of situational factors, contexts, orientations, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds (Bove, 2020). In the case of families with a migratory background, it is essential to enhance opportunities for exchange, dialogue, and negotiation between the symbolic and cultural universes that inform the behaviours of all actors involved. This approach aims to strengthen ties, networks, and connections within the community, fostering a supportive environment for these families. Such efforts are crucial in a context where many individuals experience social invisibility, marginality, and exclusion.

Research indicates that parental involvement significantly impacts children's academic performance and overall wellbeing (Bove, 2020). In particular, when families actively engage in their children's education, it not only enhances the children's learning experiences but also promotes their integration into the school community.

Nevertheless, within the scholarship on effective practices for enhancing school-family relationships, there is less clarity regarding strategies applicable to secondary schools. In these settings, adolescents increasingly assert their autonomy from their families, which can lead to a widening gap between home

environments and the external social context—particularly for students with migratory backgrounds (Moro, 1998).

## **2. “REINVENTING CITIZENSHIP” WITH PARENTS**

Our study was part of a wider action conducted inside the project Reinventing Citizenship, that aimed to promote citizenship key competences in order to prevent and tackle school dropout in students with migratory background (Bove, & Zecca, in press). Inside WP4 Task 1 – Mapping the socio-educational and didactic needs and resources of students with migratory backgrounds, families/caregivers, teachers (Cotza, & Mussi, in press) a qualitative in-depth study was developed inside a high school of San Siro. The school later also served as the site of two pilot experimental interventions<sup>2</sup> (Mussi, Cotza, Zecca, & Bove, 2024).

Our study involved the parents of the students attending the institution. The objectives were:

- to give voice to parents regarding their children’s school experience and concerning critical issues, resources, and improvement perspectives from their viewpoint;
- to explore their opinions and students’ experiences at school, particularly concerning the themes of dropout, school wellbeing, and the school-family relationship;
- to create contexts for discussion among parents within the school;
- to lay the groundwork for a generative dialogue involving teachers, parents, and students.

### **2.1 Methods and methodology**

Framed within the research-action-training paradigm (Traverso, 2015), the research employed two qualitative data-gathering methods:

- Two focus groups were conducted with a total of 36 parents. The focus group method was chosen not only for its heuristic value but also for its (trans)formative nature (Baldry, 2005; Bove, 2009). To leverage this affordance, the meeting took place online, allowing a more significant number of parents to participate.

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<sup>2</sup> One of them is described in detail in Cotza’s essay.

- Four in-depth interviews were conducted in-person or remotely (depending on the participant's availability) with some volunteers among focus group participants.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded using Nvivo. Data analysis was based on a thematic approach (Braun, & Clarke, 2021). Research insights highlighted some emerging themes, related to: parents' representations of school dropout and its factors, the relationship between school and families and intercultural encounters.

### **3. PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE. KEY AREAS OF FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 School dropout**

Parents included in the study tend to associate "school dropout" with very specific personal experiences involving people they know, such as classmates of their children who have either dropped out or considered leaving school. Some students, they say, may remain "parked" in their studies, merely aiming to complete compulsory education, and exhibiting sporadic attendance. Various interrelated dimensions emerged from participants' discussion on school dropout:

- The level of students. In the participants' view, students associated with school dropout exhibit particularly problematic behaviours in the classroom, have disorders such as ADHD, or are simply disinterested in school and are just waiting to reach the age of 16. Classroom dynamics can further exacerbate this issue; as one participant noted: "We also have a class with disruptive students, and so even those who want to engage, focus on being attentive during class, this is often not possible".
- The family level. Some parents dwell on the description of cases of early school leavers with complex family situations, "inadequate" parents who do not "educate" their children properly.
- The school level. Several parents express concern that educational institutions could do more to assist both students and their families. There is a perception that the school is not adequately addressing the needs of at-risk students.
- The macro level. Finally, some parents also connect the dropout phenomenon to broader societal factors. Particularly, they observe a cultural inclination towards seeking simpler rewards and immediate

gratification rather than encouraging perseverance and effort toward sustained goals.

Regarding endogenous factors related specifically to the school environment, parents frequently describe schools as “confused” and “confusing”, creating challenges for both children and families in navigating their educational journeys.

Teachers are often described as inadequately trained, unmotivated, and unable to motivate the youngsters. Some of them, on the other hand, are described as “empathetic,” “knowing how to listen”, but the constant turnover effects negatively teachers-students relationship:

Until recently, every week the school schedule would change (...) so discontinuity. (...) [It means] unfortunately having to start again every time to get to know the teacher, to be known, to create a team, that... that trust, that bond, that relationship that there must be between student and teacher. (...) However, the teachers she [the daughter] had were very helpful, very empathetic teachers. So from that point of view then there is always the exception.

In the view of some parents, the school’s role is crucial in addressing exogenous factors related to students and their families. Parents believe that family and contextual difficulties could be alleviated if teachers committed more to supporting families. However, they also recognise that the school’s ability to prevent dropout diminishes as students mature, fostering their autonomy and increasing their responsibility for engagement.

### **3.2 School-family relationship**

The research participants, who are parents deeply involved in their children’s education, unanimously acknowledge the importance of their active participation in school life. While they place varying emphasis on the level of autonomy to be granted to their children, they all view the school-family relationship as one characterised by open and continuous communication, along with active involvement and participation.

Some parents evoke the image of a “net”, among parents and between parents and school, so that it would be possible to help each other and, at the same time, help the school:

It’s really in high school that families, the school, the kids have to be cohesive. (...)

It's obvious that the goal is autonomy. The network is what saves, though. Cohesion is what helps you. Support is what facilitates.

Parents themselves tell us how, however, not all families share this way of conceiving the relationship with the school. They witness, in fact, a gradual disengagement by other families, especially looking back to previous school grades (“Parents in high school leave the kids... the youngsters, because: ‘They’re grown up and that’s it, my job is done here’”). In addition, many of the participants report that the school does not create the conditions to encourage all parents’ participation.

Various communication channels have been established to facilitate asynchronous school-family interactions; however, many parents find them unclear or difficult to navigate. Opportunities for face-to-face meetings with teachers are limited to interviews and assemblies.

### **3.3 Interculturality**

Research participants recognise the great heterogeneity that characterises the school and its classes and many of them express a favourable opinion on classrooms’ “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2007): they consider it as an opportunity for growth for their children, who learn to interact with people from very different backgrounds.

At the same time, differing opinions coexist on the school’s effectiveness in fostering interculturality. Some parents think that the school welcomes children with migratory background adequately, while others think there is little integration inside the school, because teachers care more about cognitive learning rather than social learning, including the development of intercultural skills. Others refer to what Portes and Zhou (1993) describe as “segmented integration”, where children with migratory backgrounds are integrated within the school environment but remain excluded outside of it.

Perhaps these different positions are due to the fact that the daily coexistence inside school informally fosters interaction between children with different backgrounds to varying degrees. At the same time, it seems to suggest a lack of conscious adoption of an intercultural pedagogical approach among teachers and of adequate teachers’ training (Fiorucci, 2020).

Fewer interactions take place between the families of children who come from different countries, and several parents report how there is widespread discrimination against non-Italian parents. The distance between families is described as a missed opportunity for parents to integrate, which will

necessarily affect their children (“Integrating kids is nice, but they are already more or less integrated. (...) Then they go home, and they take it all apart. Then you have to integrate the parents more than the kids”).

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The research insights suggest the urgent need for enhanced communication and collaboration between families and schools, particularly for families with migratory backgrounds. The research also emphasises that effective engagement strategies must adapt to the complexities introduced by students’ growing autonomy at this educational level.

In the project, a “virtual” dialogue among teachers, parents, and students is presented, reflecting a pedagogical vision where the school-family relationship is framed as a “triangular” dynamic. In this perspective, teachers, parents, and students are considered equal partners, engaging in stable, direct, and institutionalised exchanges. These insights informed the co-design of the Yards of Dialogue initiative (Mussi et al., 2024), which aims to create innovative dialogue spaces within schools. Artistic and embedded languages are used to promote meaningful interactions among teachers, students, and parents, thereby enriching the educational experience for all involved.

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# PROJECT EVALUATION OF “OLTRE I CONFINI. UN MODELLO DI SCUOLA APERTA AL TERRITORIO” – AGAINST SCHOOL DROPOUT: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

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School dropout is a multifaceted issue tied to student discomfort during their educational journey, manifesting in various behaviours (Gulli, 2008). Influenced by socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors, it negatively impacts individual and collective growth (Batini, 2016; Zecca, Passalacqua, Ribis, 2020). The project “Oltre i confini. Un modello di scuola aperta al territorio,” led by C.I.D.I. di Milano and selected by Con i Bambini, involved 70 entities, including 45 schools across 9 networks, to combat educational poverty. It aimed to foster collaboration between schools, public institutions, and the third sector, enhancing student engagement and reducing dropout rates through innovative teaching methods (Martini & Trivellato, 2011; Giosi, 2011). The evaluation, conducted by Università di Milano Bicocca, utilized a qualitative approach involving interviews, focus groups, targeted samples, and multiple case studies, by using Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) guiding data gathering and analysis. Preliminary results highlighted that integrating schools with local communities and employing innovative practices enhanced student engagement and reduced inequalities, despite challenges in geographic allocation, teacher turnover, and scalability. These findings align with the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) objectives to combat dropout and underline the importance of scaling successful practices.

school dropout; project evaluation; school and territory

## INTRODUCTION

School dropout can be defined as a heterogeneous set of phenomena manifested through students' disengagement, withdrawal, or abandonment of their educational path (Gulli, 2008). It cannot be traced back to a single cause, but rather results from the interplay of personal, relational, and environmental factors, and it negatively affects both individual and collective development (Batini, 2016; Zecca, Passalacqua, Ribis, 2020). The most recent data on the Italian situation (Eurostat, 2024) show some improvement, though the overall picture remains complex. In 2023, school dropout in Italy fell to 10.5% (down from 11.5% in 2022), approaching the European target of 9% by 2030. At the same time, the so-called "implicit dropout"—the share of students who, despite completing their studies, acquire inadequate competencies—has dropped below pre-pandemic levels, showing initial positive signals after the challenges posed by the Covid period. Nonetheless, concerns remain: Italy is still among the European countries with the highest dropout rates, territorial disparities persist, and significant effort is still required to recover competencies in key subjects such as Italian and mathematics.

The project "Oltre i Confini. Un modello di scuola aperta al territorio" (Beyond Borders: A Model of Schools Open to the Territory), led by C.I.D.I. di Milano, was selected as part of the Fund for Combating Educational Poverty in Minors—an initiative arising from an agreement among banking foundations, the National Forum of the Third Sector, and the Government, and implemented through the social enterprise Con i Bambini. Its central objective was to prevent and counter school dropout by adopting a systemic vision of educational intervention.

The qualitative evaluation of the "Oltre i Confini" project, conducted by the University of Milan-Bicocca in collaboration with C.I.D.I. di Milano, utilizes a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to identify qualitative indicators of the project's effectiveness. The aim is to provide empirical evidence useful for guiding future interventions and policies, in line with the resources and priorities outlined by the PNRR (Ministerial Decree 24-06-2022; Investment 1.4 of the PNRR), with the goal of promoting inclusive and sustainable educational practices on a broader scale. This article presents the preliminary results of the thematic analysis of focus groups conducted with teachers, offering insights into how the "Oltre i Confini" project has impacted various school contexts involved in this experience.

## 1. THE “OLTRE I CONFINI” PROJECT

Launched in 2018 and completed in 2023, the project involved 70 entities, including 45 schools (24 Comprehensive Institutes and 21 Upper Secondary Schools), 20 Third Sector Organizations, universities (Università Statale and Bicocca in Milan), and additional partners. These were organized into 9 territorial networks nationwide, reaching over 14,000 students aged 11 to 17.

The project took place within the complex context of the pandemic and post-pandemic period, during which school closures in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years exacerbated inequalities and learning loss, especially among the most vulnerable groups. The funding made it possible to test innovative educational models, strengthen teachers’ professional skills, and introduce new learning environments. The project’s structure was articulated into 9 integrated actions:

1. Establishment of 45 educational hubs.
2. Management of the 45 educational hubs.
3. Direct action in support of the target population.
4. Support network for families.
5. Training pathways.
6. Structure and management processes.
7. Communication and dissemination of results.
8. Monitoring and evaluation.
9. Impact evaluation.

Within the “Oltre i Confini” project, action 3 was central to the qualitative impact evaluation, as it directly focused on students at risk of dropping out. This provided the empirical basis for gaining a better understanding of the changing educational practices. Over five years, this action involved 45 schools aimed at supporting preadolescents and adolescents aged 11 to 17. Action 3 was centred on a variety of remedial courses, conducted both in lower and upper secondary schools, to address gaps in basic competencies and contribute to the recovery of at-risk students, as shown in Tab. 1. All data relating to student numbers were collected by C.I.D.I. di Milano in the third report titled “The School, the Territory, and Third Sector Organizations: A Strategic Alliance to Combat School Dropouts”, edited by Prof. Walter Moro.

Tab. 1. Number of students involved in Action 3

Academic year	Students	Lower secondary	Upper secondary
2018/19	1,346	611	735
2019/20	1,007	351	656
2020/21	2,491	1,014	1,477
2021/22	2,464	1,090	1,374
2022/23	978	338	640
TOTAL	8,286	3,404	4,882

Overall, 8,286 students were involved, with a relatively balanced distribution between lower and upper secondary levels. However, the results show a higher concentration of interventions in the first two years of upper secondary school, where the risk of dropping out is greater.

Tab. 2. Results of the students involved in Action 3

Academic year	% of student passed	% of student failed
2018/19	85.30%	14.70%
2019/20	97.20%	2.80%
2020/21	89.40%	10.60%
2021/22	90.90%	9.10%
2022/23	89.10%	10.90%
TOTAL	90.05%	9.95%

The overall data show a 90.05% pass rate among students who participated in the remedial courses (Tab. 2). Although these were considered “fragile” students or at risk of dropping out, the results suggest that the strategies implemented had a positive impact. This underlines the significance of Action 3 as a privileged area of observation for understanding the changes made in teaching practices and in the organization of educational pathways.

## 2. THE QUALITATIVE EVALUATION OF THE “OLTRE I CONFINI” PROJECT: PRELIMINARY RESULTS

### 2.1. Evaluation Research Methodology

The participatory and qualitative evaluation research aims to delve into the processes and perceptions of the impact of the “Oltre i Confini” project two

years after its conclusion, focusing on Action 3 from the perspectives of involved principals, project-referent teachers, and students who participated in the courses. The choice to adopt a participatory approach stems from the awareness that educational interventions cannot be rigidly predetermined without risking a loss in effectiveness (Lisimberti, Montalbetti, Orizio, 2021). Data analysis was conducted following the principles of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) through an initial thematic coding phase aimed at identifying qualitative indicators and understanding the diverse experiences that emerged. The research involves the entire population, with the selection of certain criteria based on continuity in project coordination. A total of 31 schools—68% of the total—were selected, each of which had a principal who ensured operational continuity for at least two years during the project’s implementation.

## 2.2. The Teachers’ Voices

This contribution presents the preliminary results that emerged from the analysis of focus group transcripts, starting from teachers’ perceptions, to identify the professional knowledge and skills that continued to influence educational intentionality and pedagogical practice. In this regard, reference is made to studies on teachers’ professional development and Shulman’s reflections, which recognize the teacher’s thought process as the driving force of didactic action (Shulman, 1987).

The objective is to understand whether and how the introduced teaching and learning methodologies have been integrated into teaching practice after the intervention ended. The attempt is therefore to grasp, through the collection and analysis of teachers’ voices, how these innovations have become ingrained in professional practice.

Tab. 3. Composition of the Teachers’ Focus Groups

Focus group code	Geographic area	School type	N. of teachers
FG IC NORD	Northern Italy	IC	7
FG IIS NORD	Northern Italy	IIS	6
FG IC SUD	Southern Italy	IC	2
FG IIS SUD	Southern Italy	IIS	4

Data were collected through focus groups divided by school type, Comprehensive Institutes (IC) and Upper Secondary Institutes (IIS), and by major geographic area, Northern and Southern Italy (Tab. 3). This distinction aims to explore similarities and differences in the perceptions and teaching practices adopted, considering territorial and organizational specificities.

### **2.3. Thematic Analysis of the Voices Emerging from the Focus Groups**

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of the focus groups conducted with teachers from various schools involved in the “Oltre i Confini” project. The analysis takes a thematic approach and is based on several key concepts that emerged in the core category called “Activities or methodologies integrated into the school at the end of the project”

A strongly recurring aspect in the teachers’ words is the “stable dissemination of a laboratory-based teaching approach” within their daily practices. No longer isolated initiatives, but a lasting transformation:

We, as an institute, are now absolutely oriented towards a more hands-on, laboratory-based teaching approach, in all transdisciplinary subjects, focusing on competences and developing transversal competences. (FG IC NORD).

One teacher clearly highlights the impact of this approach on groups of struggling students:

We have worked mainly with a particularly challenged class group that responded very well to active, laboratory-based teaching, while showing far less appreciation for the traditional, lecture-based approach. (FG IC NORD).

This integration not only facilitated the learning of disciplinary competences but also enhanced individual potential, as emerges from the following: “With many activities that put the kids at the center, each with their own potential (...) each one found themselves valued for what they did best. “ (FG IC NORD). The testimonies converge in showing a sedimentation process of a teaching method that is no longer negligible or sporadic, but fully integrated into the curriculum: “This is a way of operating that has become part of the work of all the class councils. “ (FG IIS SUD).

The analysis of the focus groups reveals that ICT has become a structural resource in the teaching-learning process, bringing to the fore the theme “Use of ICT and the Digital Approach”. One teacher highlighted: “Now that we have monitors in every classroom, we’ve continued to use them. “ (FG IC SUD). Other

teachers emphasize the value of ICT in offering personalized and motivating instruction: “Learning digital skills that just three years ago seemed unthinkable (...) has also allowed ICT to enter teaching as a normal practice, a habit, a good practice. “ (FG IIS NORD). The widespread adoption of tablets in class, the presence of interactive screens, and the implementation of digital learning spaces have thus accelerated a change in perspective, turning digital tools into levers for a more dynamic, inclusive teaching approach, aligned with the competences required by teachers and students in today’s context.

The third theme that emerged is “Competency-Based and Uda (Learning Unit) Planning” Among the most significant changes emerging from the interviews, competency-based planning and the use of Learning Units (Uda) have played a central role. Placing the student at the centre and encouraging active engagement and the personalization of interventions. One teacher underscores the value of the UDA as a meaningful, lasting experience:

My experience with the UDA... I am so happy I did it, but most importantly, I’m happy that I did it personally... Leading the students forward, I found myself very much at ease, so much so that (...) I continued working this way. (FG IC SUD).

Thus, curriculum development is no longer viewed as the mere frontal transmission of content, but rather as a design process that integrates disciplinary and transversal competences, promotes co-construction of knowledge, and enhances student motivation. In this sense, competency-based and Uda planning, supported by meaningful real-world tasks, has redefined the teacher’s role as a facilitator, contributing to a more inclusive, dynamic formative approach oriented toward the academic success of all students. The introduction of Uda methodology appears particularly significant, as it suggests that teachers may not have engaged in systematic planning prior to the project. Integrating structured, competence-based design into their professional practice not only enhances the quality of their pedagogical approach but also contributes to a more reflective and intentional form of teaching, ultimately benefiting both teachers and learners.

Although these are preliminary results and limited to the population involved, they suggest the potential for an increase in educational and teaching practices that, if consolidated over time and coherently integrated into curricula, could contribute to improved engagement and educational outcomes, particularly in more vulnerable contexts.



The preliminary findings here investigated indicate positive changes in teaching practices and the development of inclusive, competency-based approaches, but some critical aspects remain. These may include challenges in ensuring the sustainability of new methodologies over time, as well as difficulties in providing ongoing support and training for all involved teachers. These points of tension will be further explored and discussed with the teaching staff during the next phase, when project results are presented and collectively reflected upon.

### **3. PROSPECTS AND DEVELOPMENT LINES**

The preliminary results presented in this contribution suggest a scenario in which the “Oltre i Confini” project experience has triggered significant changes in how teaching is perceived and practiced, particularly from the teachers’ perspective. The initial qualitative analysis highlighted some emerging thematic categories, outlining a scenario in which the adoption of active methodologies, the reorganization of learning environments, attention to inclusion, and the prevention of early school leaving now appear to be firmly established as essential dimensions of educational action.

These results align coherently with current educational policies, especially with reference to the guidelines and resources provided by the PNRR. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan places at its center the goal of reducing school dropout rates through inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education. The emerging perspective is that of a school which, supported by effective methodological approaches, can expand and scale these experiences, incorporating them fully into the widespread professional culture among teachers.

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# PEER TUTORING TO PREVENT SCHOOL DROPOUT. THE CASE OF A HIGH SCHOOL IN SAN SIRO

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In 2023 the University of Milano-Bicocca was a partner in the FAMI project “Reinventing Citizenship. Paths of capacitation of networks and social groups in the neighbourhood of San Siro”. UNIMIB oversaw the WP4, “Key citizenship competencies for the prevention of school dropout and exclusion”, an integrated capacity-building action aimed at teachers from schools in the neighbourhood. The paper presents the results of the experimental action, concerning the strategy of peer tutoring. The peer tutoring activities involved 17 students and were aimed at students in the first-grade classes. The process included initial training of peer tutors, welcoming laboratories, and the opening of a listening and mutual aid space. The research supported these activities with 23 observational reports and 5 focus groups, 3 with tutors, 1 with teachers, and 1 with educators. The focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis. The students’ voices bring out the awareness and skills they acquired in the role as tutors, true reference figures, returning a picture of peer education as a strategy for preventing dropout and social exclusion.

school dropout; capacity-building; peer tutoring; focus groups; thematic analysis

## INTRODUCTION. THE FAMI PROJECT “REINVENTING CITIZENSHIP” IN SAN SIRO

The “quadrilateral” of San Siro is one of the largest Public Residential Housing areas in Milan and has a high concentration of fragile population. 48.6% are of foreign origin, with 85 different nationalities and a prevalence of people from Egypt (37.2%), Morocco (10.4%) and the Philippines (9.5%). These communities express discomfort related to difficult intercultural relations and fatigue caused by living in compromised residential and public spaces (Grassi,

2022). Neighbourhood schools are fundamental headmasters in guaranteeing access to education in pathways to citizenship. These schools often suffer from a widespread negative perception of their educational offer linked to the presence of minors of non-Italian origin ranging from 65% to 90%, even though they constitute spaces for combating school drop-out (AGIA, 2022). Here this phenomenon reaches rates of 19.4% of minors dropping out before high school diploma and 4.3% before the end of lower secondary school, percentages twice as high as the city average (ISMU, 2017).

The FAMI project “Reinventing Citizenship. Paths of capacitation of networks and social groups in the neighbourhood of San Siro” (2023) aims at developing a citizenship model in San Siro starting from the valorisation of its endogenous resources within innovative paths of social, educational, and territorial intervention.<sup>1</sup> The University of Milano-Bicocca oversaw the WP4, “Key citizenship competencies for the prevention of school dropout and exclusion”, an integrated capacity-building action addressed to teachers and educators of schools in the neighbourhood (Bove & Zecca, 2024), in order to strengthen: (1) the skills to detect and analyse the needs and resources of young people; (2) the capacity to implement actions to counter school drop-out and exclusion. The research, from an ecological and systemic perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), had a circular course: from a “macro” level, which involved all 12 schools taking part in the project (comprehensive institutes and high schools), it moved on to a “micro” level with two experimental actions, to finally return again to a “macro” level, in a formative perspective for all participating schools.

## **1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PEER TUTORING ACTION**

The methodological approach followed the Professional Development Action-Research (Charlier, 2005; Zecca, 2018) and favoured a qualitative approach of a participative type. After a mapping phase on school drop-out and social exclusion (Cotza & Mussi, 2024), which involved the network of 12 schools in the neighbourhood, two experimental actions (“cantieri di dialogo” and peer tutoring; Mussi et al., 2024) were co-designed and implemented within a pilot

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<sup>1</sup> The project, financed by the Asylum and Migration Integration Fund 2014–2020 (FAMI 3867), coordinated by the Prefecture of Milan (contact person: Alessandra Tripodi, coordination: Miria Manzo), involved the scientific coordination of three Universities: Politecnico of Milan (PI: Francesca Cognetti), Bocconi University (PI: Melissa Miedico) and University of Milano-Bicocca (PI: Chiara Bove and Luisa Zecca). The following Third Sector entities were partners: Comunità Nuova, Milano Mediterranea, and Itinerari Paralleli. You can read the complementary paper by A. Chinazzi and A. Mussi, School dropout in the perspectives of parents: Insights from a qualitative study in a peripheral neighbourhood in Milan, which was developed based on the same project.

school, the Galilei-Luxemburg Institute of Upper Secondary Education, finally proceeding to a formative analysis and dissemination of the results at the enlarged network level.

The pilot action that is the subject of this contribution, i.e. the peer tutoring action, was developed in light of the results that emerged from the qualitative mapping, in order to:

- Build a tutoring device to accompany students in “risk” conditions by enhancing their resources and skills;
- Involve teachers to promote the acquisition of know-how of innovative methods for preventing and combating school drop-out and exclusion.

The action was implemented by the Cooperative Comunità Nuova in Milan and was co-designed in collaboration with the teachers and UNIMIB, which supervised the entire process. It was divided into three phases: 1) Co-design; 2) Action; 3) Verification. The first phase consisted of 6 co-design meetings (April-November 2023). The second one comprised:

- Identification of tutors, 17 in all, from the third, fourth and fifth grades;
- Tutor training, with the objective of creating the working group and developing life skills useful for peer tutor work (September 2023);
- Welcome laboratories aimed at 10 first classes, in which activities were proposed that worked on cooperation between classmates by encouraging the creation of a group dimension, to enable students to experience the school environment to the fullest (October-November 2023);
- Implementation of an in-school space for students, called “Galileo Ascolta”, run by the tutors themselves (supervised by at least one adult), which took the form of a space for mutual help, listening and homework help.

During this second phase, 23 observational reports were produced (Cardano, Manocchi, & Venturini, 2011) to document the ongoing process. In the third phase a monitoring and evaluation path was proposed, mediated by qualitative tools: 5 focus groups were conducted (November 2023; Baldry, 2005), 3 with peer tutors (22 participants in total); 1 with 8 teachers of the classes in which the laboratories were held; and 1 with 5 educators from Comunità Nuova.

The focus groups were recorded, transcribed *verbatim* and analysed using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2008), based on the analysis of significant transversal nuclei. The findings presented here are the result of the analysis of focus groups conducted with students and the critical reading of reports.

## 2. FIRST RESULTS. THE VOICE OF PEER TUTORS

The peer tutoring action was aimed at implementing an educational strategy at school to activate a natural process of passing on knowledge, experiences and emotions from some members of a group to other members of equal status (Antonietti et al., 2003). In fact, peer tutor activities:

can generate positive changes and enable participants to develop aptitude for initiative, goal setting and goal achieving, time and emotion management as well as empathy and the ability to establish relations with others. In particular, tutors indicated the improvement of key skills like the ability to establish relations with peers, to work hard at their goals, to take over responsibility and the ability to manage relations, rights and duties when working with others. (Schir & Basso, 2018, p. 237)

The discussion that developed from the focus groups with the peer tutors made it possible to start a process evaluation of the action, which seems to corroborate what the scientific literature states about the potential of this strategy, which was experienced by the tutors as new, interesting, formative, useful, authentic, curious, nice, unexpected, although at times stressful, demanding and challenging.

### 2.1. New awareness and skills: The construction of the peer tutor role

According to the tutors, the activities generated in them a greater ability to relate to others and empathise, fostering peer interaction and communication:

Challenge and courage, more like the challenge of standing in front of a group of people, right? *Being able to dialogue with people you don't know* can seem like a challenge anyway, so you must have courage accordingly. And support, because in any case for these classes I have been more or less a support, that is, *I helped them to understand more or less the dynamics they are going to encounter on this path.*

Formative, because I learnt not only how to do group work with more people but also how to talk more, be more open, make myself understood.

It was also very pleasant to have helped some of the guys in the class, because there are some who are shyer than others and *we made sure that they could interact with the rest of the class.*

The activities undertaken enabled them to make use of their individual resources, such as knowledge of a language – e.g. Arabic, the mother tongue of many students in the school – which helped first-year students to feel

understood and accepted:

I did this course for a reason: for the guys in the same course, *I went there to help them with the language as well*. So, it was interesting, because there were a lot of guys in the course who spoke Arabic, there are a few words they don't understand, so I have to speak Arabic.

Interesting, because *I explain to them what they have to do, how to study, why it's important to speak Italian, to learn how to write*.

The development of soft skills was accompanied by a transformative process that led tutors to overcome the anxiety and embarrassment of speaking in front of an audience of students. It was a challenge met with courage:

I'm quite a shy person, so *I was afraid* that I wouldn't be able to call attention to myself, make myself heard, but in the end everything went well because *I took courage*, even seeing that they were actually more embarrassed than I was.

The course seems to have raised a progressive awareness both of their own role and of their own prejudices and preconceptions. Most of them acknowledged that they had stereotyped the school's addresses, coming up against a much more complex reality:

It was interesting to see how the addresses are stereotyped (...). I mean, I liked the graphics class more than the health and social class, usually you think that graphics class is messier than health and social class, but this time, in my experience, it was the opposite.

I had a class of electrics, and I had this very strong stereotype because in our class they are considered the ones who make a mess, who break things... there were also some thefts last year and the first thing they thought was "it was the electrics". Now, I take my blame, and I also realise that I stereotype this a lot.

## **2.2. Beyond criticality: Peer tutors as reference figures**

In general, the tutors were faced with difficult situations, which challenged them and did not always see them recognised in their role as tutors, especially due to young age and communication problems:

*I many times did not feel respected as a tutor*. Because I was not seen as a tutor, I was seen as the girl in fourth grade, that is, *I was seen as a pupil*, not as someone who can give you something.

Challenging because *I was not always faced with people who were easy to talk to, easy to interface with, easy to understand, but if you put your mind to it, you manage to conclude, to something positive.*

Nevertheless, as is also evident from the previous quotation, the balance of the experience seems to be positive. The intervention of the tutors helped to improve the dynamics of the class group and they were often seen as authoritative figures, guides to be relied upon:

*They took us very seriously, I mean in the sense as tutors, even when they needed us they came more to us guys than to C. [educator at Comunità Nuova], so I saw them very keen, I mean to see us as authority figures.*

*The second meeting we started talking (...) a lot of questions came up, I saw them very engaged and also very concerned about being able to bring a very, very high level to the exam; so, I was very pleased about that.*

Carrying out peer education activities seems to have activated important metacognitive skills in the tutors. Indeed, they reflect on their own responsibility towards younger pupils and thus on the importance of assuming the awareness of being reference figures:

*We have a responsibility, because we are talking to younger people who may interpret what we say in another way, so we have to have, let's say, an eye on.*

*Not everyone can do this, because as much as you can understand the teachers' point of view, you still have to keep in mind that we are there to give not an example but a reference figure, and in our class many wanted to do this experience but in my opinion not all of them were adequate, and in fact were not advised by our teacher.*

During their focus group, the teachers themselves say that the tutors were able to make the students think – for example, about rules – from another point of view, and add that “it was interesting because it wasn't the professor giving an explanation (...), but an older student”. In addition, the teachers themselves perceived the peer tutor as “intermediary figure” between teachers and pupils, a “link between the adult world and their world”.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS AND DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES**

These first results lead to the drafting of some points that seem crucial for the prevention of school dropout in multicultural and multi-problem contexts:



- Involve students in an active manner, by leveraging their skills, dreams, talents, as well as their vulnerabilities in a democratic citizenship perspective;
- Build heterogeneous groups of students among the different classes to expand the dimension of social relations and exchange beyond all diversity;
- Give students specific roles in a project so that they feel themselves to be social actors, stakeholders, and responsible for the success of the action beyond the logic of power and role asymmetries within the school institution;
- Invest in the transformation of space to foster a sense of belonging to the school, ensuring alternative and protected spaces for the students to allow their freedom of expression and to enable them to participate competently and reflectively in heterogeneous dialogue spaces shared with adults.

Looking ahead, thinking about the development of peer tutoring as a strategy to prevent school dropout, the analysis of focus groups and reports suggests implementing the role of peer tutors as cultural and linguistic mediators, having tutors work in classes that have the same study field as them, and finally, as told by the tutors themselves, devoting more time to debates on sensitive topics for students.

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# FOR THOSE WHO FALL BEHIND: EXAMINING LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL ENHANCEMENT PRACTICES IN MILAN'S EXTRA-SCHOOL SERVICES

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This study explores the educational needs of a diverse urban neighbourhood, focusing on after-school programs and their role in supporting multilingual children. Through a qualitative method and an Ethnographic methodology 30 observations were done in 14 after-school services revealed significant gaps in the training of practitioners, particularly in teaching Italian as a second language (L2) and utilizing strategies to value students' home languages. This research highlights the urgent need for professional development in multilingual pedagogies to empower practitioners to leverage students' linguistic and cultural resources. Such training can create more inclusive, dynamic learning environments, improving outcomes and reducing dropout risks. While preliminary, these findings provide a foundation for rethinking after-school programs as spaces of inclusion and academic growth for multilingual youth in urban contexts.

school dropout; migration; multilingualism

## INTRODUCTION

Although early school leaving conjures up an image of an escape from the school system, a definitive end to one's study path, the term transcends this one-sided view and adopts a pluralistic perspective (Besozzi, 2006). Early school leaving is a multifaceted phenomenon that doesn't result only in the extreme act of not getting a diploma, but it has to do with episodes of compulsory school evasion, repeated failures, irregular attendance, transfers and low performance (Zurla, 2004). Hence, the phenomenon of school leaving may take two distinguished forms: an explicit one, defined by the non-achievement of a lower secondary education diploma, and an implicit one,

portrayed by individuals who finish compulsory education without obtaining the necessary skills to thrive in today's society.

Whichever form does this hardship adopt, early school leaving bursts from variables well-known for quite some time (e.g. Rumberger & Lim, 2008). The vast literature on the subject clusters the different variables into three main groups: Socio-economic variables (Turner & Thiede, 2018), such as educational level of parents, belonging to single-parent families, and geographical segregation; school endogenous variables (Wolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2019), like peer relationships and teacher relationships; individual variables (Rumberger, 2011), mental health and special educational needs.

In the Italian context, among those who are more susceptible to these variables, students with migrant background are three times more at risk. In 2023, 26.9% of students with a migrant background experienced some form of early school dropout compared to 9% of natives (ISTAT, 2024a). Furthermore, if one were to consider implicit dropout, namely underachievement and low school performance, students with a migrant background are more prone to the phenomenon than their Italian peers. According to the INVALSI 2024 data in second year of primary school, first generation migrants score 18.8% points lower in Italian tests than their non-immigrant peers and for second generations the difference is 14.3%. In fifth grade the gap narrows but the results remain worrying: First generations overall score 13.5% lower than their non-immigrant peers and for second generations the difference is 9.2% (INVALSI, 2024).

Migrant pupils' greater risk of early school leaving paired with the increase of 4.9% of students with a non-Italian citizenship and the 2% decrease of Italian citizens in schools (ISTAT, 2024b) triggers a new emergency in education: achieving a fair and equitable education, which succeeds in implementing actions to prevent school dropout of children with migrant background, by implement a pedagogy of listening, which stems from children's personal experience (Dewey, 1938) and values their cultural and linguistic heritage (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002).

## **1. RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Therefor it is important to design school dropout combat interventions in neighbourhoods with high percentage of pupils with migrant background. This study focuses on the San Siro area, with particular attention to the quadrilateral Selinunte. This portion of the city is characterised by a marked social and territorial heterogeneity, reflecting a mosaic of different and contrasting urban

realities. On the one hand, there are residential neighbourhoods frequented predominantly by middle and upper classes, well served and maintained, defined by a well-kept urban environment and quality housing; on the other, there are areas of public housing, often marked by situations of structural and social decay.

This contrast generates a clear polarisation within the neighbourhood, distinguishing a 'upper-class' San Siro from a 'working-class' San Siro. The latter area is characterised by the strong presence of foreign communities, which make up about 37.3% of the resident population. Multiculturalism is evident not only in the percentages, but also in the extraordinary variety of origins: there are about 85 different nationalities, with a prevalence of people from North Africa.

Despite its urban criticalities, San Siro also stands out for some positive and significant demographic trends. In contrast to the general decline in the number of young people in the 0-18 age group, found in many of Milan's neighbourhoods, San Siro's forecasts a population growth of 19.1% by 2030 (Milan 2030, 2017). This perspective makes San Siro the 'womb' of the new Milanese generation, a place of youth renaissance that could influence the city's future.

However, this demographic potential must be accompanied by targeted policies and strategic interventions to ensure that the growth of the youth population represents an asset rather than becoming a source of difficulty. In fact, there are several extra-school educational services in the neighbourhood that seek to support children in their studies. In this regard, bearing in mind the theoretical assumptions described above, it seems necessary to understand whether the extra-school services succeed in guaranteeing an education that draws on the children's linguistic and cultural background in order to create a more meaningful learning.

## **2. STUDY DESIGN**

To achieve its exploratory objectives a qualitative method (Creswell, 2003) and an ethnographic methodology tailored to educational contexts (Bove, 2019) was carried out in the school year 2022/23 for a total of 30 observations. In alignment with these methodological principles, data collection was carried out using multiple qualitative tools designed to capture a diverse range of information. Participant observation was a central component of the research, enabling the researcher to engage directly with the environment, fostering a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play. This approach was

complemented by visual data collection through photography, which allowed for the documentation of physical spaces, interactions, and other contextual elements that might escape verbal descriptions.

Additionally, audio recordings were employed to capture conversations, ambient sounds, and other auditory aspects of the environment, preserving the richness of oral exchanges and ensuring accurate transcriptions for subsequent analysis. To further support the data collection process, detailed handwritten notes were taken using pen and pencil, providing immediate reflections, contextual insights, and annotations that might not be captured through other means.

### **3. RESULTS**

For the analysis of the data collected, content analysis was employed, as it is particularly well-suited for examining verbal and textual material of low complexity (Gianni, 2007). By breaking down the material into manageable units – such as themes, patterns, or recurring ideas – content analysis facilitates a deeper understanding of the underlying meanings and trends within the data. Through the analysis process three themes have been identified.

#### **3.1 District Profiling**

During the reporting year, 14 after-school services were considered in the mapping analysis. These services varied significantly in terms of structure, governance, target users, and weekly frequency, ranging from a minimum of one meeting per week to a maximum of five, for a combined total of 63 hours of school support per week. It is important to note that after-school programs organized directly by and within schools were not included in this analysis since they were voluntarily organized by teachers and weren't included in any official report. In fact, observations in two specific after-school sessions – one held at the Paravia school and the other at the Don Gnocchi school – revealed that some teachers voluntarily stayed beyond their regular working hours to coordinate and support these programs.

Paravia School 11/05/2023

P: 'Good morning, my name is P., I have an appointment with L. from the afterschool.'

School Reception: 'Which afterschool? On Thursdays there are 8 after-school activities.'

Don Gnocchi School 19/05/2023

P: 'Hi, what are you doing here at this time, do you have some kind of school meeting?'

A: 'No, no, I volunteer extra hours to help the children with their homework.'

From a logistical perspective, 5 of the 14 after-school programs were conducted within school building, while the remaining 9 took place in out-of-school settings. Among the out-of-school programs, 3 were managed by social cooperatives, 1 by a non-profit organization, 3 by a university, 1 by a voluntary association, and 1 by the municipality. For the school-based after-school activities, 1 was organized by a cooperative, 3 by the municipality, and 1 by a voluntary association.

The enrolment records indicate that a total of 475 children were registered across the network of after-school programs. However, field observations revealed a significant discrepancy between the number of children officially enrolled and those actually attending. Practitioners confirmed these inconsistencies, though they were often unable to provide precise attendance figures during observations. Furthermore, approximately 75% of the attendees were identified as Arabic speakers. The remaining 25% represented a variety of cultural backgrounds, with no Italian children observed attending any of the sessions. It is important to note that this demographic data is incomplete, as not all children were present during the observations, and their personal information was not always available for review.

### **3.2 Language and Cultural Background**

The use of children's home languages varied depending on the setting. In out-of-school contexts, the use of native languages was generally not discouraged. For instance, children were observed speaking in their home language freely, except in one case where two boys were scolded for allegedly swearing in Arabic during a play session. Conversely, in school-based after-school programs, children did not use their home languages and those with limited Italian proficiency remained largely silent, which highlighted their discomfort or lack of engagement.

Despite the occasional spontaneous use of home languages in out-of-school settings, there was little evidence that practitioners leveraged this linguistic diversity as a resource for engagement or learning. Home languages were actively used by practitioners in only a few observed instances and in all these cases the usage lacked an educational purpose. For example, at one

afterschool program, a practitioner casually asked a child to teach him the names of colours in Arabic, but this interaction remained superficial and did not translate into a learning opportunity (See Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Home language use – observation 18.04.23

rosso	→	أحمر	achmar
verde	→	أخضر	achdar
blu	→	أزرق	asvak
grigio	→	أبيض	asfar
nero	→	أسود	asud
bianco	→	أبيض	abial
marone	→	بني	bonni

### 3.3 Challenges and Implications in Pedagogical Practices

The limited use of children’s linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the educational process points to a broader issue: the lack of professional training among practitioners, particularly in teaching Italian as a second language, as it is highlighted by the diary written on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April: *‘I wonder if the operator has followed training courses on teaching Italian L2 since I only offered dictation activities during the hour.’* Observations raised concerns about the effectiveness of the pedagogical approaches employed in these after-school programs.

31.05.2023

‘The staff does not seem to me to have any specific skills to conduct an after-school activity: they are very attached to the text of the books, they feed the answers, they make people read out loud. The activity takes the form of classic repetitions, conducted by people of good will, passionate, but without any knowledge of the study method or the teaching of Italian L2.’

Common activities included dictation, reading aloud, completing worksheets, or practitioners directly doing homework for children. These practices, while prevalent, were often misaligned with the goal of fostering meaningful learning and engagement, particularly for students struggling with Italian language proficiency.

The observed weaknesses in pedagogical strategies and the underutilization of children’s linguistic and cultural assets significantly limit the effectiveness of



after-school programs. For some children, these activities risk becoming mere extensions of the school environment, offering little in terms of tailored support or meaningful engagement. This lack of innovation reduces the potential impact of after-school programs and risks transforming them into ‘parking lots’ rather than effective educational resources. To truly support children’s learning and development, greater emphasis must be placed on integrating culturally responsive teaching methods and enhancing practitioner training in second-language instruction. Without these improvements, the quality of school support provided by after-school programs remains inconsistent and, in some cases, inadequate.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION**

Over the past two decades, a growing body of theoretical and empirical research has demonstrated the benefits of multilingual education in fostering deeper and more comprehensive learning experiences (e.g., Carbonara & Scibetta, 2020; Cummins, 2021). Multilingual practices can contribute to the development of critical academic skills, such as the development of critical thinking, the acquisition of technical vocabulary, and a deeper understanding of the subjects. Moreover, multilingualism supports the creation of a more inclusive and serene learning environment. Allowing students to use their home languages freely not only reduces stress and anxiety but also fosters a stronger sense of identity and belonging. This, in turn, increases their motivation and engagement with the learning process, which are essential factors in preventing school disengagement and dropout.

Thus, this first exploratory research of the neighbourhood’s needs has highlighted the necessity to train practitioners in the didactics of Italian as a second language, but also in mother tongue valorisation strategies. Training practitioners in multilingual pedagogical strategies would not only enhance the quality of after-school programs but also empower educators to build on students’ linguistic and cultural resources as tools for learning, strategies that might guarantee a more equitable education and help in the prevention of early school leaving among migrant students.

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# STRENGTHEN THE SCHOOL-FAMILY-SERVICES PARTNERSHIP THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE P.I.P.P.I LEPS

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The phenomenon of school dropout is defined by those who don't gain either the necessary skills to live in society or high school qualifications (Council of the European Union, 2011). It is often linked to a condition of socioeconomic disadvantage, coming from environments with a low level of education, school rejection, factors of labour market attraction, and/or a combination of social, psychological, educational problems. Investing in education, therefore, is essential to break the "cycle of disadvantage" (European Commission, 2013); it is why is necessary an early and multi-disciplinary approach (AGIA, 2022). In this contribution, we intend to present the first phase of a participatory research-action-training to promote the success of every child, a new action within the Italian P.I.P.P.I. programme. The research aims to promote the active involvement of kindergarten teachers in the prevention and early recognition of situations of family and social vulnerability, with an integrated and shared approach with social, educational-school, and socio-health services. It will be held during the years 2024/25 through the collaboration between sectors, following a co-educational approach, to develop early recognition strategies of vulnerabilities. Monitoring tools will include the RPMonline digital platform.

P.I.P.P.I. programme; prevention; co-education; integration

## INTRODUCTION

The school drop-out phenomenon can take two shapes. The explicit one is defined by Early School Leavers (ESL) or Early Leavers from Education and Training (ELET), those who aged 18-24 and who leaved the education system with at most a lower secondary education qualification. The implicit one, more

difficult to identify, is represented by those who finish compulsory education without gaining the essential skills needed to participate in the XXI century society (Council of the European Union, 2011). In 2023, based on Eurostat data (Eurostat, 2023), ELET in Italy were more than 11%; the EU-level target for 2030 should be less than 9%. Students “implicitly dispersed”, in Italy in 2019, were 7,1%, measured by INVALSI (Ricci, 2019). By aggregating the two percentages, the school dropout in Italy is around 20%.

This phenomenon impacts societies, countries and personal life of people, feeding the “cycle of disadvantage”: poverty and low levels of education could lead to becoming parents with lower income, cultural and educational attainments, resulting in a lower quality of education both within families and educational services, increasing school dropout rates and learning difficulties, reducing the number of university students, and leading to greater vulnerability, more poverty, and higher welfare spending. Similarly, in parent families with low income, cultural and educational levels, children develop a greater chance of school dropout (Milani, 2018; Garcia and Heckman, 2022), compromising their well-being, their life potential and life’s opportunities. Promoting and encouraging school-educational success, investing in education, in early childhood, means to break the “cycle of disadvantage” ensuring more equity in opportunities and full realization of each potential, for smart and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2013).

As school drop-out is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, it needs to be faced in the same way, through an evolutionary and systematic perspective, involving the whole community in the entire life cycle (AGIA, 2022). In this contribution, we would like to introduce a new and innovative research-action within the national P.I.P.P.I. programme, that would want to enforce an early, holistic and multidisciplinary approach, facing the dropout phenomenon, through the implementation of the school-family-services partnership.

## **1. THE SCHOOL DROPOUT PHENOMENON AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF SUCCESS**

The problem’s complexity results by a combination of personal, social, economic, educational, gender and family-related factors. It is linked to situations of cumulative disadvantage, often originated in early childhood, feeding the “cycle of disadvantage”.

Children are more exposed to poverty or social exclusion than the rest of the population; children growing up in such conditions have fewer opportunities than their luckiest peers to succeed in their studies, enjoy good health, and fully realize their potential as adults (European Commission, 2013, 5).

J. Heckman (2012) emphasizes the significant advantages of investing in the early and equitable development of human potential, to build a more skilled, productive and valuable workforce that will benefit the future generations. Therefore, it is essential for the growth of the countries' economy and social cohesion, leading to more democracy, less unemployment, inequalities and poverty (European Commission, 2013). Early childhood interventions are the most effective because of the more brain plasticity of the first life's years, the early emergence of cognitive, emotional, executive, social, etc. functions and the role of interactions, that determine the futures way of life (Tamburlini, 2014). Building on these assumptions, to tackle the school dropout is fundamental to adopt an early, holistic, and multidisciplinary approach that keeps together the entire school community and extends to the broader community in an ecological and preventive perspective, looking the children in a developmental way (Guryan et al., 2008; Council of the European Union, 2015; Milani, 2022). Indeed, the absence of services, as a support network for growth, creates a lack of stimulation and resources, leading to negative impacts on the social, cognitive, emotional skill's development of young people (AGIA, 2022).

## **2. THE PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH-ACTION-TRAINING**

### **2.1. The national P.I.P.P.I. programme**

P.I.P.P.I. (Intervention Programme to Prevent Institutionalization) embodies the approaches and the perspectives outlined up to this point. It is a national programme born in 2011 and, in 2021, it has been recognized within the LEPS (Essential Level of Social Benefit) to prevent the phenomenon of out of home children. It promotes innovative practices of intervention towards families in which children experience neglect and vulnerability situations, aiming to avoid the emergence of risk conditions that could lead to early school leaving too. The described approach is reflected by the integration of social, health and educational-school sectors, which works together to co-create a unified and personalized plan with, not on, the child and the parents. The effort is to generate a cross-sectoral community based on an ecosystemic approach to the family (Milani, 2022).

## **2.2. The family-school-services partnership**

One of the four actions made available to each family participating in the programme, is the family-school-service partnership, that

can prevent and counteract the effects of vulnerability on children's development, to ensure the academic success of every child growing up in a vulnerable family situation, also providing teachers with the possibility of implementing affective-emotional and social interventions integrated into teaching-learning processes, in line with the objectives of the design defined in the multidisciplinary team (EM) (Serbati and Milani, 2022, 44-45).

The aim is to work at an early stage, realizing coherent and timely actions between sectors, involving the family and the community, helping a better comprehension of children needs and supporting parenting resources (MLPS, 2017; Milani, 2022). Cooperation between different sectors, in the P.I.P.P.I. programme, is built through a digital platform called "RPMonline", designed in a community and participatory perspective, used by practitioners, involved in the care of families, to communicate, cooperate, share, document, assess, plan the common project.

## **2.3. "P.I.P.P.I. AT KINDERGARTENS – Three-year training program for FISM kindergartens in the West Veronese area"**

### *2.3.1. Objectives, methods and participants, and expected outcomes*

The participatory research-action-training, subject of this contribution, develops itself from a long experience in P.I.P.P.I. of the social area of Verona West: indeed, in October 2023, the social's practitioners and the research group in charge of P.I.P.P.I. started a three-year training addressed to about 400 teachers and/or coordinators of the local territory's kindergartens. It has the objectives to make known P.I.P.P.I. approach, as a common way to work with families, and to increase knowledge and trust among the different professionals and sectors.

Specifically, the objectives of the participatory research-action-training project, started in the Veronese area, are:

- to promote and to integrate the professional agency of teachers in the multidisciplinary teams;
- to strengthen the school-family-services partnership, in order to improve enabling inclusive ecosystems;

- to develop an awareness of the potential of technologies in prevention and in socio-educational-school-health collaboration;
- to promote the active involvement of teachers in early recognition and support of vulnerability situations.

As a participatory action-research-training, it looks at teachers/coordinators and social services as co-researchers and active participant in the research. The training methodology assumes a reflective and dialogic perspective, and the techniques are speech and simulation based, starting from the teachers' experience to co-create a common language with social services and in relationship with families. The research tools are RPMonline, initial and on-going training, questionnaires, focus groups, interviews.

The final expected outcomes are:

- the innovation of teachers' practices to address the needs of children and in their relationships with families;
- the knowledge's improvement, by teachers, of early recognition of families living in situations of vulnerability;
- the consolidation of a timely and integrated support partnership between teachers and local service providers;
- to develop more confidence with technologies in a community and social intervention perspective (RPMonline in particular).

### *2.3.2. Schedule*

In this first year, from October 2023 to May 2024, in collaboration with representatives of the ASL as trainers, we realized the in presence-training phase to about 100 kindergartens' teachers/coordinators. From March to June 2024, we carried out an in-depth online training with a subgroup of them (17), to experiment the practical design in RPMonline starting from the real families' situations reported by teachers, to test observative and assessment tools. It took place in a mostly workshop format of active group learning, using simulative techniques, case analyses and autobiographical accounts to encourage reflection, experimentation, comparison and negotiation of meanings. In summary to learn a method of co-construction and shared project for/with each child and family in situations of vulnerability.

After and thanks this initial training, teachers will be invited to be protagonist in the identification (for 2024/25 year) of 10 families to support within P.I.P.P.I. multidisciplinary teams.



### **3. FIRST RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In these phases of initial active training, we could observe a high motivation by teachers, that reflects also the high responsibility that they feel regarding families and children. These represent strong points in the work with them. Based on the initial questionnaire, submitted them before the beginning of training, the priority motivation to attend the training, as well as getting to know better the programme, is to acquire new tools, skills and methods to work with families in vulnerable situations, to improve the ability to relate with them; moreover another priority motivation is to implement the collaboration with services in the local area, considered fundamental for the previous purpose. The motivation and sense of responsibility have also emerged during the training, in each different group activities, relied on their professional experience with families and children: there was a big emotional involvement, that request more time to reflect on the situations and to support them. Teachers have manifested trust, toward us, and great expertise in their work: they got involved, feeding and enriching discussions, showing the skill to question themselves, their professional practices with desire to learn and curiosity. We submitted, to teacher, also an intermediate and a final questionnaire. The various answers showed excitement and satisfaction, for example “Finally a clear and defined support to accompany fragile families”, “The importance of prevention and networking, of the triangulation between school, family and other institutions”, “Awareness of how to ‘take’ and get in touch with a family that is experiencing any social, personal, emotional distress, etc. Personal awareness of my role as a teacher”.

In relation to our objectives, it seems to be an improvement in the school-family-services partnership and their wish to early recognize and prevent emergency situations, to be concretely developed in the integrated care of families in P.I.P.P.I. Based on these assumptions, there may be an effective promotion of teachers’ professional agency in inclusive human and technological ecosystems created in concert with socio-educational-health sectors.

### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

School drop-out can be fought by schools as social elevators to promote more equity. As school drop-out is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, it needs to be faced in the same way: acting before the first day of school, investing in early childhood and in an evolutionary and systematic perspective. Starting with these purposes, we planned a participatory research-action-training

project, in collaboration with services of West Veronese, addressed to private kindergartens' teachers.

In the initial training teachers showed involvement and motivation, trust towards services and sense of responsibility towards families and children, strong points for next steps. The challenge will be the use of RPMonline as a platform aims to share, cooperate, communicate and document, despite the daily workload, lack of time and digital inexperience. The use will be fully supported by ongoing training.

This research, as a new and innovative action within the national P.I.P.P.I. programme, would like to be a starting experience to promote the active involvement of teachers in the multidisciplinary team and in the prevention of risk conditions that feed the “cycle of social disadvantage”, so the school dropout too.

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# PREVENTING AND COMBATING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING SINCE EARLY CHILDHOOD. TOWARDS A DYNAMIC, SITUATED AND ECO-SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO PROMOTE EQUALITY, SOCIAL COHESION AND JUSTICE

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite a decline in early school leavers' numbers (Eurostat, 2024), the phenomenon of school dropouts is gaining increasing prominence on national and international political agendas, becoming a paradoxical topic in public policy analysis (Berthet, 2023). Hence, even though Countries are conveying a decline in percentage in early school leaving, the concern about the dropouts is drastically raising. This increase might be due to the fact that today's society is knowledge based, a society in which the role of knowledge assumes, economically, socially and politically, a fundamental centrality in life, and which bases its growth and competitiveness on knowledge, research and innovation. Thus, since living in a society that bases its principles on education, it is no wonder to witness an increase in policies aimed at combating and preventing early school leaving.

The Treaty of Lisbon marked a significant step in combating early school leaving by emphasizing education as a central pillar of the labour market and promoting lifelong learning to boost employability. Adopted in 2000, the Treaty sought to address disparities in access to education and ensure equal opportunities for all. Further advancing this agenda, the 2007 Lisbon Report on Growth and Jobs included specific recommendations to lower national early school leaving rates. Following the Lisbon Strategy, the Europe 2020 Strategy tackled the issue of early school leaving directly by clearly stating the need to reduce the share of early school leavers to 10% from the current 15% and increase the share of the population aged 30–34 having completed tertiary from 31% to at least 40% by

2020. One year after Europe 2020, to solidify Europe's position in the 'war' against early school leaving the European Union published the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving. In the document not only the importance of reaching previously set benchmarks was stated but also flagship initiatives, with a specific focus on preventive actions were proposed.

Europe managed to reach the desired goal by reducing the rates of early school leavers to 10% by 2020, however in many Countries, including Italy, the school dropout quota exceeded the set threshold. Recognizing the need for continued progress, the European Union released the Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond, in which the new target level was set to be less than 9% by 2030.

However, despite these actions, early school leaving still pervades today's society. It is a multifaceted issue encompassing all forms of "loss" within the educational system (Besozzi, 2006), that is associated with factors such as delays in academic progress, missed learning opportunities, and failure to obtain qualifications (Batini & Bartolucci 2016). In Italy, this phenomenon is defined as the sum of different conditions, such as marginalized or poor families, lack of access to early childhood services, early school leaving, repetition rates, interruptions and irregularities of various kinds. Moreover, school dropout reflects the broader complexity of society (Tuè, 2003) and impacts various domains, including family, social relationships, and peer groups (Morgagni, 1998).

On this regard, the latest analyses by AGIA, the OECD and national and international literature (Rumberger, 2020; Mussi et al., 2024; Zecca, Fredella, & Cotza, 2023) reveal that to prevent and combat early school leaving it is necessary to adopt a multi-levelled and multi-dimensional approach, which can effectively tackle the school dropout issue from an integrated perspective: one that can take into account various interconnected dimensions, including socio-economic, cultural, institutional, personal, and school endogenous (Cingolani & Premazzi, 2016; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Thus, within this theoretical framework the contribute presents five empirical research-based articles aimed at, one hand, enriching the contemporary academic debate on the topic of early school leaving and, on the other, to disseminate practical actions intended to prevent school dropout. The panel aims to discuss teaching strategies and policies that could prevent or counteract early school leaving risks at the

mesosystemic level of relationships in the school community. This includes promoting social cohesion processes such as accessible and quality childcare services, improving family-school relationship, and supporting young newcomers in their integration process. Furthermore, the five articles will engage in a discussion on multicultural and multilingual alternative teaching strategies, as well as integrated and inter-institutional actions (welfare policies, education policies, school policies, urban policies, job policies, home policies). The research proposed by Cotza shares results of the experimental action of peer tutoring, that took place at one high school in Milano. The action research, which involved 22 participants, explores the strengths and challenges of this intervention, emphasizing the importance of student voices in co-creating educational strategies. Through focus groups and observations, it is underscored the role of collaborative efforts between schools, third-sector organizations, and universities in preventing school dropout.

Lefterov delves into the experiences of migrant students, who face disproportionately high risks of school dropout due to intersecting socio-economic, institutional, and personal challenges. The study investigates how language and cultural valorisation practices in extra-school services might enhance educational equity and engagement. Using ethnographic methods, it reveals both successes and gaps in these initiatives, proposing a pedagogy rooted in cultural and linguistic appreciation.

Colleagues Marcellan and Milani present a model of integrated governance aimed at fostering collaboration between schools, families, and social services. By involving preschool teachers, families, and service providers, this study emphasizes the importance of co-constructed approaches to identifying and addressing vulnerability early, thereby creating more cohesive educational and social systems.

In the evaluation of the project *Oltre i Confini*, which integrates schools with local communities to combat educational poverty and prevent school dropout, Coacci and Moro highlight the challenges of scaling community-based initiatives and their relevance within broader educational reforms, such as those outlined in the PNRR.

Lastly, Chinazzi and Mussi explore parental perspectives on school dropout, focusing on families in a multicultural neighbourhood in Milan. Using focus groups and interviews, the chapter sheds light on the challenges faced by parents, their views on school-family relationships, and their suggestions for improvement. The authors advocate for creating spaces for systemic dialogue

between parents, teachers, and students to foster mutual understanding and collaborative problem-solving.

In conclusion, these studies aim at discussing teaching strategies and policies that could prevent or counteract early school leaving risks at the mesosystemic level of relationships in the school community. This includes promoting social cohesion processes such as accessible and quality childcare services, improving family-school relationship, and supporting young newcomers in their integration process. By highlighting successful interventions and identifying persistent challenges, the studies suggest that effective strategies require coordinated efforts between schools, families, communities, and policymakers, creating a supportive ecosystem that addresses students' academic, emotional, and social challenges.

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# SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH SPORT AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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## INTRODUCTION

The issue of inclusion has been crossing the public debate for many decades, developing on several levels: political, economic, legal, social, etc. The definitions of social inclusion are many and polychrome. For Taylor (1994), it expresses the need to recognize all forms of cultural difference and to create public spaces in which these differences can be expressed and valued. Bauman (2001) defines it as belonging to supportive communities characterized by relationships of reciprocity. Sennett (2012) refers to creating contexts that enable people to actively experience their sociality. Ricolfi (2018) highlights the prerequisite for social inclusion: equal access to goods, services, and opportunities that enable individuals to be protagonists in the social, cultural, and economic life of communities and to be able to develop their full potential. The desired effects of any inclusive process are dense in meaning and particularly topical (Gray, 2000; Young, 2000; Coakley and Donnelly, 2002).

## 1. INTERSECTION BETWEEN SPORT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

In the late 1990s, reflections on sport and social inclusion intersected (Frisby and Ponic, 2013; Pegg and Compton, 2004): 1) the universalism of sport, its ability to reach anyone – at least on a symbolic level – can help people overcome physical, social, cultural, and generational barriers, while at the same time contributing to improved health, self-esteem, emotional management, and relationships with others (Carless and Douglas, 2004; Carless, 2007); 2) the extreme plasticity of its practice, adapting structures and settings. Sport has appeared able to build social contexts, public spaces, and supportive communities, to welcome and enhance diversity, thus initiating inclusive processes (Bianchi, 2022).

International sports systems have seen a process of increasing expansion and differentiation since the 1970s (Pirone, 2019). Spectacle sports and commercial opportunities, opposed to ‘Sport for All’ movement, promoting social inclusion. A more spontaneous and less organized sport, aimed at a different public, largely made up of people belonging to vulnerable populations. Sport is beginning to enter more and more into the areas of disability (motor, intellectual, psychic, and relational), social vulnerability, addictions, and criminal justice. “Sport for all” and “in the measure of each individual” (Cei, 2003) aim to redesign sporting practice by assigning individuals the possibility of contributing and participating in the game, each in their own way, each according to their possibilities. How to do this is already an open question, and it raises relevant questions on who the excluded are and what requirements sport itself must have to be truly inclusive.

## **2. DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH**

Policies and practices – yet experimented or theorized – in terms of social inclusion through sports and physical activities are still, in particular in school, are still less studied.

Significant topics for social science research within school contexts, emphasize the intersection of education, physical activity, and societal influences. Cross-cultural comparisons of physical education (PE) and sport explore how different cultures implement these programs, shedding light on varying educational priorities and societal values while revealing the role of sport in fostering identity and social cohesion. The study of youth disaffection and re-engagement focuses on understanding why young people disengage from PE and sports and identifying strategies to motivate and include them, addressing broader issues of equity and lifelong participation in physical activity.

Research on the rights of the child in sport and the incorporation of youth voices examines how children’s rights are upheld within sporting environments, tackling concerns around safety, access, equality, and young people’s agency to influence their experiences. Additionally, investigating PE and sport as settings for formal, informal, and non-formal learning highlights their educational potential beyond traditional academics, encompassing structured knowledge, social skills, and experiential development. Collectively, these areas emphasize the critical role of PE and sports in addressing educational, cultural, and social challenges in schools, offering pathways to promote inclusion, well-being, and holistic development among students.

Health and body pedagogies focus on how schools and sports programs teach young people about health, wellness, and body awareness, shaping their understanding of physical well-being and promoting lifelong healthy habits.

The study of dis/ability examines how physical education and sports address the needs of individuals with disabilities, exploring strategies to foster inclusivity, accessibility, and equitable participation while challenging stereotypes and societal barriers. In this regard, several research studies highlight that there are two key dimensions for an inclusive process to lead to the desired benefits: the co-participation in the same sport activity by people with and without disabilities (Hansen et al. 2023; Emmers et al. 2023) and the accessibility to sport activities of this target audience (Robinson et al.2023; Jiménez-Monteagudo et al. 2023; Stanojevic et al. 2023). Among the benefits most often reported by this research is an improvement in self-esteem (Schluchter et al. 2023). In particular, in settings where there is co-participation of people with and without disabilities, it emerges how changes to the physical activity setting, made inclusive, left the physical benefits for normotypically developing individuals unchanged but, the same time, significantly increased the self-esteem levels of those with disabilities.

Innovation in and through sport emphasizes the role of creativity and new approaches in enhancing the educational, social, and cultural impact of sports. This includes developing novel methods, technologies, and practices to engage participants and address contemporary challenges in sports and physical education. Professional development for teachers and coaches highlights the importance of equipping educators and mentors with the knowledge, skills, and tools to effectively guide students and athletes. It underscores the need for continuous learning to adapt to changing educational landscapes and diverse participant needs.

Together, these topics underscore the transformative potential of physical education and sports to drive progress in health, inclusion, innovation, and professional growth, fostering more dynamic and equitable learning environments.

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# SOCIAL JUSTICE AND AGEING: OLDER LEARNERS AS ACTIVE CITIZENS IN A COMPLEX SYSTEM

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The call for this panel was based on the need to reflect on active ageing as a fundamental framework for late-modern societies, in order to address the challenges related to longevity. The thesis is that learning and education are main resources in guaranteeing justice, meaning, and well-being at all ages. Later life needs to be prepared in advance, by building the life skills that will sustain all citizens in the last part of their lives. Interdisciplinary research on education and learning, with a special attention to pedagogy and older adults' education, could sustain policies and practices better aligned with the Active Ageing framework.

*Age-it* is an interdisciplinary national program aimed at mainstreaming ageing in the Italian system. The convenors of this panel are part of it and members of the Learning Education and Active Ageing (LEAA) Board, with the task to address education and learning issues and possibilities across the program. This is the first step of a process that aims to sustain Italian studies on longevity and active ageing through interdisciplinarity (750 researchers involved, from health to technical studies), and build an economic and political vision based on knowledge. The LEAA Board represents education and learning across disciplines, with a special regard for pedagogy, sociology, and psychology; this inspired our call for this panel, to answer the conference question: how can we develop a more democratic society through learning?

Being an older citizen means risking being “othered”, i.e. labelled as vulnerable and marginalized. This is truer for certain categories, that are more likely subjected to stigma and unseen by policy makers: women, not least as family caregivers, disabled older people, poor citizens, migrants, and/or with lower levels of education, technological competence, health literacy. Yet, older adults can also be privileged, richer than the younger generations. The panel wants to interrogate this complexity and the emerging learning needs of older citizens,

informal caregivers, professionals in communities and agencies, where formal, informal and non-formal learning develops.

The paradigm of active ageing (WHO, 2001, 2002) should inform policies to accompany our society towards a new balance between generations; in fact, longevity is a very influent factor that will have increasing impact on individual and family lives, economy and organization of health policies, housing, job market, and of course the welfare system. At a microlevel, becoming older means to live a transformation that requires the capacitation of life-skills that are undervalued by our society (Boffo, 2022). At a meso level, a society of older citizens requires adaptation and calibration of many aspects of community life, new services and practices, the development of a culture of care that should avoid dispossession and marginalization. At a macro level, we need new policies but also awareness of the discursive frameworks and normative narratives that impact the larger system (Formenti, 2022).

In defining the determinants, challenges and policy answers of active ageing, the WHO identified four key pillars – health, lifelong learning, participation, and security – to sustain older people’s potential for well-being. In Italy, however, there is a delay in the implementation of this model, especially when it comes to lifelong learning as a leverage for well-being. Besides, health is interpreted as an individual good and in medical terms, neglecting that well-being emerges from a complex system of interdependent variables.

The international literature on active ageing brings special attention on the four Pillars of the Active Ageing Index (UNECE, 2021). An overview of this literature (Boffo, 2006; Boffo, 2022) shows the role of *educational care* in contrasting fragility by offering help and support in the transition to a new phase of life. This panel presented a panoply of studies focused on education and learning in different contexts, aiming at prevention as well as support in the developmental processes of growing adult and older.

We want to stress here the construct of *transition*, not least from the labour market to retirement (ILO, 2020). A critical reflection on what we mean by transition entails a new understanding of the non-linear pathways between work and quiescence, and the life skills that are useful for prevention and support. The LifeComp framework is a set of ‘personal, social and learning-to-learn’ competences that can be applied to all the spheres of life (Sala et al., 2020). These competences, that can be built through formal, informal and non-formal education, can help citizens to cope with longevity.

Individual trajectories across work and life contexts have a fundamental role to

play in the ongoing building of active aging skills; they cannot be invented from scratch in later life. This is why the topic is so important and urgent now: in order to guarantee wellbeing, and social, personal, cultural care (Boffo, 2022) for a better life, we must prepare the conditions that make it possible. We are facing here the multiple links connecting learning processes, civil society, workplace learning, with the strategic vision of guaranteeing proper educational pathways for all. The whole professional and personal life of an individual has to be interpreted in the light of continuing learning and education, as a catalyst of Active Aging strategies and policies. The translational and transversal power of learning and the life skills acquired through working, family, civic participation, leisure, will improve individual wellbeing and civic awareness in the long run. We can summarize our results in some final tips:

- The culture of aging is still weak, maybe too linear and charged of hidden ageism;
- Life skills are relevant at all ages and need early investment to ensure good transitions in later life;
- Technological innovation and digital tools can sustain good transitions, if they are designed, assessed, and improved with citizens' participation;
- Many older people are committed in the production of cultural services and knowledge; there seems to be a correlation between cultural volunteering, life skills development, and predictive factors of good transitions.

Our society is facing a challenge: building a culture of aging, not only for the older people, but to ensure care in the whole society. We have just begun studying the social responsibility and impact of all sectors in sustaining active ageing. It will be important to invest on policies, at a national and regional level, and keep an open dialogue with different agents and institutions, in the health system, labour market, third sector, with the providers of non-formal and formal education and learning, and with the larger cultural system.



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# ACTIVATING THE POTENTIAL OF OLDER ADULTS: EDUCATION AND ACTIVE AGING IN ITALY

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As societies age, the need for innovative approaches to aging becomes critical. This study focuses on Italy, where a rapidly aging population reveals opportunities for rethinking aging as a phase of active engagement. It examines the role of education and lifelong learning in empowering older adults to maintain active societal roles and foster intergenerational solidarity. Through the “Promising Practices for Education and Active Aging” questionnaire, the research highlights successful initiatives that enhance skills, confidence, and community involvement. These programs promote individual well-being, challenge stereotypes, and strengthen social cohesion. The study provides a framework for policymakers and educators to harness the potential of older adults, advocating for an inclusive and resilient future.

Active aging; Lifelong learning; Intergenerational solidarity.

## INTRODUCTION

Old age is often portrayed through the lens of decline, with physical frailty and cognitive deterioration dominating societal perceptions. Such views perpetuate ageist stereotypes that marginalize older adults, limiting their opportunities for meaningful engagement in society. These narratives fail to account for the immense value that older individuals bring, rooted in their wealth of experience, resilience, and unique perspectives. Far from being a burden, seniors represent a vital resource capable of enriching social, economic, and cultural life.

In Europe, Italy provides a striking example of the demographic challenges associated with aging. Nearly 24% of its population is 65 or older, making it one of the world's fastest-aging nations (ISTAT 2021). This demographic

transformation has been likened to a “silver tsunami,” reflecting the profound and sweeping impacts of aging populations on institutions, communities, and economies. As a “super-aged” society, Italy faces the pressing need to develop innovative strategies to address the implications of this shift. The challenge lies in mitigating the strain on social systems while capitalizing on the opportunities an aging population presents.

This paper contends that education and lifelong learning are pivotal for achieving this balance. Structured educational programs provide older adults with opportunities to acquire new skills, broaden their knowledge, and maintain an active role in society. Education can empower older individuals to contribute in diverse ways, from participating in the workforce to engaging in civic life and mentoring younger generations. Such initiatives can also help dismantle ageist stereotypes by showcasing the capabilities and contributions of older adults (Baschiera 2019, European Commission 2012).

Moreover, lifelong learning fosters intergenerational solidarity, encouraging dialogue and collaboration between different age groups. By promoting shared experiences and mutual understanding, these programs strengthen the fabric of society and lay the groundwork for enduring social cohesion. In Italy, where family ties and community connections are deeply valued, such efforts resonate strongly with cultural norms and priorities (Bramanti, Meda 2018).

The overarching goal of this study is to explore how education can empower older adults, contributing to their well-being and societal integration. Specifically, the research aims to:

- Identify and analyze current educational practices targeting older adults in Italy.
- Highlight promising practices that promote active aging and intergenerational learning.
- Offer actionable recommendations to maximize the potential of older adults and shift societal perspectives regarding their roles.

## **1. THE IMPORTANCE OF LIFELONG LEARNING**

Lifelong learning is increasingly recognized as an essential pillar for promoting active aging and addressing the challenges posed by aging populations. It involves continuous, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional development (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2011). Research underscores that engaging in lifelong learning yields

numerous benefits for older adults, ranging from cognitive health to social inclusion. Cognitive benefits include the maintenance of memory, problem-solving skills, and overall mental agility, which are crucial in combating age-related cognitive decline and delaying the onset of neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia (Formosa 2019).

Educational opportunities for older adults extend far beyond traditional academic settings, reflecting a shift towards more inclusive and accessible forms of learning. Vocational training programs enable older adults to adapt to evolving labor markets, maintaining their employability and financial independence. Personal development initiatives, such as art classes, language courses, and mindfulness workshops, encourage creativity and self-expression, enriching the quality of life. Additionally, community-based educational programs focus on fostering connections within local settings, emphasizing inclusivity and collaboration. These diverse forms of learning affirm the potential of older adults to adapt, contribute, and thrive in a rapidly changing world.

### **1.1. Intergenerational Learning**

Intergenerational learning represents a dynamic approach to bridging the generational divide, fostering mutual understanding, and promoting collaboration between age groups. These programs create shared learning environments where older and younger individuals come together to exchange knowledge, skills, and experiences. By facilitating these interactions, intergenerational initiatives combat ageism, challenge stereotypes, and highlight the capabilities of older adults.

For older participants, intergenerational programs provide opportunities to share their expertise, mentorship, and cultural knowledge, affirming their role as valuable contributors to society. Reciprocal learning is a key aspect of these programs, as both age groups benefit from exposure to different perspectives and skill sets. For instance, digital literacy workshops often pair tech-savvy youth with older adults eager to learn about new technologies, fostering collaboration and mutual respect (Unesco 2020).

Intergenerational initiatives also strengthen community bonds and promote social cohesion. Joint projects, such as community gardening, storytelling events, and cultural exchanges, provide meaningful opportunities for collaboration while addressing shared challenges. By fostering connections across generations, these initiatives contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

## 1.2. Active Aging Frameworks

The concept of active aging, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), emphasizes the importance of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security to enhance quality of life as people age. This holistic framework shifts the narrative of aging from one of dependency to one of continued growth and contribution. Central to the active aging model is the recognition that older adults can and should remain engaged in social, economic, and cultural life (World Health Organization 2002).

Education is a cornerstone of the active aging framework, serving as a powerful tool for empowering older adults to lead fulfilling and autonomous lives.

In Italy, where nearly a quarter of the population is aged 65 or older, active aging frameworks are particularly relevant. Policies and programs that promote active aging can address the challenges of a rapidly aging population while leveraging the opportunities it presents. Education-focused initiatives within this framework not only enhance individual well-being but also contribute to broader societal goals, such as reducing healthcare costs, increasing social inclusion, and strengthening intergenerational ties (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca 2012).

By examining the intersections of lifelong learning, intergenerational collaboration, and active aging frameworks, this literature review highlights the transformative potential of education in unlocking the capabilities of older adults. These approaches provide a roadmap for fostering active, engaged, and resilient aging populations in Italy and beyond.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory design, leveraging a questionnaire on “Promising Practices for Education and Active Aging” to collect data from stakeholders involved in educational initiatives for older adults in Italy<sup>1</sup>. The questionnaire comprises 45 items across nine domains, capturing a comprehensive overview of projects, participants, and outcomes.

- Aim: Mapping and analysis of the ‘Promising Practices’ in Training, Learning and Education for Active Ageing
- Technique: WEB questionnaire, consisting of 47 items (of which 42

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<sup>1</sup> The study was designed and implemented by the members of the Learning, Education and Active Ageing Board of the National Research Program Age-It “Ageing Well in an Ageing Society”. More details at: <https://ageit.eu/wp/en/board-apprendimento-e-formazione-per-linvecchiamento-attivo/>.

closed-ended and 5 open-ended)

- Main topics of analysis:
  - Profile of the institution/organization
  - Profile of the target population
  - Typology of intervention
  - Teaching methodology
  - Main critical issues

Data Collection: December 2023 – March 2024. Data were collected from a diverse range of stakeholders, including government agencies, non-profits, educational institutions, and community organizations. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing for quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The analysis of the questionnaire was performed using SPSS Statistics v29. In the results presented, variables are described as frequency and relative frequency.

### 3. RESULTS

Forty-three organizations completed the web questionnaire and fifty practices for training and education for the purpose of active ageing were collected. The main results are summarized in Table 1.

Tab. 1 – The fifty practices at-a-glance.

Geographical area	● Northern: 23	Collection of practices from the Northern and Central Italy are balanced, while data collection in the South and Island was more difficult
	● Central: 21	
	● Southern and Islands: 6	
Typology of organization	● Public administration: 13	Data received predominantly from the NGO's
	● Firms: 7	
	● NGO's: 30	
Beneficiaries: target age (years)	● Public administration: 70-79	As expected, firms tend to engage older workers

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Firms: 50-69</li> </ul>	while public administration and NGO's pensioners
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NGO's: 70-79</li> </ul>	
Participants per project/activity (mean)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public administration: 250</li> </ul>	The public administration tends to involve more participants
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Firms: 100</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NGO's: 100</li> </ul>	
Intergenerational project/activity (n)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public administration: 8 out of 9</li> </ul>	A very important issue recognized by all the organizations surveyed
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Firms: 4 out of 5</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NGO's: 18 out of 30</li> </ul>	
Project/activity targeted to women (n)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public administration: 7 out of 12</li> </ul>	Another key aspect included in the practices collected
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Firms: 1 out of 5</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NGO's: 23 out of 27</li> </ul>	
Learning themes	The main macro-themes are:	Rich proposal in terms of programs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Health and wellbeing</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Culture (museum, painting, choir, etc.)</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Digitalisation</li> </ul>	
Didactic methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participative: 18</li> </ul>	Primarily 'participative' didactic methods
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Laboratory: 12</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interactive: 5</li> </ul>	



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Others (mixed, frontal): 8 on the total of 43</li> </ul>	
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NGOs are the prevailing typology of involved organizations in terms of projects realized. Most projects have an intergenerational quality and/or are targeted to older women. The public administration – here represented by a heterogeneous group of municipalities, universities, adult schools and local health services – on average involve 250 participants per project.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The demographic shift toward an aging population in Italy is a transformative force that demands innovative and inclusive responses. While challenges such as accessibility barriers, economic constraints, and pervasive ageism persist, this paper has demonstrated that education and lifelong learning hold immense promise in activating the potential of older adults. By equipping seniors with skills, knowledge, and opportunities for engagement, these initiatives can transform perceptions of aging and unlock the significant contributions older adults can make to society.

The educational practices analysed in this study reveal a diverse and impactful landscape of programs, from vocational training and digital literacy to cultural enrichment and intergenerational collaborations. Success stories like *Digital Bridge*, *Generations in Dialogue*, and *Active Arts* illustrate how well-designed initiatives can empower older adults, foster creativity, and promote meaningful connections across age groups. These examples serve as models for expanding similar programs nationwide, showcasing the potential for scalable, adaptable solutions that address the diverse needs of aging populations.

Policy and practice must now rise to the occasion, addressing the systemic barriers that limit participation and inclusivity. Expanding accessibility, whether through improved transportation, affordable programming, or digital equity efforts, is essential. Simultaneously, targeted campaigns to combat ageism and foster intergenerational solidarity can help reshape societal attitudes, creating a culture that values and celebrates aging as a period of growth, contribution, and renewal.

This research advocates for a paradigm shift in how society perceives aging, urging a transition from seeing older adults as passive recipients of care to recognizing them as active agents of change. In a nation as culturally rich and historically interconnected as Italy, older adults embody a wealth of experience and wisdom that, when mobilized, can strengthen communities, enhance

cultural vitality, and drive social innovation.

As Italy faces a relevant growth of the aging population, the need for policies and programs that promote active aging is more urgent than ever. By leveraging education and lifelong learning, Italy has the opportunity to not only address the challenges of an aging population but to harness its potential as a catalyst for social cohesion, economic vitality, and cultural enrichment. The insights from this study underscore the necessity of investing in inclusive, forward-thinking strategies that empower older adults, ensuring that they remain integral contributors to a more equitable, dynamic, and resilient society.

The findings underscore the need for policies that prioritize lifelong learning and active aging. Key recommendations include:

- **Expand Accessibility:** Develop inclusive programs that accommodate diverse needs, including those of individuals with disabilities or limited resources.
- **Promote Intergenerational Solidarity:** Scale up initiatives that foster collaboration and mutual learning between age groups.
- **Combat Ageism:** Launch public awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes and highlight the value of older adults' contributions.

This research advocates for a shift in societal perspectives regarding aging. By recognizing older adults as valuable contributors rather than passive dependents, communities can create environments that celebrate diversity and foster inclusion.

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# ELDER ACTIVE CITIZENS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Ageing populations represent both a critical societal challenge and an untapped resource. As Europe and other regions of the world face rising life expectancy and declining birth rates, the question of how best to engage older citizens in social, economic and cultural life becomes increasingly urgent. In rural and mountainous areas such as the Casentino region of Italy, older adults are essential custodians of traditional knowledge and practices that contribute to the sustainability and vitality of their communities. This paper explores the role of active older citizens in building social capital and contributing to community engagement in the Casentino region, with a focus on their ability to generate professionalisation processes that enhance community resilience (Del Gobbo & Federighi, 2021). Social capital, understood as a collective resource based on social relationships and trust (Bourdieu, 1980; Putnam, 1995), is a crucial determinant of a community's ability to adapt to and manage change (Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2005). We examine the contributions of older individuals, highlighting the interplay between their life experiences and skills, and the broader social and cultural dynamics of the local area.

active ageing, biography, inland areas, community development, social capital

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of social capital has gained considerable traction in the field of community development, particularly in understanding how communities respond to challenges and opportunities. Social capital, as conceptualised by Bourdieu (1980) and Putnam (1995), originates in micro-level interactions between individuals, which must then be embedded within meso- and macro-

level social structures to have an impact. It is through such interactions that trust, reciprocity, and collective identity are built, enabling communities to act collectively in pursuit of shared goals (Del Gobbo, 2024). According to Falk and Kilpatrick (2000), social capital is context-dependent; it depends on the characteristics of a specific community and on how well the human capital within that community is leveraged. The concept of “community efficacy,” as discussed by Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman (2005), is closely linked to social capital and refers to a community’s capacity to manage change and influence its own future. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant when examining the role of older citizens in Casentino, where a combination of demographic challenges and rich cultural heritage creates both risks and opportunities for local development. The notion of active ageing further complements this framework by emphasising the agency of older individuals in contributing to societal processes (World Health Organization, 2015). Older adults possess valuable knowledge and skills that can support the social, cultural and economic fabric of their communities. By understanding how these individuals contribute informally to community life, we can begin to recognise the potential for professionalisation processes that translate these informal contributions into more structured and impactful roles (Neyer & Andersson, 2008).

## **2. THE CASENTINO REGION AND METHODOLOGY**

The Casentino is a mountainous rural area in the Tuscan Apennines, renowned for its tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It is an area marked by demographic decline, with an ageing population and limited economic opportunities, yet it also exhibits interesting flows of incoming post-retirement mobility (Regione Toscana, 2022).

Designated as a pilot area within Italy’s National Strategy for Inner Areas (MIUR, 2013), Casentino offers a valuable context for studying the dynamics of community-based regeneration, particularly as they relate to the involvement of older citizens.

The Casentino’s rich cultural landscape includes practices, traditions and local knowledge that have been handed down through the generations. These elements are not only central to the community’s identity, but also represent a potential asset for fostering sustainable development. The REACT project, which aims to regenerate cultural landscapes by enhancing human and social capital, serves as the backdrop for this research, exploring how local resources can be leveraged for community-led development.

In Work Package 2 (WP2), which aims to construct a knowledge framework for the Casentino, the REACT project is studying the territory across four thematic areas:

1. Agro-food and forestry heritage and local craftsmanship
2. Traditions and social practices
3. Landscape and territorial networks
4. Settlements, public spaces and buildings

On the basis of ten thematic focuses, 33 representative case studies from the Casentino were identified and analysed, allowing the researchers to understand both inhabitants and places through field analysis. This led to an interdisciplinary SWOT analysis of all the cases in order to reach a comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the thematic areas. For this particular contribution, three of the 33 case studies were selected for their strong community engagement, all of which originated from participatory community activation processes:

1. **The Casentino Ecomuseum:** The Ecomuseum was created as a participatory project that involves the local population, institutions and associations in managing the cultural heritage of the locality. It is explicitly designed to activate and engage the local community. The Ecomuseum represents an innovative model of heritage valorisation that goes far beyond a mere exhibition space, and is conceived as a dynamic process committed to the continuous research and promotion of intangible heritage and best practices, and the development of sustainable tourism while protecting the land. The Ecomuseum demonstrates valuable opportunities for growth, such as the potential for the further professionalisation of processes and the establishment of a more stable structure. It constitutes the main participatory process from which the other two case studies emerged, showcasing the dynamic and changing nature of community engagement.
2. **The Territorial Educational Pact of Casentino:** Promoted by the Union of Municipalities of Casentino under the scientific direction of the FORLILPSI Department of the University of Florence, this community engagement process began in 2020. The network formed through the Ecomuseum and was tailored to local needs, aligning with regional legislation n.32 of 2002. The pact involves a network of stakeholders, including businesses, public bodies, schools, private entities and the tertiary sector, in order to facilitate inclusive territorial governance. The

use of a pact-like structure has proven to be an effective tool to activate and make visible the social capital expressed by the community.

3. **The Heritage Community:** Heritage communities are organised forms of civil society that foster social networks and human capital relating to intangible heritage, with the aim of encouraging sustainable development (Faro Convention, 2005). The Ecomuseum has collaborated with a number of groups and associations representing heritage communities active in issues related to ritual traditions, the aim being to establish a pact that allows revitalisation and innovation in the transmission of this particular form of local heritage. The organisation of heritage communities is driven by a bottom-up logic; actions taken have no predefined objectives and are strongly desired by the participants. In Casentino, these heritage communities partly emerged from the Ecomuseum network, which is formalising a community engagement process through a pact. This formalisation seeks to give a name to existing informal networks surrounding local traditions, particularly those related to rites of passage.

The three processes described above constitute activators of citizenship and local networks. Interestingly, approximately 90% of the individuals actively involved in these processes are over 50, and more than 60% are retired, in line with local trends. The evidence collected highlights certain contextual factors and conditions that contribute to the definition of professionalisation processes (Federighi, 2021) which can influence the creation of social capital. The REACT research highlighted the role that citizens over 55 can play when they decide to make the skills they have acquired through their experience of life and work available for the development of their community.

The Casentino Ecomuseum guides these community engagement processes and embodies a hybrid professionalism that plays a role in education and care for the local area. The complexity of these community activation processes means they require someone to guide and instigate them, and this allows examination of the professional skills necessary to manage participatory processes that have a significant impact in terms of active citizenship but need to be activated, managed and mediated.

The informal contributions of older adults often mirror professional roles, such as those of cultural mediators, educators, and 'community dynamisers'. However, these hybrid professional figures are typically not acknowledged or formalised, and this limits their potential impact. By identifying and formalising

these roles, it is possible to enhance the contributions of older citizens, ensuring that their skills and knowledge are more effectively utilised for the benefit of the community.

The concept of professionalisation involves the acknowledgement and legitimisation of the informal skills and abilities that individuals acquire through their life experiences (Del Gobbo & Federighi, 2021). In the case of the Casentino, professionalisation processes could help to transform the informal contributions of older citizens into structured roles that are integrated into local development strategies. This could include the creation of new professional figures in the fields of education, cultural heritage management, and community development tailored to the specific needs and characteristics of the locality.

### **3. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

While the Casentino benefits from a rich reservoir of social capital, there are also significant challenges that must be addressed in order to fully leverage the potential of older citizens. One of the main challenges is the limited institutional support for community-led initiatives, which often rely on the voluntary efforts of a small number of individuals. This lack of support can hamper the sustainability of such initiatives and limit their ability to generate broader community benefits. Another challenge is the low level of youth participation in community activities, which threatens the continuity of social capital across generations. To address this issue, it is essential to encourage intergenerational collaboration and create opportunities for young people to engage with the community. This could involve the development of educational programmes that focus on local heritage and traditions in an innovative way. The context appears to constitute a laboratory for the observation of professionalisation processes with the potential to define new professional education-related roles in territorial contexts characterised by a high population of over 55s, who are an important local resource. Moreover, the Casentino's cultural heritage is a valuable asset that can be leveraged to attract visitors and generate economic opportunities. By incorporating the contributions of older citizens into local development strategies, it is possible to create a more inclusive and resilient community that values the skills and knowledge of all its members.



## CONCLUSION

This paper seeks to highlight the transformative role that older adults play in activating and sustaining social capital within the Casentino community, and in the management and conservation of its cultural landscape. Initiatives such as the Casentino Ecomuseum, the Territorial Educational Pact and the Heritage Communities illustrate how older citizens have the potential to foster networks of trust, facilitate the circulation of local knowledge, and bridge generational gaps. By acknowledging and valuing their contributions, and by addressing the systemic barriers that limit their involvement, it is possible to unlock the potential of ageing populations to drive sustainable rural regeneration. Education plays a crucial role in supporting the active engagement of older citizens and in fostering community development. Lifelong learning opportunities can help older adults to continue developing their skills and to remain active participants in society, helping to combat depopulation and becoming catalysts for social innovation and resilience.

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# EDUCATION, LEARNING AND SKILLS FOR ACTIVE AGEING: AN ITALIAN RESEARCH ON GOOD PRACTICES

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The literature review examined the main studies on the topic of active ageing in relation to the construction of educational care to contrast the fragility of the older person and the individual transition to a new phase of their life. Starting from this consideration, the transversal scientific committee *Learning, Education and Active Aging*, set up within the *Age-It Programme*, is conducting national research aimed to collecting Good Practices for understand the processes linking learning, education and work in active ageing, in order to build a map of them at national level. The mixed research design has seen the active involvement of the Programme's stakeholders, in particular medium and large sized companies and social enterprises, both public and private. The analysis of the quantitative data identified several categories capable of guiding the selection of the Good Practices considered most representative, in terms of population, actions and socio-educational impact. Consequently, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the intentions and the level of planning underlying the educational action proposed on the territory. The results provided a clear vision of the presence and diffusion, on the territory, of educational and learning processes aimed at the wellbeing of the population in transition and at the development of those *life skills* capable of supporting entry and remaining in the old age phase.

active ageing; retirement; good practices; lifelong learning

## 1. AN INTRODUCTION TO PEDAGOGICAL MODELS FOR ACTIVE AGEING

The transversal Scientific Committee *Learning, Education and Active Ageing*, set up within the *Age-It programme*, has launched a national research aimed at

collecting existing good practices with the objective of mapping the research and projects that have a connection with the themes of Learning and Education, understood as learning and training processes both of the population and of professionals working in contexts of intervention or promotion of Active Ageing (services, administrations, public, private, health, local, regional institutions)

Education and learning entail and support reflection on the need to shape one's life through the development of the personal self and through the multiplicity of cultural and social forms that constitute man's ecological environment (Dewey, 1899; 1916). Living in an ageing society implies not only preparing for old age, preventing illnesses and taking care of personal, social and collective development, but also training professionals, volunteers, family caregivers and politicians to become more aware of the processes needed to be able to support the wellbeing of all, with a vision oriented towards inclusion and social justice. Based on these premises, learning and participation in formal, informal, non-formal, integrated and embodied educational processes (Knowles, Swanson & Holton III, 1990) constitute the reference points of Board *Learning, Education and Active Ageing*.

Educational research also focuses on the construction of a self-care that extends into a care for the other and for the world, in order to prevent the spread of human frailty resulting from an educational poverty that increasingly manifests itself in adulthood, causing illness, social degradation, forms of loneliness and isolation. Such factors often lead to depression and the progressive abandonment of one's human form (Foucault, 1984; Nussbaum, 2010; 2011).

Learning and education, therefore, are categories that derive vitality from the acts of care that people bring to bear within educational and training processes. Care gives dimension to learning processes because it gives them a sense of direction. Care is, moreover, a reflective practice, which implies critical action and consciously responsible thinking (Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1987; Tronto, 1993). Lifelong learning is the main instrument for building educational care and for promoting well-being in the future of a long-lived society and for ensuring social justice (Rawls, 1971; Nussbaum, 2010; 2011). This model does not only support the needs of an ageing society, but also contributes to the creation of more inclusive and just communities in which education acts as an engine for equity and social progress.

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN

Starting from the theoretical assumptions outlined above, *mixed method research* was conducted with the very aim of exploring existing practices within the national context, promoted by the Associations and Bodies of the sector<sup>1</sup>. The choice of adopting the mixed method methodology proved to be the most appropriate for the study and in-depth study of this educational phenomenon, with an interdisciplinary and multi-perspective outlook (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007).

In particular, the research was divided into four distinct phases a first phase, carried out by the Professors and Researchers of the Transversal Scientific Committee Learning, Education and Active Ageing, involved the elaboration of a semi-structured questionnaire and its relative administration through Google Forms<sup>2</sup>; a second phase involved the analysis of the data, aimed at the construction of the second research tool, i.e. the outline of the semi-structured interview; a third phase involved the administration of interviews to a privileged sample of respondents to the questionnaire and, finally, an awareness-raising action was carried out on the territory through the organisation of a dissemination event at national level<sup>3</sup>.

Regarding the first part of the research, i.e. the semi-structured questionnaire, the latter consisted of 47 items of which 42 were closed-ended questions and 5 open-ended questions. A total of 50 good practices were collected, divided as follows: 30 from the Third Sector, 13 proposed by the Public Administration and, finally, 7 carried out by private enterprises. Going into greater detail regarding the analysis of the sample, it is important here to highlight the geographical distribution, which saw a complete extension from the north (18) to the south, including the islands (4), with particular involvement from central Italy (20).

From this sample 12 realities were subsequently selected (between Associations and Bodies) to which a semi-structured interview composed of 20 questions was administered, with the aim of provoking reflection on the theme of active ageing and exploring the training and educational activities promoted

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<sup>1</sup> The research involved Associations and Organisations on the list of Stakeholders collaborating within the *Age-It* Programme, *Ageing Well in Ageing Society*.

<sup>2</sup> The Transversal Scientific Committee *Learning, Education and Active Ageing* availed itself of the support of the Social Enterprise and University Spin-off *MoCa Future Designer* for the following actions: contacting the Associations and organisations, administering the questionnaire by telematics or telephone interview, first draft of the re-elaboration of the data that emerged and analysis and analysis of the critical aspects of the survey instrument.

<sup>3</sup> Please refer to the dedicated section within the *Age-It* site, *Ageing well in an ageing society* available at the following link: National Conference Board LEAA Florence 2024 - Age-It (25.11.2024).

in the area, understanding the presence (or not) of an educational project that guides this action.

As can be seen in the table below, once again the Third Sector confirms itself as the most responsive entity, with an involvement of realities extending in size from the mega to the micro level.

Tab. 1. Distribution of the sample of interviewed realities. Edited by the authors.

Entities	Level	Part of Italy
Third Sector	Mega Level (1)	Central (Lazio)
	Macro Level (2)	Central and South (Tuscany and Calabria)
	Meso Level (2)	North and Central (Veneto and Tuscany)
	Micro Level (5)	North and Central (Lombardia and Tuscany)
Public Administrations	Meso Level (2)	Central and Islands (Tuscany and Sardinia)

In the following section, a brief restitution will be made regarding the common and divergent elements emerging from the good practice analysis, with a focus on the second phase of the research.

### **3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: MAIN RESULTS ON EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES AND LIFE SKILLS**

As underlined above, the semi-structured interviews carried out by the Transversal Learning, Education and Active Ageing Scientific Committee highlighted the explicit, and above all implicit, characteristics of the good practices existing on the national territory. The common dimensions that emerged from the questionnaire mainly revolve around three areas of reference: *A) Personal care and Well-being; b) Social care and Well-being; c) Learning Policies*. Within these dimensions, personal empowerment and integration emerge as relevant, fostering personal inclusion in support of frailty, individual vulnerability and exclusion; the promotion of self-care aimed at supporting autonomy, awareness and personal growth; and, finally, social inclusion and

intergenerationality, encouraging the ‘social health’ of all and not only of the elderly.

Distinctive elements concern the content and scope of practices, as each proposal focuses on specific areas; the teaching methodologies, such as training programmes, artistic activities, sports or practical support services; the dimensions, as some proposals operate at the local level, while others have a broader scope and may involve several municipalities or regions; and, finally, the different partnerships.

The textual and narrative analysis of the interviews, done using the Atlas.ti 24 software, produced 112 codes and 22 code groups, from which an interpretative process was initiated, expanding on what the questionnaire returned, and which can be summarised as follows:

Tab. 2. Categories and codes emerged through analysis with Atlas.ti 24. Edited by the authors.

Category 1 – Role of territorial networks and sustainability for Active Ageing		
Codes’ Group	Relevant Codes	Major National Entities
Organisational sustainability Economic sustainability Lifelong Learning partnerships and networks	Lack of a strategic dimension and a solid organisational structure Excessive bureaucracy Limited budget and lack of external funding Co-organisation with other local authorities	AUSER Calabria CPIA 4 Oristano, Sardinia
Category 2 – Building a Culture of and for Ageing		
Codes’ Group	Relevant Codes	Major National Entities
The development of active citizenship Creation of a common language Fragility and Vulnerability of the Elderly Population	«Young» elders, «upcoming» seniors Depression, loneliness, social isolation	Association for the Rights of the Elderly (ADA), Milan National Association of All Ages Active in Solidarity (ANTEAS), Venice

Category 3 – Educating to Educate. Caring for oneself, others and the community		
Codes' Group	Relevant Codes	Major National Entities
Care for transitions Intergenerationally and Sense of community Reflexivity and metacognition Sense of social self-concept	Self-care and Care of the Elderly Process Public History: memories and stories of places Promotion of intergenerationally Intercultural Dimension Maintaining a social role	Association for the Rights of the Elderly (ADA), Venice Anchise Group, Milan
Category 4 – Formative and Educational Processes for Lifelong Learning		
Codes' Group	Relevant Codes	Major National Entities
Learning courses (bottom- up) Non-formal activities Peer to peer activities (by members for members) Evaluation and monitoring	<u>Types of activities:</u> Awareness- raising and prevention, orientation, reflection and writing, cultural- artistic <u>Areas/themes of activities:</u> Computer and digital literacy, ecological-environmental transition, nutrition, etc Absence of evaluation by the funding entities, no continuity of activities	Free-age University, Florence AUSER, Tuscany Nestore Association, Milan
Category 5 – «Seniors» and work		
Codes' Group	Relevant Codes	Major National Entities
Skill Recognition/Certification Using members' expertise Mentoring/accompaniment for transition to/from work	Previous professional career Seniors as a resource	AttivaMENTE Association, Florence Third Sector Forum, Lazio
Category 6 – Learning Policies		
Codes' Group	Relevant Codes	Major National Entities
Employability opportunities for older people Upgrading and re-skilling the worker Reconsidering the role of the volunteer Creation of an institutional network	Retiree 'condition'/status change Decline of volunteers at national level Relationship between public and private social sector	Third Sector Forum, Lazio



Culture emerges as an implicit fact of the formal, non-formal and informal actions that a country produces for its inhabitants. Moreover, evaluation and monitoring are informal and unstructured, through the perception of spill-over effects in terms of engagement and involvement in the territory. Few respondents have an explicit theory of education and learning in later life, its personal, social and cultural implications, and the pedagogical framework that would support the design, implementation and evaluation of learning outcomes and impact.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES**

The research conducted highlighted the variety and unevenness of the initiatives promoted by the Third Sector, the Public Administration and the private sector in the field of active ageing. The methodological approach adopted, based on a *mixed method*, made it possible to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, thus offering a multidisciplinary view useful for delving into the complex dynamics of this phenomenon.

The results indicate that good practices focus on three key dimensions: a) personal and social well-being; 2) inclusion and self-care; 3) educational policies for lifelong learning. Although the practices adopted are diverse in terms of the content proposed as well as the dimensions and methodologies adopted, a common goal is emerging: promote active ageing that fosters autonomy, intergenerational relations and personal growth. However, the research also highlighted certain shortcomings, in particular the lack of a shared pedagogical vision to guide the design and evaluation of the proposed activities.

The qualitative study, carried out by means of semi-structured interviews, highlighted the crucial role played by territorial networks together with the need to build a culture that not only meets the needs of the elderly but also encourages their active involvement in society. The character of educational actions is aimed at developing one's reflexivity and conscious action in support of an active citizenship that encourages individual responsibility. The research also emphasised the importance of organisational and economic sustainability, highlighting the need to overcome bureaucratic and financial barriers that limit the effectiveness of the proposed initiatives.

Although the research has provided valuable insights into existing practices in the field of active ageing, it is clear that work in this area is still developing and requires constant and continuous efforts to consolidate an integrated, systemic and multidisciplinary vision. This perspective is fundamental in order to take

care of the needs and requirements of an increasingly long-living population, taking into account cultural, social and economic diversities, as well as specific territorial needs, developing educational and training policies and practices that are truly inclusive and aimed at countering forms of social injustice and building a culture of longevity.

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# EMPOWERING ACTIVE AGING WITH LIMITED AUTONOMY: A TRAINING PROPOSAL TO ENHANCE THE SKILLS OF HOME CAREGIVERS FOR FRAIL OLDER PEOPLE

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Current demographic changes highlight the urgent need for active, collective strategies that span the entire lifespan. These strategies aim to encourage the participation of older individuals in social life and foster a culture of solidarity, recognizing them as valuable resources within an age-integrated society. Maintaining quality of life at home has become a crucial generational issue across EU countries, particularly during the pandemic. Many countries should develop recognized accreditation programs to train caregivers and service professionals, aiming to improve the quality of life and home care for frail older adults, especially those with dementia. Given the current situation and future prospects, it is essential to reassess the needs of home care services and reconsider the training and skills of professionals providing them. This requires action on three levels: fostering a personalized and proactive approach to aging at the micro level; enhancing training for home care professionals with a focus on resilience and life skills at the meso level; and ensuring welfare system sustainability at the macro level. This contribution presents the “Qavad Project”—an Erasmus Plus initiative aimed at enhancing support for maintaining autonomy and assisting professionals in home care. Grounded in a theoretical framework that incorporates key pedagogical and psychosocial perspectives on older adult care, the transnational partnership developed a training model to innovate and support the training of home care professionals. The model consists of 8 modules, adaptable to the target audience. The outcomes of the piloting phase of the training modules will be discussed.

active ageing, quality of life at home, ageing in place, home care services, training and skills development.

## INTRODUCTION

Current demographic shifts underscore the need for active, collective strategies that span the entire lifespan. These strategies aim to foster the participation of older adults in social life and cultivate a culture of solidarity, recognizing this demographic as a valuable asset within an age-integrated society. (Gasperi, 2013).

Within this framework, the pivotal role of active ageing, in a critical intersectional perspective, in addressing the challenges of aging becomes even more significant when considering the care needs of frail older individuals. The decreasing reliance on the traditional institutionalization model has shifted focus toward approaches that support individuals aging in their own homes, aligning with the well-being framework promoted by the WHO (2002). Ensuring the quality of life within the home environment has emerged as a critical concern across EU countries, a concern that was particularly highlighted during the pandemic.

As highlighted in the Care Needed Report (OECD, 2018), most countries should establish accredited training programs for caregivers and service professionals, equipping them with the necessary skills in care provision and social support. Such initiatives are essential for improving the quality of life and home care for frail older adults, particularly for those living with dementia.

Given the current context and future challenges, it is imperative to reassess the requirements of home care services and reevaluate the training and competences of the professionals who provide them. This process necessitates the establishment of a robust foundation at multiple levels: at the micro level, fostering a paradigm shift in individual thinking and practices, enabling older adults to shape their later years in a highly personalized way, while maintaining a proactive approach and a sense of purpose in their experiences (Deluigi, 2008); at the meso level, strengthening the training systems for home care professionals by prioritizing the development of life skills, coping strategies, and resilience (Boffo et al., 2023); and at the macro level, contributing to the sustainability of welfare systems by aiming to reduce public expenditures on social and health care interventions.

The “Qavad Project,” an Erasmus Plus initiative, was designed to improve the quality of life for older adults living at home by providing tailored training to professionals and families engaged in home care services.

## 1. PROJECT AND TRAINING PROGRAM

The Erasmus Plus Project “Qavad – Qualité de vie à domicile”<sup>1</sup> began in September 2019. The pedagogical model adopted promotes a paradigm shift (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Baltes & Brim, 1979; Feil, 1993; Jones, 1999; Kitwood, 1997), moving beyond the adult-centric perspectives to focus on individual needs and fostering quality of life in aging. It acknowledges that, for older adults, quality of life is intrinsically linked to active participation in decisions on the living environment, care plans, and activities, both individually and collectively. This goal demands a rethinking of professional training to better support and enhance such processes (Altieri & Santangelo, 2021; Sala et al., 2020).

The project developed initiatives and best practices leveraging home care to enhance the quality of life for older adults, including a training model for professionals in home care settings. The program comprises eight modules (120 hours) and can be adapted to the target audience. The modules are structured with a transversal and multidisciplinary approach, to be tailored to the specific audience: family caregivers, volunteers, or professionals. Moreover, the topics and contents can be addressed both from the perspective of professionals, focusing on practical tools to be implemented, and of managers, with an emphasis on the development and application of risk prevention strategies.

- *Models, Methods, and Knowledge of Care.* This module focuses on care models and methods, emphasizing person-centered care. It addresses normal and pathological aspects of aging and encourages reflection on professional care experiences. Exploring the relationship between care and home care, it promotes a relational approach within a multidimensional framework to meet all fundamental individual needs.
- *Know-How: Care Activities and Non-Medicinal Activities at Home.* This module provides participants with the knowledge and skills necessary for home care, focusing on strategies and procedures that respect individual identity, foster autonomy, and promote well-being with dignity and support.
- *Professional Tools for Investment and Spatial Planning.* This module imparts knowledge and skills to support independent living at home, emphasizing the creation of environments that respect both the individual’s habits and the surrounding environment. It promotes

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<sup>1</sup> Coordinated by Etcharry Formation Développement. Partners: Laguntza Etxerart (FR), Gaves and Bidouze Association (FR), Department of Educational Sciences of the University of Bologna (IT), Cefal (IT), Solco Insieme (IT), Matia (ES), Nazaret (ES), FIOH (FI), Foibekartano (FI).

autonomy and participation in daily activities while preserving the dignity and abilities of the person receiving care.

- *Technology for Care.* This module examines the ethical aspects of welfare technologies in care for older adults, exploring current and future trends. Participants learn about available technologies and their impact on caregiver-client relationships, while understanding how these innovations empower older individuals, enhance their quality of life, and foster societal inclusion.
- *Caregiver Well-Being and Coping Strategies.* This module aims to strengthen caregivers' role modelling by developing skills to manage stress and prevent burnout. Participants explore strategies to improve their well-being, effectively address caregiving challenges, and maintain a healthy work-life balance.
- *Communication and Interaction.* This module promotes ethical communication and empathy in caregiving, emphasizing the importance of considering cognitive and physical abilities when interacting with individuals. Participants learn to manage conflicts in caregiving and foster respectful, life-affirming written communication. It also highlights the value of diversity and equity in all forms of communication and interaction.
- *Management.* This module aims to develop strategies for effective management that enhance well-being in the workplace, improving communication between caregivers, individuals, and their families, as well as using digital technology to facilitate team communication. Participants explore methods to prevent psychosocial risks and improve work organization to create supportive and efficient care environments.
- *Coordination, Partnerships, Networks in a Territory.* This module aims to raise the visibility and empower older adults living at home. It shares knowledge, skills, and experiences to enhance their quality of life. It emphasizes the importance of collaboration and the development of local networks to support older individuals within their communities.

To ensure the modules' effectiveness and adaptability, project partners piloted them in their local contexts, selecting modules based on regional needs. A blended learning approach, using an online platform, was adopted due to COVID-19. This phase provided feedback and assessed content effectiveness, enabling continuous program improvement.

The piloting addressed the needs of field caregivers, volunteers, and family

members through the foundational modules, with the management-focused module reserved for future initiatives involving coordinators and leaders. For these reasons, the piloting phase did not include Module 7.

In France, Modules 5 and 6 were piloted, focusing on caregiver well-being and ethical communication. In Italy, Modules 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 were tested, reflecting a comprehensive approach that included foundational caregiving models, interior space organisation, technology for care, caregiver well-being, and communication. Spain focused on Modules 1, 2, 5, 6, emphasizing care models, practical activities, and caregiver-centered support. Finally, Finland piloted Modules 4 and 6, with a particular focus on technology and communication.

Tab. 1. Expectation Dimension. Source: elaboration by the Authors

EX-ANTE	EX-POST
1. I expect the course to be engaging	1. The course was engaging
2. I expect the course to be interesting	2. The course was interesting
3. I expect the time to fly during the course	3. Time flew by in the course
4. I expect the course to be easy to concentrate on	4. It was easy to maintain concentration in the course
5. I expect to feel involved during the course	5. I felt engaged in the course

Tab. 2. Satisfaction Dimension. Source: elaboration by the Authors

1. The interaction with the trainer
2. The interaction with the other training participants
3. The teaching methods used by the trainer
4. The level of trainer preparation
5. The teaching materials used
6. The training setting
7. The training in general

The evaluation design for the training activity followed a pre-experimental design with a group, utilizing only pre-test and post-test assessments (Gay et al., 2009). The modules were assessed through an online questionnaire administered at two stages: ex-ante (T1) and ex-post (T2). The questionnaire explored two key dimensions: expectations and satisfaction (Tab. 1 & 2). The expectations dimension (T1 Cronbach's  $\alpha=,751$ ; T2 Cronbach's  $\alpha=,882$ )



examined the respondent's agreement with five statements on a scale from 1 to 5. The satisfaction dimension (T2 Cronbach's  $\alpha=.834$ ) measured the respondent's level of satisfaction with the course, using seven statements rated on the same scale.

## **2. CONCLUSIONS**

The data collected through the questionnaire offer insights into the effectiveness of the proposed training model. A summary of the key results provides an overview of the course outcomes.

The sample consisted of 83 respondents, with 53% professionals with prior training in care, 16% professionals without previous training in care, and 57% female participants. Additionally, 40% of the respondents held an Upper Secondary School diploma.

The results are based on the questionnaire administered across all modules, reflecting participants' expectations and satisfaction levels throughout the course. On the expectations dimension, a significant difference was observed in the item 3, "The time to fly during the course" (M: T1=3,60; T2=4,29), indicating a positive shift in expectations over the course duration.

In the satisfaction dimension, significant scores were recorded in several items: Item 1, "The interaction with the trainer" (M=4,55); Item 3, "The teaching methods used by the trainer", (M=4,53); Item 4, "The level of trainer preparation", (M=4,63); and Item 7, "The training in general", (M=4,57). These results suggest high levels of satisfaction with the interaction, teaching methods, trainer preparation, and overall training experience.

It is interesting to further explore the results for Modules 3 and 4, which deserve particular attention due to lower mean scores in specific areas. Item 2, "The interaction with the other training participants" (M=3,25), suggesting that participants felt the interaction with peers could have been more engaging or effective. Additionally, Item 6, "The training setting" (M=3,50), indicating that the environment in which the training took place may not have fully met the participants' expectations or needs. The lower scores may be due to the blended learning format, which, due to COVID-19 restrictions, limited in-person interactions. Specifically, Modules 3 (Professional Tools for Investment and Spatial Planning) and 4 (Technology for Care) could have benefited from more interactive, practical experiences and discussions, which were hindered by the reduced face-to-face contact (Mali & Lim, 2021; Steenkamp & Chipps, 2024). These factors likely affected the overall training environment and participant

engagement.

The results of the Erasmus Plus Project “Qavad – Qualité de vie à domicile” show the potential of the training model in enhancing the skills of professionals and caregivers in home care for older adults. Despite COVID-19 pandemic, which limited in-person interactions and may have affected participant engagement and satisfaction, the overall feedback indicates positive outcomes regarding the relevance and effectiveness of the training content. The blended learning approach, while impacted by the pandemic, offered flexibility and adaptability, enabling participants to engage with the material and apply key concepts in their professional contexts. However, the results highlight areas for improvement, particularly in fostering higher interaction among participants and optimizing the training environment. A more dynamic, interactive approach focused on enhancing peer collaboration and better adapting the training setting to participants’ needs would be beneficial. Future research could explore the long-term impacts of the training model on professional practice and the quality of home care services for older adults. Additionally, studies could investigate the effectiveness of different delivery formats and examine how contextual factors, such as cultural differences and technological infrastructure, influence training outcomes. In conclusion, the project highlights the value of continuous professional development in the field of home care for older adults, offering valuable insights for further refinement and scaling of the training model.

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# ACTIVE AGEING FOR CULTURAL SERVICES: FOCUS ON ELDERLY POPULATION IN INLAND AREAS

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In the last twenty years, the concept of local heritage has changed and expanded, with a general convergence towards the unity of natural, cultural and social dimensions (Del Gobbo & Galeotti, 2018). The current debate also confirms the shift towards people-centred approaches (Auclair & Fairclough, 2015), suggesting a focus on bottom-up processes in cultural policy and heritage governance, involving diverse stakeholders and dynamic networks for heritage management and use. This paradigm shift influences the day-to-day activities of cultural institutions and third sector actors providing access to, use and preservation of local heritage (UN, 2022; Gordon & Beilby-Orrin, 2007). This article presents the results of a pilot study conducted in the Casentino valley, a mountainous region in the centre of Tuscany with a high age index. A mixed methods approach was used to identify the active participation of the over 55s in the provision of cultural services and the benefits of active ageing through the enjoyment and use of cultural heritage. The study is original in it aims to highlight the fundamental role of the older population in ensuring access to and use of cultural heritage by tapping the potential for informal and non-formal education opportunities.

active ageing; cultural heritage; community wellbeing; ecosystem services; inland areas

## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the results of a study carried out in the mountainous region of Casentino in Tuscany (Italy), focusing on the active participation of the over

55s in the provision of cultural services. In particular, it examined the extent to which cultural heritage valorization activities promote active ageing among the over 55s and to which these individuals, generally acting within local cultural associations, foster a knowledge of the values and traditions of the mountainous region in which they live.

The literature points out that volunteering, in this case in the cultural sphere, contributes to the sustainability and well-being of local communities (Zaidi & Stanton, 2015). Therefore, volunteering can also be associated with favorable processes of active ageing in territories where it is practised and widespread (Boerio et al., 2023; Jongenelis et al., 2022). Active ageing refers to a category based on three pillars, as proposed by the Active Ageing Index<sup>1</sup>: health, participation and security. Cultural volunteering and related activities promote the well-being of the over-55s, while volunteers' participation in the local community strengthens and defines their role. The creation of solidarity networks through the mechanism of volunteering not only combats ageism<sup>2</sup> but also creates social security, especially when supported by inclusive measures (Zaidi & Stanton, 2015).

In the case in point, mediated by associations active in the territories and their volunteers, cultural heritage promotes active ageing processes, playing an intrinsic educational role, and promotes the development of social skills and competences such as critical action, greater autonomy, self-control and empowerment (Marconi, 2024; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Participation in heritage-related activities promotes overall social wellbeing, particularly among the over 55s, and improves cognition, the quality and quantity of relationships, and a sense of closeness and belonging (Bone & Fancourt, 2022; Goulding, 2018; Dadswell et al., 2017).

The approaches outlined above see cultural heritage as a valuable resource for active ageing, the well-being of individuals and local communities. They refer to models that are people-centred and not just about heritage preservation (Auclair & Fairclough, 2015), and are thus able to incorporate intangible, natural and social aspects alongside tangible ones (Del Gobbo & Galeotti, 2018) by adopting a holistic perspective (Del Gobbo et al., 2018).

In particular, the epistemological approach of ecosystem services, which was used as a reference for the present study, emphasises the fact that culture and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://unece.org/population/active-ageing-index>

<sup>2</sup> According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), ageism refers to stereotypes (the way we think), prejudice (the way we feel) and discrimination (the way we act) against others or ourselves on the basis of age.

cultural activities can be considered as community services that generate non-material benefits, such as learning or spiritual enrichment, and contribute to the overall well-being and development of individuals and communities (MA, 2005). At the same time, the theoretical approaches described encourage a rethinking of cultural heritage management. Only through the active involvement of different stakeholders of different ages and the existence of dynamic networks can local cultural heritage, with its specific characteristics and attributes, be managed effectively and sustainably.

## 1. BACKGROUND

The Casentino valley is a particular subject of the National Strategy for Inner Areas<sup>3</sup> (S.N.A.I.) as it is a mountainous area at risk of marginalization. Specific funds are allocated to this territory for the improvement of services and the promotion of activities that can improve the local economy. Despite the phenomenon of depopulation and demographic ageing, the Third Sector and local associations are active in Casentino, with a total of 154 organizations registered in the Third Sector Single National Register<sup>4</sup> (RUNTS), offering informal and non-formal learning opportunities.

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The hypothesis underlying the present research in Casentino is that the cultural third sector fosters processes to improve social capital and community well-being (Atkinson, et al., 2017), being able to nurture social relations, create or improve territorial services and promote active citizenship (UN, 2022; Krlev et al., 2021). In particular, volunteers over the age of 55 engaged in cultural associations in Casentino give their time and knowledge to their local community and are important actors in the processes of transmission, hybridization and cultural creativity that can emerge in territories, especially in mountainous areas (Viazzo & Zanini, 2014). The questions guiding the research were twofold: 1) Do the over 55s in Casentino play a role as producers of cultural services, and do they promote access to and the dynamic preservation of the region's cultural heritage? 2) Is there a recognizable relationship between

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<sup>3</sup> <https://politichecoesione.governo.it/it/politica-di-coesione/strategie-tematiche-e-territoriali/strategie-territoriali/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne-snai/>

<sup>4</sup> The Third Sector Single National Register (RUNTS) is a tool to get to know non-profit organisations, containing basic information about the characteristics of registered organisations, further to Article 45 of the Law on the Third Sector (Legislative Decree No. 117 of 3 July 2017)

cultural volunteering and active ageing?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

Case study. The research design used to investigate the relationship between the over 55s, active ageing and cultural heritage is qualitative-quantitative (mixed and multi methods), correlative and observational, with an exploratory objective to describe and interpret an ongoing phenomenon that has been little studied from an empirical point of view. What is described in the article is a digital form that was created with a set of survey dimensions that could be freely compiled by the contact persons of the cultural associations surveyed. The main dimensions of the organizations surveyed were: the type of activities carried out; the number of people active in the organization; the youngest, oldest and average age of people active in the organization; the ageing of the population and strategies for generational change.

#### **3.1. Convenience Sampling**

Between March and May 2024, 154 associations in the Casentino region were identified via the Third Sector Single National Register (RUNTS). Of these, 38 were contacted, as they could be categorized as cultural. During the contact process 5 organizations could not be contacted, while 33 associations confirmed their willingness to participate in the study. In the end, 27 associations actually took part in the survey, with 26 cultural organizations returning the completed form by e-mail and one organization preferring to submit their data by telephone.

### **4. RESULTS**

The data on the 27 participating associations provided useful information on the type of cultural activities and services promoted by the different organizations surveyed, as well as on the profile of their members. The six main areas of activity of the cultural associations appear to be archaeological and historical research, organization of exhibitions and festivals, management of libraries and craft workshops, maintenance of village decorum, promotion of tourism and food culture, and promotion of sporting activities. The cultural associations in Casentino that took part in the survey have a total of 1988 members, 1021 of whom are volunteers. The average age of members is 60, with a top age of 90 and a low of 6. The spokespersons of the associations interviewed stated that the over 55s are very much involved in the proposed activities, in terms of

organization, leadership and commitment to the region, and that these people have strong ethical and civic values. Furthermore, 20 of the 27 respondents believe that the progressive ageing of the population in Casentino threatens the sustainability of the cultural activities they currently propose in the territory. In particular, four associations are very concerned that without a generational change, they will close within a few years, which could have a negative impact on the cultural heritage of Casentino. To address this issue, 17 of the 20 associations state that they have already launched initiatives to involve young people more in Casentino, although the results of these strategies cannot yet be assessed. Youth participation seems to be crucial for the operational sustainability of the cultural associations surveyed.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The strong presence of the over 55s in the various cultural activities promoted by the cultural associations surveyed in Casentino emphasises their important role as producers of cultural services and as a source of experience and knowledge. The lack of specific and wide-ranging initiatives to address the impending impossibility for the older population of Casentino to continue to provide many cultural services in the area and to actively involve younger generations represents a major challenge for Casentino and its cultural heritage. This area is facing a profound demographic, social and cultural shake-up. Currently, a significant proportion of the cultural associations interviewed in the study are kept alive by mostly older members who are only sporadically able to create synergies and collaborate with younger people.

The study also highlighted the strong values and solidarity among the over 55s. In addition to their role in the region's cultural associations, they also benefit from cultural activities as a way to stay active. This suggests that cultural associations can serve as a platform for intergenerational processes (Baschiera, 2013), for inclusion and for the creation of a safe and cohesive social environment for the over 55s and, more generally, for the entire local community. Despite the challenges for the Casentino valley related to the ageing of the population and the management and sustainability of the cultural services currently in place, we emphasise the fact that this territory is characterized by a diverse and vibrant panorama of cultural projects and research initiatives. It is therefore possible and desirable that ongoing social and cultural transformations are able to create "empty" spaces (Viazzo & Zanini, 2014) from which creativity and cultural innovation can emerge.



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# LEARNING IN LONGEVITY: A CRITICAL ECOSYSTEMIC APPROACH TO RESEARCH AND INTERVENTION

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This paper discusses the need for a paradigmatic shift in research and intervention on longevity, a field dominated by linear definitions, policies, and practices. Complexity allows to understand how individual, organizational, and socio-cultural dimensions are interconnected in the process of ageing. A critical ecosystemic approach de-centres attention from the individual learner to the environment and considers the co-evolution of individuals in contexts, processes, relationships, and materiality. A critical literature review on complexity, ageing and care informs a study focusing the processes of transition related to ageing in six geographic areas and communities.

longevity; complexity; lifelong learning; interdependence.

## INTRODUCTION

Increased life expectancy presents unique challenges and opportunities for individuals, communities, and societies. Longevity not only extends biological life but changes our relationship to the world, demanding adaptations that entail new attitudes, emotions, and identities. It also changes the relationships and social landscape of a community or country that is ‘growing older’. The dominant idea of adult learning related to work and skills weakens, and the relevance of lifelong learning – i.e. any activity or experience in formal, non-formal, or informal contexts that produces new attitudes and knowledge – takes unexpected turns. As educational gerontology has started to address, the experience, learning and possibilities of growing older reframe learning as *long life* (Whitnall, 2011). The individual-istic definition of learning appears too narrow and inadequate to address these challenges, especially if we consider

the inequal distribution of resources for different categories and territories, and pervasive hidden ageism that reduces older people to ‘patients’ or ‘service consumers’. Education and learning depend on many intersecting factors. Age, gender, income, education, family structure and composition, care-giving and receiving, migration, neighbourhood, digital competence, health literacy are among the predictors of well-being, inclusion, and agency in later life. Recognizing the role of these factors in people’s lives requires systemic transformative learning that affects individuals, groups, communities, and environments (Formenti and Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023).

Transforming perspectives (Formenti and West, 2018) from the linear model to a critical ecosystemic model (Braithwaite et al., 2017; Hynes et al. 2020) would enhance our capacity to ensure justice, well-being, and meaning for all, at all ages. Learning in longevity is a systemic process of co-adaptation, where older adults are not isolated or passive recipients of care and services, or self-directed learners eager to ‘acquire new skills’, but active participants in living, meaning-making, problem-solving, and identity-building. Interactions are the basis for the co-creation of knowledge, informed decisions, good enough integrated care, and the system’s capacity to cope with changing dynamic situations, but they can also perpetrate structural violence, disrespect, and worsen the quality of life of all the involved people, since they depend on each other.

New narratives can fuel our capacity to tackle with longevity. Hachem (2023) analysed the evolution of narratives about older learners in educational theories, showing a divide between emancipatory theories where older adults appear powerless and needy (and educators as saviours) and the neoliberal myth of free, empowered, and active citizens (with educators as life coaches). A more complex idea would combine critical social theory and transformative learning to recognize the heterogeneity of older adults, the complexity of their identities and trajectories, and the unprecedented levels of agency and economic power that some of them may have in late modernity. If we define older adults in these terms, the main learning task in later life is reflexivity – on one’s life, habits, and choices, and how to pursue self-actualization and emancipation. Educators would be facilitators of self-reflexivity or enablers of “*transitional educational processes*” (Alheit, 2021, 120). Alheit’s concept of *biographicity*.

means that we can continually reinterpret our life in the contexts in which we (must) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as ‘formable’ and

'shapeable'. It is important to decipher the excess meaning of our biographical knowledge, and that means: to perceive the potentiality of our 'unlived life' (p. 120).

## **1. COMPLEXITY: A 'DESPERATELY NEEDED' CHANGE OF PARADIGM**

Research and intervention on complex adaptive systems (Axelrod and Cohen, 2000; Morin, 2008; May, Johnson, and Finch, 2016) are increasingly used to illuminate interactions and interdependence in human lives.

The science of complex adaptive systems provides important concepts and tools for responding to the challenges of health care in the 21st century. Clinical practice, organisation, information management, research, education, and professional development are interdependent and built around multiple self-adjusting and interacting systems. In complex systems, unpredictability and paradox are ever present, and some things will remain unknowable. New conceptual frameworks that incorporate a dynamic, emergent, creative, and intuitive view of the world must replace traditional 'reduce and resolve' approaches to clinical care and service organization (Plsek and Greenhalgh, 2001, 625).

A "desperately needed" change of paradigm (Greenhalgh and Papoutsis, 2018) would enable researchers to recognize tensions and multiply their perspectives to generate insights and wisdom. Complexity-based research has the power to "illustrate the plurality of voices inherent in the research and phenomena under study (...) to produce a rich, nuanced picture of what is going on and why" (Table 1, 3). Researchers and professionals, as lifelong learners, can learn to accept uncertainty and unpredictability, and develop a mindset that recognizes the "pattern which connects" (Bateson, 1979, 8) the different parts of a dynamic system. Complexity is not focused on problem-solving, but problems-setting: it interrogates the criteria used by different observers to define a 'problem'. Since tensions and paradoxes are unavoidable, researchers should explore the unexpected and embrace "creative, reflexive and collaborative ways of working and thinking" (Greenhalgh and Papoutsis, 2018, 5). Interdisciplinarity and disagreement require critical theoretical and methodological pluralism. The turn to complexity invites to fix new standards for research quality and praises interpretation as a way to transformative learning and adaptation.

Interdependence, circularity, and self-organization are the constitutive features of adaptive systems that characterize learning as a cross-cutting process, framing individuals (citizens, family members, health professionals, local administrators, and designers of tools and services) as parts of more-than-

human worlds where technologies, landscapes, artefacts, and procedures bring effects. Learning can be read at different levels: macro (Hawe, 2015); meso (Axelrod and Cohen, 2000); and micro (Formenti, West, and Horsdal, 2014). *Biographicity* (Alheit, 2021), *cooperative education* (Formenti, 2018), and *time and rhythm in emancipatory education* (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017) are concepts that help understanding the co-evolution of individual and environment.

## **2. RESEARCHING COMPLEXITY, LEARNING AND CARE**

Long life learning can be illuminated by co-evolution. At the microlevel, learning is weaved with care in the personal strategy developed to cope with ageing, not necessarily aligned to normative 'active ageing'. The person's capacity for self-care and meaning-making depends on previous trajectories and the present context, where the needs for dignity, recognition and slowing down are not always met. Caring about oneself, the others and the environment nurtures awareness of lights and shadows, and shows the dilemmas of longevity: autonomy/heteronomy; safety/risk; continuity/discontinuity; ageing-in-place/moving. A critical reading may then open new interpretative possibilities to investigate emancipation, respect, equality, meaning, and wisdom.

A critical review of 62 papers on complexity (Formenti, Cino, and Loberto, 2025) has identified three learning contexts: informal, formal and technology mediated care. The informal system of care entails learning for the older persons and their partners, children, grandchildren, companions (Suárez Vázquez et al., 2022). In this regard, *transition* is an emerging concept that brings attention to the intrinsic relationality and dynamicity of this phase of life; it became the main focus of our research. New meaning and identities are shaped by interactions among family members of different generations and by the material and symbolic weaved in space and objects (Roux et al., 2019). The complexity of care is testified by the presence of dilemmas and polarities, as well as the positive and negative sides of shared decision making, communication, and knowledge. The interplay of social factors and intersectionality of gender, income, ethnicity, education, relativize the role of age in the process.

In formal care, learning is mainly seen in relation to professional work: learning about the circularity of care, the discursive construction of ageing in language and practices, the relevance of health literacy in decision making, and issues of communication, collaboration, and integration of practices. Finally, also technology-mediated care is an educational process, with a contrast between

top-down and bottom-up approaches, where older adults can be involved as experts in designing and assessing tools. The dominant paradigm tends to reduce older adults to passive consumers of services and overlook their agency, self-determination, and contribution.

In this literature, mixed and participatory methods are used to involve insiders (Majón-Valpuesta et al. 2022); to investigate co-evolution in dyads (Berg and Upchurch, 2007); to highlight diversity of experiences and trajectories (Keating et al. 2019); and to achieve deep analysis of contexts (McCormack et al. 2002) and practices (Nowak & Hubbard, 2009).

### **2.1. Doing participatory research in territories**

Age-It is a national research program that aims at doing research to build “an inclusive society for all ages” (<https://ageit.eu/wp/en/>). Within it, our study titled *Aligning the new health and social care policies to emerging needs: a bottom-up community-based systemic approach* implements a territorial approach within 6 municipalities in 3 geographical areas: the foothills of Piacenza’s Apennine (Morfasso and Vernasca), the Susa Valley in Piedmont (Meana and Mattie), and the sub-Vesuvian area (Liveri and Terzigno).

Our work, involving researchers from education, social gerontology, family sociology, economy and technology, addresses transition as a complex process. Transitions are manifold in longevity: from paid work to retirement, from driving to being not-driven, from good health to physical fragility, from social life to more solitude and isolation. In-depth interviews with older adults are used in this study to illuminate how biographies affect meaning and identity in later life, and the role of relationships in it. Following the interviews, participatory research involves groups of older people, caregivers, decision makers, and relevant stakeholders to reflect on representations, experiences, emerging needs, or desires, and possible answers. The study aims at creating a rich representation of the specific features of each territory, resources and limits due to geographical, social, cultural, and economic factors. We are especially interested in uncovering local pockets of social injustice, unequal access to services, but also in participatory research to sustain the collective construction of meaning and value.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

A critical approach to longevity, based on complexity theories, can open new possibilities for research and intervention. The role of education and learning is



pivotal in later life, a phase that poses new questions and seeks new answers, with positive and negative outcomes. So, doing research that creates spaces for self-narration and reflection, participation and dialogue, is a way to overcome ageism and marginalization, contrasting ways of doing, policies, and languages that reduce the older persons to their vulnerability, calling them ‘patients’ and acting *on* instead of inter-acting *with* them. Or treating them as ‘service consumers’. Seeing the older person as part of a larger system of interactions, in space and time, in a material context, embedded in a community that evolves and grows older too, is a perspective that can inspire policy makers, professionals, and researchers to embrace complexity.

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# ACTIVE AGEING AND THE CHALLENGES OF DIGITALISATION. EXPERIENCES FROM THE SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTIVE.IT

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Digital transformation impacts every sphere of private and public life, including public administration (PA). Particularly, it affects different social groups, with the older population being among the most vulnerable. Even with efforts to increase their digital skills, there remains a significant risk of older adults being excluded from many aspects of social life when digital technologies are involved, including access to public services—an issue contradicting the active ageing principles. This contribution investigates the relationship between older people and digital technologies, with a focus on digital public services. It draws on two research streams from the ACTIVE-it project: respectively, semi-structured longitudinal interviews that explore older adults' digital practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, and participant observation within the environment of a digital literacy course. Our findings indicate that, to harness the opportunities and mitigate the risks of digital transformation, it is essential to provide institutional learning opportunities tailored to the specific needs of older age groups. Furthermore, these interventions must be supported by public institutions to address this issue systematically. Ensuring widespread dissemination and accessibility of solutions is crucial in the face of such extensive and radical societal transformations.

active ageing; older people; digital public services; peer-to-peer; digital practices

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Italy, only 19.3% of people aged 65-74 possess at least basic digital skills, a percentage that drops to around 4.6% when considering the over-75 age group (Eurostat, 2023). In a society increasingly transformed by the diffusion and use of digital technologies in the most diverse contexts (Floridi, 2017), the risks of a digital revolution that does not adopt an intergenerational approach, which

takes into account the differences in terms of access, propensity and mode of use, is still visible. Indeed, older age groups are often excluded from the digitisation processes of different areas of social life, including public services (Pihlainen et al, 2021; Walsh et al., 2021).

This phenomenon contradicts the extensive evidence in support of active ageing, which advocates older adults' participation and contribution within societies (WHO, 2002; Zaidi & Howse, 2017). Drawing on this literature, two key themes emerge: the need to develop digital competences among older people (Gatti et al., 2017; Pihlainen et al., 2021), especially with regard to DPS; and the need to focus on older digital users, putting the peculiarities and heterogeneity of digital practices in older age back at the centre. However, this literature discusses how active ageing policies often place the responsibility for keeping up with social changes on the older population itself, rather than reframing the digital divide and the resulting risk of exclusion as a public issue (Boudiny, 2013).

Our contribution originates from the ACTIVE-it project, a social research carried out in the Lombardy region adopting a multi-method approach, which investigated the relationship between elderly people and digital technologies – first and foremost, the use of smartphones and the most commonly used apps in everyday life, including those of the PA. In this contribution, we first describe the ongoing debate on the digitisation of society and its implications on the ageing process, referring in particular to the literature on active ageing.

Focusing on the experiences with some among the main digital public services, we will then discuss some results from our two research experiences: firstly, we will discuss older adults' interest and motivation in learning digital skills, especially related to public services; secondly, we aim to shed light on our participants' difficulties in using such services. Hence, from this point of view, we aim to document how the refusal to interact with digital services, a typical stereotype about older generations, does not often correspond to the subjects' disinterest in digital technologies but is rather a choice forced upon them by the lack of access.

The lack of support in developing digital competences is thus at the centre of our attention. As we will discuss, these findings document the need to integrate digital training experiences for/with older age groups on a systemic level.

## **2. THE ACTIVE-IT RESEARCH PROJECT**

ACTIVE-it, funded by Fondazione Cariplo, studies the ageing population in Italy

within a post-pandemic context. It is a multi-methods social research, with the main goal to explore the profound challenges that the digitisation produces with respect to the well-being and social inclusion of older adults. By drawing on the key principles of the active ageing framework, i.e. well-being and social participation, we discuss how Covid-19 measures adopted since 2020 have challenged these principles, with negative repercussions for older adults. In particular, lockdowns encouraged a digital acceleration at an unprecedented pace, creating unexpected opportunities to social and economic life but also generating further risks of digital exclusion. This contribution discusses two distinct case studies of the ACTIVE.it project, both conducted in the Lombardy region in Italy. The case studies are, respectively, a longitudinal qualitative research conducted in the Lodi area, and a participatory digitalisation course conducted in the Monza and Brianza areas. As we will discuss in the following sections, where we will describe more deeply each of the case studies, in the two research we aim to directly involve the population, through interviews, participant observation and the delivery of a co-constructed digitisation course, adopting a micro sociological perspective. At the same time, in refocusing on the specific experience and needs of older people, we aim to extend the discussion to meso and macro contexts, addressing the crucial role of institutions and the third sector in facilitating (or limiting) social participation in physical and digitised contexts.

### **2.1. Older people digital practices in the everyday context**

The ILQA-19 research is a longitudinal case study, started in 2020, that focuses on the quality of life of older adults during the Covid-19 pandemic, in the first municipalities in Italy affected by the red zone as of February 2020. The study participants are a heterogeneous panel of men and women, aged between 65 and 80 (in 2020), differing in social background, marital status, social capital and digital skills. Each stage of the research was also conducted remotely, adopting innovative protocols to include participants with minimal or no digital skills (Melis et al., 2021). Each year, the study participants undergo a semi-structured video-interview conducted remotely, on different topics: the changes in everyday life during and after the pandemic, the social and digital resources to face social transformations, along with the role of digital technologies in shaping a post-pandemic society. The interviews are all fully transcribed, anonymised and archived (Sala et al., 2020; Sala et al., 2021).

The literature underlines how the older population, apart from age homogeneity, is a complex and heterogeneous set (Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017). Similarly,

the ILQA-19 panel appears diverse with respect to digital skills, preferences and practices. During the pandemic years, the drive to maintain social activities and relationships increased participants' use of digital technologies. In particular, social networks (e.g. Facebook) and communication apps (e.g. WhatsApp) often played a key role in reconstructing that everyday familiarity long suspended by public regulations to contain the spread of the virus (Melis et al., 2021).

There were numerous governmental proposals that made use of digital technologies for the management of the pandemic – e.g., the Immuni App, the platforms for vaccines reservation or, consequently, for obtaining and showing the Green Pass certificate – but also for encouraging the economic recovery. While, on the one hand, the experience with digital technologies has produced diversified types of experiences (Carlo & Nanetti, 2024), a lack of systemic support emerges across the interviews. Empirical data show how the exchange of digital skills takes place within informal, intergenerational, and family networks but also among peers; in the case of DPS, further support comes from the third sector, although not without limits: as recipients and/or providers of voluntary activities, some of our participants underline the lack of organicity of digital support interventions. It should not be forgotten that volunteering in Italy is mainly supported by the contribution of older adults, who benefit in terms of active contribution in their communities and active ageing (Boccacin, 2016) but, in the absence of adequate training of their members, are subject to the same digital difficulties as the older population in general.

In conclusion, the interviews demonstrate how our panel is often aware that the failure to keep up with society's digital transition is instead part of a broader exclusion carried out by institutions, that do not take responsibility for older people's integration and "digital autonomy" in handling their own everyday requirements. In fact, the request to activate digital procedures appears to be directed solely to social and registry groups that are already familiar with digital use practices, without offering support to those that need it the most. However, an intergenerational approach (very common when talking about older adults' informal digital support) is rarely considered when it comes to DPS enactment.

## **2.2. Peer-to-peer digital education**

The second case study assesses the impact of a digitalisation course for people over 65 on digital skills and their well-being. The course was co-constructed in partnership with Auser Monza-Brianza, 'an association of voluntary work and social promotion, committed to promoting the active ageing of older adults and

enhancing their role in society' (Auser, 2024).

The digital education course focused on the use of smartphones and useful applications in everyday life. It adopted a peer-education approach, in which people over 65, who are more experienced in the use of digital technologies, give lessons to groups of other people over 65 (Pizzul et al. 2024). Among the methodologies adopted (ibid.), one of them was participant observation during the lessons. Referring specifically to the aspects most related to the digitisation of PA, which are the ones of most interest here, the observation yields two main aspects.

Firstly, digital public services aroused more interest among participants than other topics, e.g. online shopping. The electronic health record is undoubtedly a service to which participants devoted a great deal of attention, despite the fact that some were already using it. Engaging with the digital social security service platform (INPS) also interested many, despite the fact that it seems to be less well-known than the previous platform: both raise the same concerns related to digital skills. Secondly, a significant difficulty emerged for several participants in learning the procedure to access these services independently. The main problems, however, are not so much related to the platforms themselves, but rather to their authentication systems, such as Spid or the Electronic Identity Card (CiE).

### **3. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Digital transformation and an ageing population are two contemporary macro-phenomena affecting several Western societies, including Italy. At the intersection of these two important evolutions arise opportunities and risks for the older part of the population. This contribution sheds light on the implications that the digitisation of public services has on the elderly population and on active ageing processes – starting from the discussion on two distinct research lines of the ACTIVE-it project.

In order to embrace the opportunities and prevent the risks in this transitional phase, it is urgent to monitor the relationship between different age groups and technologies. To do so, it is necessary to critically address the exclusive individualisation of the issue, characteristic of the more neoliberal approaches to active ageing (Rubinsten & de Medeiros, 2015; Stephens, 2017); secondly, it is advisable not to fall into an 'institutional paternalism' that takes it for granted that older people are not inclined to use digital technologies; finally, digitisation measures are not accompanied by specific support to bridge the digital divide



for certain categories, such as older people.

The ACTIVE-IT project draws a possible path between these two, equally problematic, extremes, that provides a different perspective to look at the phenomenon of digital skills in the third age. In the longitudinal case study, the interviews shape an older population that, when stimulated as during the pandemic, shows a greater ability to experiment with digital practices. This interest, however, is not encouraged by institutions that do not propose systemic and tailored forms of digital learning. In the digital peer education course, participant observation showed that the interest in developing one's digital skills is well present among the older participants involved in our courses, who, when put in a position to improve themselves and master digital services independently, show initiative and the ability to self-determine their own learning path.

In conclusion, the needs expressed are to have learning places and contexts tailored to the needs of this age group, which, as the literature shows, displays digital cultures and practices specific to its generation. It is precisely at this level that the commitment of public institutions should be inserted so that learning processes can be facilitated, perhaps through peer education, in a more systemic manner.

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# ENHANCING WELL-BEING AND AUTONOMY IN ACTIVE AGING: A MONTESSORI PERSPECTIVE. THE CASE STUDY 'G. PALENA'

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This study explores the implementation of the Montessori method within a geriatric context, specifically through an experimental project at RSSA Fondazione 'G. Palena'. By fostering a carefully structured educational environment and engaging residents in meaningful activities, significant improvements were documented in cognitive, behavioral, and emotional well-being. The approach emphasizes individualized intervention, characterized by respect, sensitivity, and recognition of the autonomy of aging individuals. By redefining the understanding of aging, this method challenges the prevailing notion of the elderly as passive or vulnerable, instead highlighting their capacity for growth and active participation.

Montessori Method, Active Aging, Geriatrics, Lifelong Education, Well-being

## INTRODUCTION

The aging of the Italian population, one of the fastest among industrialized nations, has only recently been recognized as a priority by institutions and social actors. The rise in unemployment among older workers and their low participation in the labor market, previously neglected, have now become critical indicators. This phenomenon represents a complex transformation with social, cultural, and economic implications, making the management of demographic transition a strategic priority for the country (ISTAT, 2024).

The enhancement of the elderly population is essential for a nation's progress and competitiveness, necessitating a perspective that regards aging not only as a demographic challenge but also as a social opportunity. Older adults are a valuable social resource, particularly those who are healthy and vital, who

require the ability to live in “full citizenship” through inclusion in policies that promote access to continuous education and training. Such educational pathways not only contribute to updating basic skills but also enhance the overall education level of those over 65, a category where current levels remain unfortunately low (ISTAT, 2024).

According to the most recent statistics, 71.9% of Italians over 65 have only elementary education or no formal qualifications, while just 24.8% have completed high school, and only 3.3% hold a university degree. In total, 87.7% of this population segment has not attained a secondary education diploma, highlighting the need to strengthen education for the elderly (ISTAT, 2024).

The permanence and quality of employment among older workers are directly influenced by their level of education and opportunities for professional development. Studies indicate that rather than age itself, it is the lack of updated skills that limits the productivity of this group of workers.

The increase in longevity has led to a profound transformation in the organization of old age, which can no longer be viewed as a uniform phase of life. Today, this period is divided into at least two or three distinct phases. The term “third age” refers to the decade between 70 and 80 years, while the “fourth age” encompasses those over 80, often characterized by increased vulnerability and functional limitations. Additionally, some authors identify a “fifth age,” referring to conditions of extreme fragility and total dependence (Baroni, 2003).

The use of terms such as “young elderly” or “senior adults” to describe active and dynamic individuals over 65, contrasted with “older elderly,” reflects a more complex and diversified approach to aging. This distinction underscores that aging is not a linear process but one marked by significant heterogeneity, related both to residual capacities and socio-environmental conditions.

## **1. AGING BEYOND STEREOTYPES**

The concept of the third age is a broad and complex set of individual and collective experiences influenced by biological, health, and personal factors. Aging is an adaptive process requiring the construction of meaning and future goals, leading to diverse life paths (Iori, 2020). This variability underscores the need to view aging as a dynamic phenomenon shaped by individuals’ abilities to respond to the challenges of advancing age.

Historically, old age was marginalized socially, relegated to a form of “clandestinity.” Although it is now a topic of general interest, it remains bound by cultural restrictions, often portrayed in a sanitized manner that limits a true

expression of its complexities (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013). Where old age once signified rest, today older adults are encouraged to maintain vitality, often depicted as resilient examples of a “happy age” (Granier, 2012).

This shift reflects new social expectations, demanding that older adults not only display happiness but also demonstrate sustained vitality. Nevertheless, this perspective accompanies a social need to categorize old age under cultural guardianship (Tramma, 2000). Consequently, portrayals of aging oscillate between vulnerability and success, creating anxieties for both older individuals and the young (Martinson & Berridge, 2015).

Age-related stereotypes remain potent and affect interpersonal relationships, shaping attitudes and values despite lifestyle changes that suggest otherwise. These stereotypes can stigmatize older adults, distorting perceptions of their capabilities. Many still view old age as a time of physical decline, lethargy, and unenthusiastic daily routines, which can result in a passive existence (Luppi, 2020).

However, aging does not inherently imply inactivity. With a suitable lifestyle, cognitive abilities, especially when continuously exercised, can endure despite physical decline. Recent decades have seen increased focus on active aging, with initiatives emphasizing renewed social and health engagement. In 2002, the World Health Organization’s “Active Ageing” initiative highlighted the importance of the elderly’s social inclusion, aiming to enhance their irreplaceable role in the community through policies promoting participation and well-being. The discipline of lifelong education is rooted in classical pedagogical traditions. Comenius’ *Pampaedia* advocated lifelong education for all, while Kant emphasized the value of discipline and learning by example. Dewey’s active schooling in the United States and Montessori’s contributions in Italy offer a vision of lifelong learning as an active, continuous process.

Effective educational interventions are essential in promoting autobiographical recognition and creating stimulating environments for older adults. Such interventions, resonant with memories and senses, support the elderly in maintaining a sense of purpose despite advancing conditions (Mortari, 2019). Upholding the rights and dignity of frail older individuals revives the Montessori pedagogical model, equipping caregivers with tools to appreciate the latent potential within the elderly (De Serio, 2014).

## **2. THE MONTESSORI PERSPECTIVE AS A NEW AVENUE OF INQUIRY**

A re-examination of Maria Montessori's thought has enabled connections to be drawn with current pedagogical challenges, which have had significant implications in contemporary pedagogy and psychopedagogy.

A highly promising intervention, already used in several studies (van der Ploeg et al., 2013) with subjects experiencing cognitive decline due to multiple neurodegenerative conditions, is the Montessori Method.

The relevance of Montessori pedagogy lies in its core element—the documented and repeated observation of the educated subject within an educational context progressively organized according to emerging needs. In this way, education becomes a means to support the expansion of life in its various dimensions: intellectual, affective, social, emotional, and more (Trabalzini, 2013).

The Montessori method employs structured educational programs developed to promote learning through key elements. These include adapting tasks to the competence levels of the subjects, breaking down tasks into smaller components, categorizing elements by difficulty, and using guided repetition.

These principles have been adapted to provide personalized stimulation for different types of subjects, involving meaningful activities, and requiring significant attention and effort, particularly when applied in geriatric settings.

The Montessori method encourages considerable engagement, requiring that residents in care facilities, who suffer from cognitive decline, engage in tasks with increasing levels of difficulty—whether motor, linguistic, mnemonic, or tasks involving attention and repetition of gestures (Camp, 1999; Camp et al., 2006).

## **3. EXPERIMENTAL PROJECT AT RSSA FONDAZIONE 'G. PALENA'**

Building on this theoretical framework, an experimental educational project was launched at the RSSA Fondazione "G. Palena" in Foggia, involving a sample of 45 residents with moderate to high cognitive abilities, representative of the 76 total residents. A key focus of the research was creating an enriched environment to support hypothesized outcomes and confirm or challenge existing international studies on the subject.

A harmonious environment was meticulously created, emphasizing order and functionality. Warm wall colors, simple and familiar furniture, and minimal superfluous stimulation helped eliminate distractions and create an orderly atmosphere. Observational reports, completed by educators before and after

each session, focused on attention span, agitation levels, muscle tone, interaction with the operator and environment, mood, short- and long-term memory, concentration, familiarity with the material, and interest in activities. The observations were recorded over nine months of experimentation.

The activities were designed to engage procedural memory, which tends to be better preserved than verbal memory (Squire, 2004), minimizing linguistic demands and providing external cues to compensate for cognitive deficits. Unstructured materials, inspired by familiar objects (e.g., clothespins, kitchen utensils, string), allowed educators to demonstrate their arrangement in sequences or by color. This enabled participants to actively engage with the material, feeling empowered and capable. Each material served as a stimulus to the senses, promoting concentration, logical thinking, manual coordination, and verbalization (Benetton, 2019).

Educators presented the activities, providing examples to ease the cognitive demands required, and subsequently handed over the objects to participants, encouraging them to work independently—a key tenet of Montessori’s philosophy of learning by doing. During the experimentation phase, a consistent effort was made to adhere strictly to Montessori principles, ensuring a truly Montessori-inspired educational project. Materials were varied over time to maintain engagement, while the environment was kept quiet, orderly, and serene, with timelines tailored to individual needs.

The Montessori approach, which does not rely on lexical or semantic linguistic skills, but instead uses highly structured tasks and materials, demonstrated its potential to assist residents with neurodegenerative conditions and communication challenges. Montessori-based activities evoked high levels of engagement and enjoyment among RSSA “G. Palena” residents, consistent with findings from other studies involving nursing home residents with dementia (Camp et al., 2006). These activities also led to a modest but significant reduction in agitation scores, as shown in a broader study utilizing predetermined activities (Lin et al., 2009).

In the current study, data analysis comparing agitation levels and behavioral symptoms before, during, and after personalized Montessori-based activities indicated an overall improvement in the residents’ well-being. Observations confirmed a strong alignment with Montessori’s pedagogical principles, evident in the presence of key elements relating to methodology application, the organization of the educational environment, and the preparation of both structured and unstructured materials.



## CONCLUSIONS

The Montessori educational approach in geriatric care prioritizes the dignity and well-being of elderly individuals within a systemic framework. It demonstrates both scientific rigor and unique methodology, emphasizing “humanizing” interventions rooted in the experiences, desires, and expectations of the individual, ultimately fostering autonomy and making the elderly active participants in their environment (Musaio, 2021).

Applying Montessori principles to geriatric settings values the life history of the elderly, integrating personal narratives into a meaningful educational process that aims to activate residual capabilities, even amidst cognitive decline (Trabalzini, 2015). This approach creates an environment in which older adults feel respected and supported, ensuring their identity is preserved. Activities designed to recover autobiographical memory can significantly improve the sense of belonging and continuity, reinforcing the individual’s perception of being an active community member (Scocchera, 2020).

Engaging in personalized activities based on individual history has been shown to enhance mood and reduce problematic behaviors (Camp et al., 2006). These activities allow elderly individuals to recognize familiar elements, bolstering their sense of identity and preserving cognitive and social abilities. The approach goes beyond supporting residual capacities, fostering a dialogue between the past and present, thus honoring the uniqueness of each person (Cives, 2019).

Active listening, both verbal and empathetic, plays a crucial role in this methodology. It fosters trust, security, and a deeper understanding of the individual’s needs, affirming the Montessori approach’s effectiveness in delivering personalized and humanizing interventions (De Serio, 2021). Promoting individualized interventions that honor the nuances of aging challenges the prevailing paradigm of viewing the elderly as static and vulnerable.

The ongoing reflections on the Montessori approach’s enriching potential in creating a supportive learning environment, as demonstrated in the Foggia project, prompt further exploration of its application in broader geriatric settings. Expanding investigations could clarify the extent of Montessori principles’ use in elderly care and how they align with recent findings on neuroplasticity.

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# SOCIAL PARTICIPATION, EDUCATION AND HEALTHY AGEING IN ITALY

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In this paper we aim to analyze the relationship between social participation and education among elderly people in Italy. Social participation, that is a key dimension of active ageing, is divided into three sub-dimensions: cultural participation; socio-political participation and social contacts. Our main research question focuses on the role played by education that can be linked to social participation in at least two ways: i) education may directly influence the acquisition of certain lifestyles and cultural tastes that lead individuals to conduct a more active social life; ii) education can also have an indirect effect through economic resources and health condition. To answer these research questions, we analyze ISTAT data (*Aspetti della vita quotidiana*, 2013-2021) by means of regression (OLS and logistic) and mediation models. Our findings corroborate our hypotheses showing that education has a strong influence on social participation and that the mediation effect is particularly relevant only for social contacts.

Italy; Ageing; social participation

## INTRODUCTION

It's well-known that the Italian demographic dynamic is characterized by high levels of life expectations at birth (Caselli et al., 2021) and by low fertility (Billari, 2022) that have led to an increase in the share of elderly population. This change poses new challenges in terms of active ageing and healthy ageing. Our work tries to contribute to this literature focusing on social participation – intended as cultural consumption and socio-political participation – and social contacts, that can be considered as possible dimensions of active ageing (WHO, 2002; Principi et al., 2023) as well as social cohesion (Vergolini, 2011). We aim to contribute to this literature focusing on the role played by education trying to estimate its total effect as well as the mediating effect of economic resources

and health status. The paper is organized as follows: the next section presents the hypotheses that will guide our analysis. The second section is devoted to the description of the data and methods used in the analysis which results are presented in section 3. The final section provides concluding remarks.

## **1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES**

The aim of this paper is to identify the role played by education in shaping socio-cultural participation and in reducing social isolation. From a theoretical point of view, education could have an impact on these outcomes in at least two ways. Firstly, it can act through a direct channel: education could push to the acquisition of lifestyles and cultural tastes that lead individuals to conduct a more active social life (Jensen & Skjøtt-Larsen 2021). In fact, highly educated people tend to have higher cultural consumption and are more active in social participation (van Hek and Kraaykamp, 2013). At the same time, having an active social life will also mechanically increase social contacts, thus reducing isolation. From this discussion, we can derive our first hypothesis:

H1: educational level is directly and positively related to socio-cultural participation and social contacts.

The second channel through which education can work is an indirect one. It has to be taken into account that social participation is a costly activity and people have to invest time and/or money to play an active role in community life (Yang & Konrath 2023). Therefore, education could have an indirect impact through the attainment of remunerative occupations. Another aspect to consider is the state of health. Older adults often devote significant time to leisure activities, like joining organized events and going out, but as people age, chronic health issues tend to increase, often implying a reduction in sustain social engagement (Galenkamp and Deeg, 2016). It is known that education has an impact on health status (Vilhelmsson & Östergren, 2018), that can be attributed to factors like the higher incomes typically associated with higher education and greater general literacy, which enable more educated individuals to make more informed decisions about their health and to be more active in prevention (Braveman et al., 2011). From this discussion, we can derive our second hypothesis:

H2: the impact of education is moderated by economic resources and health status.

## 2. DATA, VARIABLES AND METHODS

### 2.1. Data and variables

The database comprises several waves (2013–2021) of the ISTAT *Aspetti della vita quotidiana* (AVQ) survey, which is conducted annually and is representative at the regional level. This survey examines various aspects of social life among Italian households, covering the entire Italian population across all age groups. For this study, the final dataset was constructed by harmonizing and merging the cross-sectional waves, focusing solely on individuals aged 55 and over. This selection yielded an analytical sample of 113,289 statistical units.<sup>1</sup>

We rely on AVQ survey since it has all the information that we need to test our hypotheses (see Table 1 for the descriptive statistics). As anticipated in the previous section, we are interested in the effect of education on socio-cultural participation and on social contacts. More precisely, our focus is on the following dimensions: cultural consumption, socio-political participation and social contacts. For what concerns cultural consumption, we use a set of items that considers the following activities:

- Going to:
  - theatre.
  - cinema.
  - discotheque or dance hall.
  - classical music concert, going to a concert of another type of music.
- Attending sporting events.
- Visiting a:
  - museum or an art exhibition.
  - monument or an archaeological site.

These items are all measured on a scale of the frequency with which the indicated behaviour was carried out during the last 12 months. This scale ranges from 1 ('never') to 5 ('more than 12 times'). To derive a synthetic index of cultural consumption<sup>2</sup>, we employ a factor analysis to compute factor scores.

Socio-political participation is measured according to the following set of items:

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<sup>1</sup> These are the individuals for those we observe all the variables considered in the analysis.

<sup>2</sup> The Cronbach's alpha for these items is 0.607.

- Participation in:
  - political party meetings.
  - trade union meetings.
  - voluntary associations.
  - ecological or civil rights associations.
  - cultural or recreational associations.
  - professional associations.
  - political public speech.
  - political parade.
- Listening to a political debate.

These nine items concern the performance of activities pertaining to the sphere of participation in the political life of one’s own community and, more generally, participation in social activities (cultural, civil rights, professional associations, etc.). All these items are dichotomous, taking value ‘1’ when that certain behaviour has occurred in the last 12 months, and value ‘0’ otherwise. Also in this case, we apply a factor analysis to compute a synthetic index of socio-cultural participation.<sup>3</sup>

Tab. 1. Descriptive statistics (N=113,289). Source: *Aspetti della vita quotidiana (2013-2021)*.

Outcomes		
	Mean	Std. dev.
Cultural consumption (standardized)	0.000	1.000
Socio-political participation (standardized)	0.000	1.000
Social contacts (meet)	0.498	0.500
Social contacts (count on)	0.599	0.490
Main independent variables		
Education	%	
No title	6.2	
Primary	30.1	
Lower secondary	28.2	
Upper secondary	26.0	
Tertiary	9.5	

<sup>3</sup> The Cronbach’s alpha for these items is 0.794.

Economic resources	%
Good	63.3
Insufficient	36.7
Health status	%
Good	87.6
Bad	12.4

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Social contacts are measured exploiting two variables: the frequency of meeting friends and the existence (or not) of friends you can count on. In the first case, the frequency of meeting friends is measured by a scale ranging from 1 ('I meet friends every day') to 7 ('I have no friends'). It has been coded as a dummy variable turning values from 1 to 3 into '1' and values from 4 to 7 into '0'. As far as the variable friends I can count on is concerned, it is basically already dichotomous, except for the possibility of the answer option 'I don't know', which we considered equivalent to the negative answer.

Our main independent variable is the educational level coded in five categories: 'no title', 'primary school', 'lower secondary school', 'upper secondary school', 'tertiary degree'. The other main independent variables are those that could play a mediating role: the economic resources available to the household and the self-perceived health status. Regarding the first variable, it measures the availability of economic resources for the family with reference to the last 12 months, by means of a 4-category scale ranging from 1 ('very good resources') to 4 ('absolutely insufficient resources'). We dichotomised this variable by combining the first two categories (1-2='good economic conditions') and the last two (3-4='bad economic conditions'). Similarly, self-reported health status, initially on a 5-point scale (1='very good' to 5='very bad'), was recoded as dichotomous by merging the first three categories (1-3='good health') and the last two (4-5='poor health').

## 2.2. Methods

The analytical strategy of the paper is based on a two-step analysis. The first step is the estimation of the total effect of education on the outcomes (i.e., cultural consumption, socio-political participation and social contacts). As for statistical computations, we opted for two different models that relate the educational level to variables with different measurement scales. In the first two cases, those relating, respectively, to the indexes of cultural consumption and



socio-cultural participation we used an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model since these variables are quantitative. In the other two cases, those relating respectively to the variables meeting with friends and friends you can count on, which are dichotomous variables, we used a logit model and to facilitate the comparisons we present average marginal effects (Mood, 2010). We use the same set of control variables that include gender, age, marital status, employment status, citizenship, living alone, size of the city, region and the year the survey was conducted.

The second step of our analysis involves the attempt to identify the mediating role played by economic resources and self-perceived health. To do this we employ structural equation modelling (Cain, 2021) to estimate the indirect effect, that is interpretable as the share of the total effect of education that is mediated by economic resources and health status.

### **3. EMPIRICAL RESULTS**

#### **3.1. Does education matter?**

Table 2 shows the results of the first step of our analysis (i.e., the identification of the total effect of education). All the models present average marginal effects using

the tertiary level of education as a reference category.<sup>4</sup> In general, lower levels of education are associated with significant reductions in cultural engagement and socio-political participation, with effect sizes increasing as educational attainment decreases. The effects of education appear more pronounced for Cultural consumption than for Socio-political participation. Across all educational levels below tertiary, the coefficients for cultural consumption are larger in magnitude than those for Socio-political participation, indicating that lower educational attainment has a stronger negative impact on cultural engagement than on socio-political involvement. For example, having only primary education, as opposed to tertiary, is associated with a reduction of 1.034 standard deviations in Cultural consumption, compared to a 0.565 standard deviation reduction in Socio-political participation. This pattern suggests that education level influences cultural engagement more strongly than socio-political participation, potentially highlighting a greater dependency

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<sup>4</sup> The first two outcomes are quantitative variables that have been standardized, meaning that the coefficient can be interpreted in terms of standard deviations. The other two outcomes are dichotomous variables, and the coefficients are then interpretable in terms of percentage points (pp) differences.

of cultural activities on educational attainment.

Regarding social contacts, lower education levels are associated with higher social isolation. For example, individuals with no formal education have a 13.7 pp lower probability of meeting friends compared to those with tertiary education, while this reduction amount to 25.2 pp in the likelihood of having someone to count on. Moreover, the emerging pattern suggests that lower educational attainment has a greater negative impact on the availability of reliable social support (count on) compared to simply meeting friends or acquaintances.

All in all, these results bring sound empirical evidence in support of our first hypothesis: education is a strong driver of social participation and help people in maintaining durable social connections.

Tab. 2. OLS (cultural and social participation) and logistic (isolation) regression models to estimate the role played by educational level. Source: *Aspetti della vita quotidiana (2013-2021)*.

	Cultural consumption		Socio-political participation		Social contacts (meet)		Social contacts (count on)	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Tertiary (ref.)								
Upper secondary	-	0.01	-	0.01	-	0.00	-	0.00
Lower secondary	0.572***	7	0.292***	4	0.027***	7	0.070***	6
Primary	-	0.01	-	0.01	-	0.00	-	0.00
No title	1.034***	6	0.493***	4	0.022***	7	0.122***	6
	-	0.01	-	0.01	-	0.00	-	0.00
	1.037***	7	0.565***	4	0.058***	7	0.183***	6
	-	0.01	-	0.01	-	0.01	-	0.00
	1.037***	7	0.590***	4	0.137***	0	0.252***	9
N	113,289		113,289		113,289		113,289	
R <sup>2</sup> /pseudo-R2	0.194		0.107		0.038		0.038	

### 3.2. The mediation effect of economic resources and health status

Table 3 reports the mediation effect of economic resources and health status. Our findings show that the mediation effects of both economic resources and health status are relatively modest for both cultural and social participation. This suggests that while economic resources and health do play a role, they are

not major pathways through which education influences participation in cultural and social activities. This might indicate that education’s impact on these types of participation is more direct or mediated by other factors, such as personal interests, social norms, or intrinsic motivations related to educational level.

In contrast, economic resources and health status have a far stronger mediating effect on contacts, particularly in the context of meeting with social contacts (38 pp for economic resources and 20.3 pp for health) and, to a lesser extent, on relying on social contacts (14.7 pp for economic resources and 3.5 pp for health). This indicates that economic and health resources are more crucial for maintaining and relying on social contacts, likely because these relationships may demand more resources—both financial (for travel, social activities) and health-related (physical ability to engage socially).

The evidence shown so far only partially corroborates our second hypothesis since a relevant mediating effect is in act only for social contacts.

Tab. 3. Mediation effect of economic resources and health status (N=113,289). Source: *Aspetti della vita quotidiana (2013-2021)*.

	Cultural consumption	Socio-political participation	Social contacts (meet)	Social contacts (count on)
Economic resources	3.7%	2.4%	38.0%	14.7%
Health status	0.7%	0.9%	20.3%	3.5%

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this paper we have analyzed the role played by education in shaping socio-cultural participation and social contacts of elderly people in Italy. Our results emphasize the positive role of education and show how it is mediated by economic resources and health status. In particular, cultural and social participation appear less dependent on economic and health resources, perhaps because they can be pursued individually or in more accessible, community-based contexts. In contrast, maintaining social contacts, especially face-to-face meetings, relies heavily on the availability of both financial and health resources. This distinction implies that educational attainment might facilitate social integration differently: it promotes cultural and social participation through pathways other than financial and health resources, while it supports social contacts more significantly through these resources.

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# DEVELOPING AGE-FRIENDLY CITIES FOR PROMOTING ACTIVE AGEING: STATE OF THE ART IN EUROPE

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The growing elderly population in society is considered an issue that needs to be addressed systematically to manage unescapable social and economic effects (Istat, 2023). Demographic ageing poses both a challenge and an opportunity in a society that is changing because of people's changing needs, and current expectations regarding longevity and quality of life (Boffo, 2022; Formenti, 2022). For this reason, the possibility of rethinking living spaces, public and private, as places that promote well-being and active ageing, defined as the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and safety in order to improve the quality of life of older people, assumes great importance (World Health Organization, 2002). Within this horizon, the contribution proposes some reflections on the state of the art outlined through a narrative literature review referring to the topic of 'active ageing' in the European context, in relation to the redevelopment and rethinking of urban contexts in an 'age-friendly' key (World Health Organization, 2023).

active ageing; 'age-friendly cities', 'learning cities', lifelong learning, urban regeneration.

## INTRODUCTION

Population ageing is one of the main demographic challenges that Europe has long been facing. According to projections by the World Health Organization (WHO), by 2050 the proportion of people aged 65 and over will account for more than a third of the population in many European countries, and 68% of people will live in urban areas, compared to 55% today<sup>1</sup>. This trend, which has already been underway for at least two decades, highlights the need to 'form ageing'

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/activities/creating-age-friendly-cities-and-communities> (11/2024).

(Boffo, 2022), rethink urban and social policies to support active ageing, and re-create 'age-friendly' cities that facilitate healthy, independent and socially inclusive living for all age groups (Buffel et al., 2012). From the pedagogical point of view, the challenge of ageing poses the need for a profound reflection on active ageing as a central theme in Adult Education, where the lifelong learning dimension becomes the paradigm of reference to support individuals, groups and communities within the ongoing transformation processes, at social and environmental level (Boffo, 2022). In this trajectory, the concept of the age-friendly city was born with the aim of promoting an urban environment that not only meets the needs of older people, but also promotes social inclusion and active participation in community life. This approach focuses on interventions to improve the accessibility and safety of public spaces, transport efficiency and infrastructure for social wellbeing (Phillipson, 2011).

Starting from these considerations, the aim of this paper is to outline the salient features of the state of the art in relation to research on age-friendly cities in Europe, focusing on initiatives and policies that are emerging as best practices to promote ageing. Understanding the evolution of city and community patterns in favour of longevity and active ageing is crucial to building a future in which every citizen can age in dignity and actively, with full participation in community life (Beard and Petitot, 2010).

## **1. METHOD**

The literature review undertaken (Ghirotto, 2020) moves from what was developed by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010) in connection with the Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities and Communities. The objective is to explore research experiences in the field of Adult & Continuing Education (cf. Egetenmeyer, Boffo and Kröner, 2020) in tune with processes of urban regeneration aimed at overcoming the structural fragilities of contemporary cities by looking at the model of learning cities (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2014).

The framework of the review is based on a broad investigation question that intends to bring out the models of cities in support of longevity and active ageing that have been widespread in Europe over the last two decades. The related objectives concern the possibility of intercepting the main factors that have driven the debate on the creation of older adult-friendly cities in order to highlight their limits and opportunities, and to bring out possible options for the evolution of social policies focused on the needs of the elderly population in

European urban areas.

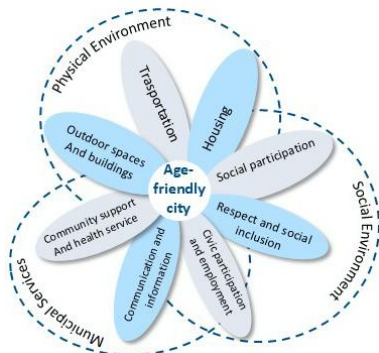
The method implemented is the narrative literature review approach, which here takes the form of an initial approach to the study of the phenomenon, with the assumption of a source search strategy based on clusters of key words referring to the subjects under investigation ('older people' 'older learners' 'eldest'), the context ('community/ties'; 'city/ties' 'urban development'; 'regeneration from below'), the phenomenon ('active ageing') and the intervention model ('age friendly'). These keywords were combined into search strings via the Boolean operators 'AND' 'OR' within the Eric, Scopus, WoS, Emerald Google Scholar databases. Leading international journals in the pedagogical and multidisciplinary fields were also considered, with access to numerous contributions consistent with the review question.

## 2. RESEARCH RESULTS

### 2.1. Evolving the city idea for active ageing

The idea of 'active ageing' was originally developed during the United Nations' Year of Older People in 1999 and further elaborated by the World Health Organization (2002). The same idea was further developed in 2006, when the WHO launched the research project 'Global Age-friendly Cities'. On this occasion, focus groups involving older adults, caregivers and stakeholders in the service area and the third sector were conducted in 33 cities on all continents to identify the factors that make urban settings 'age-friendly'. Eight key issues emerged from the discussion round tables that need to be taken into account in order to make cities 'friendly for all ages' and not only 'friendly for the elderly' (Fig. 1). The results of this research led to the development of the WHO Age-Friendly Approach outlined in the 2007 document *Global age-friendly cities: a guide*, where active ageing is focused on as a framework for age-friendly cities.

Fig. 1. Age-friendly city topic areas. Source: Jackisch J. et. al. (2015), p. 109.



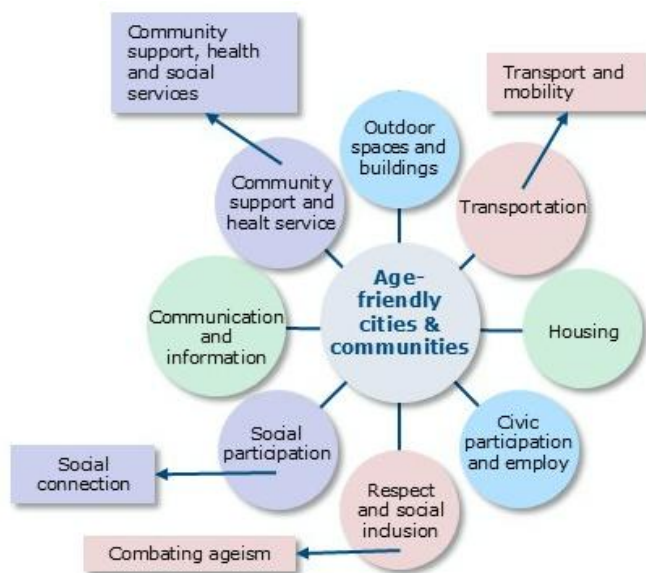


Subsequently, in response to requests for support from cities and national governments, the WHO launched the *Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities* (2010). The mission of this Network is to stimulate and enable cities, and other sub-national levels of government, around the world to become increasingly 'age-friendly'. It can be argued that the WHO Guide published in 2007 and the creation of the Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities in 2010 were milestones in providing support for three key themes: older people and development; lifelong health and wellbeing; and environments that enable and support the health and wellbeing of all, across the lifespan. In 2018, the WHO publishes a report to provide a global overview of the progress made by the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities: from the 47 cities initially involved, after eight years, this has increased to 760 participating cities and communities globally. At this time, three years after the launch of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is now clear that the creation of age-friendly cities and communities is a priority, and that the attribute 'age-friendly' no longer applies only to cities, but also to communities, underlining the urgency of involving society at all levels, from the micro to the macro level (WHO, 2018).

In 2020, the United Nations General Assembly declares 2021-2030 as the 'Decade of Active Ageing', identifying as a priority action to support communities that foster capacity-building for older adults, recognising the importance of rethinking cities and communities as contexts where everyone can live well and longer. An important point to note is that with the 'Decade of Active Ageing' (2021-2030), the United Nations aligns the theme of active ageing with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda to improve the lives of older people, their families and the communities in which they live. In 2023, a new 'Guide to National Programmes for Age-Friendly Cities and Communities' was published, which represents further progress towards the evolution of cities that promote health and wellbeing also in old age, built with this 'street-by-street, neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood' purpose (WHO, 2023).

Starting from the two 'Guides to Age-Friendly Cities and Communities' of 2007 and 2023, it is possible to define the factors that make urban contexts 'age-friendly', based on structural characteristics, environmental care, services and policies that reflect the determinants of active ageing (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Age-friendly cities and communities topic areas. Source: WHO, *National Programmes for Age-friendly Cities and Communities: A guide*, 2023, p. 6



In particular, the Guide published in 2023 emphasises the issue of involving older adults in the development and maintenance of age-friendly environments as a crucial goal for social policies.

## 2.2. Age-friendly city models

In accordance with this synthesis of the evolution of the studied topic, which urban model can intercept the demands of ‘age-friendly’ cities? In this regard, Lido, Osborne and colleagues (2016), in the context of research on the importance of learning for older adults carried out in the city of Glasgow, approximate the model of ‘ageing friendly’ cities formulated by the WHO (2007), to the model of cities for lifelong learning. This investigation collected 1,500 questionnaires completed by families of residents with the aim of drawing a ‘three-dimensional’ picture of lifelong learning in the urban context of Glasgow. In addition, 1,300 of the families involved included 377 older adults. The data from these participants provided insight into the engagement of older learners in formal, non-formal and in-formal learning contexts. The results of the survey indicate that, in the participant group, older people involved in lifelong education and training processes, often characterised by the intergenerational dimension, were more likely to take care of themselves and to enjoy better health overall. Furthermore, long-term disabilities in the elderly were found to

be associated with lower engagement in non-formal learning activities. At the end of the research, Lido, Osborne and colleagues consider the ‘learning cities’ model as an urban model for learning in a holistic dimension, which therefore also takes on the ‘age-friendly’ dimension. According to the UNESCO Lifelong Institute, in fact, a ‘learning city’ is a city that effectively mobilises its resources in every sector to promote inclusive learning from basic to higher education; revitalise learning in families and communities; facilitate learning for and in the workplace; extend the use of modern learning technologies for all; improve the quality and excellence of learning; and promote a lifelong learning culture (Boffo and Biagioli, 2023). Such a city model aims to strengthen individual empowerment and social cohesion, economic and cultural prosperity and sustainable development, setting itself as an important reference also for age-friendly cities and communities, combining the active role of space in both shaping the individual and promoting well-being.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

It is now clear that ‘good’ ageing is not only a health issue, but has a broader social profile and requires investment in prevention, general risk reduction, and education at a systemic level (Togni, 2021). This requires the development of new forms of solidarity and intervention that promote intergenerational cooperation based on mutual support and exchange of experiences and skills (Chianese and Cornacchia, 2022).

The literature review conducted highlights intergenerational dialogue as a foundational element in the development of age-friendly cities. For instance, intergenerational participation within educational and training processes in/for bottom-up regeneration plays a key role in ensuring that such regenerative phenomena are inclusive, sustainable and representative of diverse community needs (cf. European Parliament, European Council, 2011; Lido, Osborne, Livingston, et. al. 2016), as confirmed by the international debate on the ‘learning city’ model (Osborne e Piazza, 2023). For this reason, research on ‘age-friendly’ city models can only be interconnected with the investigation of community strategies, starting with good practices for active ageing, in the lifelong and lifewide learning perspective substantiated by the centrality of competences for life, through which it is possible to face the challenge of ageing.

### Acknowledgements

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# “UNIVERSITÀ DELL’ETÀ LIBERA” FOR ACTIVE AGEING. FOSTERING WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN LATER LIFE

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This study investigates how foreign language learning fosters active ageing, focusing on a case study of the University of the Third Age in Florence. Grounded in the LifeComp model, it investigates the educational and cognitive impact of language courses on older adults at the University of Florence’s Language Center. Semi-structured interviews with three participants, conducted before and after a Spanish language course, revealed a predominance of learning-to-learn competencies, alongside personal and social skills. Key factors such as cross-generational dynamics, personalised teaching, and a supportive environment emerged as transformative elements. The findings confirm that language courses support self-regulation, metacognition, and active citizenship, contributing to cognitive engagement, emotional well-being, and inclusion. This study highlights the potential of lifelong learning to promote successful ageing and active participation in later life.

active ageing; lifelong learning; languages learning; life-comp; U3A

## INTRODUCTION

This study explores the role of foreign language learning in later life, focusing on educational processes that promote active ageing (Boffo, 2022) and develop life skills through the LifeComp model (Sala, Punie, Garkov & Cabrera, 2020). It centres on a unique case study of the University of the Third Age in Florence, a service yet to be thoroughly examined. The research aims to investigate how participation in language courses can facilitate the transition to retirement

(Cachioni et al., 2021), foster social inclusion and active citizenship (Togni, 2022), and deepen participants' awareness of LifeComp competencies. By framing language learning as a tool for lifelong development, the study also highlights its potential in addressing the challenges of ageing populations in contemporary society. Grounded in the LifeComp framework, the study analyses the socio-demographic profiles and autobiographical narratives of retirees participating in language courses at the CLA (Language Center of the University of Florence), in collaboration with the University of the Third Age (Università dell'Età Libera, UEL). The analysis seeks to uncover how these educational experiences influence the development of key competencies for active ageing, while emphasising the transformative potential of language learning for personal and social growth.

## **1. STATE OF THE ART**

This section provides the conceptual framework that situates the key elements of this study. Within the broader demographic trend of population ageing, this research focuses on exploring the educational processes involved in learning a foreign language in later life. A significant aspect of this context lies in the role of universities of the third age (U3As), which offer older adults opportunities for lifelong learning and social engagement. As highlighted by Balboni (1996) and Cachioni et al. (2021), U3As play a pivotal role in fostering active participation and well-being among older learners. The current demographic revolution demands a radical shift in how ageing is perceived, moving from an association with decline to an emphasis on active engagement and lifelong learning (Formosa, 2021). This shift is echoed in the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) guidelines (2021), which emphasise the integration of ageing as a core policy objective. In this context, educational interventions are powerful tools for promoting cognitive, social, and emotional well-being. According to Boffo (2022), lifelong learning is not only a personal responsibility but also a societal opportunity for growth and development. In particular, language learning emerges as a pivotal activity, enhancing cognitive flexibility and fostering social engagement among older adults (Serra Borneto, 2007; Cardona & Luise, 2018). The European LifeComp framework (Sala et al., 2020), which organises competencies into personal, social, and learning-to-learn domains, provides the theoretical foundation for this study. This model is particularly relevant for ageing populations, as it addresses cognitive decline while fostering a proactive approach to ageing care. The growing interest in foreign language courses among older adults is well-documented. Gómez



Bedoya (2008) and Villarini & La Grassa (2010) identify motivations such as self-fulfilment, cognitive engagement, and adapting to multilingual societies, while Yi-Yin (2011) highlights the importance of personal growth and meaningful engagement in education later in life. Building on these foundations, this research investigates how language learning fosters active ageing and develops competencies aligned with the LifeComp framework. This approach addresses Togni's (2022) critique of the limited public discourse on the role of education in supporting longevity. By situating this study within the broader discourse on ageing and education, it contributes to the growing body of evidence on the transformative potential of lifelong learning. Language learning, in particular, is highlighted as a dynamic and impactful context for promoting well-being, inclusion, and active participation among ageing populations (UNECE, 2019; Formosa, 2021).

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology focuses on the qualitative analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with three students enrolled in the Spanish courses at CLA/UEL. This approach, well-suited to educational-linguistic research, combines structural rigour with flexibility, facilitating the exploration of emergent themes and capturing the intricacies of learning experience. The interviews, conducted both pre- and post-course, were analysed through the lens of the LifeComp model. Each excerpt was examined to identify which competence indicators the informants explicitly mentioned in their narratives.

This approach provides a deeper understanding of LifeComp-related categories within the context of autobiographical accounts, enabling insights into the learners' experiences, their competencies, and the transformative impact of the language course.

An example of annotation is:

E.g. (1): SPK\_1 – Ok. Tornando al corso che sta seguendo adesso, perché ha scelto lo spagnolo?

SPK\_2 – Allora io potevo scegliere l'inglese, però ho questa sensazione, non so se giusto o sbagliata (P1.1 + P1.2), che il mio cervello ha raggiunto la saturazione nell'apprendimento dell'inglese (L2.1), cioè quello che dovevo imparare l'ho imparato (L2.2) e non si va oltre (L1.3). Invece mi piaceva cimentarmi con lo studio di una lingua che non avevo mai studiato (P1.1 + L3.1),

perché più nuova (L3.1), e quindi pensavo che anche il mio cervello fosse meglio disposto (L1.1 + L1.2)<sup>1</sup>.

The abbreviations (e.g., P1.1., L2.1) represent the areas of the LifeComp model: personal (P), social (S), or learning to learn (L), with numerical indices indicating specific competencies and descriptors<sup>2</sup>. In some fragments, multiple LifeComp elements were observed, leading to the application of multiple labels when necessary. A decrease in occurrences was noted in the final interviews compared to the initial ones, likely due to the different focus of the interviews: the initial ones provided detailed descriptions of the participants, while the final ones concentrated on the learning process, without reiterating previously covered data.

The analysis of annotations and the overall text interpretation allowed for the profiling of the participants' competencies and an exploration of their potential evolution after the language course. To better contextualise the findings, we first present an overview of the participants' profiles, which form the basis of the qualitative analysis.

### 3. SAMPLE PROFILING

This section outlines the participants' professional and educational backgrounds, alongside their current engagement in language learning. The profiles reveal shared characteristics such as age, retirement status, and enrollment in A1-level Spanish courses at the CLA, while also highlighting their unique educational and professional trajectories. These insights provide a solid foundation for understanding the participants' motivations and experiences throughout the learning process. The three subjects in the analysis sample were selected as participants in the Spanish courses offered by the CLA.

The three informants are retired women aged 70-71 with diverse professional and educational backgrounds. Informants A and B hold degrees in architecture and worked as architects, while Informant C has a degree in pharmacy and is currently pursuing a bachelor's in art history at the University of Florence. All

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<sup>1</sup> SPK\_1 - Ok. Going back to the course you are currently taking, why did you choose Spanish?

SPK\_2 - Well, I could have chosen English, but I have this feeling—I'm not sure if it's right or wrong—that my brain has reached a saturation point with learning English; I've learned what I needed to, and I can't go further. Instead, I liked the idea of trying to study a language I had never studied before, because it was new to me, and I thought that my brain would be more receptive.

<sup>2</sup> The indicators refer to the structure of the LifeComp model, which, for the sake of brevity, is not included in this analysis. For further details, please refer to the full text of the model available at the following link: [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/lifecomp\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/lifecomp_en).

three studied French at different points in their lives; informants A and B for personal or professional reasons, and Informant C for academic purposes.

Additionally, they all speak English and are currently enrolled in an A1-level Spanish course at CLA. These profiles reveal a common predisposition towards structured learning environments, likely influenced by their educational and professional backgrounds. This predisposition aligns with the strong emphasis on learning to learn competencies observed in the participants, as their prior academic and professional experiences seem to have fostered a metacognitive approach to learning.

The following section presents the results of the LifeComp indicators identified in the narratives. The participant profiles outlined above provide a foundation for interpreting the data and understanding the trends in LifeComp awareness.

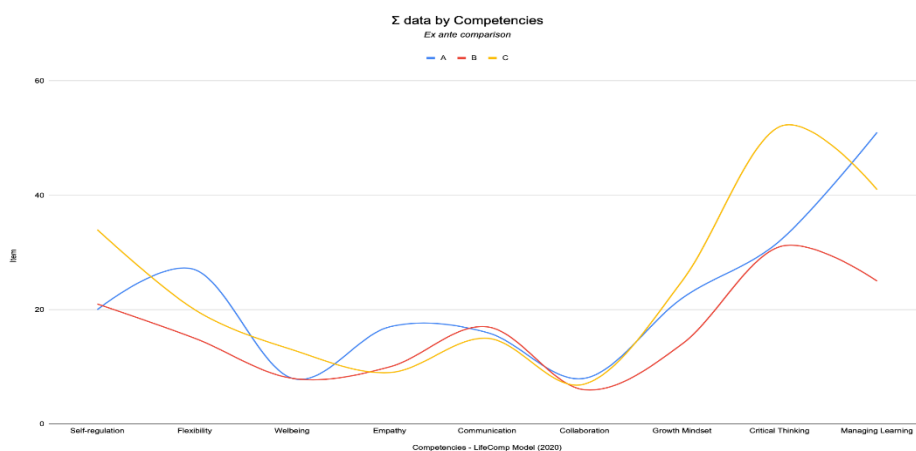
#### **4. DISCUSSION OF THE DATA**

Regarding the profiles of our informants, we observe that there aren't substantial idiosyncratic differences in the LifeComp indicators present among the three interviewees. All informants demonstrate competence across the three areas of the model, with a clear predominance of Learning to learn skills. The figures illustrate this distribution, with the competencies organised in groups of three, corresponding to the personal, social, and learning to learn domains, as defined by the LifeComp framework.

The first figure (fig. 1) illustrates the relationships between the profiles of the three informants and the performance of the competences based on the initial interview results. In contrast, the second figure (fig. 2) highlights the data gathered during the final interview, providing a comparative perspective on the findings. These findings reflect the socio-familial characteristics of the subjects, such as a high level of schooling, a professional life enabling an adequate pension, and a supportive family context that allows time for self-development. These attributes suggest a conscious, informed, and active ageing process. Analysing the first indicators present in the interviews helps describe the profiles of the informants and identify trends in LifeComp awareness before and after the language course. Notably, students over 55 tend to emphasise more positive aspects of the learning environment than younger students, as supported by literature (Gómez Bedoya, 2008). Participants expressed high appreciation for the lecturer, who fostered a relaxed and positive teaching climate. Moreover, the presence of young students in the group, initially perceived as a source of stress, was ultimately recognized as an enriching

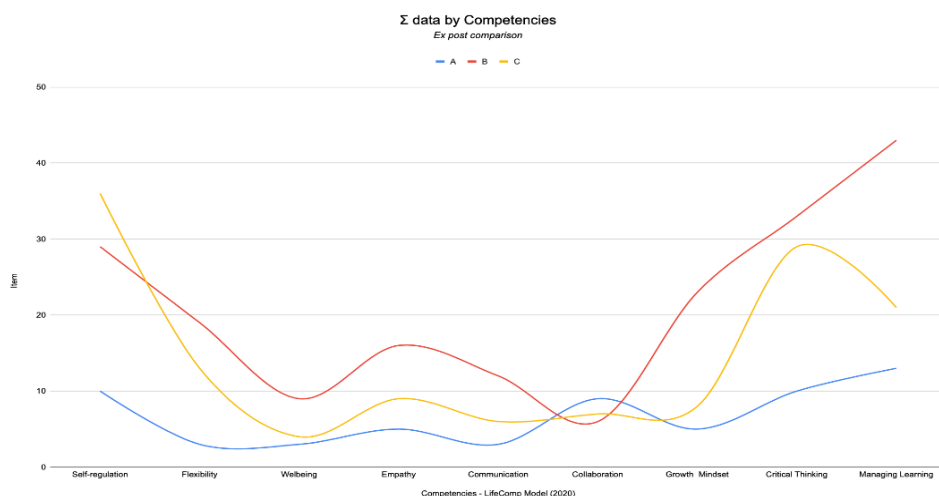
experience. Beyond individual differences, the core competencies remained consistent across interviews, with peaks predominantly in Learning to learn skills. Notable peaks also appeared in P1.1 (self-regulation), a key indicator of active ageing. High self-regulation competence likely explains the participation of these individuals in actions aimed at ageing care, such as foreign language courses. This competence reflects a greater awareness of emotions, thoughts, and behaviours, as well as the ability to manage them effectively, which contributes to successful ageing. The prevalence of Learning to learn skills – encompassing growth mindset, critical thinking, and managing learning – may stem from the participants’ academic and cultural backgrounds, which foster a metacognitive approach to learning. The profiles of the informants embody the essence of lifelong learning.

Fig. 1: Relationship between the profiles of the three informants and evolution of the indicators during the first interview. Edited by the authors.



Examining the evolution of LifeComp indicators after the course, we note that L2.1 (critical thinking) decreases in all final interviews. While unexpected, this reduction might reflect increased confidence in the learning process, leading participants to articulate competencies less explicitly. However, alternative explanations, such as differences in interview focus or participant adaptation to the context, cannot be excluded. This nuance underscores the importance of further investigation to deepen our understanding of how learning experiences shape the expression and awareness of competencies over time. The analysis highlights consistent patterns in competencies and learning dynamics, offering valuable insights into the transformative potential of language courses for active ageing.

Fig. 2: Relationship between the profiles of the three informants and evolution of the indicators during the second interview. Edited by the authors.



## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The findings confirm the initial hypothesis that foreign language learning fosters a prototypical profile of active ageing, characterised by strong self-regulation and learning-to-learn competencies. Participants benefited from a combination of personalised teaching, cross-generational interaction, and a supportive learning environment, which enhanced their cognitive and emotional well-being. These factors collectively highlight the transformative potential of language learning not only as an educational activity but as a tool for improving quality of life and promoting lifelong engagement. While social competencies were less prominent, the study underscores the broader potential of language learning to foster inclusion, personal growth, and resilience in later life. Notably, the presence of younger learners, initially perceived as a source of stress, evolved into an enriching dynamic, suggesting that intergenerational interaction within educational contexts deserves further exploration. As an exploratory study with a small, context-specific sample, its findings are not broadly generalizable. However, they provide a foundation for future research, which should aim to expand the sample size, include participants from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and adopt mixed-method approaches. Incorporating longitudinal designs or assessing the long-term effects of language learning on active ageing could further elucidate the enduring benefits of such interventions. Additionally, integrating quantitative metrics alongside

qualitative insights would enable a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between language learning, competency development, and ageing well.

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# AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND QUALITY LONGEVITY

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What role do autobiographical narratives play in the process of longevity? Can life stories contribute to fostering and activating potential in late adulthood? This study seeks to answer these questions by reflecting on the formative and educational outcomes that recounting one's past experiences can trigger throughout the lifespan. Drawing directly from the perspective of Narrative Gerontology, a field of study that uses narratives to gain a deeper understanding of aging, this paper aims to establish a connection between autobiographical narratives and the goals of a pedagogy of longevity. The objective is to identify new pathways for research and educational action that promote Active Aging and respond to the social transformations we are witnessing.

longevity; autobiography; active ageing

## 1. THE HUMAN ACT OF NARRATION AS A LIFELONG ASSERTION OF SELF

It is widely acknowledged that the reality in which humans live possesses a profound and immersive narrative dimension (Ferraro, 2020). The act of narration represents one of the cornerstones of human *Physis*, having historically facilitated the essential connections that built communities and enabled the creation and transmission of culture. Moreover, narration penetrates the most intimate levels of an individual, influencing thought patterns and the fundamental structures of identity, to the point where one can speak of a 'narrative identity' (Ricoeur, 1991).

Thus, the formative process itself, fuelled by the human desire to achieve a sense of form from a state of current incompleteness, is also narrative in nature, allowing individuals to assert themselves throughout their lives. For these reasons, there is no distinction between formation—understood as a process of subjective shaping—and narration—understood as a process of acquiring



meaning through self-assertion.

Pedagogy has extensively emphasized the virtuous link between narration and formation (Gennari, 2014). The autobiographical perspective, in particular, has received significant attention, primarily because it is recognized as a tool for self-care. As highlighted by Demetrio (1996), narrating one's life allows individuals to 'become other' than themselves, activating a process of giving meaning and re-signifying their lived experiences. This enables individuals to revisit pivotal events in their journeys, which might initially appear fragmented and disconnected, in order to trace a coherent thread that provides direction and meaning. Additionally, it can restore value to seemingly ordinary moments that may conceal a hidden and unexpected wealth of meanings. This reflective weaving unfolds across various dimensions of a person's life—such as familial, social, and professional—promoting self-development.

However, the process inevitably involves confronting the pains and losses that characterize every life trajectory, opening the possibility of mending what represents fractures and ruptures in the fabric of one's life. Autobiographical narration can thus outline a possible horizon of orientation, where, by looking back at the past, individuals can navigate the uncertainties of the present and future.

This potential becomes even more urgent and essential for those living in the disenchantment of postmodernity (Cambi, 2006), who have witnessed the disintegration of the grand 'Metanarratives' long regarded as reliable compasses for guiding individual development. Telling one's story becomes a way of 'centring oneself', attributing meaning to oneself, and, above all, embarking on a journey that is transformative and therefore formative.

In narrating one's life, an individual decides to share their truth: a truth that, while rooted in a strictly subjective perspective, acquires precious value as a testimony of one of the many diverse realities of human experience. By weaving together the biographical threads of another person's self-narrative, one gains a glimpse into new landscapes to explore, each carrying values and meanings that can be drawn upon, granting deeper understanding of the uniqueness of every existence. It is for this reason—and for the inevitable and fascinating 'beyond' inherent in human life—that research has developed biographical and autobiographical methodologies to investigate what might otherwise remain undetected. The autobiographical-narrative approach, carefully collecting life stories, has thus become a scientific pathway to explore the often-hidden and unspoken nuances of humanity (Poggio, 2004).

## 2. THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF NARRATIVE GERONTOLOGY

Among the various fields of study that have integrated narratives into their research trajectories, Gerontology stands out as particularly illustrative. During the last decade of the 20th century, *Narrative Gerontology* emerged (Kenyon & Randall, 1999), a perspective aimed at recognizing the scientific and cognitive value of life stories in late adulthood. Many of these stories would otherwise risk going unheard, leading to the loss of the wealth of experiences they embody (Blix, 2017). This approach seeks to emphasize the diverse ‘internal viewpoints’ within the aging phase of life, making them privileged witnesses whose narrated experiences can offer new ways of understanding the specificities of the aging process.

In this sense, Kate de Medeiros describes Narrative Gerontology as “a lens through which to see aging, specifically through how experience is put into story form and what those stories say” (2017, 15). From this description, a spectrum of opportunities emerges for pedagogy—not only as a discipline accompanying individuals in acquiring new forms throughout their existential trajectory but also in its reflective function regarding the formative processes inherent in narrative acts, particularly autobiographical ones.

One could envision a pathway branching out from the *macro* level into *meso* and *micro* levels, unveiling stimulating (albeit perhaps utopian) pedagogical implications of Narrative Gerontology. These implications contribute to centring longevity as a crucial category in discussions about aging, reaffirming the importance of consistently fostering existential planning at every age. Promoting quality longevity, linked to the widely discussed and emphasized theme of Active Aging, necessarily involves addressing the dominant representations and narratives of late adulthood, which often impoverish the view of this stage by neglecting some aspects while overemphasizing others (de Medeiros, 2016).

By rejecting a complex image that acknowledges the myriad facets each individual embodies, society opts instead for prejudiced stereotypes—such as the myth of elderly wisdom or the spectre of entering an undesirable period of decline and loss, inevitably leading toward an end. These representations are further shaped by the sensationalized narratives of extraordinary feats achieved by older adults, portrayed as so exceptional and unrepeatable that they distance the concepts of strength, agency, and capability from daily life and ordinariness. Such social images, inevitably influencing the self-representations individuals construct, may lead to the rejection and non-acceptance of aging (Moscato,

2014), directly compromising the capacity for existential (re)planning that underpins every formative process. A fundamental objective of a pedagogy of longevity could thus be to deconstruct these dominant, simplistic, and often demeaning representations of old age. This could be achieved by promoting new narratives that restore the multifaceted complexity of this phase, drawing from the experiences recounted by its direct protagonists.

With quality longevity goals in mind, and moving toward micro and intrapersonal dimensions, autobiographical narration in late adulthood can serve as a valuable tool for fostering a culture of self-care (Cambi, 2010). This approach activates cathartic processes that enhance awareness of one's trajectory, still in progress and constantly evolving, opening it to countless opportunities and possibilities for planning.

The theme of self-care, which should be a core category of every educational journey from childhood onward, becomes in this context a pedagogical and educational guideline accompanying an entire lifetime. It underscores the importance of developing and disseminating autobiographical narrative skills for constructing one's past, present, and future story. These skills, complementing the life skills outlined in the *LifeComp* framework (Sala et al., 2020)<sup>1</sup>, can help individuals face the challenges, transitions, and uncertainties typical of the present age.

This is particularly relevant to old age, keeping in mind the objectives of Narrative Gerontology while simultaneously pursuing the utopian aim of pedagogy: to support the journey toward new forms of self-realization by providing tools to counter and overcome opposing forces, which, in this context, are predominantly represented by the disabling effects of aging.

### **3. PEDAGOGY OF LONGEVITY: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATION FOR THE 'ACTIVE' CARE OF AGING**

“It is observed that difficulty in narrativizing one's life experience can lead to severe depression or even a decision to commit suicide” (Ferraro, 2020, 27). With these words, the discussion on the importance of fostering a daily narrative dimension continues, emphasizing its beneficial and healing effects, which, in the specific context of late adulthood, can counteract otherwise paralyzing and

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<sup>1</sup> The framework was developed by the European Commission in 2020 and outlines the competencies deemed necessary to navigate the fluidity of today's world. The nine *life competences*, divided into three areas (personal, social, and learning to learn), are: self-regulation, flexibility, wellbeing, empathy, communication, collaboration, growth mindset, critical thinking and managing learning.

depleting tendencies. The risk of ‘narrative atrophy’ (Randall, 2019, 86), stemming from the lack of opportunities to share one’s story or from the absence of listeners, becomes particularly acute in later life, especially in situations marked by profound loneliness (Florenzano, 2022)<sup>2</sup> or by changes often experienced as biographical ruptures brought about by the passage of time. Consider, for instance, the transition from work to retirement, a pivotal moment that may be greeted with enthusiasm or with deep anguish at the closure of a life chapter. Alternatively, reflect on the inevitable losses faced, which grow more frequent with advancing years. Given these circumstances, the pedagogical perspective must shift from a focus on absence to a focus on presence, highlighting and promoting what narration can ‘offer’.

Evidence suggests that encouraging the recollection and sharing of autobiographical events in late adulthood is associated with an increase in positive emotions (Cappeliez et al., 2008) and enhanced resilience (Randall, 2013)—resources that are undeniably valuable for navigating the challenges of aging. As discussed earlier, the narration of one’s experience emerges as a tool with both formative and educational functions, creating optimal conditions for individuals to continue their journey autonomously.

As education and training professionals and scholars of the human life cycle, we are called to act on multiple fronts. On one hand, from a social and preventive perspective, we must promote a culture of longevity starting from early life stages, leveraging insights from Narrative Gerontology. On the other hand, we should design educational pathways that foster skills for telling and retelling life stories.

Finally, to establish continuity, it becomes imperative to reflect on how to ensure spaces and times dedicated to the storytelling of others, so they never feel that their story has reached its conclusion. This can be achieved through an act of decentring—fully embracing the narratively articulated life experience that the other shares with us. This goal should guide the construction of effective educational relationships with children, adolescents, and undoubtedly adults of all ages: a genuine ‘I care’ that drives every educational action. Such an objective aligns with the aspirations of a pedagogy for Active Aging in an increasingly long-lived society.

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<sup>2</sup> As highlighted by Florenzano, in Italy, an increasing number of people over 75 live alone, and their numbers appear to be on the rise.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Acknowledging the central role that narration plays in the daily lives of individuals—and its potential to improve their quality of life—opens new avenues for exploration, including direct engagement with adults and the older people. For instance, studying their perceptions of the presence or absence of a narrative dimension and its effects in their reality could increase awareness of its importance, activating reflective processes that lead to positive changes in habits.

This direction could be pursued through autobiographical methodologies, elevating narration to a meta-level: a *narrating the narrated* approach that promotes the development of new competencies for longevity.

This is just one of the emerging and promising perspectives in the field of pedagogical research, an opportunity to be seized promptly given the ongoing transformations of our time.

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# SOCIAL MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY. A STUDY ON ITALIAN INFLUENCERS

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This qualitative study aims to explore the role of disability influencers on social media, delving into the challenges they encounter and the positive aspects emerging from their interactions with followers. This study also aims to emphasise the transformative impact of disability influencers on the traditional narrative, challenging stereotypes and promoting a more authentic and inclusive image of people with disabilities. In terms of methodology, the study is based on semi-structured interviews involving three Italian influencers. The study explores various key themes, such as understanding how these influencers navigate the landscape of social media, a detailed examination of the instances of online hatred they have faced through their journey as influencers and their perspectives on sexuality — often a particularly sensitive topic, especially when associated with disability.

Disability; Social Media; Digital Society; Sexuality; Social Inclusion

## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape, technological evolution has sparked an extraordinary revolution in communication and social interaction. Social media are at the core of this transformation and, in recent years, their exponential growth has significantly shaped society, influencing lifestyles, opinions and economic models. In this context, Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have emerged as undisputed protagonists, playing a key role in shaping the perceptions and decisions of big online audiences. SMIs are generally divided into four categories based on the number of followers they have: nano-influencers have between 1k and 10k followers; micro-influencers have between 10k and 100k followers; macro-influencers have between 100k and 1

million followers; and mega-influencers tend to have more than 1 million followers (Social Studies 2022). The role of disability influencers is a crucial aspect that has very recently gained increasing relevance. This article aims to explore the revolutionary role played by social media, with a specific focus on the voice of disability influencers and how they contribute to shaping the public perception of disability. To understand this phenomenon, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with three Italian influencers who have been providing glimpses into their daily lives on their social accounts. This research adopts a theoretical approach rooted in Disability Studies. In contrast to the conventional medical paradigm, which frequently views disability as a condition necessitating correction or cure, our positioning aligns with a social and critical perspective. We view disability as a social construct, extending beyond its purely biological or medical dimensions. The theoretical framework of Disability Studies provides us with the conceptual tools necessary to explore disability as a social construct, extensively influenced by cultural, political and economic factors (Beacom & Kendall 2016). This approach enables a nuanced analysis of power dynamics, structural inequalities and social representations that significantly shape the experiences of individuals with disabilities. The disadvantages commonly attributed to the disabled are no longer seen as a form of biological difference, but rather as the product of specific social processes. The traditional dichotomy of norm/deficit becomes obsolete, shifting the focus towards disabling conditions caused by society (Pasciuto, Cava & Falzone 2023). This study also aims to emphasise the transformative impact of disability influencers on the traditional narrative, challenging stereotypes and promoting a more authentic and inclusive image of people with disabilities. Special attention has also been paid to the realm of sexuality, an integral part of every human being's life but often ignored when discussing individuals with disabilities. Addressing barriers related to sexuality is crucial in our society, where representations of sexuality are pervasive – in the media, in advertising, art and elsewhere – but become an immediate taboo when discussing disabled bodies. By fostering a more open approach to the intersection of sex and disability, these influencers play a crucial role in encouraging followers to understand that sexuality is an intrinsic aspect of everyone's life.

## **1. THE ROLE OF DISABLED INFLUENCERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

Among the many voices that manage to emerge online today, disability influencers have emerged as the promoters of a crucial transformation in the perception of disability, challenging stereotypes, breaking down barriers and



encouraging a more inclusive and authentic representation of disabled people. The diversity of the experiences represented is helping to dismantle the monolithic idea of disability, emphasising the uniqueness of each person and demonstrating that disability does not define their identity. The presence of disability influencers on the web is proving invaluable in challenging the dualistic and polarised portrayal of disability, a clear trend in mainstream media representations (Worrel 2018). Despite advancements, disability remains inadequately represented in the media (Melchior 2023) and, when it does feature, it often conforms to a narrative casting disabled protagonists either as exceptional heroes endowed with extraordinary strength and courage or as victims in need of salvation (Ellis & Goggin 2015). This narrative tends to accentuate the emotional dimension associated with disability. Furthermore, as highlighted by Foster and Pettinicchio (2022), representations of disabled individuals in sectors such as advertising and fashion — domains significantly influenced by social media — have garnered notably positive responses from consumers. This appears to forge new pathways in shaping broader socio-cultural norms and values. However, presenting a realistic perspective on disability remains imperative. Even within the realm of social media-mediated marketing, there is a persistent tendency to portray disabled individuals as a source of inspiration based exclusively on their disabilities (Shelton & Waddel 2021). This perpetuates what has been termed “inspiration porn” (Young 2012), referring to stereotypical representations of people with disabilities. Inspiration porn has the potential to turn the everyday lives of people with disabilities into a show. For Young, by frequently neglecting, this narrative contributes to a distorted and superficial perspective. It is crucial to acknowledge that disability is a complex and multifaceted issue that intersects with various aspects of human life. Disability can present itself in various forms, involving both conspicuous indications and subtler yet equally impactful hurdles. On the one hand, there are obvious disabilities, which may involve noticeable physical or sensory conditions. These constitute tangible challenges, readily observable by external peoples and often fostering heightened awareness and understanding within society. On the other hand, there are invisible disabilities, which may encompass cognitive, neurological and mental health challenges. These conditions are often not immediately apparent to others, rendering the experience of disability more complex and occasionally challenging to convey. With regard to sexuality, the negative perception of disabled people’s sexuality is linked to the process known in Disability Studies as disablement. Moreover, this perspective posits that society labels individuals as truly disabled through

actions that categorise them as different from the norm. In the context of disablement, it is noteworthy to observe instances of online hatred targeting disabled individuals, especially influencers who reach higher visibility on social media (Hollomotz 2013). Therefore, the social-media presence of disability influencers who openly share their own experiences with disability, or that of a family member, plays a crucial role in today's society. In contrast to inspiration porn, which reduces disability to a mere symbol of courage and determination, influencers who discuss their own disabilities or those of their loved ones offer a complete and human picture, showcasing the complexity of life with a disability. Therefore, despite the persisting challenges, particularly among young people (Borgström, Daneback & Molin 2019), social media has undeniably created extensive opportunities for individuals with disabilities. These include enhancements in their quality of life, improved access to education and the positive reinforcement of their interpersonal relationships (Bonilla del Rio et al. 2022).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The semi-structured interview methodology was chosen for this research study. This approach was selected because it allows for the integration of predefined structural elements with the flexibility needed to explore participants' responses thoroughly. We interviewed three Italian influencers, representing a variety of perspectives and experiences. These interviews offered valuable insight into how disability is represented and addressed in digital contexts. Among the nano-influencers, we met a deaf girl and LIS performer, who shares her experiences on LinkedIn and Instagram; among the macro-influences, we interviewed a girl with an upper limb malformation, who reaches a large audience on TikTok and Instagram through her always self-ironic approach, and the father of a child with a neurodegenerative disease, who openly shares his experience, offering an insight into the parenting experience. The thematic areas explored during the interviews covered various aspects, including:

1. Exploring the genesis of their interest in social media, its impact on their lives, and the nature of their relationships with followers.
2. Investigating their perception of disability through social media, including any experiences of misperceptions or stereotypes leading to online hostility.
3. Examining their attitudes toward sexuality and whether they engage in discussions about it with their followers.

### 3. RESULTS

The interviews offer a glimpse into the initial strides these influencers undertook, shedding light on their initial steps, challenges, and triumphs. While some started their social profiles for leisure, amusement or to alleviate boredom, others, turned to social media from the outset seeking assistance and solidarity from those experiencing similar conditions, specifically grappling with the disability of a child:

I embarked on this journey because, at the time, my wife and I were utterly bewildered by the new world we found ourselves in upon learning about the challenges we were about to face with Tommaso (...) I thought, perhaps, by narrating our story in a light-hearted manner, we might catch the attention of someone more knowledgeable about disability than we were, and in the process, learn something. So it was more a call for help in response to a gap in society. (F.)

The social media experience proved to be extremely positive for all three influencers interviewed, teaching them how to live with a disability, love and accept themselves. Primarily, this was made possible through the overwhelming support and approval received from thousands of followers, as well as those who shared similar experiences. However, visibility on these platforms also brought its challenges. Despite the influencers' preference for different platforms none of them was exempted from being targets of hatred. Nevertheless, it has been observed that hate speech tends to be more violent in the context of physical disabilities, given their immediate visibility. One of the interviewees shared with us how she used to create content on TikTok with her boyfriend, and their love story became the target of judgment, labelled as *undeserving* due to her physical disability. This notion of merit reflects deep-seated and conspicuous prejudice and stereotypes in our society, overlooking the complexities and depth intrinsic to personal relationships. The concept of merit in this context varies widely according to cultural and social beliefs and is often rooted in a distorted framework of human value and dignity.

In the early days, during one of my live shows where I was sharing my story, I mentioned having epilepsy and not having a driving licence. A girl started to make senseless comments, saying things like, 'There are so many beautiful girls who get dumped for no reason, and you're engaged. I don't think you deserve it.' Later, I came across a comment on another video that said, 'No one would ever get involved with a cripple.' It hurt me deeply, and I couldn't help but cry. Subsequently, I created a video responding to that comment,

and, unfortunately or fortunately, let's say, all my followers — more like virtual friends — rushed to her profile and really destroyed her! (S.)

Hate speech directed at individuals with disabilities can manifest in various forms, including insults, discrimination, harmful stereotypes and the spread of misinformation that undermines their dignity and integrity. The delegitimisation of those within the targeted group occurs when the experiences, voices and validity of individuals with disabilities are either denied or ridiculed. This may involve the denial of rights, downplaying the challenges faced, or devaluing their perspectives and contributions. Such online delegitimisation can have severe consequences, hindering the active participation of people with disabilities in digital spaces and more broadly in society. Another element that amplifies the expression of hatred on social media is the prevailing sense of impunity that individuals seem to feel when engaging in inappropriate behaviour online. Those who act with a sense of impunity and disinhibition often overlook the diminishing divide between our online and offline lives.

In my opinion, it's a kind of impunity, though one has to be cautious nowadays. If someone sends me a message, it takes very little time for me to trace them, even if their social media profile is not entirely filled out. It doesn't take more than fifteen minutes with Google. I just need to cross-reference some data or find a post they forgot to delete, or a location they visited, and I can locate them even without expertise. So, there is this sense of impunity, which is not just that, but also a lot of frustration. There are many dissatisfied people in the world, and what better way to release your frustrations than engaging in something where you believe you won't face consequences because you think you're not traceable, even though you actually are. (F.)

Furthermore, an important factor contributing to the evident online hatred is a widespread lack of knowledge about disabilities, highlighting a pressing need for education and awareness. The deaf influencer, for instance, shared that she became the target of individuals who, unaware of what a hearing impairment entails, questioned the authenticity of her disability.

I was not involved in any specific actions of online hatred. I can say that I faced *indirect* insults when content about Sanremo's accessibility was posted on Facebook. Some people claimed that I wasn't truly deaf because, as they pointed out, I can speak. This, however, was deeply hurtful to me. In the initial years of Sanremo, reading those comments and criticisms was genuinely painful. (M.)

This view of disability, rooted in prejudice and stereotypes as previously discussed, becomes even more pronounced when addressing the sexuality of disabled individuals. A disabled body is often unfairly perceived as asexual and unattractive, particularly in the context of physical disabilities. Conversely, those with intellectual disabilities are frequently treated like children, deemed in need of control and considered incapable of expressing their desires — in terms of both relationships and sexuality. This stresses the importance of the narratives of influencers in this space; by sharing their personal experiences, they provide authentic insights into their perceptions of sexuality. One of the interviewees, for instance, highlighted a generational difference in attitudes, noting a greater openness among younger audiences toward discussions about sexuality. Meanwhile, her older followers tend to label such conversations as “vulgar” and something to be concealed in public.

Yes, I address it in a humorous manner through an ironic video, but I also strive to convey to young people that sex exists and discussing it is crucial. It’s essential to have open conversations, whether in schools, at home, or within the family. Nowadays, even 12–13-year-olds are already engaging in sexual activities, so they need to be informed about the existence of condoms, the contraceptive pill, and the potential consequences if they don’t take necessary precautions, such as the risk of contracting diseases or getting pregnant. (S.)

The topic of sexuality was also broached with the father of the child with a degenerative disease. He expressed great openness towards the professional role of a sexual assistant and the non-profit Lovegiver Association, established to promote and support these professionals.

Sexual assistance extends beyond emotional support. It involves becoming familiar with one’s own body. Understanding one’s body isn’t just about fulfilling sexual needs—just as any person thinks about sex, there’s no reason why someone with a disability couldn’t do the same. What’s often overlooked is a crucial aspect: by learning about my body, I also learn about the limits, and I can also understand if someone is abusing me. It’s an issue which is rarely discussed, but it has happened many times! (F.)

The reflection highlights the crucial error made by those who feel uncertain about interacting with people with disabilities: the assumption that there is only one approach that fits all. The pivotal shift starts with prioritising the person over their disability.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Social media facilitate the forming of relationships, fostering a previously unexplored depth of connection. In this role, social media work as catalysts for meaningful offline connections, which is particularly resonant with individuals with disabilities. For them, these platforms work as avenues to cultivate friendships and establish bonds that transcend physical and temporal barriers, offering opportunities for inclusiveness. From this standpoint, the rise of figures such as influencers, particularly those addressing disability, highlights the influential role of social media as a powerful communication tool. It works as a platform to inform about and narrate a wide array of disabilities, even those often overlooked by mainstream media. Not only do these influencers contribute to increasing the visibility of disability and sparking more open discussions, they also act as inclusive agents, providing individuals with the means to authentically showcase their daily lives, free from taboos and fears. In doing so, they challenge paradigms that have historically sought to conceal and silence disabilities. This perspective redirects attention from an individual with a disability to a context that can work as a *disabling tool*. In this social perspective, disability is reframed not as an intrinsic attribute but as an outcome of the interplay between an individual and society.

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# UNLEASHING POTENTIAL: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF NON FORMAL EDUCATION IN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

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This contribution explores the integration of digitalization into youth work – a practice of non formal education aimed at supporting the personal and social development of young people – as a key strategy for promoting the social inclusion of young people, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. It highlights how traditional youth work is evolving to incorporate digital tools and platforms to improve access to educational resources and promote digital literacy. European policies support these efforts by emphasizing the importance of digital skills and media literacy as a basis for young people’s full participation in society. Existing research shows that digital youth work can significantly increase engagement, especially for vulnerable young people, by overcoming barriers to participation and promoting social cohesion.

youth work; non formal education; digitalization; social inclusion

## INTRODUCTION

Promoting social inclusion is widely acknowledged as essential for fostering individual well-being and societal cohesion, as it enables individuals to actively contribute to and benefit from various dimensions of community life. In Europe, the social inclusion of young people is unevenly felt, experienced and distributed, with young offenders, migrants and refugees, single mothers, ethnic minorities and poor or disabled people being among the most vulnerable sectors at risk of social exclusion (Buntinx & Schalock, 2010; AbuJarour & Krasnova, 2017).

The rise of digital technologies has further complicated these issues, creating both new opportunities and challenges for social inclusion. According to the



Youth Knowledge Book “Young people, social inclusion and digitalisation” (EC-CoE, 2021), digital exclusion has emerged as a significant barrier for young people from marginalized backgrounds, limiting their access to essential services and reducing their opportunities for full participation in society. The digital divide adds a layer of complexity to social exclusion. For young people, especially those from vulnerable groups, limited access to digital resources such as the internet, computers, and digital literacy skills can significantly hinder their ability to participate fully in educational, social and economic activities. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored these challenges, as reliance on digital tools for education, communication and work increased dramatically, leaving behind those without adequate digital infrastructure or skills. The European framework advocates for the inclusion of digital skills and online engagement as essential components of social inclusion strategies, highlighting the need for policies that provide equitable access to digital technologies and promote digital literacy (Siurala, 2020; Vermeire & Van den Broeck, 2024).

Furthermore, digital inclusion is not just about bridging the technological gap but also about fostering trust and community participation in online spaces. Without adequate access to digital tools and the necessary skills to navigate them, young people from marginalized communities may feel excluded from digital platforms, limiting their ability to engage with civic life, participate in community activities, and access crucial information.

The integration of digital dimensions into the concept of social inclusion is therefore crucial. It not only addresses the need for equitable access to digital resources and education but also highlights the role of digital literacy and online engagement as essential components of full social participation. Policies and interventions must address both the structural barriers of digital access and the social barriers of digital skill gaps, thus fostering a more inclusive society where digital participation is not just a privilege for some but a fundamental right for all (Beel & Wallace, 2023).

Looking ahead, it is essential to explore how youth work – a practice of non formal education aimed at supporting the personal and social development of young people – can serve as a crucial tool in bridging these gaps. In particular, the emergence of digital youth work, supported by the policies of both the Council of Europe and the European Commission, highlights innovative approaches to tackling exclusion. By using both traditional and digital methods, youth work not only promotes young people’s active participation in society but

is also in line with broader European efforts to create inclusive and equitable opportunities for all.

## **YOUTH WORK AND DIGITAL YOUTH WORK: KEY TOOLS FOR THE SOCIAL INCLUSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

The term “youth work” is defined as socio-educational activities of a multifaceted and diversified nature, situated at the boundary between the formal education system and informal socialization practices (European Commission, 2009; Morciano, 2021). Youth work encompasses the various methods through which young people acquire and convey knowledge, including comparison, dialogue and self-reflection. These methods are undergoing a gradual transformation in response to structural shifts in society, including unemployment, poverty and changes in the labour market. Additionally, they are evolving in conjunction with the evolving meanings expressed by youth cultures, their representations and lifestyles, which are often influenced by the use of new digital media and the internet (Coppola & Crescenzo, 2022).

In this context, the Council of European Union adopted the “Council Conclusions on Smart Youth Work” (Council of the European Union, 2017) emphasizing the significance of digital youth work – a form of youth work that integrates digital technologies into its practices to better engage young people and respond to their evolving needs – for fostering social inclusion. Furthermore, the Council acknowledged the potential of digital technologies and media to enhance young people’s future employability and career prospects, while also recognizing the necessity to address the digital divide and to mitigate digital risks. These conclusions are primarily based on the report “Developing digital youth work” (European Commission, 2017), which provides an in-depth analysis of the essential elements of digital youth work and smart youth work.

It is noteworthy that the Commission’s proposal for a new EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027), entitled “Engaging, Connecting and Empowering Young People” begins with the assertion: “young people enrich the EU’s ambitions. This generation is the most educated ever and among the most creative in the use of information and communication technologies and social media” (European Commission 2018: 1). The advent of the virtual world has revolutionized young people’s lives and it is incumbent upon policy-makers to consider the opportunities and challenges presented by this new reality. They must seek to harness the potential of social media, to equip young people with the requisite digital skills and to promote critical thinking and media literacy. Youth work

must use technologies and pedagogical practices to enhance accessibility and equip young people with the skills to navigate digital environments (Fernández-de-Castro et al., 2023).

Through the strategic use of digital technologies, it is possible to develop activities that respond to young people's emerging needs, provide tools to help them navigate the complex technological landscape and turn digital risks into opportunities for growth and inclusion. Key initiatives include digital citizenship courses that teach young people how to navigate the online world responsibly, addressing issues such as privacy, cybersecurity and critical awareness in the use of social media. These are complemented by media literacy workshops, which are essential for understanding and countering phenomena such as fake news and digital manipulation, and for developing critical thinking and decision-making autonomy. Digital youth work also encourages the creation of digital content such as videos, podcasts and storytelling projects, which not only stimulate creativity but also provide a platform for young people to express themselves and raise awareness of relevant social issues. Similarly, the use of educational games and virtual experiences facilitates learning through play and promotes skills such as problem solving and teamwork.

Digital technologies also open new frontiers for intercultural participation and virtual exchanges, allowing young people to connect with peers from other countries to work on joint projects, share experiences and develop language and intercultural skills. At the same time, digital platforms promote youth activism, enabling young people to organize awareness-raising campaigns and actively contribute to social and environmental issues. Finally, digital youth work also focuses on equal access to educational opportunities by offering online courses on innovative topics such as coding, digital design and entrepreneurship. These tools make it possible to reach those young people who may be excluded from traditional learning pathways, breaking down geographical and social barriers. Digital also facilitates psychological support and online mentoring, ensuring continued support even in the most challenging situations.

## **EXISTING WORK IN THE AREA**

A review of studies conducted at the European level have highlighted how the use of digital technologies in youth work activities promotes greater participation of young people, especially those belonging to vulnerable categories who are often excluded from traditional educational and

socialization pathways. For example, pilot projects in Finland<sup>1</sup> and Estonia<sup>2</sup>, pioneering countries in the field of digital youth work, have shown how online platforms enable young people to access educational and psychological support services more easily, thus helping to promote equal opportunities.

Furthermore, findings on media literacy programmes in Germany and Ireland also highlight their effectiveness in improving digital literacy among young people. In Germany, various government-organised media literacy campaigns<sup>3</sup> have aimed to close the digital divide by educating the public on responsible digital media use and improving digital skills across different socio-economic groups. Similarly, in Ireland, projects<sup>4</sup> have shown significant impact, particularly in improving critical thinking skills and the ability to identify fake or manipulative content online. These initiatives are funded by national agencies and EU grants, reflecting a strong commitment to promoting digital literacy and inclusion.

In addition, the report “Exploring new, appealing, inclusive and engaging practices for online services in digital youth work”, published in 2023, provides insights into how digital services can enhance youth work across Europe, making it more accessible, inclusive and safe. Based on a survey conducted in 14 EU Member States through the Erasmus+ Youth National Agencies, the report highlights the importance of ensuring that these services are designed to meet the diverse needs of young people from different backgrounds and experiences, while prioritizing accessibility, safety and inclusivity. Notwithstanding the considerable potential of digital youth work, significant challenges remain. The digital divide continues to preclude some young people from gaining access to technologies. Moreover, the use of commercial platforms, despite being a crucial means of reaching young people, gives rise to concerns pertaining to data security and sustainability. In order to address these issues, the report puts forward the proposition of investing in open-source platforms and more targeted training for practitioners.

Moreover, virtual exchange experiences have furnished further evidence of the added value of digital youth work. Initiatives such as Erasmus+ Virtual

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<sup>1</sup> For more information: <https://www.oph.fi/en/education-development-and-internationalisation/long-term-cooperation-projects/digital-youth-work>

<sup>2</sup> For more information: <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/inspiration/good-practices/digital-leap-youth-field-estonia>

<sup>3</sup> For more information: <https://includemedia.eu/media-literacy-campaigns-in-germany-bridging-the-digital-divide/>

<sup>4</sup> For more information: <https://www.medialiteracyireland.ie/emif-announces-support-for-eight-media-literacy-projects/>

Exchange<sup>5</sup> have demonstrated that young participants develop intercultural competencies, enhance their communication skills and establish international networks that facilitate social inclusion.

Finally, the RAY DIGI project<sup>6</sup> emphasizes the pivotal function of digitalization in advancing social integration among younger demographics. The project examines the potential of digital tools and online platforms to facilitate non-formal education, thereby enhancing accessibility and inclusiveness. The project identifies digital inclusion as a vital element for ensuring that all young people, regardless of their background or socio-economic status, can access educational resources and participate actively in society. Digital inclusion in RAY DIGI is addressed through policies that emphasize the creation of supportive learning environments online, encouraging co-creation and participatory methods where young people can shape and lead digital activities. This approach not only fosters inclusivity but also enhances the relevance and impact of digital youth work.

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the integration of digital technologies not only enhances accessibility and engagement for young people, especially those from marginalized groups, but also helps bridge the digital divide and promote equality. However, it is essential to address the associated risks, such as digital exclusion and concerns over privacy, which could undermine the benefits of digitalization if left unchecked. A balanced approach, which maintains the core values and objectives of youth work, is necessary to reconcile the benefits of digitalization with its potential drawbacks. This involves ensuring equitable access to digital resources, promoting critical media literacy and fostering an inclusive digital environment where all young people can participate fully and equitably (Moxon et al., 2021).

We cannot keep digitalization out of youth work. Instead, we should – with a critical mind – build a conscious, structured and balanced way to integrate digitalization in our practices with its ambiguities, interests and approaches, in a way which is based on:

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<sup>5</sup> For more information: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-1/virtual-exchanges>

<sup>6</sup> For more information: [https://www.jint.be/sites/default/files/2023-06/RAY DIGI\\_Vermeire-Van den Broeck\\_2023 Report.pdf](https://www.jint.be/sites/default/files/2023-06/RAY DIGI_Vermeire-Van den Broeck_2023 Report.pdf)

- The ethos, values, objectives and competences of youth work.
- The objectives of our own youth work organization.
- The constantly changing challenges from young people.
- Responsiveness to new digital opportunities and risks.

Youth work as an educational practice has to find ways of improving young peoples' critical media literacy to help them face the opportunities and threats of digitalization. It is not easy and it is not a silver bullet, but it belongs to the big questions of today and the future.

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# THE TRIANGLE P+: A TRANSMEDIA CATALYST FOR FAMILY INCLUSION IN PARENTING EDUCATION

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The integration of technology into daily life presents opportunities to advance social justice, particularly in extra-school contexts, where social learning often occurs through technological platforms. This study introduces Triangle P+, an innovative transmedia tool designed to promote family inclusion in parental education. Transmedia education leverages media convergence, participative culture, and collective intelligence to foster dynamic and interactive learning. It enables learners to become co-creators of knowledge, enhancing agency and collaboration. Triangle P+ exemplifies this approach, offering personalized learning environments through peer-research methodologies rooted in produsage and collective intelligence. The tool provides immersive learning experiences with multiple access points, bridging traditional education and dynamic, digitally connected environments. It emphasizes reaching learners in their everyday spaces, reflecting the influence of digital platforms on identity and socialization while fostering inclusion, belonging, and ownership. This contribution highlights the importance of transmedia storytelling in creating meaningful social participation and collaboration between families and educators. By addressing the potential of transmedia in non-formal settings, Triangle P+ represents a socially inclusive approach to learning, transcending traditional boundaries and emphasizing collective representation and engagement.

transmedia parental support; family inclusion; peer-research; coproduction



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The digitalization and platformization of society have redefined how people communicate, and access information, leading to a paradigm shift across various domains, including education and parenting responsibilities (Van Dijk et al., 2018). This digital shift offers an opportunity to enhance and democratize parenting education through more accessible, flexible, and participative forms of engagement. This opportunity is particularly relevant in the context of the European Council's Rec(2006)19 on positive parenting, which emphasizes creating supportive policies and research to help families navigate parenting responsibilities in today's world. As family structures become increasingly diverse, it becomes paramount to develop inclusive and adaptable approaches to parenting education that leverage digital tools for wider reach and effectiveness.

Parenting education has traditionally been built around two primary methods: group and individual socioeducational action. Group socioeducational action fosters community support and shared learning, where parents collectively explore and address common challenges in a supportive environment (González, 2018). On the other hand, individual socioeducational action allows for tailored guidance that considers the specific needs and circumstances of each family (Balsells et al., 2023). Both approaches have proven effective in promoting positive parenting by helping parents develop skills and competencies for the well-being and growth of their children (Balsells et al., 2017). Therefore, nowadays, integrating these methods with digital solutions becomes increasingly relevant, especially in promoting participative and collective learning environments that transcend physical limitations (Vaquero et al., 2022).

Within this setting, the parenting triangle (PT) model (Fig. 1) has shown to be a valuable tool for guiding and informing parenting education. Rooted in the ecological model of family and child development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and the FACNF (Department of Health, 2001), the PT posits that parenting skills are developed at the intersection of three core elements: the child's needs, the parent's competencies, and the broader environmental context (Milani, Serbati, Ius, 2020). Yet, the tool remains largely dependent on analog resources and in-person interactions, creating a need for a transmedia adaptation that can extend its reach and applicability.

This study aims to address this gap by coproducing a digital platform for family participation on parenting education. The result seeks to promote social

inclusion through parenting education processes, creating a dynamic and participatory platform that allows families to engage actively with parenting resources. As a transmedia tool, the resulting product leverages the principles of media convergence, participative culture, and collective intelligence (Fig. 2) to foster meaningful engagement across diverse media formats and platforms. Transmedia tools create more immersive and participatory learning experiences by allowing content to be presented across multiple media formats, promoting a holistic and interactive approach to education (Scolari et al., 2019). The goal is to enhance accessibility and engagement by enabling families to connect with the material in ways that are relevant to their everyday lives, thereby bridging the gap between structured parenting education and the dynamic digital environments that daily permeate contemporary family life.

Fig. 1. Parenting triangle model (Balsells et al., 2015).

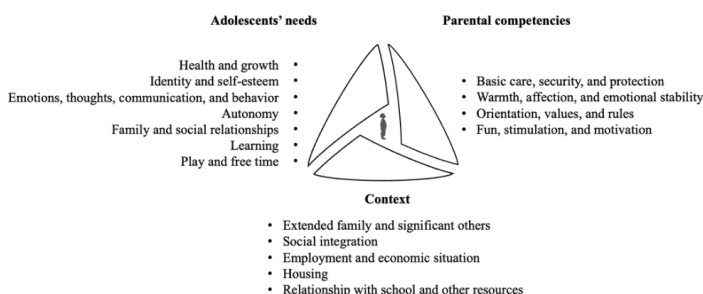
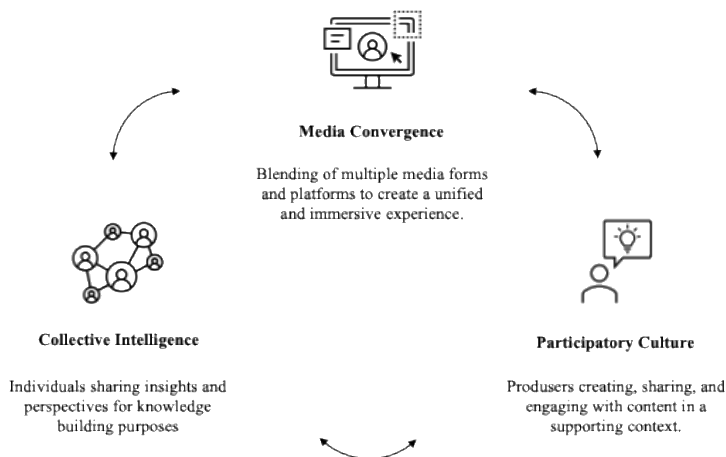


Fig. 2. Transmedia principle (Freire, 2020).



## 2. METHODS

### 2.1. Design

This study utilized a participatory research design rooted in the peer-research methodology. Drawing on Dixon et al.'s (2019) levels of participatory research, this study applies the third level, in which participants assume an active researcher role, contributing equally to knowledge creation alongside academic researchers. The design emphasizes knowledge and resource coproduction benefiting from peer engagement and participant agency, fostering a collaborative atmosphere that supports shared understanding and ownership of outcomes.

### 2.2 Participants

The study included 3 distinct participant groups:

- Parents: 5 mothers participated, all actively involved in parenting education programs. Their ages ranged from 29 to 46 years.
- Children: 23 children, aged between 6 and 12 years, participated. These children were recruited from local community support programs, with a distribution of 13 5–9 years children and 10–12 years 10 children.
- Adolescents: 12 teenagers, aged between 14 and 18 years, participated. Most had received care from social services because of issues with family support.

Each group engaged independently in their sessions throughout the coproduction process. This separation ensured that each group could explore and express its unique perspectives without any influence or interference.

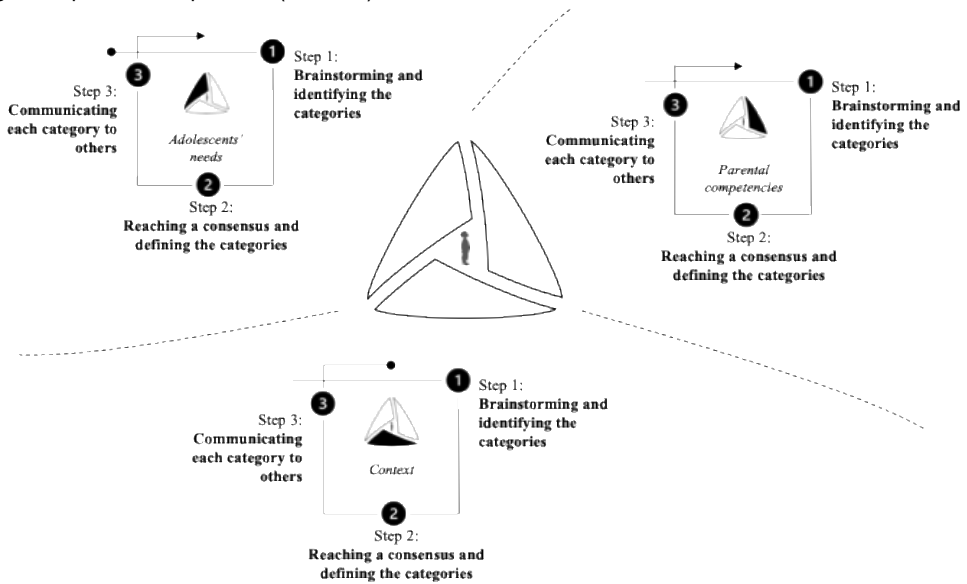
### 2.3 Procedure

The research was structured into 4 main phases (Urrea-Monclus et al., 2023):

1. *Preparation*: Professional researchers organized the groups, dynamics, and materials. A preliminary session introducing the research process was conducted, and ethical consent was obtained from all participants and their legal guardians.
2. *Audience*: Participants engaged in structured sessions focusing on each dimension of the PT to coproduce the final product. Each session included collaborative activities where participants shared experiences and insights. The coproduction process involved 3 steps, which were repeated for each of the PT dimensions (Fig. 3). The initial step involved identifying the core themes relevant to the dimension. Participants

generated diverse perspectives and organized them into specific categories. On a second step, participants collaborated to reach a consensus on defining each category. This step ensured that the elements incorporated were representative of the collective input. Finally, the last step participants created outputs to communicate the categories and definitions using formats chosen for clarity and accessibility.

Fig. 3. Coproduction process (Authors).

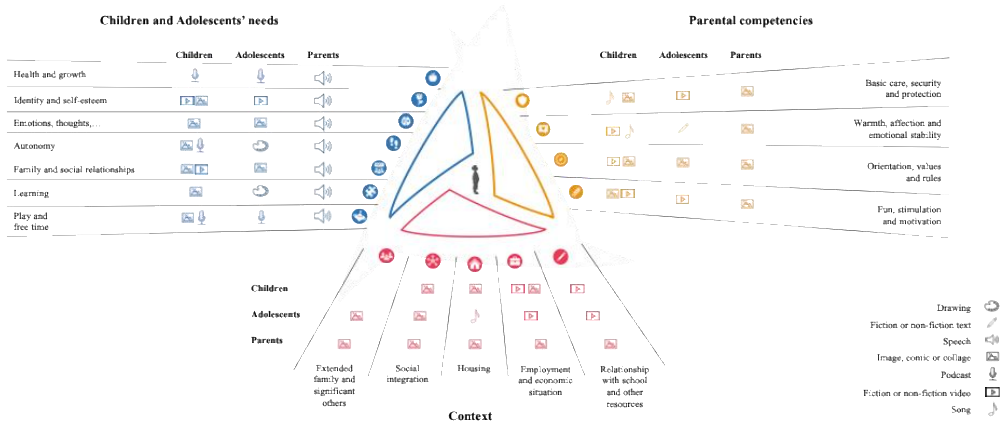


3. *Validation*: Following the coproduction sessions, internal and external validation were held. Participants and additional stakeholders examined and provided feedback on the materials generated. This aimed to ensure that the developed resources were both accurate and reflective of participants' perspectives.
4. *Transfer*: The resulting tool was made available as an open-access platform to ensure it reached a broader audience. This phase also included participants' involvement in professional seminars and conferences to advocate for the tool's impact and applications.

### 3. RESULTS

The interconnected approaches to the coproduced tool, named Triangle P+ (Fig. 4), function synergistically to support the goals of the study. Through this multi-faceted approach, it also addresses social justice, enabling parents to learn and navigate parenting responsibilities.

Fig. 4. Triangle P+ (Authors).



#### 3.1 Transmedia Educational Object

The Triangle P+ was conceptualized as a transmedia educational object, encompassing a diverse array of media resources interconnected through a transmedia logic. By offering content in various formats the Triangle P+ encourages parents, children, and educators to participate in an immersive learning experience that enriches their understanding of family dynamics and parenting roles. Furthermore, these media resources were coproduced with families, encouraging active participation in a produser role that blends production with user engagement, fostering collective knowledge creation. This transmedia approach combines structured content with flexible, user-driven exploration, allowing families to engage meaningfully with the material while fostering a deeper understanding of parenting dynamics.

#### 3.2 Open Educational Resource

The Triangle P+ tool was also designed as an open educational resource, offering freely accessible educational materials that a broad community can consult, use, and adapt. This broadens its reach and reinforces principles of inclusivity and adaptability. The Triangle P+ leverages the accessibility and flexibility of digital tools, empowering parents, educators, and communities to

tailor it to the specific context and challenges. By enabling such customization, the open educational resource framework plays a role in advancing social justice, ensuring equitable access to resources that support positive parenting and educational inclusivity. In this way, the Triangle P+ becomes a tool for spreading knowledge but also an instrument for fostering social inclusion through parenting education.

### **3.3 Digital Platform**

To support interactive and participatory engagement, the Triangle P+ tool was built on a digital platform that facilitates interaction and knowledge sharing among users. The platform emphasizes the role of digital infrastructures in shaping user interactions and data sharing. The platform enables users—parents, children, educators, and professionals—to collaborate, and access resources within a cohesive digital ecosystem. The resources created by each group were tailored primarily for their own profile, such as children for children, to address the unique perspective of each group. However, the final platform allows for cross-role use, as resources produced by one group can be valuable for others, providing insights that can foster empathy and understanding among parents and children, enriching the overall learning experience. Through this digital interface, users can engage with the Triangle P+ resources interactively, enhancing the tool’s impact by fostering a community-oriented learning environment that supports family well-being and parental competencies.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

The Triangle P+ represents a social innovation in parenting education, developed through a participatory research that integrates the voices of children, adolescents, and families as essential contributors. This coproduction process underscores the citizen science approach, in which participants act as “experts by experience” (Jacobson, 2021), bringing valuable insights that enhance the research relevance and applicability.

The implications of this project extend beyond conventional e-parenting approaches, advancing towards a model of transmedia parenting education that aligns with the demands of a postdigital society (Cramer & Jandrić, 2021). Family engagement is fostered through the producer role, promoting active participation and knowledge cocreation within a systematic framework. The tool’s multimodal design encourages users to engage with the material in ways that align with their preferences, making the tool more accessible and personally relevant. By mirroring the media formats familiar to participants, the

tool increases user participation and commitment, creating collaborative learning environments where families and professionals alike contribute to a shared learning experience.

Transmedia is a way in today's digital world to bridge the gap between traditional learning and the dynamic environments where individuals live, interact, and grow. The Triangle P+ is designed to harness the potentialities of transmedia by weaving narratives that resonate with learners in diverse and informal settings (Raybourn, 2012). It recognizes the importance of reaching learners in their everyday spaces, acknowledging the influence of digital platforms on identity formation and socialization (Taddeo & Tirocchi, 2021). Moreover, its creation involves collective intelligence, allowing for a more inclusive and diverse representation in content and knowledge development promoting a sense of belonging and ownership for all involved. This approach offers a dynamic and socially inclusive method of learning.

The Triangle P+ sets a transformative example for the field, bridging traditional parental education with the interactive, multimodal, and inclusive potential of the transmedia framework. By extending its reach and fostering social inclusion, it underscores a future for parental education that transcends digital boundaries and adapts responsively to promote social inclusion through non-formal education.

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# THE DIVERSITY CHALLENGE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION. BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN UPDATING EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS TO DEAL WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND GUARANTEE EQUAL AND INCLUSIVE MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

This position paper aims to open an interdisciplinary discussion on the barriers and opportunities that international students pose at university level, in order to promote greater awareness and focus on how to enhance processes of teaching and managing cultural diversity from an equal opportunity perspective. It intends to launch a critical discussion starting from the findings of both empirical research and theoretical and methodological analyses on intercultural professionalism of teachers, personnel policies, participatory education and field research methods, social justice in education in Higher Education institutions and combating institutional discrimination.

Specifically, this paper would like to discuss the role of three group of actors living in the Higher educational institutions, such as faculty level, Staff level, and peer level by pointing out tensions and challenges (Beech, 2018) these students pose at tertiary education level.

## 1. DEALING WITH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Educational systems and pedagogical models today are challenged by confronting an increasingly heterogeneous and multicultural student population. To promote the right to education for all and equal opportunities for access and learning, and so ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development and global citizenship (see

Goal 4, *Agenda 2030*. United Nation, 2015; Banks, 2017), it is more necessary than ever to learn how to make the most of the human capital that students carry and to address the various forms of inequality that still exist. Diversity among students (in terms of culture, age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion and social status) is an increasingly important issue and requires complex and intersectional readings of reality, able to take into account intra- and intergenerational differences in order to approach and live with others in an open, inclusive and fair way (Lipura and Collins 2020; Besley, 2012; Grant, 1999). It entails respecting and valuing linguistic and cultural diversity, fostering critical reflection on cultural diversity, encouraging the learner's voice, and supporting the inclusion of disadvantaged and marginalised learners (Council of Europe, 2022).

This change of perspective also concerns Higher Education contexts, which see a growing presence of international students (Erasmus students, students with a migratory background and 'still' a foreigner passport, students arriving under specific conditions, i.e. students refugee like, students at risk like Afghani, Ukrainians etc.). Higher Education contexts, indeed, are challenged both to question certain stereotypical and traditional notions of working methods and relationships with the Other, and to train and update the professional competencies of teaching staff in an intercultural, democratic and non-discriminatory way, as well as those of administrative staff who must interact with this diversity (Beech, 2018; Smith and Conover-Williams, 2017; Unesco, 2022).

It is a matter of updating and improving reflections and practices on educational policies at the system level, involving both those who educate and those who manage the organizational and administrative aspects. Thus, the education and training of tertiary personnel becomes a key to interpreting social and cultural changes and to developing innovative perspectives and practices that can be reflected and impacted also in school and socio-educational contexts on the ground, acting on the intergenerational reproduction of inequalities and promoting the agency of different actors as vectors for greater social justice.

## **2. MIGRANT STUDENTS ON THE STAGE. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

Diversity among students (in terms of culture, age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, social status and so on) is an important issue that Higher Education have to face in an equal and inclusive way in our complex and multicultural societies.

Diversity linked to a migratory experience is quite new at University level in relatively recent migration countries, like Italy. Indeed, apart from Erasmus students and international students enrolled under special agreements between Universities, there are more and more first-generation migrant students, or their children, who challenge the system on several levels (Guadalupe-Diaz, Rincón and Rutter, 2017; Griga and Hadjar, 2014; Launcelot and Brown, 2004).

This growing phenomenon requires attention and work on three levels in a synergetic manner. At faculty level, there is the need (not always well-recognized) to overcome prejudices dealing with their inclusion in the migration framework (which is – after the 2015 crisis more negative) and to learn how to teach in multicultural classrooms (and not-always with European legacy). At Staff level, it is necessary to develop new educational competences and practices in order to address different needs, valorize diversity as a resource for learning, and fight against the various forms of inequality and discrimination, by including principles of plurilingual and intercultural education (Palaiologou, 2023). This concerns a rethinking of some implicit and tacit knowledge, underlying certain established ideas of learning and teaching habits, as well as of the processes of teaching and managing cultural diversity in class, but also at the political and organizational level. At peer level, there is the need to update knowledge and intercultural skills already learned in the multicultural environment of compulsory tracks, and enhance them through teaching methodologies that pay attention to relationships and knowledge exchange in the academic classroom (such as, peer-to-peer; cooperative learning; work-project) precisely in order to promote intercultural competences and build a plural learning context.

In such a perspective, some research and educational initiatives carried out at the University of Turin (Italy) were aimed at exploring the various sub-groups of youth academic paths; discussing similarities/difference between international students and second generations students; and identifying key turning points in their academic paths. These topics were investigated through qualitative research methodologies (such as, interviews, case studies) and highlighted that, on one side, the issue of cultural diversity among students at the University are still a topic under the umbrella of ‘International students’, with a lack awareness of their socio-cultural characteristics. On the other side, this growing learning paths leads students to come to terms with the inheriting parents’ dreams, but also raises sometimes intergenerational conflicts on social class identity issues and labour market opportunities.

In conclusion, the future challenges will be: overcoming the risks of delaying integration paths, due to the lack of equal opportunities; going beyond occasional projects, by fostering the empowerment, recognition, involvement of all the actors involved; and improving the capacity building process for all the involved adults (Ricucci and Pinna Pintor, 2022).

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# TRANSFORMING INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION FOR PLURILINGUAL COMPETENCE: INSIGHTS FROM AN ERASMUS+ PROJECT IN A HETEROGENEOUS SCHOOL

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The implementation of a project aimed at promoting intercultural pedagogy and plurilingual approaches in an upper secondary school in Italy provided valuable data that also prompted reflection on initial teacher training. In particular, training in inclusive and workshop-based teaching proved to be crucial for the project's implementation and thus emerge as central elements in this context. This article discusses the data collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

plurilingualism; intercultural pedagogy; observant participation; teacher education

## INTRODUCTION

This article examines a pilot project implemented during the 2022–2023 school year in an upper secondary school in Italy. The project aimed to promote teaching approaches grounded in intercultural pedagogy and to develop plurilingual competences. Drawing on the work of Garcia and Li Wei (2014), the project sought to create an educational environment where the various languages present in the school coexist and interact naturally.

Focusing on a single school context is advantageous as it allows for a more nuanced understanding of how policy directives are translated into everyday practice. Although Italian school legislation supports approaches that foster intercultural and plurilingual education, many institutions struggle to implement them effectively. By closely examining a specific context, this study aims to shed light on the day-to-day dynamics that drive educational innovation.

The project, initiated by the school leadership team and a group of teachers, was designed to transform the educational environment by encouraging innovation in organisational cultures, practices, and policies (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Its central goal was to test the feasibility of a plurilingual approach grounded in linguistic justice and democracy (Van Parijs, 2011), recognising the equal value of all languages and the importance of linguistic diversity in educational settings. Key strategies included teacher training programmes, opportunities for student mobility abroad, and the dissemination of teaching practices aligned with the project's overarching aims.

The initiative addressed two pressing needs: the persistent risk of academic underachievement among students with a migrant background and the opportunity presented by Erasmus+ funding to promote school internationalisation. Researchers from the University of Turin played an active role in the project, contributing to its design, implementation, and evaluation. The author, who was directly involved, provided operational support and gathered data through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, offering a detailed perspective on how educational innovation emerges in practice.

Building on the description of the school context and the actions undertaken, this article focuses on analysing key data from the project. It highlights critical interpretative insights and their implications for policy recommendations, particularly in shaping pre-service teacher training to better support intercultural pedagogy and plurilingual approaches.

## **1. LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN THE INSTITUTE**

The issue of multilingualism holds particular importance within the Institute. With foreign students comprising 27% of total enrolments—significantly above the national average (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2023)—the school's linguistic diversity is both notable and complex. Overall, students come from 26 different national backgrounds, with Romanian, Peruvian, Filipino, Egyptian, and Moroccan groups most prominently represented. In Italian educational linguistics, scholars such as Bagna and Casini (2012) and Vedovelli (2017) describe this degree of linguistic variation as 'neoplurilingualism,' a concept highlighting the coexistence and interaction of multiple linguistic systems.

However, to gain a deeper understanding of this complexity, it is helpful to broaden our perspective by introducing the notion of a "student with a migratory background," as suggested by international research guidelines. According to



these guidelines, such students include those who are foreign-born or have one or both parents originating from abroad (OECD 2018, pp. 46–49).

By closely examining the birthplaces of parents in three classes, it became clear that in each of these classes, the proportion of students with both parents born abroad exceeded the overall percentage of non-Italian citizens enrolled at the Institute. For example, in the first class, 27.2% of students met this criterion, rising to 47.6% in the second, and reaching 52.4% in the third.

The third class provided an opportunity to explore plurilingualism in greater depth. Within this group, we identified students demonstrating at least partial competence in six different languages. North African varieties of Arabic were particularly prominent—three students spoke Maghrebi Arabic and two spoke Egyptian Arabic—alongside other widely used languages such as Andean Spanish (two students) and Romanian (two students). Additionally, minority yet significant languages, including Albanian (one student), Chinese (one student), and Croatian (one student), were also present.

The picture of linguistic competences—both in Italian and in students’ heritage languages—is highly fragmented. Three newly arrived students in Italy are acquiring Italian and can be considered emerging bilinguals. Nine other students with migratory backgrounds show varying levels of Italian proficiency, influenced by their age of arrival. Among them, the six students born in Italy have full command of Italian. With regard to their parents’ languages, all students report complete oral comprehension, though oral production varies: some use it daily, while others, despite fluent skills, reserve it for what they consider special circumstances. Written proficiency, especially in non-Latin alphabets, presents an additional layer of complexity. Generally, written forms are less frequently used than spoken forms. Another aspect warranting further research is the role of dialects, which may add yet another dimension of linguistic diversity.

These findings confirm a strong presence of languages other than Italian, particularly among students with migratory backgrounds. At the same time, the school’s linguistic landscape is both varied and complex, comprising multiple language variants and varying levels of proficiency in both Italian and heritage languages.

In light of these observations, it becomes clear why the school urgently seeks to develop organisational cultures, practices, and policies that foster an intercultural and plurilingual approach. This urgency is not solely linked to the heightened risk of academic underachievement among a segment of the

student body, but also stems from recognising the potential educational opportunities that linguistic diversity can offer.

## **2. INTERVENTION DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION**

The pilot project aimed to introduce initiatives promoting intercultural education within the school, with a primary focus on enhancing linguistic diversity. Central to this objective was the practice of intercomprehension among related languages, broadly defined as a form of communication in which participants express themselves in their own language while understanding that of the other (Bonvino & Garbarini, 2022). This approach sought to foster mutual understanding and highlight the value of linguistic diversity as a resource for inclusive education.

By implementing this approach, the project aimed to provide a practical model for applying fundamental intercultural competences, including the recognition and interpretation of cultures, with an emphasis on finding shared perspectives (Reggio & Santerini, 2014). The project consisted of three key initiatives carried out during the 2022–2023 school year: a teacher training course, a short-term student mobility activity, and a dissemination day.

The first initiative involved an intensive three-day training course for the school's teachers, designed to promote the practice of intercomprehension among related languages. The course highlighted the educational potential of linguistic diversity, focusing on how it can be appreciated and integrated into teaching practices. Two multilingual trainers led the sessions: a native Romanian speaker and a native Spanish (Castilian) speaker, ensuring a diverse linguistic environment.

The second initiative comprised a short-term mobility programme for students. Twelve girls, accompanied by two teachers, travelled to a secondary school in the urban centre of southern Spain. Both schools shared a commitment to strengthening plurilingual competences among teachers and students.

Prior to departure, the students attended preparatory classes on intercomprehension and the observation of linguistic diversity in multilingual contexts. These sessions, led by the institute's teachers, provided a foundation for their experience abroad. Students were selected based on motivational letters demonstrating their interest in intercultural experiences, rather than academic performance or Spanish language proficiency.

Collaborative activities, designed in partnership with the host institution, encouraged mixed groups of students from both schools to engage in practical

and contextualised tasks. These activities aimed to foster communication and provide opportunities to practise intercomprehension, reinforcing the project's focus on linguistic diversity and mutual understanding.

The third initiative was a dissemination day dedicated to plurilingual practices within the school. This event featured interactive activities designed to raise awareness of plurilingualism. Students and teachers participated in hands-on sessions that incorporated playful elements, such as serious games and gamification, to enhance engagement and deepen their understanding of linguistic diversity.

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: THE ROLE OF INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING**

The following section examines selected data to provide insights for revising initial teacher training pathways. Specifically, it focuses on teacher profiles and teaching methodologies that contributed to the successful implementation of the pilot project's themes. The findings highlight that support teachers and workshop-based teaching methods created favourable conditions for advancing intercultural pedagogy and plurilingual approaches. These observations suggest that expanding these themes requires targeted efforts to promote relevant training in initial teacher education.

#### **3.1. Support Teachers' Engagement**

A specific group of teachers demonstrated heightened sensitivity to the themes introduced by the pilot project. The school employs a substantial number of teachers specialised in educational activities for students with disabilities (support teachers), accounting for 52 out of 142 teachers (approximately 36.7% of the total). Most of these teachers have completed specialised pre-service training programmes to prepare for their roles. Regarding participation in the training course connected to the pilot project, support teachers represented the largest group of attendees. Out of a total of 36 participants, 29 were support teachers (approximately 81%).

Further evidence of support teachers' greater willingness to engage emerged in the context of the mobility programme. When teachers were invited to act as accompanying staff, three out of four applicants (75%) were support teachers. Although the numbers in this instance were limited, the trend is consistent: support teachers repeatedly proved to be the group most inclined to participate in the pilot project's initiatives.

Support teachers exhibit characteristics often associated with inclusive

teachers (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022). However, the origin of their heightened sensitivity to the pilot project's themes warrants further investigation. While personal factors or specific contextual conditions may have played a role, the data suggest a more systemic influence. The most compelling hypothesis is that initial training pathways significantly shape teachers' behaviour and attitudes, particularly in relation to intercultural pedagogy and plurilingual approaches.

To explore this hypothesis, interviews were conducted with teachers who had participated in the pilot project's training activities. These interviews, especially those with support teachers, revealed a heightened awareness of the value of linguistic diversity, which was often linked to a broader appreciation of diversity in general. Many respondents highlighted the strong alignment between the pilot project's content and their initial training experiences. This alignment underscores the potential of well-designed training pathways to influence teachers' perspectives and practices in meaningful ways.

The findings indicate that the implementation of intercultural pedagogy and plurilingual approaches requires a more prominent focus on inclusive teaching in initial teacher training. Extending this emphasis beyond support teachers to the broader teaching workforce will ensure a more comprehensive integration of these practices into educational settings.

### **3.2. Workshop-Based Teaching**

The issues introduced by the pilot project generally struggled to gain traction and were rarely integrated into other day-to-day teaching activities. However, one particular activity stands out as an exception to this trend.

In recent years, some classes at the institute have participated in a workshop-style experience conducted during school hours. The aim of these workshops is to create a tangible product through cooperative and inclusive working methods. A key feature of this approach is its interdisciplinary dimension: rather than focusing on achieving the specific educational goals of individual academic subjects, the workshops start with the needs of the student group to design a tailor-made educational proposal. Notably, the management of these workshops is entrusted to support teachers, working in collaboration with educators and training agencies.

Within two of these workshop pathways, the experience led to the creation of tangible products that actively embraced and celebrated the linguistic diversity within the class. The decisive factor facilitating the integration of elements from

the pilot project appears to have been the extracurricular dimension of these workshops.

The capacity of these workshops in integrating elements of the pilot project underscores the advantages of operating outside conventional, subject-based structures. This flexibility allowed for more creative and inclusive approaches, facilitating the adoption of intercultural and plurilingual practices.

This case offers valuable insights for the initial training of teachers. If the themes addressed by the pilot project naturally found space only within laboratory-based teaching contexts, it is reasonable to hypothesise that these settings are the most conducive for such themes to take root. To encourage the spread of intercultural pedagogy and plurilingual approaches, it is essential to promote alternative teaching methods that move beyond traditional frontal lessons focused on disciplinary content. This underscores the need to strengthen pre-service training in laboratory-based teaching, equipping future teachers with the skills and confidence to incorporate this approach into their professional contexts.

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# INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY, RESOURCES AND INCLUSION OF INCOMING STUDENTS: PRELIMINARY DATA FROM THE VAMOS PROJECT WITH SPANISH STUDENTS

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As emerging adults, university students are in a transitional phase in terms of identity, career and relationships, which can be especially challenging during the pandemic. Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and reduced life satisfaction have increased among young adults, exacerbated by lockdowns, school closures and the inability to study abroad. International mobility, for example through Erasmus programs, is crucial for personal development and fosters skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, which are essential for European citizenship. The VAMOS project was set up to investigate the well-being of Erasmus students at the Universities of Turin and Zaragoza. This study focuses on 40 Spanish students, 15 of whom chose Italy for their Erasmus experience, and analyzes variables such as course of study, language skills, previous mobility experience and motivation. Both their strengths and weaknesses are examined, comparing those who chose Italy with those who did not. The project aims to better understand the needs of these students and develop tailored programs to support their development, enhance the Erasmus experience and promote European citizenship, especially in the post-pandemic period.

Emerging adulthood; Mental health; International mobility; Erasmus programs; European citizenship

## **1. INTRODUCTION. UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND EMERGING ADULTS IN PAN-DEMIC PERIOD**

Emerging adulthood, typically between the ages of 19 and 35, is a critical developmental stage characterized by the exploration of one's identity in areas such as work, education, relationships, and lifestyle (Arnett, 2007). While this stage offers opportunities for growth, it is also associated with considerable stress and anxiety due to instability and uncertainty in studies, career and personal relationships. While individuals gain autonomy, the responsibilities associated with this transition can lead to psychological pressure (Arnett et al., 2014).

University students belonging to this age group are particularly affected by these challenges. Universities serve as a developmental environment in which students can explore their identity and career path (Arnett, 2016). However, this exploration can either promote resilience and well-being or lead to problems such as anxiety and isolation (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2021). Emerging adults are especially vulnerable to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, which are often exacerbated by academic pressure and economic uncertainty (Arnett et al., 2014).

Research shows that university students are at increased risk to their mental health, with many of them experiencing lower levels of wellbeing compared to other age groups even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Toussaint et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2018). The WHO WMH-ICS project (Auerbach et al., 2018) has shown that diagnosable mental disorders are common among students, including depression, anxiety and substance use, which often begin before or during the study period. Common risk factors include academic stress, social isolation and financial hardship. Barriers to treatment include limited resources, mental health stigma, and lack of awareness of available services (Odrizola-González et al., 2020; Saulle et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues as lockdowns and remote learning increased social isolation and stress levels (Balanzá-Martínez et al., 2020; Halliburton et al., 2021). Addressing the mental health needs of higher education students remains a global priority.

## **2. INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY, ERASMUS AND EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on international student mobility, preventing young adults from taking advantage of the formative opportunity to study abroad. International mobility plays an important role in the



socio-emotional and relational growth of students and helps them to develop an awareness of their role in national and international communities (Martínez-Usarralde et al., 2017). Studies (e.g. Beine et al., 2014) show that economic, social and political factors, including scholarship opportunities and educational costs, influence the decision to study abroad. However, challenges such as high education costs, visa and residence permit issues and cultural barriers can affect students' ability to participate in international mobility programs (López-Duarte et al., 2020). Amendola et al. (2021) found that international mobility significantly improves students' intercultural competence, professional development and global perspective. Through exposure to other cultures and educational environments, students also improve their soft skills, such as communication, problem solving and teamwork. This personal and professional development makes students more competitive in the global job market, so international mobility programs are essential for enriching their professional profile (Handayani & Wienanda, 2021). In addition, mobility fosters critical thinking, adaptability, self-regulation and creativity, which are crucial for coping with the challenges of adulthood (Van Mol, 2018). International exchange experiences are crucial for young people in the transition to adulthood as they provide significant opportunities for identity reshaping and personal growth. These experiences also foster curiosity and a desire for entrepreneurship, key elements of European citizenship. However, the pandemic has disrupted international mobility and forced universities to adapt their programs, with many moving to online formats and restricting travel. Despite these challenges, the pandemic has also paved the way for virtual mobility programs that could complement traditional exchange programs in the future (Yıldırım et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022).

### **3. THE CURRENT STUDY**

The UNITA consortium<sup>1</sup>, founded in 2020 and made up of 12 European universities, aims to promote student mobility as an instrument of international and intercultural education in the field of European higher education. Funded by the UNITA consortium, the VAMOS<sup>2</sup> project, a collaboration between the Departments of Psychology at the Universities of Turin and Zaragoza, aims to monitor the well-being of students at the two universities who have opted for international mobility in the post-pandemic period.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unito.it/internazionalita/unita-universitas-montium>

<sup>2</sup> VAMOS: uniVersity internAtional Mobility to develop social-emOtional and creativity Skills

This study analyzes preliminary data within the VAMOS project and focuses on describing the sample of Spanish students who have opted for international mobility, with special attention to those who aspire to study abroad in Italy. Specifically, the study aims to (1) describe who the Spanish outgoing students are and what their characteristics are; (2) test for differences between the students who chose Italy or other host countries; (3) test for differences based on gender; and (4) test for differences between the Spanish outgoing students and the normative reference samples for the variables under consideration.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1. Participants**

A total of 40 students from the University of Zaragoza, Spain, took part in the study. The average age of the sample was 22 years (age range = 21–32 years). Most of the total sample was female (77%). The university students who participated in the study at the time of data collection were enrolled in different study programs: Natural Sciences 38% (Medicine, Environmental Sciences, Sports Sciences), Humanities 57% (Psychology, Education, Law), Arts 5%. The participating students were enrolled in the 2nd (3%), 3rd (55%) and 4th (42%) year of their respective degree programs.

### **4.2. Procedure**

Students completed an online questionnaire to collect sociodemographic data and the variables presented in the Measures section. Participants were informed about the aims of the study, the procedures for data storage, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any time. All procedures performed in studies with human participants complied with the principles of the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments or equivalent ethical standards and were approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Turin on July 21, 2023 (Prot. No. 0432954)

### **4.3. Measures**

All students who participated in the study answered an online questionnaire, which was completed in Spanish. The questionnaire included the validated scales to measure the study variables and a section with socio-demographic information such as gender, age, course of study at the time of data collection. The data collection took place in spring 2023. The scales used have been tested and validated in previous studies with samples of university students; the scales used are listed below:

- The Social Problem-Solving Inventory – Short Form (SPSI-SF) developed by Hawkins et al. (2009) with five sub-dimensions: Positive Problem Orientation (PPO); Negative Problem Orientation (NPO); Rational Problem Solving (RPS); Impulsive Style (ICS); Avoidance Style (AS).
- The Life Skills Scale (LSSAA) developed by Kase et al. (2016) with four subscales: Decision Making, coping with emotion, effective communication, Interpersonal Relationships.
- The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Cohen et al. (1983).
- The Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS), validated in Spanish by Herrero et al. (2003).

## 5. RESULTS

With regard to the first objective, Table 1 shows the results of previous experiences with international mobility, the choice of host country, the duration of mobility, language skills and the reasons for the decision to go abroad. The second table shows the mean values and standard deviations of the variables included in the study.

Table 1. Information about international mobility experiences and motivation

<i>Variables</i>	<i>%</i>
First international mobility experience	99%
International mobility experiences during secondary school	48%
Host Country	
Italy	37.5%
Other countries (France, Germany, Portugal, Czech Republic)	62.5%
Duration of Erasmus	
<6 months	23%
<12 months	72%
>12 months	5%
English language proficiency level	
B1	28%
B2	35%
C1	35%
C2	2%

Erasmus country language proficiency level

A1	42%
A2	20%
B1	15%
B2	15%
C1	5%
C2	3%

Reasons why international mobility was chosen

Networking internationally	65%
Immersion in a new cultural context	75%
Experiences of independence	70%
Personal growth	93%
Job opportunities	23%
CV enrichment	43%
Learning a new language	83%
Furthering a degree	58%

Table 2. Descriptive analyses of the variables considered

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean ± SD</i>
Positive_PS	16.47 ± 3.63
Negative_PS	12.30 ± 4.10
Rational_PS	16.25 ± 3.88
Impulsive_PS	8.40 ± 3.15
Avoidance_PS	8.30 ± 3.70
LS_Decision Making	12.22 ± 1.95
LS_coping with emotion	10.82 ± 2.80
LS_effective communication	11.32 ± 2.45
LS_Interpersonal Relationships	13.37 ± 1.19
Perceived Stress	20.95 ± 4.08
Anxiety	5.95 ± 3.58
Depression	3.01 ± 2.81

Note: PS=Problem Solving; LS= Life Skills

For the last objective, the values obtained by the Spanish outgoing students were compared with the normative reference values for each variable considered. The participants in this study scored higher on the life skills “Decision-making” ( $t(39)=1.99, p<.05$ ) and “Interpersonal relationships” ( $t(39)=4.75, p<.001$ ) as well as on stress level ( $t(39)=7.20, p<.001$ ). Conversely, the participants reported lower levels of anxiety ( $t(39)=-2.20, p<.05$ ) and depression ( $t(39)=-2.02, p<.05$ ).

## **6. DISCUSSIONS**

The study examines the well-being, resources and challenges of Spanish university students participating in international mobility as part of the VAMOS project, contributing to the understanding of the complexity of development in emerging adulthood. Participants showed above-average competencies in life skills, confirming the benefits of programs for personal and professional development (Amendola & Restaino, 2021; Van Mol, 2018). In terms of gender differences, young women showed a stronger tendency towards negative problem orientation, avoidant coping styles and anxiety, while young men showed better emotional coping skills, which is consistent with previous research (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2021). Participants reported lower than normal levels of anxiety and depression, but significantly more stress, reflecting an interaction between academic pressure, international experiences, and protective factors such as interpersonal skills and decision-making ability. The long-lasting effects of the pandemic, such as social isolation and lockdown, exacerbated the young adults’ mental health problems (Saulle et al., 2022). Limitations of the study include the small sample size and the exclusive focus on Spanish outgoing students, which limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow any definitive conclusions to be drawn. Longitudinal studies and qualitative methods could improve the understanding of the students’ experiences and their coping strategies.

The practical implications arising from these findings highlight the importance of specific support programs for international students, especially in the post-pandemic period. Universities should address gender-specific vulnerabilities, improve stress management resources and promote the development of life skills. Although virtual mobility has proven to be a viable alternative during the pandemic (Yıldırım et al., 2021), it cannot replace the social-emotional benefits of face-to-face exchanges, which argues for a complementary integration of both formats.

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# ADDRESSING LINGUISTIC (IN)EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND MULTILINGUALISM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LUXEMBOURG

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Social justice has a twofold role in the context of higher education. Firstly, it serves as a fundamental objective in democratic societies, embodying values such as inclusive education, equal participation, and fair accessibility in resources and in opportunities for the development of individuals. Secondly, within the context of education, social justice refers to the ongoing process of raising awareness regarding power relations and targeting existing inequalities. Language, a crucial component of social justice, remains underexplored in higher education. In the present paper, I focus on the case of the multilingual University of Luxembourg and I provide data about the use and role of languages in this higher education setting. Applying the appraisal framework, and specifically the system of attitude, I analyse lecturing staff and undergraduate students' experiences on the use of languages at the University of Luxembourg. Findings show that there is the need to raise awareness towards language inequality in higher education institutions and find ways to address this further.

social justice; higher education; linguistic diversity; language inequality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education has a dual role on a national and international level. While higher education institutions become more and more diverse, it is important for higher education to reconsider the challenges that go with it on the national and international level (Smith, 2020).

Social justice has been one of the core values and aims of higher education institutions (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009). Wilson-Strydom (2015) writes that "social justice is currently a 'mantra' in higher education" (p. 143). For Skilbeck (2000) promoting principles of social justice and democracy are one of the core



elements of higher education's role.

There is no universal definition of social justice. In fact, social justice is often associated with topics such as respect, equal access, participation, and representation (Picower, 2012). One of the crucial components of social justice is language (Wolfram, Charity Hudley & Valdés, 2023). The strong connection between the two is explained by Piller (2016) who supports that linguistic diversity facilitates social participation (Piller, 2016). Avineri et al. (2019) notice that language is found in most of the recent discussions around social justice.

Previous research on social justice in higher education focused on areas such as inclusion, equity, access, and participation in higher education from the perspective of specific populations (Brennan & Naidoo, 2007). Even though these topics are closely connected to language (Wolfram, Charity Hudley & Valdés, 2023), “language has received scant attention” (Piller & Takahashi, 2011, p. 375) in relevant research. Piller (2016) explains that there is a lack of systematic research on issues that have to do with social justice and languages.

To address this gap, I focus on the bachelor level of studies at the University of Luxembourg, to explore potential mismatches between the institution's multilingualism policy and the realities in language use, as experienced by members of the educational community. Specifically, with the present paper I aim to reply to the following question:

How do lecturing staff and bachelor students experience the role of the different languages in teaching and in learning at the University of Luxembourg?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The University of Luxembourg is the only public University of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. In May 2020, the university adopted the multilingualism policy<sup>3</sup> according to which English, French and German are the official teaching languages. In addition to the three official languages, the university recognizes the status of Luxembourgish, as the national language. According to the multilingualism policy (2020), languages have a specific function at the university “deriving from its position as academic, legal or national language”.

The present case study delves into lecturing staff and undergraduate students'

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<sup>3</sup> University of Luxembourg. 2020. Multilingualism Policy. <https://www.uni.lu/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2023/07/Multilingualism-Policy-English.pdf>

experiences and explores the use and the role of languages at the University of Luxembourg. Given that the aim of the research is to get a deeper understanding from individuals' experience, I considered a qualitative approach more appropriate (Given, 2008; Nassaji, 2020).

I collected data for the research through semi-structured interviews with thirteen lecturing staff from the three Faculties of the university. I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because it is a research method that contributes to richer data in getting lecturing staff's perspective (Taherdoost, 2021).

For undergraduate students, I designed and launched an online survey that was followed by two focus group discussions. I considered this method for data collection suitable because as mentioned in literature, it is efficient, convenient, and a quick way to collect data from a big audience maintaining anonymity and ensuring confidentiality (Patten, 2014; Cohen et al., 2017). To get a deeper understanding of the sixty eight completed survey responses, I conducted two focus group discussions with students who were willing to further contribute. I chose focus group discussions because it is a research tool that allowed me to bring together a small group of students and to exchange on a specific topic in a more relaxed environment (e.g. Packer-Muti, 2010).

In all research tools used, I asked participants about their role at the university, their experience with teaching/learning in this context and their perspective on linguistic diversity at the university.

Data was analysed using the appraisal framework, and specifically the system of attitude. I consider the appraisal framework suitable for the analysis of the data collected because it is a structured method to analyse how language reflects power dynamics and social inequalities, which were of interest to the research question.

In the appraisal framework, attitude focuses on feelings and is concerned with how they are expressed in discourse (Martin & White, 2005). Attitude is further divided to affect, judgement, and appreciation. According to Martin and White (2005), affect focuses on expressions of feelings that can be either positive or negative. Judgement is concerned with behaviour and approaches it in the framework of social expectations and systems of values. Lastly, appreciation refers to evaluations of abstract concepts such as products, phenomena, and processes.

Appraisal, and specifically the system of attitude is chosen for data analysis because it examines in depth "meanings in context" (Martin & White 2005, p.

94) and highlights the role of individuals, both of which are important to the research. With this approach to data analysis I focus on participants' expressions of affect, judgement, and appreciation to unveil power relations and underlying ideologies.

### **3. FINDINGS**

In this section I include excerpts from the multilingualism policy of the university as well as data collected from the semi-structured interviews with lecturing staff and from the online survey and focus group discussions with undergraduate students.

Starting from the multilingualism policy, the document mentions that “learning and using multiple languages is an added value to student and employee experience” and states that “multilingualism must promote inclusion”. In this excerpt from the official document, multilingualism is positively evaluated with appreciation as beneficial to all members of the university. In the next line, the advantage of using multiple languages at the university becomes a strong judgement that includes an ethical perspective and refers to an active use of multilingualism for inclusion.

However, data from participants present a contradictory picture. One of the students says that at the university “the range of languages is limited and only benefits people who are comfortable with English”. This student expresses a negative low range evaluation for the choice of languages at the university. To that, a teacher adds that he does “NOT observe linguistic diversity at the university” and that he “observe(s) a singularity which is directed towards English”. This participant uses a low range negative appreciation to describe his observations to the use of English at the university. Participant emphasizes the lack of linguistic diversity that he notices at the university by placing emphasis on the negation “not” and by using “singularity” to describe the use of English.

According to participants, English seems to be the language that is mostly used at the university. English is referred to as “the sort of lingua franca” that is “becoming a new dominant (language)”. The phrases “lingua franca” and “dominant language” are an indication of appreciation that reveals the value that participants attribute to English in the context of the university. Based on participants' sayings, English is seen as the commonly used language that prevails other languages.

To the exclusive use of English, one of the participants mentioned that it “can be a huge help” but also talked about the need to consider “what is excluded by

that”. Participant’s sayings include a strong positive appreciation about English being “a huge help”. At the same time, this participant negatively evaluates the dominance of English as an excluding factor.

Participants referred to French as “a secondary language” which is mostly used “in administration” at the university. These phrases are examples of appreciation that show that participants evaluate French as a not very important language at the university. For the same language, a student expressed their dissatisfaction saying that “French is underestimated” at the university. Participant’s expression of affect also shows a negative appreciation to the French language which, according to him, does not get the importance that deserves.

In general, participants appear concerned about French. An example is what a participant says that “French mostly is losing over English”. This phrase shows negative appreciation for the impact of English on French. Moreover, the use of present continuous for the verb adds to the dynamism of the phrase and shows a tendency for something temporary.

German is another of the official languages of the university. One of the participating lecturing staff mentions that “German is coming back much more” since in earlier years, after the Second World War, it was “not a very popular language”. This participant expresses his strong appreciation to the German language. According to him, German is in return at the country, and as an extension to that, at the university. This participant evaluates the changing status of German which was not liked due to its link to the Second World War.

However, a student writes in the questionnaire that there is “too much focus on German for a university which claims to be ‘multilingual’”. This student expresses a strong negative evaluation for the use of German. In addition to that, the phrase “claim to be” together with the use of single quotation marks for “multilingual”, indicate irony from the part of the participant to the extensive use of German at the university.

On the other hand, for Luxembourgish, a Law student mentions that she has “not encountered Luxembourgish once in any way, shape or form”. This participant uses strong negative appreciation for the use of Luxembourgish which is emphasized with the use of “any way, shape or form”. For a lecturing staff participant, Luxembourgish is seen as “a small language and a small literature” that raises questions of “language power” and therefore “have to find our corner”. This participant talks about language power and repeats the adjective “small” when referring to Luxembourgish language and literature,

making a stronger point. The metaphor “finding our corner” shows that Luxembourgish is not seen at the university, and this is why she finds it obligatory for those working with Luxembourgish to find their place at the university. The use of the first-person plural pronoun for this judgement is an indication of subjectivity and shows that she is part of the group.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Findings indicate that the status and role of languages varies at the University of Luxembourg. This imbalance, as reflected through participants’ experiences, goes back to Piller’s (2016) point about language power and hierarchy amongst the different languages.

Talking about hierarchy and language power, one of the very common topics that emerged in data is the dominance of English. As also appears in literature, English is seen as a threat to national languages in science (Duarte & van der Ploeg, 2019) and to linguistic diversity (Pérez-Llantada, 2018). Even though English appears to open possibilities in this multilingual context, it is important to consider the global but also regional and national mission of the university (Darquennes, du Plessis, & Soler, 2020) given that the more international universities seek to be, the more effective they need to be to engage with the different languages (Soler, Björkman & Kuteeva, 2017). This is why raising awareness towards linguistic diversity is crucial (Coleman, 2006).

Especially for the University of Luxembourg which envisions to be “a University for Luxembourg and the world”<sup>4</sup>, plurilingual approaches to teaching, learning, and communicating research need to be encouraged (Darling, 2021). In this context and aiming to address the (in)justices that come with the different status of languages, “critical planning (...) and purposeful education to make possible greater understanding and acceptance of our complex linguistic realities” is meaningful (Liu, 2018, p. 22).

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<sup>4</sup> University of Luxembourg. Profile of the university.  
<https://www.uni.lu/en/about/profile/>

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# FACULTY DEVELOPMENT, INCLUSION AND ATTENTION FOR DIVERSITY: PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS AT THE IRIDI START COURSE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TURIN

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Universities are increasingly responsible for promoting equitable access and learning opportunities, accommodating diverse backgrounds, and meeting students' needs. Teaching methods and assessments should be inclusive, sensitive to differences in culture, gender, age, and other factors, in order to ensure the success of all students. It is essential to review and monitor assessment processes to reduce biases and prevent discrimination based on stereotypes. To support this, Faculty Development initiatives can enhance student-centered and inclusive teaching practices. Such training fosters intercultural competence and inclusion awareness, positively impacting teachers' attitudes and sensitivity to students' needs. This inclusive approach not only helps vulnerable students express their needs but also improves overall transparency and accessibility in the classroom. This paper examines the IRIDI program at the University of Turin, specifically the START course for researchers, which includes a module on inclusivity. Reflections from participants were analysed through the text analysis software NVivo 11 in order to identify faculty attitudes and challenges, thus guiding future strategies to support inclusive teaching practices.

Higher Education; Faculty Development; Inclusion; portfolio

## 1. HIGHER EDUCATION, INCLUSION AND FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Due to the diverse educational needs and the heterogeneity of the student population, universities bear the responsibility to ensure equitable access and learning opportunities for all. Inclusive education is increasingly recognized as both a legal and ethical imperative, grounded in the principles of diversity,



equity, and social justice. However, despite its theoretical importance, a significant gap persists between the ideals of inclusive education and their practical implementation.

Universities are urged to promote equal access and learning opportunities for all students. This requires teaching and assessment practices to be inclusive and sensitive to differences such as culture, gender, age, and more, thereby supporting the success of every student. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine summative evaluation processes, particularly during exams, to avoid biases related to stereotypes or prejudices that could distort assessment and decision-making processes, potentially leading to discriminatory practices (e.g., Bellacicco & Parisi, 2021).

To address these challenges, it is essential to equip the university faculty with the skills and knowledge needed to deliver student-centered instructions that meet diverse needs. This can be achieved through targeted Faculty Development programs. Research highlights the significance of such training, with evidence showing that courses on inclusion and intercultural competence positively influence teachers' attitudes, therefore ensuring student-centered teaching that is responsive to their needs (Moriña, Perera & Carballo, 2020; Moriña & Orozco, 2020). Studies report that courses have a positive impact in terms of knowledge and sensitivity to students (Davies et al., 2013; Lombardi et al., 2011) as well as on students in general (Cunningham, 2013; Murray et al., 2014), as it promotes transparency and completeness of information provided in the classroom, attention to students, and the use of tools and methods that are functional for learning and teaching. It should also be noted that the inclusive attitude of teachers fosters the willingness of the most vulnerable students to make their needs explicit, making it possible for the teacher to implement the appropriate accommodations (Sapir & Banai, 2024).

The attitudes, skills, and commitment of university faculty play a pivotal role in shaping an inclusive learning environment. Faculty members not only facilitate academic success but also contribute to cultivating a sense of belonging among students. When faculties display inclusivity, students – especially those from vulnerable groups – are more likely to feel comfortable expressing their needs, allowing educators to provide appropriate accommodations (Sapir & Banai, 2024). Conversely, faculty attitudes rooted in stereotypes or non-inclusive perspectives act as barriers to student success (Solis-Grant et al., 2023).

## 2. THE UNITO IRIDI START COURSE

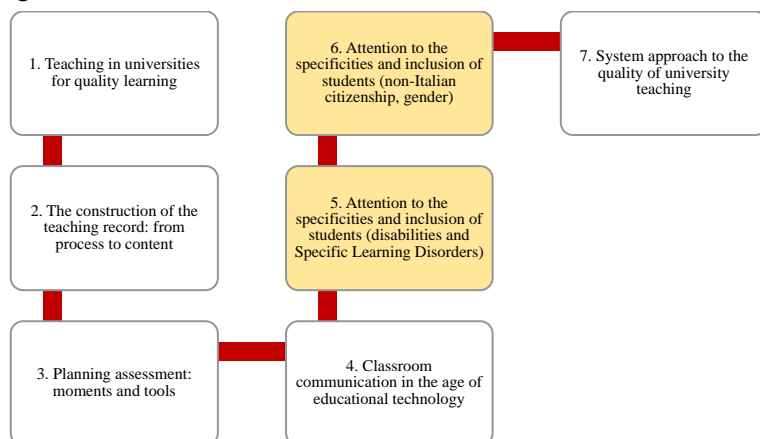
Since 2017 the University of Turin has introduced Faculty Development programs -- the IRIDI courses -- for teaching staff. Among the training options, the IRIDI START course is one designed for researchers, particularly new hires, and consists of seven training modules (Figure 1).

The objectives of the START course are:

- To develop awareness of the teaching choices being made or to be made and of the underlying intentions.
- To adequately plan the activities of the teaching(s).
- To focus on student learning and the factors that facilitate it.
- To make flexible use of digital in teaching (e.g. hybrid, collaborative approaches...).
- To investigate assessment strategies as they significantly influence learning more than teaching (transparency, objectivity, tools, etc.).
- To improve teaching strategies by also introducing innovative elements (ICT, inclusion, soft skills enhancement) and verifying their effectiveness.
- To link the quality of teaching with that of the Institution (from teaching to the course of study, to the University).

Two modules focus on the topic “Attention to the specificities and inclusion of students” from the perspectives of gender, disability and Specific Learning Disorders, and non-Italian citizenship. Specifically, this module provides guidance on rules and regulations and practical recommendations and strategies for effectively handling these cases.

Fig 1. The IRIDI START course



Participants are encouraged to document their reflections in a teaching e-portfolio, a useful tool to ensure meaningful learning (Torre & Emanuel, 2023). In this study, participants' reflections on these forms were explored, with a particular focus on the inclusion of foreign students.

### **3. RESULTS: PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTION ABOUT INCLUSION**

This paper considers the reflections of participants from the first eight editions of the course (2020 to early 2024), which trained 447 faculty members. The trainees decide for themselves on which modules to present their reflections on. The documents (N = 230) were analysed through the text analysis software NVivo 11<sup>1</sup> (Jackson et al., 2019), in order to identify attitudes, difficulties and areas for further exploration, useful to respond to the needs of the teaching staff and student community and to direct future actions to support inclusive teaching.

Participants' reflections on the three topics covered in the module were subjected to lexical analysis. Most participants included reflections related to students with disabilities and specific learning disorders, followed by inclusion of foreign students and gender. Figure 2 shows the words frequency that emerged in the textual analysis of these documents.

As observed, many terms are associated with aspects of teaching and instructional design (e.g., lessons, courses, etc.), while, comparatively, less attention is devoted to assessment.

A closer analysis reveals a focus on inclusion and the need to move beyond the concept of diversity. However, the notion of competence arises specifically in the context of including international students. It appears that when faced with challenges in linguistic and cultural communication, there is a recognition of the need to deepen understanding of these issues and to develop specific competencies to address them effectively.

Texts reflecting on the inclusion of foreign students were analysed using thematic analysis, with a focus on three key aspects: faculty attitudes toward international students, the teaching and assessment challenges encountered in classroom interactions with these students, and the strategies employed by the faculty to promote their inclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis was conducted on Italian texts, a translation of the terms and lexical occurrences is provided here.

Fig. 2. Word frequency

Disability and SLD (148)		Gender (35)		Foreign students (49)	
<i>Word</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Word</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Word</i>	<i>Count</i>
student*	1768	student*	59	student*	378
lesson(s)	469	gender	53	italy/italian*	135
course(s)	453	lesson(s)	32	foreigner	94
teacher(s)	380	teacher(s)	31	course(s)	86
SLD	342	course(s)	24	teacher(s)	83
disability	268	inclusion/inclusive	22	language/linguistic*	82
didactics	226	language	22	culture/cultural	69
difficulties	163	attention	19	diversity	55
exam	158	respect	19	citizenship	47
studying	128	discrimination(s)	16	study	44
<i>learning</i>	<i>122</i>	<i>didactics</i>	<i>11</i>	<b>competence(s)</b>	<b>41</b>
<i>assessment</i>	<i>68</i>	difficulties	10	<i>didactics</i>	27
				<i>assessment</i>	13
				<i>learning</i>	12

The findings reveal several dimensions of faculty attitudes toward international students, emphasizing the value of diversity, shared challenges, and the socio-cultural complexities inherent in the educational experience. Participants reveal a reflective and multidimensional approach to inclusion, characterized by empathy, respect for diversity, and a commitment to understanding the complexities of students' experiences. A recurring theme is the importance of valuing differences without imposing judgments. One participant reflected:

When one encounters a 'difference', it is important to emphasize and value it, not by assigning a hierarchy to the different qualities. The concept, in my opinion, should not be 'we are all the same' but 'we are different in this, and it is a value that this is so; now let us understand each other better'.

Such an inclusive attitude fosters mutual understanding and respect, encouraging both educators and students to view diversity as a strength rather than a challenge. This perspective is crucial for the creation of a supportive learning environment that appreciates each student's unique experiences and contributions.

Some participants highlighted shared experiences with foreign students, particularly the challenges of teaching and learning in a non-native language. This shared struggle fosters empathy and reduces hierarchical distinctions between teachers and students. One participant noted:

The fact that I teach on a course delivered in English puts me and the foreign students on an equal footing as far as language is concerned. For most students (native English-speaking students are rare), English is their second language, as it is for me too.

Language, often seen as a barrier, thus becomes a shared endeavour, helping to bridge gaps in understanding and create a more collaborative learning environment.

Broader reflections within the data addressed the socio-cultural factors affecting foreign students, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds. Recognizing each student's unique characteristics enables the faculty to provide support that extends beyond academic concerns. By paying attention to these dynamics, educators can better understand their students' behaviours, motivations, and challenges, tailoring their approach to foster both academic success and personal growth.

Regarding difficulties and challenges in teaching to foreign students these aspects emerged:

- **Cultural and Knowledge Disparities:** students from different cultural backgrounds often lack shared foundational knowledge or common cultural references.
- **Linguistic and Expressive Barriers:** directly impact the students' ability to communicate effectively, affecting their performance during assessments and leading to potential misunderstandings or misjudgements.
- **Differences in Student-Teacher Interaction:** cultural norms regarding interactions with educators vary widely (e.g. students may address teachers informally or frequently interrupt lessons...).
- **Administrative and Organizational Challenges:** critical issues often arise from institutional and administrative barriers (e.g. university offices that do not offer services in English, documents available only in Italian, inadequate support systems for students...).
- **Lack of Cultural Awareness:** faculty and staff may have limited knowledge of other cultures, which can lead to misunderstandings or even unintentional disrespect.

These challenges highlight the importance of addressing both linguistic and cultural differences, improving administrative support, and fostering cultural competence to create an inclusive learning environment.

Faculty members highlight strategies used to promote inclusion, in particular:

- Inclusive instructional design: incorporate cultural awareness into curricula and teaching activities to ensure relevance and inclusivity; plan and structure lessons to accommodate the diverse needs of foreign students while maintaining the coherence of the course.
- Culturally Accessible Lesson Preparation: use clear and accessible language when preparing lessons; avoiding assumptions about familiarity with analytical or interpretative frameworks specific to a particular culture.
- Individualized Attention and Availability: create a supportive environment by being attentive to students' individual needs and offering availability to address their concerns.
- Facilitating Peer Integration: encourage collaborative activities that engage students in academic content while fostering interpersonal dynamics to break down barriers between international and domestic students. This promotes a more welcoming and inclusive classroom environment.
- Valuing Intercultural Exchange: highlight the importance of intercultural exchange as both a valuable approach and a key competence for academic studies, professional work, and research.
- Providing additional Support: offer extra opportunities for interaction and clarification by organizing additional meetings.
- Peer Mentoring and Collaboration: students can support one another, creating a cooperative learning environment that benefits all.

These strategies aim to create an inclusive and supportive educational experience that values diversity, promotes mutual understanding, and fosters academic success. Addressing the challenges of teaching international students through thoughtful and empathetic practices ensures a learning environment where all students can thrive.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

To promote inclusivity in Higher Education, it is essential to integrate dedicated training on inclusion into Faculty Development programs. These training sessions should emphasize the importance of understanding and addressing the unique needs and characteristics of students, fostering a learning environment that supports their individual experiences and challenges.

Careful planning of teaching activities is equally critical. Educators should design their courses with a clear focus on student learning, considering the factors that enhance their engagement and success. This requires not only the adoption of effective teaching strategies but also the incorporation of inclusive practices into these methods. By doing so, faculty can ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have equitable opportunities to thrive.

Moreover, it is important to continually evaluate and refine these strategies to ensure their effectiveness. Incorporating inclusion elements into teaching should be accompanied by mechanisms to assess their impact, allowing for adjustments and improvements based on feedback and outcomes. Another key aspect is the need for clear and accessible guidelines to support inclusion. Providing the faculty with precise instructions and organizational procedures ensures a consistent approach across the university, helping to create an environment where inclusivity is both a shared value and a practical reality. Through these combined efforts, universities can foster a culture of inclusion that benefits students and educators alike.

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# THE EDUCATIONAL POVERTY OF MINORS WITH A MIGRATORY BACKGROUND: EXPERIENCES, ANALYSIS, CHALLENGES

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## INTRODUCTION

While scholarly attention has shifted from focusing on migrants' responsibilities to including those of all stakeholders, the extent to which the general population will accept migration-driven diversification depends on successful migrant integration.

At the third *Scuola Democratica* conference, “Education and/or Social Justice”, with my colleague Giovanna Filosa, an awareness arose to explore the role of education in migration processes. As part of a wide-ranging study, our panel offers a comparative study already underway between Italy and Spain, expanded to include experiences from other European and non-European countries. All studies are based on educational asymmetries and the analysis of gaps between domestic and foreign schoolchildren.

The panel, “The educational poverty of minors with a migratory background: experiences, analysis, challenges” received many proposals that he was split into two sessions.

The panel presentation arose from the desire to open our horizon or, if you like, build a Trojan Horse. We enter the matter by comparing ourselves with other academics doing similar research.

Our focus is on the case studies proposed by Scholars, Academics, researchers, social workers, teachers, and managers, which have territorial roots and are multi-disciplinary.

Different research fields, such as law, sociology, anthropology, geography, statistics, demography, and pedagogy, have been boarded for the most complete scenario.

First, the theoretical debate around migrant integration through education has been ongoing in Western nations for nearly a century, and the relevant literature suggests that integration is the only way to coexist. However, both theoretical and empirical studies tell us that there is no exact definition of 'educational integration' and no agreement on how to define it. Instead, there is empirical evidence of the lack of educational integration.

Although starting from different postulates, the comparative study between Italy and Spain yielded the same results.

To seek homogeneity in the papers, we established the following research questions:

- Does the current education system succeed in integrating migrant children?
- Does it bridge the differences between nationals and immigrants?
- Where are these gaps to be found within the school systems?

The research questions are based on these hypotheses:

- Data show differences between nationals and foreigners.
- Differences remain for second generations.

Some variables of the school systems examined emerged:

- Poor learning.
- Socio-cultural drawbacks.
- Risk of poverty.
- Educational deprivation.
- Vulnerability.
- Disability.
- Unaccompanied Migrant Minors.
- Use of leisure time.

Around these variables, the presentations had in common the realisation that migration is part of the evolution of humanity. All deal with first and second generations of immigrants, inequality, and the gap between newcomers and natives.

## **PANEL 1 – PARTICIPANTS**

Professor Maddalena Colombo from the Catholic University of Milan starts with her study on SEN students, those from immigrant, poor, and deprived

backgrounds. Her paper focuses on the pandemic period and how public schools cared for the most vulnerable students in the “emergency” and “post-emergency” frameworks. What was the role of teachers and principals?

The second presentation discussed the educational integration of Unaccompanied Migrant Minors, brilliantly introduced by three researchers: Chiara Ferrari, Alessandra Caragiuli from the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, and Alessandra Barzaghi from the ISMU Foundation.

Francesca Gabrielli (University of Roma Tre) discussed her research on the Third Sector, how leisure time is used, and the Sector’s role in combating the educational poverty of minors with migratory backgrounds.

Denis De Almeida Barros, a Portuguese national researcher at the University of Urbino, touched on the painful notes of Disability Studies in Education and proposed a model for studying the BES category in Italian schools.

The last paper of the first session is by Francesca Biondi del Monte from the Scuola Superiore di Pisa on the right to education of unaccompanied migrant minors and their transition to adulthood in the Italian legal system.

## **PANEL 2 – PARTICIPANTS**

In the afternoon, the discussion continued with four interventions. Annalisa Di Nuzzo, from the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples, presented an articulated speech entitled “Migrant Minors, Second Generations, Resistance to Inclusiveness and Transculturalism. A Case Investigation into the Anthropology of Migration”. The intervention aimed to problematise the definition of “second generations”, starting from an anthropological, transcultural and cross-cultural perspective. Through the methodology of action research and case studies, phenomena such as barriers and resistance to inclusion were analysed. Currently, the ability to cooperate with people of different cultures is one of the most important skills for creating an inclusive society which can involve the “new Italians”.

The successive presentation, by Ilaria Usalla (Málaga University), focused on an intervention of teaching Italian as a second language classroom. The didactic strategy was based on the utilisation of literary texts to bridge the gaps between foreign and native students within plurilingual and pluricultural classrooms, pointing to the motivation to learn as a crucial factor of education. The follow-up survey discussed aspects such as educational experience and reading habits acquired.

Oggiano & Mesaroli's paper (Civicozero Onlus) concerns the educational challenge in interventions for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFM), significantly affected by trauma and/or learning disabilities. Inclusive, innovative and effective teaching for foreign students with Specific Learning Disabilities (DSA) and Special Educational Needs (BES) can include social mediation techniques, cooperative learning, peer education, colourful image lexicon, communicating maps, gamification, playful teaching (word wall, word search, crosswords, spot the differences) and so on. In the future, it will be essential to provide teacher training on the teaching methodology used in this research and to strengthen collaboration with interdisciplinary experts: linguistics, pedagogy, neuroscience and developmental psychology.

The last paper is by Jacob Garrett (Ca' Foscari University, Venice) and describes a study on Parent Councils (*Decreti delegati*) in Italian schools. With archival documents (e.g. PTOF *–Piano triennale dell'offerta formativa*) and semi-structured interviews, the author explores the training offer for migrant students and their families in some Italian schools, pointing to inequality in the participation of migrant parents and inclusive or exclusive democratic practices.

## CONCLUSIONS

At the end of the afternoon session, a broad debate was stimulated among all the participants in the panel, which highlighted some points for reflection:

- It is crucial to continue to reflect on the new transnational identities that these young migrants carry on: many people land in Italy as a gateway to Europe to train here but settle wherever the working conditions are particularly advantageous.
- The interconnection between policies for the scholastic inclusion of young migrants and those to combat the falling birth rate and illegality and for the qualification of the future resident workforce does not escape.
- Policies for educational inclusion must be rethought together with those for the reception and integration of migrants, for the acquisition of citizenship and the support of families with a migratory background.

Ultimately, the educational and training poverty of young migrants is one of the main challenges that the school systems of advanced countries must face to be truly fair and inclusive. If inclusion is a lifelong life-wide process, it begins right at school. In education and training systems, the intellectual capital of migrant

origin risks being dispersed, if not adequately supported, in the broader framework of policies aimed at qualifying educational paths for all. The obstacles to learning that need to be removed are linguistic, social, and cultural. In educational and training inclusion paths, schools and families must be guided and accompanied by informal proximity networks and experiences – often more structured – linked to the third sector, associations, and voluntary work to ensure that the entire territory is transformed into an educating community.

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# DISABILITY MODELS IN EDUCATION: WHAT FITS THE B.E.S. CATEGORY?

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This study examines Special Education Needs (SEN) through the lens of Disability Studies, focusing on students with migratory backgrounds in Italy. It focuses on Third-Tier SEN, encompassing socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantage (referred as BES), and explores its implications within the educational system. Drawing on the British Social Model of Disability and a constructivist methodology, the research demonstrates how deficit-based perspectives can hinder inclusion efforts and perpetuate exclusion. Data were collected through participant observation in third-sector organizations and unstructured interviews over 11 months. Two case studies reveal the nuanced barriers faced by students, from stigmatization to unequal treatment, demonstrating how social factors can shape educational difficulties. The findings underscore the transformative potential of studying BES students for an understanding of processes of disablement students with migratory backgrounds are subjected to. Findings also point to the creeping presence of exclusive practices that go against the tide of general interest towards building inclusive educational settings.

BES; disability studies; migrant learners

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of Bisogni Educativi Speciali (or BES., eng: SEN) represents a broad and inclusive category encompassing various types of educational and social difficulties. In Italy, the definition of BES was introduced by the Ministerial Directive of 2012 (MIUR 2012), which reorganized general SEN into three categories: disabilities certified under Framework Law 104/1992; Specific Learning Disorders (DSA) as defined by Law 170/2010 and other developmental disorders; and finally, educational needs arising from social disadvantage, cultural barriers, and difficulties linked to a lack of familiarity with Italian

language and culture. This last category is further described in Ministerial Circular no. 8 of 2013 as the Area of Socioeconomic, Linguistic, and Cultural Disadvantage (MIUR, 2013). Particular attention is given to students with migratory backgrounds or newcomers to Italy. Socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantage (hereinafter, simply BES) encompasses a variety of irreducible situations, with the responsibility falling on teaching staff to observe and identify these difficulties in students. For this reason, it can be described as a “general and soft label,” requiring no medical certification and determined by the teaching council.

Although research has examined the presence of students with migratory backgrounds in Italian schools and addressed disability and learning disorders within the framework of inclusion, the situation of students with BES linked to socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantage remains underexplored, especially relative to learners with migratory backgrounds. This study seeks to analyze Third-Tier SEN, focusing specifically on students with migratory backgrounds. Disability Studies applied to education provide the theoretical framework, and through a qualitative methodology and two case studies, this research aims to understand how a deficit-based approach constitutes a barrier to education.

In the Italian context, the inclusion of students with BES intersects with the broader challenge of an educational system grappling with cultural and linguistic diversity. When such diversity is approached from a deficit-based perspective, the result can be disablement.

## **1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **1.1 Disability Studies**

Disability Studies offer a perspective on the social construction of disability. Although it is impossible to encapsulate all approaches to disability proposed by this field, it is worth emphasizing that many scholars and activists with disability highlight how historical, economic, and cultural contexts shape the experiences of people with disabilities (Slee, Corcoran, & Best, 2019).

In relation to the present study, one key question arises: why use Disability Studies to examine BES, which does not explicitly denote disability? This approach is justified for two reasons. Empirically, students experiencing socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantage, and those with specific learning disorders, often share educational tools and spaces. These include personalized learning plans and curricula detailed in Personalized Learning

Plans (PDPs) that feature compensatory and dispensatory measures; such measures frequently overlap; and interventions like pull-out sessions—work conducted outside the classroom in small groups—are common (Anastasiou, Kauffman, & Di Nuovo, 2015).

Secondly, Disability Studies applied to education consider the learning community as a whole, without initially distinguishing between able-bodied and disabled students, viewing ability as a characteristic distributed only after schooling (Gabel, 2005). Disability Studies underscore the importance of including different identity markers in their intersection with the distribution of ability (Erevelles, 2005). This perspective is essential for understanding the complexity of BES, particularly for students with migratory backgrounds, who often face multiple forms of disadvantage.

This approach enables the examination of how social barriers, rather than individual characteristics, contribute to the creation of disabilities in education. As such, Disability Studies challenge traditional medicalized perspectives, proposing an analysis that intersects ability, class, racialization, migratory status, and gender among those involved in schooling (Annamma et al., 2013; Connor et al., 2015).

## **1.2 British Social Model**

Part of the analytical framework for this study is the British Social Model of Disability, developed by scholars such as Michael Oliver (1990; 1996). This model distinguishes between disability and impairment. The former is defined as a social condition imposed by economic, political, and cultural barriers, while the latter refers to a physical or mental characteristic of the individual. As highlighted by UPIAS (1976): “Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (p. 4).

Central to this model is the metaphor of “on top”, which suggests the ontological precedence of impairment over disability. While this implies that individuals with impairments are not inherently disabled, it also establishes that impairment is a necessary (albeit insufficient) condition for disability. It is within the space between impairment and disability that economic, social, and cultural factors come into play, shaping individuals’ abilities. Thus, disabilities result from a process of disablement occurring at a supra-individual level.

A fundamental characteristic of the British Social Model is its transformative potential: it shifts attention from individual deficits to collective responsibilities.



Applying this model to BES entails examining how educational contexts might further the disablement of learners inadvertently, despite their explicit inclusive goals.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This contribution, part of a broader research project conducted in the metropolitan area of Turin, adopts a qualitative approach. In line with the social model of disability, the constructivist method allows for exploring the social construction of phenomena (Hacking, 1999), including categories of student populations. Utilizing grounded theory for data analysis (Tarozzi, 2008), which facilitates questioning and expanding the British model of disability outlined earlier, the data collected underwent constant comparison, resulting in revisions to the initial theory.

Data collection involved 11 months of participant observation in third-sector organizations registered with RUNTS. These organizations engaged in after-school programs, educational support, and socialization activities. These aggregation spaces are also crucial educational contexts where a plurality of socio-educational research questions intersect (Besozzi & Colombo, 2014). Participant observation was supplemented with unstructured conversations with students, educators and volunteers. The focus was limited to middle school students, given the significance of the transition from Primary to Secondary schooling orders and the division into differentiated educational pathways at its conclusion (Romito, 2014; 2016).

The organizations selected for the study were chosen based on their alignment with research objectives. Located in areas with significant migratory presence among 11-to-14-year-olds (MLPS, 2022), many observed students faced challenges related to using Italian (both as a communicative and instructional language), economic deprivation, and behavioral difficulties. Attention was directed at relational dynamics and barriers encountered by students.

## **3. CASE STUDIES**

### **3.1 Case 1**

A 12-year-old participant from a family with limited economic and cultural resources irregularly attended activities at Association 2. During a conversation about the participant, an educator emphasized how the family's "cultural poverty" was decisive in shaping academic performance and engagement within the association. The presumed lack of cultural resources was also cited

as influencing the participation of the participant's sibling. In this case, the scarcity of economic and cultural means was unilaterally assumed and extended to the family, justifying the siblings' disinterest in the association's proposed activities.

### **3.2 Case 2**

A 12-year-old boy of Moroccan origin attended activities at Association 4. The association's space was divided by a large wall that separated the homework area into two parts, one less visible to educators. The participant often sat in this space, speaking Arabic with friends and siblings—a behavior for which he was frequently reprimanded due to his impetuosity. After completing his homework, I asked the participant to draw a map of his class, indicating foreign students and support teachers. He depicted the support teachers near individual students' desks, since they provided personalized assistance. A week later, a friend of the participant completed the same activity and revealed that the participant himself received support from a teacher, a fact previously concealed. The participant displayed evident signs of shame when his friend redrew the map and did not respond to inquiries about the support teacher. This case highlights the practice of separation of perceived "difficult" students from others. Furthermore, it points to the relational impacts on individuals labelled as BES.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the case studies reveals how socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantage can reinterpret the British Social Model of Disability. While maintaining a constructivist approach to disability, Shelley Tremain (2001; 2015) questioned the apparent naturalness of impairment as posited in the British model. Adapting Butler's critique of the sex/gender distinction (Butler, 1999), Tremain suggests that impairment, like disability, is shaped by cultural readings of the biological body, such that historical, social, and economic factors lead to certain bodies being perceived as inherently impaired and others as normative.

Tremain's position aligns with critiques of deficit-thinking—the tendency to view learners' differences as intrinsic shortcomings disconnected from context (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018). This approach naturalizes socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantage, interpreting it as a fixed category. Consequently, such interpretations risk disabling students through processes exemplified in the "SENization" of students with migratory

backgrounds (Migliarini, 2018). The result is a deficit model where exclusion is predicated on attributes assigned a degree of incapacity.

Within this reprisal of the British model, impairment plays a significantly different role. It represents no more a biological, pre-discursive reality upon which disability is predicated, rather, impairment is conflated within cultural diversity, presumptively read as individual deficit. Hence, the possibility of a disabling treatment in BES students with migratory backgrounds.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the theoretical analysis and case studies demonstrate the utility of Disability Studies in examining BES linked to socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantage. By adapting the constructivist approach of the British Social Model to students with migratory backgrounds, a framework emerges in which even impairment results from deficit-oriented perspectives on this student population.

Limitation to the study must be addressed. First, despite being selected among a several instances, the cases presented have no universal validity. Secondly, the model proposed is not an all-encompassing one, rather it points to one possible occurrence in researching inclusion at the intersection of ability and migrational status. Hence, the conclusion shall be interpreted as a call for broader investigation in the BES categories, to identify elements that might slither into the practices of inclusive education.

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# LEISURE TIME USE AND THE THIRD SECTOR'S ROLE IN COMBATING EDUCATIONAL POVERTY OF MINORS WITH A MIGRATORY BACKGROUND

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This contribution addresses the issue of educational poverty among minors with a migratory background, with a particular focus on the use of leisure time and the role of the Third Sector in promoting inclusive educational practices. Through a quantitative approach, as a part of a broader research, a self-administered semi-structured questionnaire has been given to a statistically representative sample of 1761 students enrolled in the third year of lower secondary school in the academic year 2021/2022 in the municipality of Rome. The results reveal a statistically significant association between migratory background and engagement in certain educational or social activities during leisure time, mainly due to the characteristics of the territory of residence. Therefore, the importance of promoting the empowering function of the territory and a pedagogical responsibility extended to the entire community is emphasized, recalling the importance of the Frabbonian concept of “integrated educational system”. In this context, the central role of the Third Sector emerges, whose active participation underscores the importance of a collaborative and synergistic approach to address this challenge, highlighting how combating educational poverty requires the joint and coordinated commitment of all stakeholders involved.

educational poverty; minors with migratory background; third sector.

## INTRODUCTION

Due to the insights provided by various studies and a legislative trajectory that was, in part, influenced by the advocacy initiatives of the Third Sector (Save the Children, 2014, 2016, 2018), the issue of educational poverty has gained prominence in recent scientific and political discussions. It is now integrated

into public policy agendas (L. 208/2015), calling for a comprehensive, multi-level analysis to underscore its unique complexity.

In particular, the research problem from which the investigation originates is the phenomenon of educational poverty of minors from migratory backgrounds who are particularly exposed to educational poverty, due to challenges related to family and economic situation, bureaucratic obstacles, unequal access to higher education, and risk of early school dropout (MIM, 2024).

From this, the ultimate goal of the study is to explore this specific field of inquiry in order to enhance the understanding of educational poverty, contribute to the ongoing scientific discourse, and support the development of strategies for its prevention and mitigation.

The first paragraph briefly presents the theoretical framework, the second one describes the research design, illustrating its essential features and giving an account of the methodological framework, and the third paragraph presents the main research findings, followed by brief concluding remarks.

## **1. EDUCATIONAL POVERTY: A COMPLEX AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL PHENOMENON**

The analysis of poverty, in all its forms, is often a daunting challenge, both because of the complexity in defining such a complex concept and the difficulties in measuring it.

The notion of poverty in the educational context emerged in the social sciences discourse in the late 1990s to draw attention to the multidimensionality of the poverty phenomenon, not entirely reducible to purely economic aspects (Alkire & Foster, 2007; Anand & Sen, 1997; Bourguignon & Chakravarty, 2003; Sen, 1999). Scholars agree on the limitations of defining poverty as mere lack of income and describe it as a multidimensional concept, involving a wide range of aspects, such as education, health, employment, food security, active participation in social and political life, etc.

In particular, the construct of educational poverty has its roots in the *Capability Approach*, developed in the 1980s by Nobel laureate in economics Amartya K. Sen (Sen, 1999) and further explored by philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum (2011), with the aim of proposing a new theoretical paradigm for human development as an alternative to the predominant economic and political models.

Over the past two decades, there has been extensive discourse in the literature

regarding the significance of measuring and analyzing educational poverty (Allmendinger & Leibfried, 2003; Lohmann & Ferger, 2014). It has been emphasized that the impact of educational deprivation is subtle, creating a gap during a vulnerable period that proves challenging to overcome later in life (Battilocchi, 2020). An initial disadvantage can result in a crystallization of the same across different generations and transform cultural factors into hereditary elements, in a vicious circle of poverty.

In this context, accurate measures of educational poverty are crucial for designing effective policy interventions, and local data play a vital role in tailoring actions to specific communities. A review of the scientific literature reveals that the dimensions and measures of educational poverty are not fully developed. In fact, despite numerous studies on the subject (Agasisti et al., 2021; Botezat, 2016), there is still a lack of shared theorization of this notion to date (Battilocchi, 2020).

Educational poverty is understood as a polysemic concept with broad semantic boundaries, multidimensional, and depicted by a poly-perspective characterization (Sannipoli, 2019). It can be described as a shifting reality, emerging whenever circumstances are identified that restrict an individual's development, limit the expansion of their horizon of possibilities, and narrow the range of experiences accessible to them (Sottocorno, 2019). Educational poverty refers to the deprivation of formal, non-formal and informal educational opportunities, due to multiple factors of disadvantage, preventing the full flowering of human potential, with an impact on the whole community, present and future (Di Genova, 2023; Finetti, 2023; Gabrielli, 2024; Patera, 2022; Sottocorno, 2022).

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The research employs a quantitative approach. Indeed, the extensive nature of the research object and the descriptive and explanatory nature of the investigation's objective have suggested the use of this perspective, albeit with an awareness of the unique visual angle (Corbetta, 1999, p. 74) through which reality has been observed, thus acknowledging the limitations of the acquired knowledge.

Specifically, the survey technique has been chosen, involving the administration of a self-completed semi-structured questionnaire with group data collection to a statistically representative sample of 1761 students enrolled in the third year of lower secondary school in the academic year 2021/2022 in the municipality



of Rome.

With reference to the unit of analysis, in this survey it has been decided to accept the proposal of a recent document of the Italian Ministry of Education (MI, 2022): the paper aims to overcome the legal classification of 'student with non-Italian citizenship' and to replace it with the broader one of 'student from a migrant background'; the latter would include all those students who do not fall under the statistical category of 'non-Italian citizenship' but are, whether or not formally recognized as citizens, individuals whose backgrounds and perspectives contribute to the multicultural and plurilingual fabric of Italian schools (MI, 2022, p. 10). Therefore, on the basis of this recommendation, it has been decided to adopt the category of 'student with a migrant background', which includes all pupils born in Italy or abroad from at least one immigrant parent, regardless of the legal recognition of citizenship.

The survey has been conducted through a probability sampling design. Since the research specifically focuses on students from migratory backgrounds, a stratified probability sampling design has been chosen, allowing to increase the efficiency of the sample in the presence of areas of greater homogeneity (Cohen et al., 2007). The effective sample consists of 27 schools: for each adhering school, all grade III classes of all secondary school plexuses have been involved within the project, for a total of 106 classes in 35 plexuses. At the end of the procedure, a statistically representative sample of 1761 pupils enrolled in the third year of secondary school in the academic year 2021/2022 in the territory of the municipality of Rome has been obtained.

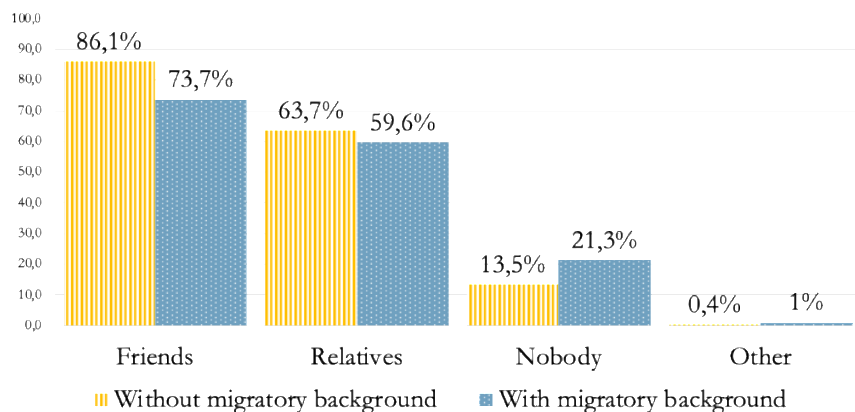
### **3. LEISURE TIME USE**

As far as the main results are concerned, one of the aspects investigated is that of leisure time, particularly focusing on the people with whom time is spent and the participation in sport and cultural activities.

With regards to people with whom time is spent, comparing the sub-sample of 1189 students with no migratory background and the sub-sample of 516 students with a migratory background (figure 1), it appears that the former is characterized by a higher percentage of students spending their free time with friends (86.1% vs. 73.7%) and relatives (63.7% vs. 59.6%), while the latter reports a higher percentage of students spending their free time alone (21.3% vs. 13.5%) or with other types of people (1.0% vs. 0.4%). In particular, it is possible to say that there is an association between the items 'nobody' and 'friends' and migration background: this association, although moderate ( $V= 0.1$

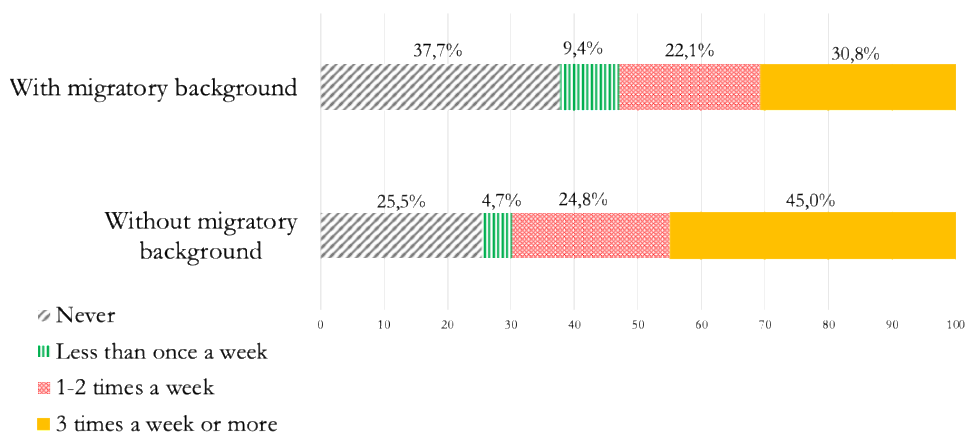
and  $V = 0.2$ , respectively), is significant for the whole sample at the 0.001 level, given the Chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 15.8$  and  $\chi^2 = 39.1$ , respectively) and p-value ( $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, students with migrant backgrounds spend their leisure time alone with a significantly higher percentage frequency than their peers.

Figure 1. People with whom one spends leisure time



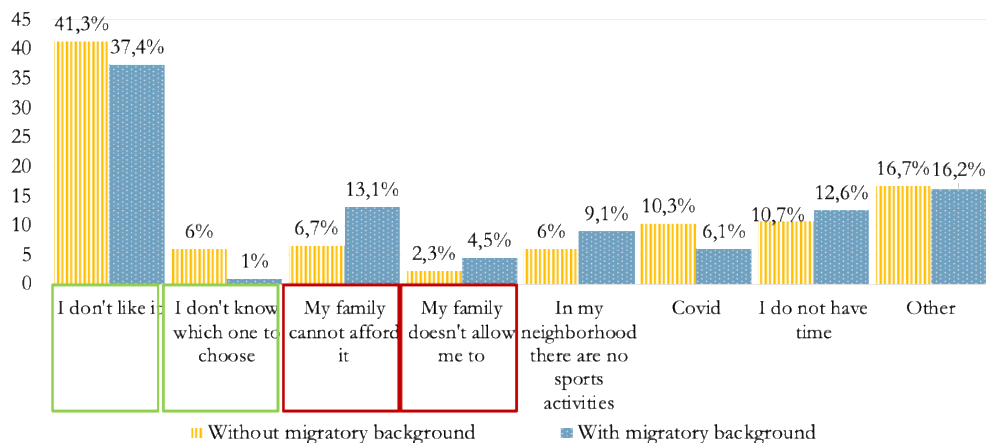
With reference to sports, analysis of the data for students with and without migrant backgrounds shows that the former play fewer sports than the latter (figure 2): in fact, an association emerges between the variables ‘frequency with which a sport is played’ and ‘migrant background,’ which, although weak ( $V = 0.2$ ), is significant for the entire sample at the 0.001 level, given the Chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 51.5$ ) and p-value ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Figure 2. Frequency with which a sport is practiced



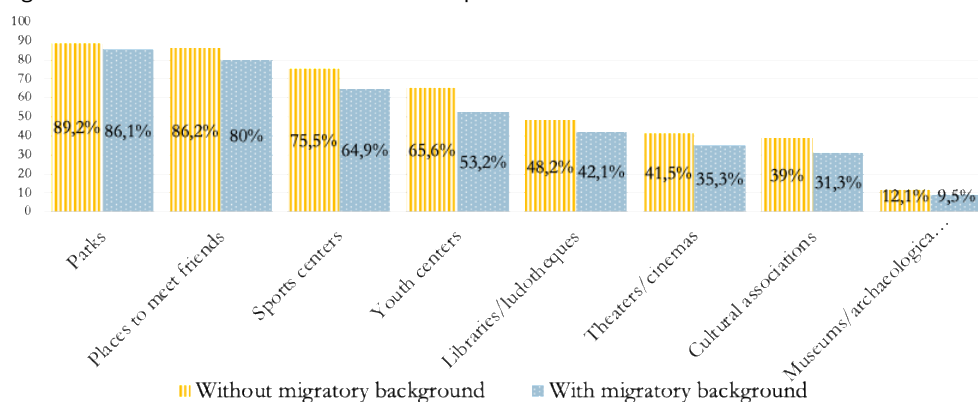
Investigating the reason for not playing a sport (figure 3), we find that the sub-sample of students without migration background reports higher frequencies in the modes related to endogenous factors, such as 'I don't like sports' or 'I don't know which one to choose', while that of students with migration background is characterized by higher percentages in the modes related to exogenous factors, such as 'my family does not allow me to play a sport', 'my family cannot afford it' or 'in my neighbourhood there are no sports activities'. In fact, it is possible to say that there is an association between the reason for not playing a sport and migration background, which, although weak ( $V= 0.2$ ), is significant for the whole sample at the 0.01 level, given the Chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 19.6$ ) and p-value ( $p = 0.007$ ).

Figure 3. Reason for not playing a sport



Delving into the territorial aspect, the presence of certain educational and social presences within the area of residence of the survey participants – such as parks, places to meet friends, sports centers, etc. – was investigated. Comparing the two subsamples (figure 4), it emerges that students with migrant backgrounds report lower percentages in all proposed items, with statistically significant associations. For example, it is noteworthy that the percentage of students with a migrant background living in territories where sports centers are present (64.9%) is 10.6 percentage points lower than that of students without a migrant background (75.5%) and is characterized by a statistically significant association for the entire sample at the 0.001 level, given the Chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 23.7$ ) and p-value ( $p < 0.001$ ). This finding, therefore, confirms the weight of spatial context in participation in sports-type activities.

Figure 4. Presence of educational and social places in the territories



## CONCLUSIONS

The data presented reveal the centrality of territories as spaces charged with potential and ambivalence (Zoletto, 2022), influencing accessibility to various educational opportunities and contributing significantly to individual identity formation. In fact, educational experiences, mediated and supported by the territory, are the starting point for developing pathways that can either promote inclusion or cause marginalization, significantly influencing individual destinies. In order to combat educational poverty, on the one hand there emerges the need to promote the expansion of coverage and access to educational principals and to create highly inclusive opportunities in contexts characterized by a complex sociocultural reality (Zinant, 2022). On the other, the importance of promoting pedagogical responsibility shared by the whole community emerges, recalling the importance of the Frabbonian concept of an integrated educational system (Frabboni, 1989): a political project of “building a shared culture of education” (Maia, 2018, p. 168), nurtured by the various educational actors in a given territory, in a democratic and inclusive perspective.

In this context, the central role of the Third Sector emerges, whose active participation underscores the importance of a collaborative and synergistic approach to addressing this challenge, highlighting how combating educational poverty requires the joint and coordinated efforts of all stakeholders in the field.

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# MIGRANT MINORS BETWEEN DISCRIMINATION AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES. A RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE ON ITALIAN CONTEMPORANEITY

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Starting from two qualitative academic research carried out by the authors (Gozzelino, Matera, 2020; Matera, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2024) the contribution provides a critical pedagogical reading of the link between the educational poverty of migrant minors in Italy and their self-determination, proposing reflections and actions of operators in the development of opportunities and experiences to encourage collaboration between school and territory, active citizenship, the empowerment of minors and intercultural encounters in their social context.

Migrant minors: education; intercultural dialogue; participative researches

## INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) considers the child a citizen to be promoted and liberated (Milani, 2019), taking up the fundamental principle of non-discrimination, but disadvantages and violations emerge from the Italian framework. Migrant minors are one of the least protected categories in Italian society (Save the Children, 2019, 2022). Scientific research shows how institutional and social racism, media disinformation and structural violence emanate from the institutional invisibility of these minors and at the same time reinforce it, compromising their ability to self-determine, as well as their ability to establish and maintain relationships significant with the local population and to participate in the construction of a more complex narrative on migration, which is often lacking or flattened on the side of deviance (Galtung, Vincent, 1992; Penalva, La Parra, 2008; Matera, 2021, 2022a; Milani, Matera, 2022;

Matera, Serrano García, 2022, Matera 2024).

In Italy, new laws on immigration make the essential relationship between school and territory for integration even more complex, delegating the responsibility for the reception and training of foreign minors to charities, volunteers and individual initiatives and denying the essential dialogue for educational planning. By exacerbating the educational disparities of foreign minors, they take away the possibility to aspiring to change, developing skills and building a conscious training question around the constraint of the migratory mandate and the logic of predestination (Matera, 2024).

Starting from two qualitative academic researches carried out by the authors (Gozzelino, Matera, 2020; Matera, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, Matera 2024) the contribution provides a critical pedagogical reading of the link between the educational poverty of migrant minors in Italy and their self-determination, proposing reflections and actions of operators in the development of opportunities and experiences to encourage collaboration between school and territory, active citizenship, the empowerment of minors and intercultural encounters in their social context.

## **2. A RESEARCH ON EDUCATIONAL POVERTY AND SELF-DETERMINATION**

The first research conducted aims to investigate how educational poverty affects the self-determination of foreign children and what educational actions are promoted to free foreign children from conditioning and invisibility.

Migrant and foreigner status has an important impact on educational poverty (Save the Children, 2014, 2019, 2022), which is exacerbated by the conditions of political, media, social and institutional invisibility of foreign-born children, which impacts the exercise of active citizenship (Milani, 2019; Milani & Matera, 2022; Matera & Serrano García, 2022). For that reason, a qualitative research was carried out through a questionnaire addressed to operators active in educational services for foreign minors in the Piedmont Region. Sixteen educators were involved: 13 educators working with Foreign Minors (81.3%); 9 educators working with Italian Minors of foreign origin (56.3%) and 4 educators with Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (25%), thus allowing us to have a global picture of the management of minors from migratory backgrounds, and not only those who face a journey themselves or who find themselves upon arrival without reference figures.

In particular, the questionnaire allows us to understand what educators' conception of 'educational poverty' is. From the methodological point of view,



we carried out interpretive-constructivist research (Trincherò, 2002; Cadei, 2005) to capture the representations that respondents have of the phenomenon under study, to understand the meanings they attribute to it. The instrument used is an open-ended questionnaire, so it is not binding from the point of view of the answers required of the subject and useful for gaining a wide range of information. and the analysis of the empirical base was conducted through the construction of a posteriori categories, focusing on emergent themes, from the perspective of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2001, 2008, 2014). Emerging data were subjected to interpretive reading, making them interact with the theory, and the results make no claim to standardization nor generalization. The first question was: “Thinking about the foreign or foreign-born children you work/have worked with and the issue of self-determination, what traits of educational poverty emerge?”. From the educators’ responses, the following traits of educational poverty in children from migrant backgrounds emerge:

- link between educational poverty and social origin: difference between urban contexts and rural contexts;
- lack of knowledge of the Italian language, which compromises relationships with peers and the exercise of active citizenship;
- institutional discrimination;
- logic of predestination: that we see in lack of interest in school due to willingness to work, in access to circuits of deviance, in migratory mandate;
- lack of resources to support children’s life projects: thus, a strong connection emerges between educational poverty and the responsibility of agencies and institutions.

In the words of the interviewees, the connection between educational poverty and the feeling, in the children, of being relegated to a “future already written” within family plans and cultural logics emerges strongly: “It almost seems as if some children already feel destined for a certain future because of their origin” (Q.16).

The lack of reference points – external to family ties, “with whom to confront, confide in, wonder about one’s future in complete freedom” (Q.8) – turns out, therefore, to be an important risk factor for the increase in educational poverty. A call, this, for education to *make free* the child of foreign origin from the inequality in which his or her path is often realized.

The second question was: “What educational responses do you activate/have

you activated to promote the participation and freedom of foreign minors?”. The words of the educators show that education is invited to educate for freedom, that is, to encourage the development of critical thinking for the authentic self-realization of the subject, encouraging the knowledge and expression of one’s nature and the construction of a personal vision of the *self* and the *world* within other contexts of experimentation and constraints that are perceived as generators of meaning: “The educational proposal was to break the mold, to bring one’s potential into play beyond the imposed limits, by experimenting with one’s abilities in sometimes unexpected areas” (Q.16). “We work to make children understand that they are the protagonists of their lives, that they can make it and that their future does not necessarily have to be the one written by the family or the system” (Q.15).

The achievement of a free will is the ultimate objective that education must aim for. The acquisition of the freedom to decide regarding one’s own personhood, which cannot ignore the provision of significant opportunities to be able to be.

The educators demonstrate attention to the promotion of commitment and responsibility, with an eye oriented towards the community and freedom for social participation: “It is a daily and constant path in which we try to make the person responsible” (Q.15), “to express the potential and desires and find areas of interest in which the children can engage” (Q.16). Strategies aimed at “involvement” (Q.10), at “respect for others” (Q.14), at “dialogue” (Q.11) are activated: the restitution of the word is a starting point and social rebirth, the fulcrum of educational work to free our future.

### **3. UNACCOMPANIED MIGRANT MINORS: INVISIBILITY AND EDUCATION**

Faced with a context of growing deprivation and invisibility of educators and unaccompanied migrant minors, the second research presented aims to understand how educators foster the culture of migrant childhood in society and how they promote the construction of more complex narratives on child migration for inclusive and intercultural societies.

Educators are considered: experts in educational practice with foreign minors; holders of experiential knowledge, of working theories; competent and thoughtful professionals (Schön, 1993) “innovation leaders” (Milani, 2017); “men of art”, therefore capable of activating significant transformations in the social context.

Involving education professionals in participatory research paths, where critical co-reflection on the epistemology of professional practice is promoted (Schon,

1993), allows the creation of complex knowledge, promotes the organization of knowledge, the articulation and the intertwining of different knowledge.

The knowledge emerging from participatory research aims to overturn consolidated imaginaries on burning issues such as immigration through a multi-perspective and situated knowledge that arises in the environments of educational practice and which is grafted onto collective and reflective processes of interpretation, management and resolution of problems venues with a global scope.

In the framework of an emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 2002), participatory research aims to bring the minor back to the center of attention and pedagogical action through the voice of *invisible educators*, placing themselves in dialogue with their practical knowledge.

The participatory research process that involved educators active in the structures and services for unaccompanied migrant minors in the City of Turin involved two levels interconnected in a circular and systemic process:

- Fact-finding survey: involved a sample of 26 privileged witnesses of the reception system, who operate in the system at different levels and covering different functions (educators of different types of structures, cultural mediators, managers of institutions, services and associations, of CPIA and of professional training), by means of 34 dialogical-reflective interviews. The interview was configured as a space for learning and building new knowledge emerging from the interaction.
- Research-Training (Reason & Bradbury, 2008): involved the participation in six focus groups of seven coordinators (also educators) from six different services. The focus group was configured as a learning and planning context and as a micropedagogical environment (Demetrio, 1992), i.e. as a cultural environment from which new knowledge and skills emerge.

Challenging dominant narratives means bringing innovative stories and actions to light, contributing to the formation of a complex thought on the migratory phenomenon, designing intercultural meeting spaces with citizens, to stimulate social participation and empowerment, reevaluating one's role as protagonists of the migration process. critical refoundation of policies and interventions on migration and reception.

There are various strategies activated to encourage widespread learning and intercultural encounters in the city.

For example, the production of collective works by minors and their presentation in contexts open to citizens turns out to be a valid tool for raising public awareness and building a divergent, more complex and powerful narrative on child migration.

Planning coordinated and widespread reception requires the active involvement of the actors of the formal and informal reception network, including citizens, in order to collegially build experiences and relationships.

In this sense, it is essential to prepare training courses so that minors from migrant backgrounds can change their position in the job market and move, for example, from the kitchen to the bar counter, from the role of vigilant, where there is an absence of communication, to the role of salesman, where communication skills even become a resource.

From this perspective, it is also important to create stable, aware and constructive links with companies and private corporations, in a network and shared planning logic, so that new potential employment situations can be opened up for minors. Companies can actively contribute to overturning collective imaginaries that are often deficient or leaning towards deviance.

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# FROM INTEGRATION TO INCLUSION. THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE IN MSNA INTERVENTIONS BETWEEN TRAUMA, LEARNING DISABILITIES AND INCLUSIVE TEACHING

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## INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the learning difficulties of Unaccompanied Minors Migrant particularly Arabic speakers, who are included in the Italian education and school system. UMM are a moderately young phenomenon in Italy and Europe. Originated in the 1990s, it has become over the past three decades a constant phenomenon with high numbers already in 2016 when 25,846 Msna arrived in Italy (Ambrosini Maurizio, 2020). According to the Ministry of Social Policy (July 2024) there are 20,213 unaccompanied migrant's minors in Italy. This is a predominantly male population (89.7%), between the ages of 16 and 17, although in recent years there it has been a decrease of the age of arrival 13- to 14-year-olds and in some cases even 10- to 11-year-olds have arrived (Benaly Mariem, 2024). Almost 75% of unaccompanied minors are over 16 years of age, 50% of these are 17 years old and 25% are 16 years old. Children between 7 and 14 years old represent 10% of the total, minors aged 15 years represent 14% and UMM up to 6 years of age represent just over 1% of the minors considered overall<sup>1</sup>. During 2024, there was also an increase in psychiatric cases, or cases with psychological difficulties among incoming UMM and, often, minors with physical and/or cognitive- sensorial disabilities. 'Children who arrived before then 2024, were prepared and had a clear family goal and mission statement to achieve, whereas now groups of minors arrive, even from the same family (siblings and cousins); difficult kids are also sent to Europe so that someone can take care of them" (Benaly Mariem, 2024). Nationalities are variable, however at 30 June 2024 the most represented communities in Italy are: Egypt (3,924),

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<sup>1</sup> Ministero del Lavoro e delle politiche sociali, rapporto di approfondimento semestrale, dati al 30 giugno 2024.

Tunisia (2,145) and Gambia (2,274). The urge to leave is often influenced by serious economic crises in the countries of origin, social conflicts and lack of future prospects. From a pedagogical-educational point of view, the three most representative nationalities share a low and/or absent basic scholastic education in their countries of origin. Among the Arabic-speaking minors (Egyptians and Tunisians) there is a large proportion of boys from the regions of: El Minieh, Beni Souef, Assiout and Fayoum in Egypt; Kairouan, Jendouba, Kasserine and Siliana, in Tunisia, completely illiterate (Diana, 2020). This has negative consequences concerning the education/training path to be set up in the host country, not only because of the gap in second language (L2). Illiteracy, in fact, is combined with cognitive, relational and emotional difficulties, often determined by pre – peri – post migration traumas that make the school learning process even more complicated, fragmented and slow. The Msna are lone, vulnerable teenagers who in most cases have spent months, if not years, in Libya or crossed the Balkans by foot through Turkey to reach Europe. The trauma symptoms have a broad spectrum, from impairment in school functioning including increased absence from school, decreased intellectual functioning, reading ability and academic performance, and lower rates of graduation (Delaney-Black et al., 2002; Milam, Furr-Holden, & Leaf, 2010). In 2010, Italy adopted (L. 170/2010) all the inclusive methodological/didactic tools necessary to ensure the right to study and accessibility to professional training for pupils/students with special educational needs (Sld – Adhd) and disabilities (L. 104/1992). To date, however, the inclusion and educational success of the migrant population is still an obstacle course frequently rejecting (school refusals) due to the language and cultural gap and riddled with failures and drop-outs, once included, due to the lack of ‘formal’ (SSN) or informal (teaching staff) acknowledgement of learning difficulties (L. 107/2010) that effectively deny access to personalized, fully inclusive and accessible teaching.

## **1. THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE WITH UMM ARABIC-SPEAKING.**

There are 161,803 Arabic-speaking students in Italy and they represent 18, 69% of the total, most of them are Moroccan (109,401), followed by Egyptians (31,298) and Tunisians (21,104); the other nationalities are under 5,000, including Syria (1,814) and Libya (749) (MIUR 2022/2023). Among the countries of origin of Msna, Egypt is the first Arab-speaking country with 4,667 minors detected as of 31 December 2023 (Ministry of Social Policy 2024). The Egyptian community is the largest in the country (155,892) and is also a community with large households, from 3 to 7 people. The Tunisian community ranks 14th in



terms of presences (98,243) on Italian territory and is notable by a high incidence of young people (37.2% of the community is under 30). These data take on a high relevance in relation to the arrival of unaccompanied minors from the two North African countries, who in Italy can count on a huge network of contacts among their nationals, which, in some cases, can facilitate their entrance into the black or illegal labour market. UMM, especially Arabic-speaking Tunisians and Egyptians, can in many aspects be considered true economic migrants:

developed countries turn away fathers looking for work, labelled as economic migrants, but they cannot turn away children who arrive alone and ask protection. Families of origin are thus induced to invest exactly in their children, and more particularly in their adolescent males, to seek an in northern markets” (Ambrosini, 2020, 216).

Most of the UMM, once they arrive in Italy, have a family assignment to look for a job, which will allow them, firstly, to return the travel debt, and secondly, to assure a respectable life for their family. This is an unavoidable starting point for all school teachers engaged in planning an educational-pedagogical pathway that should be individualised as much as possible and adapted to the needs of children, who in most cases dropped out of school at 9-10 years old, to help their families in economic difficulties, or because they were kicked out of a school system unprepared to deal with students with learning difficulties, sensorial disabilities or special educational needs. Unlike their Italian and second-generation peers, for whom it is possible to map out their past school career and detect any traumas or learning disorders through interviews with their family, UMM arrive in Italy with any personal information, useful for setting individualized study curricula. The observation of the teaching staff in the classroom, both in the performance of teaching tasks and in peer relationships, becomes a significant tool to develop hypotheses about some possible learning difficulties.

The only available informations at the time of their arrival are related to the Egyptian and Tunisian education systems, where, despite the efforts made by the two North African countries to assure access to public education system, still remain significant challenges such as: school drop-outs and illiteracy (Diana, 2020), with still high rates especially in the rural areas of the two countries. “In Egypt, a 2017 census shows that 18.4 million citizens aged 10 and above are illiterate. In Tunisia, residents of rural areas are the most affected by this phenomenon”. In Egypt in particular,

the public school attended by 90% of the students is in deep crisis. The mnemonic and authoritarian teaching method, the low salary of teachers and the overcrowding of classrooms seem to be at the heart of the malfunctioning of the education system (Mazzei, 2018, 49).

The background of negative and often traumatizing experiences suffered in the school system of the country of origin leads Arab-speaking UMM, especially Egyptians, to a negative opinion not only of the education system, which is considered useless considering the high unemployment rate of graduates in Egypt (Mazzei, 2018), but also towards the teaching staff, who in their past experience have been identified as authoritarian, repressive and rejecting, rather than a caregiver.

## **2. TRAUMAS, LEARNING DISABILITIES AND INCLUSIVE TEACHING**

The main routes of arrival of the Msna into Italian territory are landings by sea (Mediterranean route) and arrival on Italian territory near border crossings (Balkan route) (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2024). The beginning of second language learning and registration in mandatory schools (14-16 years old) usually takes place once the minors are assigned to the first welcoming system, generally located in the region where the arrival took place. This, brings to light the first problem related to the schooling of minors, which follows an irregular path due to the removal of minors from welcome centers because of: fostering, family tracing or voluntary leaving of minors, who wishing to reach Italian regions where the network of Egyptian and Tunisian communities is more present (Lombardia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia Romagna e Lazio). That means the exit of minors, not only from the welcome system, but also from the educational – professional system. The UMM are a new target group for the Italian school system. They are usually admitted to the Cpia (Centers for Adult Education) to start a literacy course in L2 or to short professional training courses (maximum 6 months). In the last few years, however, we have seen the arrival of young people of compulsory school age, who cannot be enrolled in the Cpia (16 years of age). These students once enrolled in the secondary school (high school or college) hardly manage to complete their studies. There are many obstacles to their education: frequent interruptions in their studies due to continuous relocation or voluntary displacement from the first and second welcoming centres; illiteracy in their mother tongue (L1); language gap in L2; traumas pre – peri e post journeys, that actually demand to the teaching staff the activation of resources (teachers or special needs tutors) individualized and inclusive teaching methodologies, even

in the absence of national health system certification for learning difficulties or disorders.

If UMM experience a psychological distress or a physical condition that requires a diagnosis or health certification, the path is very complex. First of all, the legislation does not clarify who should/could undertake it. Secondly, access to services without a residence permit and without knowledge of the language is almost impossible. If the child succeeds in the neuro-psychiatric examination, there are no suitable tools, from a linguistic and cultural point of view, for a health assessment: the lack of mediators and of a deep knowledge of the approach to mental distress in other cultures weighs heavily in the sector; instead, an eco-systemic and global vision would be necessary (Traverso & Marullo, 2020, 128).

Trauma, in fact, has obvious repercussions on the cognitive and behavioural processes of minors and often compromises their educational and training success. Concentration problems, intolerance to sit still at the desk, inhibition of working memory, oppositional reactions with peers and teachers are some of the ‘symptoms’ that can be detected by the teaching staff in the classroom.

Children who have experienced trauma experience neurobiological effects hindering their abilities to learn (Delima & Vimpani, 2011; Fox et al., 2015). Trauma damages the hippocampus which can impede memory and learning (Brendtro, 2015). The more trauma and stress a child experience, the less likely he or she can cognitively process information and learn. Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and learning and behaviour issues are identified in schools by teachers who then refer the child for testing. ADHD has become a common diagnosis and one of the most frequently accessed interventions is medication (Cornel-Swanson, Irwin, Johnson, Bowman, & Frankengerger, 2005). Like children who have experienced trauma, children with ADHD have trouble regulating emotions, sitting still, concentrating, organizing, and have problems with their peers (Murrell, Steinberg, Connally, Hulse, & Hogan, 2015). Children who have experienced trauma typically are unable to regulate their emotions. Even if they appear relatively calm, their brain chemistry and bodies have adapted to respond more quickly and strongly to potential danger, which could be a harmless stimulus. In the typical school setting, there is a lot of stimulation including other children, teachers, different environments, and more” (Berg, 2017, 11).

Classroom observation by teachers is therefore an indispensable resource for promptly activating all the resources needed to create a learning environment that is as welcoming and inclusive as possible, facilitating the learning of unaccompanied foreign minors with customised teaching plans, using, where necessary, intercultural mediation to make study content fully accessible while

fostering positive relationships between peers (student-student) and between pupils and teaching staff. Despite the difficulties of being able to access the activation of special teachers and support tutors due to the lack of NHS certification, the teaching staff can activate classroom experimentation using teaching methodologies, already developed by special pedagogy and inclusive language education for Italian-speaking: special educational Needs students (social mediation techniques; massive use of images in texts; simplified texts with longer introductory phases; closed-answer and never open-answer tests; controlled compositions; frequent pauses and shorter lessons to facilitate lack of concentration and weak or absent working memory) to check their efficiency and adapt their contents, using intercultural pedagogy and multilingualism, to this particular category of learners with a migrant background.

## **2. CONCLUSIONS**

The situation presented in this article shows the limits of inclusion within the Italian education and school system, which is today called to face an important and unavoidable challenge: taking charge of the education of unaccompanied foreign minors with a migratory background. More than twenty years have passed since Italy adopted the 'Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Pupils' updated in 2022 (L.189/2022), however, the education of UMM and minors with a migratory background continues to be the exclusive affair of the Cpia and too often linked only to second language courses, even for minors of compulsory school age (14-15). Standardized educational paths predominate to the disadvantage of individualized interventions. This is very often due to the lack of adequate teaching tools and supports within the school system. The need is therefore to start mapping out the learning difficulties of the UMM reconstructing their school and family history and testing the didactic tools already made available by special pedagogy and inclusive and accessible language education in order to verify their effectiveness and test new tools that enable the full success of the educational process.

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# TEACHING LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERARY TEXTS: A POSSIBLE DIDACTIC STRATEGY FOR THE ITALIAN AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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This paper describes the potential affordances offered by the use of literary texts, ludolinguistic activities, and creative writing activities, for teaching Italian as a second language to young learners, paying particular attention to the potential for social and linguistic inclusion, as well as employing an approach that accounts for the rational and emotional dimension of the learner. The objective of this research is the observation of a teaching experiment in which linguistic purposes and literary means encounter in order to create a particular focus on the creative uses of language and storytelling. The data analyzed here was collected within an 'Italian as L2' course aimed at foreign students attending a lower secondary school in the Cagliari area, specifically directed to a group of A2 level learners aged 12 to 16 years old from Bangladesh and Pakistan. The corpus of data consists of a teaching unit specific for A2 level learners, supplemented by preliminary activities for creative writing and for vocabulary development, as well as a post-intervention questionnaire.

second language teaching; Italian; inclusion; linguistic education; literary text

## INTRODUCTION

The Italian school population presents itself as a multicultural and multilingual community of students: the percentage of students without Italian citizenship, according to ministerial data, has increased compared to previous years, reaching a value of 11,2% in the 2022/2023 school year.<sup>1</sup>

As a direct consequence of the incremented linguistic and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see the full report conducted by the Ministero dell'educazione e del merito - Ufficio di Statistica (2024).

heterogeneity within educational institutes, a rising number of students experience the Italian class as an ‘Italian as a second language’ (Italian L2) lesson, as opposed to native speakers; in addition, the lack of proficiency in Italian language affects all school subjects and the learning experience as a whole. For those students coming from a migratory background and experiencing difficulties associated with the language gap, linguistic inclusion is hence fundamental to achieving quality learning.

The school system plays a significant role in gradually overcoming this obstacle and supporting the student while developing strong linguistic skills, which constitute the fundamental means to social inclusion and educational success.

In this perspective, the objective that animates this work is to explore the array of possibilities for teaching the Italian language addressing the educational demands of school-aged learners studying Italian as a second language.

Specifically, this study analyses an approach that equally emphasizes linguistic and literary aspects, aiming to set the act of storytelling and a creative usage of Italian as a focal point, while developing grammatical structures suitable for A2-level lower secondary students.

## **1. THEORETICAL PREMISES**

The Italian society and school population is historically characterized by a multifaceted variety of cultures, languages and dialects sharing the same geographical space. In such a rich and complex context, language education must meet the educational needs of all individuals, in accordance with the principles expressed by GISCEL (*Language Education Study and Action Group*) in the *Ten Theses for Democratic Language Education* (1975). These principles highlight the weak points of traditional language education and advocate for a shift to a more democratic approach to language teaching.

In light of these considerations, it is essential to reevaluate the traditional approach to teaching the subject of Italian in schools. In the Italian education system, ‘Italian’ is typically divided into language studies and literature, despite the fact that the relationship between language and literary texts is complex and inseparable (Lavinio, 2021). Literary texts not only offer an insight on culture, history, and collective values, but also embody language, idiomatic expressions, registers, and even nonverbal communication (Colombo, 2005; Caon, Spaliviero, 2015). They provide valuable information to students learning Italian as a second language, and offer potential for intercultural education, especially in multicultural contexts (Pinello, 2014; Spaliviero, 2021).

Encouraging students to engage with literary texts across various genres can foster a love for reading, which is a fundamental goal of education. This process requires guidance and support from teachers. In the context of second language acquisition, the wealth of information in literary texts provides many educational opportunities. Creativity, used as a tool to explore language across different levels (morphology, syntax, phonology, text) and contexts, has been shown to be effective in promoting language learning (see among others Altieri Biagi, 2005; GISCEL Sicilia, 2005; Guerriero, 2021) and is explicitly advocated in the *Indicazioni Nazionali* (MIUR, 2012).

It must be emphasized that engaging with language and literary texts creatively does not lead to linguistic anarchy. Only those who understand the rules can fully participate. Thus, a playful approach that places the learner at the center while stimulating curiosity and motivation can complement metalinguistic reflection and be integrated into the various activities aimed at language acquisition.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. THE DIDACTIC PROPOSAL**

### **2.1. Participants**

In the 2020-2021 school year, CPIA<sup>3</sup> '1 Karalis' and the University of Cagliari collaborated to offer an Italian L2 course for lower secondary school students in the Cagliari area.<sup>4</sup> Due to the multilevel nature of the class, students were grouped by Italian proficiency levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2020). The intervention targeted A2-level Italian learners and involved six students, aged 12 to 16, all first-generation immigrants from Bangladesh and Pakistan.

### **2.2. Data collection**

The language course lasted from February to June; however, the experimentation took place between the months of May and June for a total of 14 hours.

The educational intervention formed a corpus of data consisting of two

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<sup>2</sup> For ideas and linguistic games adaptable to different educational contexts and age groups, see Fornara and Giudici (2015).

<sup>3</sup> CPIAs are *Provincial centers for adult education and training*. They are public schools that offer educational services for people aged 16 and over. For further details see Deiana (2022).

<sup>4</sup> The language course is part of a broader project titled 'ItalStudio' coordinated by Professor Antonietta Marra and Professor Giulia I. Grosso (University of Cagliari) and conducted in collaboration with CPIA '1 Karalis'. The project was devoted to the enhancement of cognitive-academic language proficiency of students with migratory background, through the use of adequate teaching materials.



preliminary activities for creative writing and vocabulary development, a Teaching Unit (TU), and a satisfaction questionnaire.

Data collection was conducted in the classroom through written responses and direct observation, as recording students' oral production was deemed inadvisable. The presence of a recording device was likely to elevate the affective filter,<sup>5</sup> hinder learner-teacher interactions, and ultimately disrupt language acquisition processes. Additionally, usage of masks and adherence to social distancing measures, implemented to mitigate COVID-19 transmission, would have posed significant practical challenges for recording.

### **2.3. Preliminary activities**

The first phase of the experimentation includes two preliminary activities inspired by Gianni Rodari's *La grammatica della fantasia* (1973)<sup>6</sup> and is designed to enhance collaborative skills and encourage the use of past tenses in storytelling.

The first activity consists of a creative writing exercise based on images: students are divided into groups, and each group collaboratively develops a story inspired by two images projected on the screen.

The second activity, the 'fantastic binomial', involves the pairing of two seemingly unrelated words provided by the teacher, which students use as the basis to create written stories. This task is performed in pairs, encouraging collaborative storytelling. During both activities, students receive teacher guidance and follow prompting questions to support their creative process. At the end of each activity, students share their stories with the class.

### **2.4. The Teaching Unit: *C'era una svolta***

The title of the TU '*C'era una svolta*' alludes to the underlying theme that accompanies students in their educational path: it combines storytelling with unexpected turns of events and unique characters that prompt reflection on 'diversity'. The structure of the Unit is inspired by Gestalt psychological theories (Freddi, 1970; Titone, 1976) and consists of six phases: motivation, globality, analysis, synthesis, reflection, and verification.

The selected activities are programmed according to the linguistic competences of the students, hence aligned with the A2 level of the CEFR. The

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of affective filter refers to Krashen's five input hypotheses (1982).

<sup>6</sup> Gianni Rodari (1920-1980) was an Italian writer and educator, known for his innovative contributions to children's literature and educational theory. His work has significantly influenced educational practices through his ideas on creativity and storytelling.

primary focus is the construction of the *passato prossimo* tense, the understanding of its distinction from the *imperfetto* in relation to the communicative functions of narrating events in the past as opposed to describing habitual actions in the past, and vocabulary expansion through forming antonyms with prefixes. An inductive method is employed, as it is believed to be particularly effective in fostering student engagement and active participation.

In the initial motivation phase, learners watch the short film *Float* as an icebreaker to stimulate engagement. This phase includes elicitation activities involving guided analysis of both linguistic and visual elements. The absence of spoken dialogue (except for one English sentence) increases the accessibility of the film to all students and requires them to interpret plot progression, character relationships, and implicit cultural and social themes solely through visuals, regardless of their Italian proficiency level.

Subsequently, students proceed to the comprehension phase, responding in writing to open-ended questions that reveal their strengths and areas for improvement. The themes of the video are then explored collectively through a brainstorming activity, aided by a spidergram to deepen understanding and encourage collaborative discussion.

In the globality phase, the short story *La chitarra magica* serves as an input text, guiding learners through the unit to the final assessment. Selected from Stefano Benni's *Il bar sotto il mare*, the text has been adapted to align with the students' proficiency levels. Linguistic adjustments included changing *passato remoto* to *passato prossimo* and simplifying vocabulary, using tools for readability like GulpEase and READ-IT.<sup>7</sup>

Benni's work, known for its fantastical elements and unique characters, complements the unit goals by fostering discussions on themes of "diversity" and otherness. Following activities that facilitate the general comprehension of the text, students move to the analysis phase, identifying linguistic patterns through varied tasks. A transcoding exercise engages students by asking them to draw *Lucifumandro*, a character described as an unconventional godmother adorned in sequins. This activity leads to discussions on gender identity, discrimination and bullying.

The metalinguistic reflection segment focuses on a detailed examination of

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<sup>7</sup> Modifications to the text have been done in respect of the literary work and its author. The didactic adaptation of the text is to be intended as a transitional phase that makes the encounter between the learners and the literary text possible and enjoyable.

linguistic structures in the text. Subsequent exercises include gap fills, cloze tests, creative manipulation of proverbs, prefix-based word formations, and crossword puzzles. The interactive quiz *Kahoot!* is used for informal, playful assessment throughout the unit.

In the final verification phase, students complete two assignments: in the first, they are asked to write an ending for the input text, aided by “Propp-Rodari cards”; in the second, they compose a short story about a cherished childhood memory.<sup>8</sup>

### **3. QUESTIONNAIRE**

The questionnaire, which was administered at the end of the TU and filled anonymously, provide valuable insights into students’ reading habits, highlighting key trends. Students generally express an enjoyment of reading but report limited access to books at home, apart from school texts; five students have 25 books or fewer, while one has none. Two students specifically noted that they left many of their books in their home countries. Overall, students indicate that reading played a more central role in their lives before relocating to Italy, with various factors contributing to a decline in this habit.

The findings also reveal positive feedback on the course, particularly regarding the creative activities. Some students suggested incorporating additional literary genres, such as mystery and detective fiction, to enrich their engagement with the course material.

### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Data collection and classroom observation indicate that all students met the linguistic objectives for the unit. Even “off-program” moments provided valuable opportunities for open dialogue on complex topics, utilizing the L2 to express meaningful thoughts, share experiences, and facilitate connection. This setting allowed for the natural integration of creative, language-focused activities, including reading and imaginative storytelling, which effectively stimulated motivation and engagement. Imagination and storytelling emerged as powerful, democratic tools, enabling all participants to engage actively in class activities.

These findings underscore that, while stories are not the only element necessary

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<sup>8</sup> The two distinct prompts are designed to ensure that each student can produce a text demonstrating achievement of the linguistic objectives set for the teaching unit.

for student engagement, they serve as a valuable motivator, enriching the range of teaching activities available. Imagination should be valued alongside attention and memory in education, enabling a full spectrum of linguistic expression.

Reflecting on students' reading habits enables teachers to tailor interventions to meet specific needs, selecting literary texts that suit the linguistic level, age, and interests of learners to capture their attention and curiosity. Overall, the educational intervention yielded positive results. However, the lasting impact on students' appreciation for reading will depend on sustained continuity in teaching and instructional intent.

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# THE CURRENT VALUE OF *LETTERA A UNA PROFESSORESSA* FOR THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION: A BOOK FOR PARENTS

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A well-established approach to *Lettera a una professoressa* considers it a pedagogical manifesto primarily addressed to Italian school teachers. This contribution intends to propose a revisitation of the work of the School of Barbiana along two directions. On the one hand, it would highlight the contemporary relevance of the text as a contribution to the sociology of education, particularly regarding the understanding of educational inequalities, by means, among other things, of a valuable statistical survey on the phenomenon of early school leaving; on the other hand, it would underscore the role of family environments and reinterprets the book as an appeal for responsibility and organization, primarily directed at parents.

Don Milani; sociology of education; educational inequalities

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this contribution is to show the persistent relevance of *Lettera a una professoressa* by the School of Barbiana for the sociology of education. In addition to some key and yet well-known issues, I especially aim to highlight how the book describes still-current mechanisms underpinning the reproduction of educational inequality. Furthermore, I argue that it can be read assuming parents as the declared recipients of the letter, despite its overt address to teachers in the title.

### 1. MASS SCHOOLING AND (RE)PRODUCTION OF INEQUALITIES

*Lettera a una professoressa* places itself in the cultural and political debate on school in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, characterized by a plurality of dilemmas: between selection and socialisation, and between equality and selection (Besozzi, 2017, pp. 192-195). It also sheds light on the emergence and

persistence of social inequalities in education during those years, even amidst the advent of mass schooling, as well as the substantial risk of reproducing such inequalities.

The introduction of the unified lower secondary school by Law 1859 of 1962 meant the affirmation of a principle of formal equality of opportunity of access; however, it brought out the social inequalities that compromised a full participation in the education system and the achievement of positive learning outcomes for all.

Grounding its arguments in a foundational reference to the constitution, *Lettera a una professoressa*, as well as the pedagogical experience of Barbiana, distances itself from a liberal and meritocratic perspective and fully adheres to a substantial idea of equality, which is expressed in the achievement of tendentially equal outcomes, and in the didactically declined commitment to the scholastic success of all pupils. Consistently, the prior of Barbiana reported the persistent selectivity of the renewed middle school and of the entire segment of compulsory schooling, strictly linked to the social origin of the students. Doing so, Don Milani took an equally clear position with respect to the new alternative that comes to the fore, that between selection and equality. In this regard, with his usual immediacy, Don Milani and the schoolboys of Barbiana pointed out that the eight years of free and compulsory schooling provided by the Constitution had to correspond to eight different classes and the attainment of the middle school leaving certificate; otherwise, it would be just 'fractions of equality'.

## **2. 'SCHOOL HAS ONLY ONE PROBLEM'. SELECTION AND SCHOOL DROPOUT**

As is well known, the book includes a statistically well-founded sociological study of the issue of school dropout, which, for the boys of Barbiana, represents the essential problem of the school, the outcome that reveals a misrepresentation of the nature and the constitutive mission of the school as an institution.

School dropout remains a relevant problem in Italy nowadays. However, in the decades following Barbiana's experience, it has substantially changed its face, shifting the effects of selectivity beyond compulsory schooling to the upper secondary school level. Despite this, the vision of the phenomenon that can be observed in the pages of the *Lettera* is, in the writer's opinion, characterised by relevant elements of modernity.

With reference to the sequence of conceptions of school dropout proposed by

Colombo (2010, pp. 34-42), the analysis of the School of Barbiana echoes a 'structural' vision and the theories of deprivation and social reproduction, insofar as it identifies mechanisms and institutional responsibilities for the expulsion of socially and culturally disadvantaged sectors of the school population. However, in reconstructing the pathways of school truancy involving the schoolboys of Barbiana, the focus seems to shift towards a more up-to-date 'contextualised' approach. Consider, for instance, Gianni's story, which is portrayed through a focus on character and biographical elements, the context of origin with its constraints but also its frustrated potential, and the procedural aspects in which school practices interact with these factors, triggering and developing trajectories of disaffection from school and early attraction towards work (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967, pp. 20-21).

Moreover, in the pages of the book, we can trace a broad vision, attentive to a variety of critical manifestations, not only limited to early exit from the school system, in line with a conception "that considers school drop-out a complex and variegated phenomenon that includes everything that is "lost" – temporarily or permanently – during the assessment of the outcomes of the learning process" (Besozzi 2017, p. 203).

Consider, for example, the emphasis placed on the mechanism triggered by failures: even when they do not result in immediate dropout, the accumulated delay relative to regular courses and the ageing process in school expose repeaters to what is referred to as a 'tragedy of the older ones', the risk of further failures and of leaving school too early, entering the workforce before completing the primary cycle.

The fact is that, inexorably, failure hits the older children. Those who have a job within arm's reach. Instead those children who are within the correct age-frame pass. They had no reason to fail them in the past years. They have no reason to do so now either (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967, pp. 20-21).

### **3. HATING EQUALITY. MECHANISMS OF SEGREGATION**

On some pages in *Lettera a una professoressa* one can also find descriptions of specific mechanisms that continue to be relevant in the production of school inequality. This is the case, for example, with the dynamics related to school choices, connected to the so-called school effect (Cavaletto, Luciano, Olagnero, Ricucci, 2015, pp. 28-32), which refers to the phenomena of selective orientation of some parents towards more qualified and prestigious, or otherwise preferred schools and sections, and the avoidance of socially



undesirable institutions.

If these dynamics manifest themselves today in the context of school autonomy and growing competition between institutes, Don Milani clearly indicates how the egalitarian and democratic goal of the institution of the single middle school could be circumvented with a collusive dynamic between families and school principals.

A headmaster in Florence told a lady: 'Don't worry, send him to me. Mine is the least unified average in Italy'. Playing the sovereign people is easy. All you have to do is gather the 'good' guys in a section. It is not important to know them personally. You look at report card, age, place of residence (country, city), place of origin (north, south), father's profession, recommendations. So two, three, four different middle schools will live in the same school. A is the 'Old Middle'. The one that runs well. The most esteemed professors let it go. A certain kind of parents go out of their way to put their child there. B is already a little less, and so on (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967, pp. 20-21).

#### **4. 'TO WHOM DOES IT BENEFIT THAT SCHOOL IS LITTLE'. SCHOOL TIME AS A VECTOR OF (DIS)EQUALITY**

A similar focus on the drivers of inequality is placed on school time. For Don Milani, the time dimension is a key factor in reproducing inequalities and maintaining the classist nature of the school.

More specifically, Don Milani highlights the issue of the learning loss during the summer break and its differing impact on students from different social backgrounds, leading to a widening gap between them.

Summer holidays, in particular, seem to coincide with precise interests. The sons of the rich go abroad and learn more than they do in winter. The poor ones, on the first of October, have forgotten the little they knew in June. If they have re-sit sessions in September, they cannot afford to pay for repetition classes. Normally they do not sit for them. If they are peasants, they give a hand in the heavy summer chores not to burden the farm with further expenses. (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967, p. 60).

The book of the School of Barbiana seems to anticipate the essential terms of the 'faucet theory', later developed by the scholars of summer learning loss (Entwisle, Alexander and Olson 2001). According to this theory, during the summer the flow of educational and training opportunities is essentially turned off for all children. However, children from higher social strata can benefit from the resources provided by their family environment, thereby reducing the effects

of the interruption in educational activities.

## **5. A BOOK FOR PARENTS. AN INVITATION TO GET ORGANISED**

Despite its focus on the school system and despite the fact that it appears to be addressed to teachers from the very title, the book begins with a clarification that it was not written for teachers, but for parents, and aims to serve as an invitation to organize themselves.

Thus, it seems legitimate to read the text in a way that emphasises not only the role of educational institutions but also that of family contexts in the production and reproduction of school inequalities.

A passage in the *Lettera* allows us to better understand the invitation addressed to parents (especially those from peasants and mountain communities): confronted with the class composition practices that allowed for a substantial circumvention of the egalitarian instance of the 1962 reform, Don Milani draws a sharp distinction between the attitudes of parents from different backgrounds (Scuola di Barbiana, p. 33). While parents from families with greater economic and cultural resources understandably become involved in their children's success at school, the parents from poorer families remain passive in the face of what they perceive as a previously totally unimaginable opportunity. The passivity and silence of these parents are rooted in a relationship of reverent subordination to teachers, to whom they attribute unquestionable authority, capable of having a decisive influence on the image and evaluation of their children's gifts and potential. In light of this asymmetry of power between teachers and (some of the) parents, Don Milani's appeal calls for a collective activation of parents, in the form of a 'union of dads', with the aim of claiming a constitutionally guaranteed right: the school open to all.

The issue of involvement in their children's education is introduced here by emphasising the resource gap between parents of different social classes in terms of information on how the school institution works, investment in their children's education, and building an equal relationship with schools and teachers. The form of parental activation that the book advocates, however, is not limited to a conscious and equipped promotion of their children's school experience but extends to collective mobilisation. In doing so, it seems to envision a commitment for the parents from more disadvantaged social classes that does not merely reproduce that of better-equipped families, but is primarily focused on a level of advocacy and political negotiation.

## 6. SOCIAL ORIGIN, FAMILY ENVIRONMENT AND PARENTING STYLES

*Lettera a una professoressa* offers valuable insights into how the home environment and family educational practices contribute to shaping different outcomes in the educational and socialization processes. The book outlines different kinds of home and family contexts, as well as differing levels of parental investment in the “cultivation” of their children’s talents and potential. Maybe Pierino’s story can provide us with a clue. Let’s try to show affection even toward his family. The doctor and his wife are smart people. They read, they travel, they entertain friends, they play with their child, they have time to dedicate to him, they know how to do all this well. The house is full of books and of culture. At five years of age, I [Gianni] could use the shovel expertly. Pierino the pencil. (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967, p. 63)

In my view, a lot of echoes and references can be traced between the description of Pierino and Gianni, of the “houses of the poor” and the “houses of the rich”, and the findings of Annette Lareau’s work (2011), especially where she characterizes parenting styles and psychological profiles of children according to social class: middle-class parents are distinguished by a style defined as “concerted cultivation”, by structured care of their children’s experience in order to bring out their talents and potential, while working-class and poor parents are characterised by an approach called “accomplishment of the natural growth”, aimed at responding to children’s essential needs without, however, pursuing systematic stimulation of growth processes. These logics of action differ especially in two aspects: the enjoyment of educational opportunities beyond the school offer and the mastery of language and its competent use in interaction with adults. Lareau seems to echo the School of Barbiana particularly when she outlines the salient outcomes of these child-rearing logics, contrasting the “sense of entitlement” of middle-class children with the “sense of constraint” of children from working-class and poor families: the former would develop ease in their relationships with adults, a sense of legitimacy in their aspirations. In contrast, the burden faced by the latter would be expressed in relationship difficulties with adult authority and in a sense of inadequacy and passivity within institutional contexts, facets of what, in *Lettera a una professoressa*, is indicated as Gianni’s dominant psychological trait: the shyness of the children from mountain and peasants backgrounds.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted to outline the legacy of Don Milani’s work for the sociological

analysis of educational processes and systems. As we have seen, the *Lettera* must be placed within the framework of the debate on mass schooling in Italy in the 1960s, but the text proves capable of highlighting mechanisms that remain active in the development of school inequalities, showing the specific responsibilities of the main agencies of socialisation.

Some proposals in the book are based on representations that merit further articulation and updating. The current Italian scenario appears distant from both the one described and criticized, as well as the one hoped for by the schoolboys of Barbiana. With regard to family-school relationships, Triani (2011, p. 230) pointed out for example that, while in the *Lettera* parents are urged to mobilize collectively, “today the problem even seems to have been reversed and schools complain of families that are too “invasive”, that look only to the particular interest of their own child and take on a defence of it without exception”.

The analyses of the school and its functioning present a view not far from that which led Bourdieu to unequivocally consider the school as an instrument of social preservation (Bourdieu, p. 203). In the case of the prior of Barbiana, this perception is shaped by his personal experience as a teacher, by the failures and hostility his boys encountered within the school system. However, the lucid and severe analysis is intertwined with civil and pedagogical commitment, leaving no room for a defeatist attitude. On the one hand, Don Milani identified the Gospel and the Constitution as the foundational references for his life as a teacher; on the other hand, his love for his children and his passion for teaching probably represent an inescapable key to his pedagogical experience.

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# DON MILANI GENERATIVE CENTER. LOOKING FOR THE PRESENT “BARBIANA SCHOOLS” TO PROMOTE THE IDEA OF ACTUALIZATION

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“scientia Atque usus” Research Center for Generative Communication (sAu Research Center) has explored the relationship between technology, cultural heritage, and communication since 1991. This research culminated in the creation of the “Atque” Design and Communication System and its application in the Generative Center “Scuole di Barbiana”. This article discusses the theoretical and practical foundations of the “Atque” Design and Communication System, emphasizing its transformative potential in turning cultural heritage and archives into participatory knowledge centers while addressing the risks of compulsive digitalization and unsustainable energy consumption.

Generative Communication; Cultural Heritage; Digital Technology; Memory and Documentation

## INTRODUCTION

This contribution shares a research project from the “scientia Atque usus” (sAu) Research Center for Generative Communication with the scientific community and stakeholders. Since 1991, the sAu Research Center has been redefining the relationship between new technologies, cultural heritage, and communication. This effort led to the creation of the “Atque” Design and Communication System (Atque System) and its implementation in the Generative Center “Scuole di Barbiana” (Generative Center), which is detailed further in this document.

The sAu team emphasizes that cultural heritage and archives are invaluable resources. However, the digitalization of such resources must be meaningful. Reckless digitization risks turning physical archives from inaccessible formats

into equally opaque digital systems while escalating unsustainable energy consumption. To counter this, the sAu Research Center has focused on designing archives and documentation centers that foster knowledge sharing and active community engagement.

The Integrated Atque System was developed to enable the effective sharing of knowledge generated through Generative Communication projects (Toschi, 2011), ensuring that involved communities not only benefit from but also contribute to the enrichment of this collective knowledge.

### **1. 30 YEARS OF RESEARCH: GENERATIVE COMMUNICATION AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES TO ENHANCE CREATIVITY AND COLLABORATION, PROMOTING CRITICAL AND PROACTIVE DOCUMENTATION**

The sAu Research Center carries forward the legacy of research on the potential of new digital technologies to enhance people’s creative, critical, and collaborative activities. This work builds upon projects initiated since 1991, including the Research and Application Center for Informatics in Text Analysis (C.R.A.I.A.T.), active at the University of Florence from 1991 to 2022; the Communication Strategies Laboratory, established in 2001; and the Center for Generative Communication, launched in 2016 within the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Florence.

In this context, the sAu Research Center conceived, designed, and developed the Atque System as a cohesive set of tools for conducting research, analysis, planning, development, supervision, communication, and training—all strongly oriented toward documentation and knowledge sharing.

### **2. DESIGNING AND DEVELOPING NEW TECHNOLOGIES WITH A HUMAN TOUCH**

The Atque System is distinctive in its foundation on a critical value for the future of communication: the human touch. Designing and developing new technologies with a human touch means valuing critical thinking and human creativity within a vision of increasingly collaborative projects (Norman, 2013). It involves leveraging shared data documented not only for archiving but also for sharing, discussing, and connecting with other elements of knowledge. The primary goal is to generate new knowledge through new initiatives.

Unfortunately, the current architecture of digital automation systems has driven communication (institutional, organizational, informational, etc.) toward an exacerbated fragmentation of human labor, intelligence, and memory (Toschi, 2019).

Through these technologies and their proposed uses, elites and powerful groups impose perspectives, behaviors, and opinions through repetitive daily practices, fostering their internalization. As a result, individuals' capacity to connect various elements into a systematic vision is severely limited.

Based on these premises, we encounter a society unable to manage the diversity and complexity that characterize this historical moment. It lacks the ability to analyze its own contexts, recognize its cultural, economic, and social heritage, and use its memory to plan for the future.

### **3. THE ATQUE SYSTEM**

The Atque System enables collaboration between different researchers and specialists while fostering dialogue among them and stakeholders. It offers a suite of digital tools for use across the entire lifecycle of activities, including research and project implementation, project monitoring and training.

These tools emphasize a shared commitment to creativity and human thought, allowing organizations to:

- Systematize collective memory: Collect knowledge from diverse sources, including researchers, stakeholders, and organizational records.
- Build cohesive project communities around shared innovation goals.
- Enhance internal communication
- Promote creativity and cooperation.

### **4. OFFICINE, LIBRARY, MATRIX, AND ACADEMY: DESIGNING DIGITAL SOLUTIONS TO ACTIVATE KNOWLEDGE AND MEMORY GENERATION PROCESSES**

The Atque System is designed to communicate project outcomes through a precise content publication strategy. This strategy seeks to shape a body of knowledge useful both to the project's internal community and to external parties interested in the same topics. It generates a communication approach that transforms the knowledge of people involved in each project into a shared resource, promoting innovation and disseminating the concept of knowledge as a common good (Hess & Ostrom, 2006). This knowledge emerges from specific application contexts, embodying the results of collaboration and cooperation across sociocultural and economic fields traditionally separated and hierarchized (Bateson, 1972).

The Atque System consists of four primary tools: sAu Officine, sAu Library, sAu



Matrix and sAu Academy.

sAu Officine serves as the operational hub of the sAu community, bringing together organizations, stakeholders, institutions, companies, and citizens to collaborate on projects through the *Generative Communication* approach. This evolving workspace supports ideation, design, development, and monitoring of projects, fostering innovation and transcending traditional networks. It ensures broad participation by engaging diverse stakeholders, enabling asynchronous and customizable interactions with sections such as project timelines, directories, and working documents.

For knowledge management, sAu Officine integrates two complementary tools: sAu Matrix and sAu Library.

sAu Matrix specializes in archiving and organizing relationships and contacts. It allows for continuous updates to individual and group profiles, tracking activities, and recording potential connections. Profiles are shaped by active dialogue, creating tailored communication strategies and strengthening community ties.

sAu Library acts as a relational database that organizes resources produced by projects. It enhances transparency, documents shared activities, and systematizes data to convert project memory into actionable knowledge. It embodies the idea of knowledge as a common good (Hess & Ostrom, 2006), bridging the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application (Bateson, 1972). sAu Library ensures that knowledge generated through collaboration becomes a sustainable and adaptable resource.

In an era dominated by digitization and automation, sAu Library emphasizes human-centered knowledge curation. By integrating past insights with innovation, it drives the creation of new ideas while reinforcing the importance of selecting and contextualizing information (Toschi, 2015).

To support practical application of this knowledge, sAu Academy provides tailored training programs for the project community. In close synergy with the other tools, Academy fosters a dynamic interplay between knowledge (Library) and its operational dimensions (Officine and Matrix). The training equips participants with project management skills and *Generative Communication* techniques, enabling them to address system-level complexities and contribute effectively to collaborative efforts.

Participants gain expertise in applying Atque System tools while mastering transdisciplinary approaches. sAu Academy emphasizes communicative behaviors that bridge disciplines, encouraging creative and systemic thinking

(Pandolfini & Sbardella, 2020). Training sessions, led by experts across various fields, prepare participants to navigate contemporary challenges, ensuring that digital technology remains a tool for human ingenuity.

## **5. DON MILANI'S LESSON: A NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENTIA AND USUS**

The sAu Research Center had spent at least two years planning the application of the Atque System to a project aimed at documenting Don Milani's legacy.

As a teacher, Don Lorenzo Milani (1923 – 1967) emphasized the importance of language, communication, and empowering those with weaker communication skills to fully exercise their citizenship. As a writer, he prioritized documentation, as evidenced by the wealth of material that underpins his works, including *Esperienze pastorali* (Milani, 1958), *Lettera a una professoressa* (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967), and *L'obbedienza non è più una virtù* (Milani, 1965).

Don Milani demonstrated a unique and forward-thinking approach toward interpreting and practicing the relationship between knowledge traditionally associated with science (*scientia*) and the skills tied to practical application (*usus*). He redefined the interaction between knowing and doing, bridging high culture and popular culture, and highlighting the presence of *usus* in *scientia* and vice versa.

Before establishing itself as a documentation center, the Generative Center ([www.centrogenerativo.it](http://www.centrogenerativo.it)) was conceived as a community-building project aimed at schools, institutions, voluntary and religious organizations, unions, and other entities. It seeks to gather and document resources, projects, and experiences that update and expand Don Milani's philosophy and work. This stems from the sAu Research Center's conviction that documentation must not be limited to the mere accumulation and organization of information. Instead, it must be accompanied by a concrete plan for utilizing the documented resources. This plan must precede the documentation itself, ensuring that the resources remain alive and valuable.

The Generative Center aims to provide an environment — accessible both nationally and internationally — that enhances diverse experiences and realities. It leverages the Atque System and the Generative Communication technique to document and update Don Milani's thoughts and actions. By doing so, it promotes the continued relevance of his teachings in addressing contemporary challenges.

By integrating community building into its foundation, the Generative Center seeks to document not only the historical experience of Barbiana but also the

ongoing initiatives inspired by its values. The Center acts as a living entity where resources are documented with the explicit intention of inspiring and supporting further creative and impactful endeavors.

The primary objective of the Center is to promote the creation of a highly structured community dedicated to reflecting on social, cultural, and religious issues through a project-oriented approach, inspired by the teachings and legacy of Don Milani. This community aims to activate virtuous cycles and establish connections among documentation, communication, and actualization activities. It is recognized that none of these three elements can exist independently but must operate in relation to the others, particularly in connection with the realization of specific projects — whether educational, social, or cultural — that have clearly defined objectives.

The Generative Center and the tools that enable the use of its resources have been designed with a focus on how potential stakeholders can utilize them. For this reason, the first action taken by the Generative Center on the day of its launch was the announcement of an open call to schools across Italy to participate in its development and test the tools as they were being created. Following the involvement of schools, the decision was made to engage organizations and associations (both secular and religious), research centers, and experts. These were the first participants invited to join the community envisioned and created by the Generative Center: this community – managed through the Atque system – consists of individuals who act daily based on shared values and a social project centered on the dignity of the human being, even as they align themselves with the legacy of the Don Milani.

## **6. MEMORY AS A POLITICAL PROJECT: “REMEMBERING” IS MORE THAN “MEMORIZING”**

As with all projects of the sAu Research Center, the development of the Generative Center was guided by precise research questions: What and for whom is an archive or documentation center today? What is the difference between “memory” and “memorizing”?

The answers that the research group has formulated stem from long-term inquiries, briefly summarized in earlier sections. The Generative Center is not—and could not be—a static repository of the original documentation from the Barbiana experience. Instead, it aims to create relationships between that historical memory and the many contemporary realities that continually revitalize its legacy across diverse spaces, forms, contexts, and sectors.

The distinction lies in the purpose and approach. Memory is always a tool for planning and is shaped by the questions we seek to answer. Today, due in part to misconceptions about the capabilities of digital tools, we tend to record, store, and accumulate information — data, photos, videos — without immediately determining how they might be used. While memorizing is a mechanical activity, using memory is a generative activity. The key difference, therefore, lies in the presence or absence of a human touch.

From these considerations arises the urgency to move beyond the logic of first collecting, organizing, and documenting material and only later questioning its purpose or audience. Instead, the project of utilization must precede the collection and organization of documentation:

An archive that can be continually interrogated and enriched by all who believe in the project is an essential condition for acting in the present. An archive that interprets memory not as a dusty and cumbersome repository but as an active process in the present, continuously questioning who we are and, more importantly, who we want to be tomorrow: for ourselves, but especially for our daughters, sons, grandchildren, and future generations. (...) To work effectively with the memory of the past means working in the present: asking how past experiences can help us improve or innovate while also recognizing how our current actions need to be remembered for the future, especially if they are new, unprecedented, or divergent from established memory. Today, memory is a right we must fight for, as it comes from history and points toward history. (Toschi, 2012, p. 58).

Updating cultural heritage means reconsidering its values, ideas, and historical significance in light of contemporary society and its evolving needs. Documentation alone, no matter how technologically advanced or user-friendly, is insufficient. For a resource or experience to be genuinely relevant, additional steps are necessary:

**Understanding Context:** it is essential to acquire a clear understanding of the context in which a resource or experience was created — what values drove it, what intellectual foundations it drew upon, and what impacts and consequences it produced.

**Learning to Communicate:** beyond documenting an experience, it is necessary to communicate it in a way that fosters the generation of new ideas, thoughts, experiences, and solutions. This type of communication turns cultural heritage into a constant resource, inspiring new reflections on current realities and serving as a stimulus for innovation and community building.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the application of the Atque System for documentation presented in this contribution is an example of generative processes that leverage the potential of digital technology in direct opposition to the contemporary trend toward compulsive memorization, which is permeating every aspect of our personal and professional lives.

The Generative Center embodies the essence of Barbiana's legacy, not as a static monument to the past, but as a dynamic force driving the search for contemporary "Barbiana Schools." These are spaces where the principles of equity, creativity, and human-centered education are actualized to meet the needs of today's society. By leveraging the tools of the Atque System and embracing Don Milani's vision, the Center champions the idea of actualization — turning memory into action and values into practice. In doing so, it invites educators, communities, and organizations to collectively envision and construct a future where the transformative power of education continues to resonate, inspire, and evolve.

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# 'THE WORD' SETS YOU FREE: DON MILANI'S REVOLUTIONARY ANTI-IDEALISTIC AND MAIEUTIC APPROACH

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Lorenzo Milani considered the individual an historical product who does not possess innate qualities and whose conscience is merely the reflection of a surrounding fraction of civil society. This perspective, which we could define as 'anti-idealist', sites Milani closer to the thought of scholars Gramsci and Bourdieu, who were convinced that the social world is endowed with an immanent, objective and persistent structure and a system of forces to which all things, including human actions, are subject. In education, denying this system of contingent forces means not admitting that teaching methods are likely to have differing effects on pupils from differing socio-economic strata. Espousing the conventional rhetoric of merit, schools may effectively fuel the process of social inequity reproduction. In an attempt to block this process and address the class differences inherent in the Italian school system, Milani decided to 'take sides' by dedicating his educational activism to the poor. He adopted a maieutic pedagogical method in the hope of seeing critical subjectivities flourish among the less privileged classes, promoting awareness and encouraging them to struggle to emerge from their condition of subordination.

Don Milani; anti-idealism; Popular School

## 1. LORENZO MILANI'S ANTI-IDEALISM

From its establishment until the end of the 1950s, the Italian school system maintained a dual aim of reproducing existing social stratification and preserving the hegemony of dominant social groups (Baldacci, 2019, 166-167). This entailed providing access to high school for the ruling classes, and vocational training for the subordinate classes. Underpinning this type of scholastic structuring is an *idealistic and elitist pedagogy* according to which an individual is not a socio-historical product but a being endowed from birth with all the characteristics that will configure their fate (Charnitzky, 1996). Schooling

merely makes manifest the qualities already present in each, separating ‘talented’ students from students who do not conform to required standards or whose talents are not immediately visible (Gramsci, 1977, Vol. i, Q. 1, 123, 114). Political, historical and social changes in Italy since the end of the 1950s have contributed to bringing the school system in line with a progressive democratisation of constitutional inspiration (Baldacci 2019, 170). However, these changes have failed to rebalance the classism in Italian schools, and the elitist pedagogical approach applied in the reforms remains unchanged. It is no coincidence that, by focusing on enhancing graduate employability, competitiveness and ‘know-how’ (Lundvall & Johnson, 1994), the new educative and training strategies adopted in Europe since the 1990s have made Italian schools similar to businesses, rewarding students able to use their skills to game the economic market and condemning those who do not ‘naturally’ adapt (Gallino, 2015; Mayo, 2015). Espousing the rhetoric of merit, a school may thus further reward the most energetic and regular and penalise the most listless or nonconforming, effectively fueling the process of social inequity reproduction.

In countering this entrepreneurial approach, Don Lorenzo Milani’s pedagogy is considered a critical and revolutionary alternative to traditional Italian education. For Milani, the individual is an historical product who does not possess innate qualities and whose conscience is merely the reflection of a surrounding fraction of civil society (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967). This perspective, which we could define as ‘anti-idealist’, sites Milani closer to the thought of scholars Gramsci and Bourdieu, who were convinced that the social world is endowed with an immanent, objective and persistent structure and a system of forces to which all things, including human actions, are subject (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Gramsci, 1977, Vol. i, Q. 4, 50, 486). In education, denying this system of contingent forces means not admitting that teaching methods are likely to have differing effects on pupils from differing socio-economic strata (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Gramsci, 1977, Vol. i, Q. 4, 55, 502; Scuola di Barbiana, 1967). In an attempt to rectify this denial and to address the class differences inherent in the Italian school system, Milani decided first of all to ‘take sides’ by dedicating his educational activism to the poor (Braccini & Taddei, 1999; Milani, 1957). His critique of traditional schooling opposed obstacles posed to the poor in accessing culture, and also the ongoing cyclical retransmission of social classism in and about which underclasses lacked means of determination and expression. In practice, Milani adopted a maieutic method which was not aimed at gentrifying the poor — the transformation and/or negation of their essence in a process of slow



homologation — but at the acknowledgement of authentic diversity: the tools provided by the teacher should be useful for deciphering the social world, imagining alternative realities and freely expressing one's subjectivity in language (Milani, 2004, 28-29, 77). That is, his school did not provide poor students with notions to be acquired uncritically; rather, it hoped to see critical subjectivities flourish, gaining awareness and an ability to struggle to emerge from their condition of subordination (Milani, 1956, 2005, 2007). Giving 'the word' to the poor, and thereby allowing them to express, critique and shape culture, became Milani's main mission (Milani, 1956, 17-18).

## 2. A SCHOOL FOR THE POOR

Don Milani turned his attention to popular schools, dedicating himself to the lower classes, the poor and the illiterate (Braccini & Taddei, 1999, 38). He reserved a deep respect for peasant culture. As Bussagli (2005, 3) recalls in the beautiful preface to the text *La Parola fa eguali*, Milani never thought that a farmer's son was more ignorant than a pharmacist's or a doctor's son. The farmer's son is the bearer of a culture that differs from that of the pharmacist's son but is not inferior. For Milani, this oppressed culture, rich in very important values, must be enhanced by providing those who possess it with the means to express it in the best possible way (Milani, 1957, 210). In 1956, before being 'exiled' from San Donato to Barbiana due to continuous conflicts with the Florentine curia, Milani wrote a letter to Ettore Bernabei, director of Florence's *Giornale del Mattino*, which read:

Dear Director, do you really think that one of my mountain boys has a lesser amount of knowledge than his city peers? (...) Granted, in books there is a concentration of observations that with our eyes cannot be so powerfully expressed. (...) I am sure, therefore, that the difference between my son and yours is not in the quality or quantity of the treasure enclosed within the mind and heart, but in something that is on the threshold between the inside and the outside, indeed it is the threshold itself: the Word. Your children's treasures expand freely from that wide open window. The treasures of mine have matured within and become sterile. (Milani, 1956, 17-18, authors' translation)

The objective of Milani's educational activism was to eliminate class differences; initially, he chose to address this by ensuring more schooling opportunities for the poor. He developed a school for the poor with three rules: do not fail; full-time school; find a purpose (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967, 80).

Seeking to provide his students with the tools to understand the ideological

structures in which we are all entangled, Milani also promoted three actions: 1) the value of the strike; 2) the rejection of traditional textbooks; and 3) the rejection of recreation. To the former: at the Conference to Educational Directors organised in Florence in 1962 by the Councillor for Public Education, Fioretta Mazzei, Don Milani had the opportunity to express his ideas on the state school institution. After underlining, à la Bourdieu, the tendency of state schools to reward those from bourgeois families to the detriment of those from peasant and worker families, he asserted that children should all be taught the ethics of striking and allowed to strike if they saw fit (Milani, 2005, 85-86). This idea triggered a heated debate with one of the educational directors present, who accused Don Milani of praising the revolution. “Studying is not a subversion!”, thundered Milani (ib.), always a proud defender of the right to culture. Once, in 1961, some children did go on strike to protest their teacher’s continuous delays. The strike consisted of staying at school until the teacher would guarantee the punctuality of the timetable and, otherwise, of returning to Don Milani where, in the absence of an available teacher, the older children would teach the younger ones. One day, finding the school closed, the teacher went to Don Milani to take the children back but received his refusal. He later recounted: “I replied that I am not sending them back, because they are on strike, and that if this situation does not appear on the register, that is, if their absences appear to be otherwise justified, I would denounce her for ideological forgery” (Milani, 2005, 60). “The word ‘strike’ is sacred to the poor, their only weapon against the lords!” (Milani, 2004, 67), he declared, and for this reason it must be taught to the children.

One of the peculiarities of Milani’s educational action stems from its incessant attempt to bring out a critical spirit in children. Underscoring the importance of studying the ideological structures of society in order to form and spread critical rationality, in his programme of revision of teaching methods Milani called for the rejection of traditional textbooks in favour of other textual tools, such as newspapers, that were ‘living things, not dead things’ (Braccini & Taddei, 1999, 103). In Milani’s Barbiana school, students read the news of the day, commenting on it and looking for the names and political orientation of the financiers of the newspapers in question. In 1961 Milani created, together with Professor Capitini, the School Newspaper, a simple and short newspaper for the workers and peasants of Umbria which dealt, in each issue, with a single topic of current affairs that was of interest to the world of work. The broadsheet contained a column about the fight against illiteracy, in which the origin and meaning of words that were deemed fundamental to the cause, but that were

yet incomprehensible to the peasants, were explained: 'colonialist', 'civilisation', 'independent', 'violence', 'functionaries', 'cultural creation', and so on.

Another fundamental aspect of Milani's educational action is his clear alignment against the 'logic' of recreation (Milani, 2007, 33). Convinced intellectual work, rather than recreation, should be the counterpoint to manual labour, as prior of Barbiana Milani had completely abolished it in his school. From Milani's point of view, entertainment is a weapon used by the ruling class to attract and distract the subordinate ones, which is why it is absolutely necessary to flee from it and devote one's free time to cultural development. In his *Recreation*, Milani recounts an emblematic episode (authors' translation):

It happened that going to the village to make a phone call I found one of them [his students] in the bar struggling with the telephone book [... and I said to him,] "workers like you are just as the lords want them. Don't you see that they organise the Giro d'Italia [national bicycle race] and the cinema for the purpose of fooling you and keeping you away from school and the union? Your friends don't read the Gazzetta and take care to keep up with their union and send their children to university, yet they laugh behind your back!" And so on for an hour, until he was destroyed (ivi, 18-19).

Milani formulated a scheme of recreational activities distinguished into four categories: a) recreation with its own malice in addition to that of sterility; b) recreation that is bad only because it is sterile; c) recreation that is good only for physical health; and d) recreation that is good because it is instructive. Among the first, Don Milani places the cinema, TV and the bar, all of which extend bourgeois control by providing the illusion of being able to choose and, therefore, of being free. This point has been explicated by Milani on several occasions, but we believe it was best explored during a lesson to girls from the middle school of Borgo S. Lorenzo in 1965. On that occasion, to a girl who was convinced of her ability to choose her fate, Milani replied that

in Paris or New York, eight or ten years ago, a rich man master, or a small group of rich men who owned a whole chain of record companies, decided to make the girls bop from the North Pole to the South Pole, including in the halls of Borgo or Vicchio. (...) None of you have chosen any of the dance tunes you dance to: you have taken them as they have been given to you. If any of you had chosen to dance the minuet, there is no scope to do that; yet your great-great-grandmother danced the minuet. (Milani, 2004, 28-29, Authors' translation)

Among recreations that are bad because they are sterile, Milani included 'passive' sports, such as taking boys to the stadium and the races, following sporting events on television, reading the sports newspaper *Gazzetta*, etc. (Milani, 2007, 55). Among recreations useful for physical health, he included sports in which children can actively participate (ivi, 61). Yet all these forms of recreation deviate from the main objective that Milani (2005, 77) had set, that is, to wage a class struggle.

Listen, boy, your social class, the oppressed, the unhappy all over the world, from Algeria to the Congo, from Barbiana to Monte Giovi, in the workshop, in the fields — the oppressed of the whole world, the proletarians of the whole world, suffer from this imparted suffering that you experience. Dedicate your whole life to helping your class emerge from this situation (ivi, 77, Authors' translation)

With this counsel, we come to perhaps the highest point of the entire Milanese educational action: for Don Milani there is no freedom without equality and there is no individual without collectivity. To the 'ignoble' goal of studying for oneself, selfishly, to make money, Milani parries another: "Study for a whole class, which is ninety percent of people. Expand your heart to the rest of the world" (ib.). Indeed, Milani's pedagogy has the concrete objective of creating and spreading a new humanism through educational action that is first and foremost political. It aims for transformation of both the general understanding of the world and of one's position within that world, and for a new, solid apprehension of the planning horizon at which fresh perspectives and *modus vivendi* are imagined.

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# THE CRONOBOK OF DON MILANI'S LIFE: AN INTERSECTION OF PHILOLOGY AND CRITICISM IN REVITALIZING HIS LEGACY

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The article introduces the resources created and developed by the "scientia Atque usus" Research Center for Generative Communication for the Generative Center "Scuole di Barbiana", with a particular focus on the Cronobook dedicated to the life of don Lorenzo Milani. The Cronobook represents an innovative experiment that combines a philological biography of don Milani with a critical interpretation of his life and works. Through a Generative Writing approach, the project aims to foster a continuous dialogue between past and present, involving schools, researchers, and students in the reinterpretation and renewal of Milani's thought. The goal is to revitalize don Milani's message to address contemporary issues like school dropout and educational poverty, keeping his legacy alive in modern challenges.

Don Lorenzo Milani; Generative Center "Scuole di Barbiana"; Generative Communication; Generative Writing

## 1. WHAT IS THE CRONOBOK OF DON MILANI'S LIFE?

Writing a biography certainly consists of a philological activity of gathering and organizing the events of a person's life, but, as Toschi (2016) argues, "philology cannot exist without criticism and vice versa." This intertwining of philology and criticism is particularly evident in the case of don Lorenzo Milani. His life has been subject to contrasting interpretations between supporters and detractors, making it necessary for the biographical work to not only chronologically collect data and dates but also to include a critical and contextual interpretation of his thought and actions, along with the context in which these took shape.

The controversies surrounding don Milani, his message, and his behavior were intense even during his life. His assignment to the remote rectory of Barbiana,

after the death of the rector of San Donato di Calenzano, was intended by the Florentine ecclesiastical hierarchy as a way to isolate and silence this uncomfortable young priest. These controversies did not end with his untimely death in 1967, at the age of only 44, and they have continued even during the centenary celebrations of his birth (May 27, 2023 – May 27, 2024). The dialectic between philology and criticism, in fact, clearly emerges in the debate sparked by Scotto di Luzio's (2023) pamphlet on Milani's pedagogical legacy and in the response that Cesari (2024) gave to this publication.

In this context, the need for a continuous and unceasing dialogue between philology and criticism represents the focal point of the Generative Center "Scuole di Barbiana" ([www.centrogenerativo.it](http://www.centrogenerativo.it)), which aims to renew and revitalize the thought and values of the prior of Barbiana through innovative research and documentation tools. Among these, one of the main ones is the Cronobook of don Lorenzo Milani's life, a digital and interactive resource that researchers of the "scientia Atque usus" Research Center for Generative Communication (henceforth: Research Center sAu) have designed and developed specifically for the Generative Center.

The purpose of the Generative Center is to foster the creation of a community engaged in reflecting on social, cultural, and religious issues inspired by don Milani's teachings and testimony, with the aim of overcoming current challenges related to communication, inclusion, and hospitality issues for which don Milani's thought and practices still offer essential insights today.

The Cronobook embodies the creative tension between philological rigor and critical interpretation, offering an operational model to actualize Milani's legacy and transform it into an educational tool that supports projects which, by looking to the past for lessons, are oriented towards addressing the most pressing current challenges for our schools and society. Always, in the spirit of Milani, with the aspiration of making our school ever more just, inclusive, and democratic: a true workshop of communication and citizenship (Toschi 2023).

## **2. WHAT DOES REVITALIZING DON MILANI'S LEGACY MEAN?**

To understand the approach of the Cronobook, it is necessary to consider the meaning of the term "revitalize" within the context of the Generative Center's project. Revitalizing the thought, testimony, and values of don Milani first requires a philological understanding of his writings and access to firsthand testimonies, such as the personal letters collected in the second volume of his complete works (Milani, 2017) and the testimonies of those who personally

experienced the Barbiana School. This is the *conditio sine qua non*, which must be accompanied by interpretative criticism, needed to distinguish those aspects of Milani's life and thought that would be incorrect and unhelpful to decontextualize (for historical, cultural, social, or personal reasons) from those that are still useful today in guiding behavior in different contexts, both inside and outside school. Finally, the third step is *actualization*, placing Milani's experience and testimony within the contemporary context, making it alive and meaningful, and continuously enriching it with new content and experiences.

The Cronobook arises from this generative tension between philology and criticism, presenting itself as a tool that, on the one hand, documents the coherence between Don Milani's life and message through a philologically accurate and scientifically rigorous biography, and on the other hand offers a platform for collective writing, allowing researchers, teachers, and students to enrich and expand the project with new events, resources, and interpretations.

### **3. STRUCTURE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE CRONOBOK**

The Cronobook, accessible from the website of the Generative Center "Scuole di Barbiana," is a research and consultation tool based on critical and philological analysis of biographical literature, as well as direct testimonies from those who had the privilege of interacting with don Lorenzo Milani daily, as well as what he personally recounted to friends and relatives in his private letters. This tool has two main objectives. The first is to provide a scientifically based biographical model, created through mediation between authoritative sources.

The Cronobook, in fact, builds a biography that emphasizes the coherence between Milani's life and message. The chronology of his existence is integrated with autobiographical narratives drawn from his correspondence and other primary sources. The second objective is to experiment with a Generative Writing method. From this perspective, the Cronobook is designed as a shared writing space where experts and researchers, as well as active classes involved in updating his message, can contribute by adding resources, events, and references, each with their own signature. This approach allows for different perspectives to be integrated into a common structure.

### **4. ACCESSIBILITY AND INTERACTIVE STRUCTURE**

The Cronobook offers an interactive structure designed to meet the needs of diverse users, from academic researchers to teachers and their students. Like



all content and resources created for the Generative Center, the Cronobook is organized around three main macro-themes:

**School:** Explores the role of the school as an instrument of social justice, focusing on the Barbiana experience and Milani's critique of the school as a means of perpetuating social injustices and economic inequalities.

**Citizenship:** Analyzes Milani's contribution to the formation of conscious citizens, highlighting the link between education and democracy and the extraordinary importance he placed on the Constitution.

**Faith:** Examines the religious dimension of Milani's thought, viewed as a driver of social action and commitment and as a compass guiding his decisions, and the conflicts he faced with the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Users can navigate the Cronobook through three possible modes:

- **Search by Event:** This allows users to identify specific events through keywords.
- **Search by Date:** Users can view events organized by year, month, or specific day.
- **Thematic Search:** This option enables users to explore events associated with the three macro-themes mentioned above (school, citizenship, faith).

Fig. 1. Search interface of the Cronobook. Source: <https://cronobook-don-milani.sau-centroricerche.org/>

**Consulta il Cronobook della vita di don Lorenzo**

Il Cronobook è un progetto di ricerca finalizzato a restituire una **rilettura - al tempo stesso filologicamente corretta e scientificamente critica - della vita del priore di Barbiana.**

Per navigare il Cronobook della vita di don Lorenzo, scegli una delle seguenti modalità:

**Cerca per evento (nascita, conversione...)**  
Evento  **CERCA**

**Cerca per data**  
Anno  **CERCA**

**Mese/Parte dell'anno**  
Digita il numero del mese oppure clicca su una voce del menu a tendina per selezionare una parte dell'anno. **CERCA**

**Giorno/Parte del mese**  
Digita il giorno oppure clicca su una voce del menu a tendina per selezionare una parte del mese. **CERCA**

**Cerca per Argomento del Percorso Informativo "Don Milani. Scuola, Cittadinanza, Fede"**  
Argomento  **CERCA**

Fig. 2. Example of chronologically-based search results (Year 1965). Source: <https://cronobook-don-milani.sau-centroricerche.org/>



## **5. A GENERATIVE WRITING EXPERIMENTATION**

A distinctive feature of the Cronobook is its approach to collective writing, expressed through “Generative Writing.”

By Generative Writing, we mean a writing paradigm that not only embraces the potential offered by new technologies but aims to radically transform the way we conceive and practice collaborative writing. Here, writing is not simply understood as a mechanical process of text composition but as a project activity rooted in critical thinking and shared reflection, leading to the creation of communities and the continuous generation of new ideas. This concept goes beyond mere collaboration or document sharing, proposing a model where writing is conceived as a continuous process of ideation, discussion, and integration. Generative Writing, ultimately, aims to add value to those creative processes of research and design that bring together the world of *scientia* (experts) and *usus* (a broader and more diverse audience). This approach aims to overcome the traditional barriers of specialized communication – which has become standardized, as in academic discourse – by exploring themes of design, collaboration, and the appreciation of differences, with the goal of promoting a form of writing that does not simply produce content but generates knowledge, builds community, and stimulates innovation.

The Cronobook, therefore, presents itself as an open space to host diverse but integrated contributions, thanks to a shared structure. This approach allows for continuous enrichment, enabling researchers (as well as students working in groups with the support of their teachers) to add new events or enrich existing ones with resources and references. An additional important aspect is interdisciplinary dialogue: the Cronobook promotes collaboration between scholars from different fields, fostering a more comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of don Milani’s figure.

## **6. LETTERS TO A TEACHER: THE NEW PROJECT FOR SCHOOLS**

For the 2024/2025 school year, with support from the Fondazione CR Firenze, we launched the project “Letters to a Teacher: Students Write to don Lorenzo Milani”. This initiative is aimed at teachers and students in secondary schools in the Metropolitan City of Florence, who can participate in a training program and a series of Generative Writing workshops organized by researchers of the Research Center sAu. Through this program, the classes involved will, by the end of the school year, write letters – modeled after Milani’s famous public letters – dedicated to current issues in schools and society today, such as:

## Education for multiculturalism and social inclusion

- Combating educational poverty and school dropout
- Health education and prevention
- Food education
- Knowledge and preservation of territory and heritage
- Education in sustainable thinking and behavior

### Citizenship education – not only digital citizenship

In addition to writing new letters, for which the participating classes will be able to rely on the Cronobook and the other resources presented in this article, schools that have worked on these topics in recent years will have the opportunity to document these projects on the Generative Center’s website, becoming one of the ‘Voices from Today’s Barbiana’.

Fig. 3. Some of the projects documented among the “Voices from Today’s Barbiana.” Source: <https://www.centrogenerativo.it/risorse/voci-barbiane-oggi/>

### — Le scuole e le associazioni che partecipano allo sviluppo del Centro Generativo —

*Le voci dalle Barbiane di oggi sono i progetti di scuole e associazioni che attualizzano il pensiero di don Lorenzo Milani.*

Le scuole hanno un ruolo centrale nello sviluppo del Centro Generativo: stiamo collaborando con decine di istituti da tutta Italia per documentare e comunicare i loro progetti che attualizzano il pensiero e l’azione di don Lorenzo Milani.

#### Scopri i progetti di scuole e associazioni!

The figure displays eight project cards arranged in a 2x4 grid. Each card contains the following information:

- Card 1:** *Conosciamo Don Milani e la Scuola di Barbiana*. Istituto Comprensivo Polizzano di Gangi (PA). Referente: docente Elisa Duca. [Leggi la scheda progetto sulla Library.](#) Audio player: 00:00 / 00:00.
- Card 2:** *Don Milani 4.0*. Istituto Comprensivo 3 di Modena. Referenti: docenti Paola Montorsi e Cecilia Scalabrini. [Leggi la scheda progetto sulla Library.](#) Audio player: 00:00 / 00:00.
- Card 3:** *Don Milani. Insegnare a tutti*. Istituto di Istruzione Superiore Statale Guglielmo Marconi. Referente: Camilla De Iorio. [Leggi la scheda progetto sulla Library.](#) Audio player: 00:00 / 00:00.
- Card 4:** *Fantast I-CARE*. Liceo "Leonardo da Vinci" – Alba. Referenti: docenti Paola Bergui e Samanta Scardino. [Leggi la scheda progetto sulla Library.](#) Audio player: 00:00 / 00:00.
- Card 5:** *I Care – Centenario don Milani*. Direzione didattica statale "Don Milani" di Trinitapoli (BAT). Referente: docente Donato Piccinino. [Leggi la scheda progetto sulla Library.](#) Audio player: 00:00 / 00:00.
- Card 6:** *Il giardino dei racconti "Un giardino da ri-scoprire"*. IC di Santa Venerina (CT). Referenti: dirigente Mariangiola Garraffo e docente Lucia Casella. [Leggi la scheda progetto sulla Library.](#) Audio player: 00:00 / 00:00.
- Card 7:** *Il nostro libro della scuola di Nucifori*. Associazione AIMC sezione di Giarre (CT) con IC Santa Venerina. Referenti: Presidente Maria Torrisi e Socia Cecilia Belfiore. [Leggi la scheda progetto sulla Library.](#) Audio player: 00:00 / 00:00.
- Card 8:** *La parola vera*. Istituto Comprensivo "Don Lorenzo Milani". Cerveteri (RM). Referente: docente Angelo Colone. [Leggi la scheda progetto sulla Library.](#) Audio player: 00:00 / 00:00.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS: REVITALIZING DON MILANI'S LEGACY

The Cronobook represents an innovative response to the need to revitalize the legacy of don Lorenzo Milani, combining philological rigor and critical interpretation into a living and participatory tool. Through meticulous documentation, critical analysis, and generative writing, the Cronobook not only preserves the past but also projects it into the present and future, making it a relevant tool for all those who, in schools and beyond, are committed to initiatives that address contemporary challenges.

In an era when schools are called upon to respond to new forms of inequality and promote active citizenship, the Cronobook offers an educational model that does not limit itself to the transmission of knowledge but engages in the shared and inclusive construction of formative resources. As Milani stated,

The right goal is to dedicate oneself to others. And in this century, how does one love if not through politics or school? We are sovereign. It is no longer a time for alms but for choices.<sup>1</sup>

The Cronobook of don Milani's life embodies this vision, presenting itself as a tool for education that not only helps to understand and interpret the past but, above all, inspires an idea of the future based on active participation, social justice, and a concept of culture that transcends current divisions between the world of *scientia* and that of *usus*.

### **Acknowledgements**

The development of the Cronobook of don Milani's life was made possible thanks to co-financing from the Fondazione CR Firenze (<https://fondazionecrfirenze.it/>), and the IT implementation was carried out in collaboration with Centrica (<https://www.centrica.it/>).

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<sup>1</sup> Il fine giusto è dedicarsi al prossimo. E in questo secolo come vuole amare se non con la politica o con la scuola? Siamo sovrani. Non è più tempo delle elemosine, ma delle scelte. (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967, 94)

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# THE TOPICALITY OF THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA ON THE CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF DON LORENZO MILANI

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This article explores the enduring relevance of don Lorenzo Milani’s educational and pedagogical philosophy on the centenary of his birth. Through an interdisciplinary panel discussion, the legacy of the Barbiana School is examined in the context of contemporary educational practices and its potential to address persistent social inequalities. The panel, organized by the “scientia Atque usus” Research Center for Generative Communication and the Generative Center “Scuole di Barbiana,” featured diverse perspectives from academia, school leadership, and the third sector. The discussion underscores the importance of reimagining education as a tool for social justice and active citizenship. By combining theoretical insights and practical applications, this article highlights how don Milani’s ideas can continue to inspire a more democratic and inclusive educational system.

Lorenzo Milani; Social Justice in Education; Democratic School Practices; Barbiana School Legacy

## INTRODUCTION

The panel was organized to explore, from various perspectives and disciplinary approaches, the pedagogical and educational legacy of Don Lorenzo Milani just a few days before the conclusion of the year-long celebrations for the centenary of his birth (May 27, 2023 – May 27, 2024). Furthermore, the panel was conceived to examine how the innovative ideas of the Barbiana School continue to inspire contemporary educational practices.

Promoted by the “scientia Atque usus” Research Center for Generative Communication ETS ([www.sau-centroricerche.org](http://www.sau-centroricerche.org)) in Florence as part of the activities of the Generative Center “Scuole di Barbiana”

([www.centrogenerativo.it](http://www.centrogenerativo.it)), the panel involved speakers who delved into various aspects of Lorenzo Milani's educational approach and its modern applications. The participants included two academic researchers (Vanessa Lamattina and Gian Luca Battilocchi), a school principal (Ornella Castellano), and two researchers active in the third sector (Viola Davini and Marco Sbardella).

### **1. VANESSA LAMATTINA – 'THE WORD' SETS YOU FREE: DON MILANI'S REVOLUTIONARY ANTI-IDEALISTIC AND MAIEUTIC APPROACH**

Vanessa Lamattina (University of Salerno, Italy) opened the panel by reflecting on Don Milani's educational approach, characterized by profound anti-elitism and a strongly maieutic method. She illustrated how Milani, operating in 1950s and 1960s Italy, challenged a dualistic educational system that restricted high school access to the ruling classes, relegating working-class individuals to vocational training. According to Lamattina, Milani rejected the idea that students should "compete" to demonstrate innate talents and viewed school as a tool for dismantling inequalities, contrary to the practices of the educational system of his time, which perpetuated them.

Lamattina highlighted how Milani considered the traditional school responsible for "treating unequals equally" and penalizing those who lacked the cultural capital to understand the language of school. These concepts share clear connections with the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Antonio Gramsci. Lamattina further emphasized the importance of language as a tool for emancipation, which Milani intended to offer to everyone without erasing the diversity and richness of popular culture.

### **2. GIAN LUCA BATTILOCCHI – THE CURRENT VALUE OF LETTERA A UNA PROFESSORESSA FOR THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION: A BOOK FOR PARENTS**

Gian Luca Battilocchi (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Italy) analyzed the value of *Lettera a una professoressa* from the perspective of sociology of education, explaining how this text criticizes the Italian school system for its role in perpetuating social inequalities. Battilocchi discussed the contrast between formal equality and substantive equality, emphasizing how Milani and his students advocated for the democratization of access to education.

Battilocchi's contribution also explored the concept of the "school effect," where families from higher social classes influence their children's school choices, directing them toward more prestigious institutions and avoiding socially undesirable contexts. According to Battilocchi, Milani's observations



anticipate the theories of social reproduction and the “summer learning loss” phenomenon, where educational disparities between students of different social origins are exacerbated during summer breaks.

### **3. ORNELLA CASTELLANO – THE LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL, YESTERDAY AND TODAY ... THE BARBIANA SCHOOL AND ITS IDEAS. IT’S YOUR TURN, GENERATION Z**

Ornella Castellano, a school principal, presented the experience of the Falcone Comprehensive Institute in Copertino, which is part of the Veliero Parlante network. She illustrated how her school has concretized and modernized Don Milani’s approach. The institution she leads adopts innovative methods such as Circle Time and creative storytelling, fostering discussions on social issues starting from texts like the Italian Constitution and *Lettera a una professoressa*. Great importance is given to communication and media: students were encouraged to produce podcasts and radio broadcasts to explore the right to education, social inequalities, and the value of inclusion.

### **4. VIOLA DAVINI – “DON MILANI GENERATIVE CENTER”: LOOKING FOR THE PRESENT “BARBIANA SCHOOLS” TO PROMOTE THE IDEA OF ACTUALIZATION**

Viola Davini (sAu Research Center) presented the Generative Center “Scuole di Barbiana,” a project promoted to foster reflection and the modernization of Don Milani’s principles and values. The Generative Center is based on the “Atque” Design and Communication System, an integrated set of tools designed to facilitate cooperation among stakeholders to continuously expand communities of interest around a project. It is also intended to communicate project outcomes through a precise content publishing strategy to engage communities beyond the project.

The goal is to build a “Milanian Galaxy,” an educational community that shares and practices the principles of the Barbiana School daily.

Davini illustrated how the Center supports various organizations by providing research tools and support for developing new educational projects and communicating Don Milani’s values. She described the sAu Academy, an online training space that offers educational paths for schools and integrates the content of the “Atque” environment.

## **5. MARCO SBARDELLA – THE CRONOBOOK OF DON MILANI’S LIFE: AN INTER-SECTION OF PHILOLOGY AND CRITICISM IN REVITALIZING HIS LEGACY**

In the final panel presentation, Marco Sbardella (sAu Research Center) introduced the *Cronobook* of Don Milani’s life, an innovative tool that systematically and scientifically documents Milani’s life and works, organizing events and texts based on philological and critical criteria. The *Cronobook*, divided into three thematic areas (School, Citizenship, and Faith), allows users to navigate significant events in Don Milani’s life and analyze his writings in relation to the historical context and contemporary testimonies.

- Sbardella also presented other resources created by the sAu Research Center and made available to schools and associations:
- The Cloud of Notable Things: The result of an in-depth content analysis of Milani’s works, this tool enables users to explore central themes like inclusion and social justice.
- Voices from Today’s Barbiana: A section featuring contemporary school projects that apply Don Milani’s ideas through initiatives such as debates and podcasting.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The panel discussions highlighted how Don Milani’s ideas remain relevant, not only as a pedagogical model but also as a toolkit for making schools more democratic and capable of fostering active citizenship among younger generations. The participants emphasized the importance of keeping Milani’s message alive, not solely through academic studies or by revisiting his name and the historical experience of Barbiana but, more importantly, through educational practices that promote an inclusive and democratic school system.

Stream H

**GENDER  
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE  
IN EDUCATION**

# FEMALE BULLYING AT SCHOOL. THE MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF VIOLENCE AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS

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## INTRODUCTION

Analysing bullying through a gender perspective has become increasingly necessary, driven by the recognition of both the potential and the limitations of literature that interprets phenomena – such as male and female bullying – as universal and, therefore, neutral-masculine rather than masculine-neutral. Over the past fifty years, female and feminist thought has developed a scientific discourse that deepens our understanding of reality in its complexity. This discourse highlights sexual and partial subjects (Diotima, 1987), emphasising a perspective rooted in sexual difference and gender as critical interpretative lenses. It also foregrounds knowledge situated and embodied within specific subjects and contexts (Haraway, 1988). This evolution has culminated in the compelling intersectional perspective, which enables us to address diversity, recognising that everyone simultaneously embodies multiple, intersecting diversities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Therefore, it is essential to open both female and male bullying to autonomous interpretations (De Vita & Burgio, 2023; Burgio, 2018; De Vita & Vittori, 2022). The studies conducted in Italy highlight a theoretical and empirical gap capable of defining female bullying dimensions. The national research “Female bullying at school. An intersectional mixed-method investigation” (coordinated by De Vita & Burgio) tried to fill this gap. The survey involving several Italian Universities (Verona, Enna “Kore”, Milan-Bicocca, Genoa, Perugia and Foggia), through a mixed-method approach, sought to deepen the understanding of female bullying from a gender and intersectional perspective by highlighting its shades (De Vita & Burgio, 2023) and measuring its incidence of the phenomenon in Italy in terms of frequency (Batini et al., 2023), implementing data collection involving the school population of the early upper secondary school. This panel was therefore aimed

at including proposals that explored the several thematic cores around female bullying from an interdisciplinary point of view.

## **1. INSIGHTS FROM THE PANEL DISCUSSION**

The panel highlighted how female bullying, though less visible than male dynamics, is equally pervasive and rooted in verbal, relational, and social exclusion. Peer relationships and social pressures shape roles and behaviours, often driven by cultural and gender norms that reinforce “femininity” and power hierarchies. Research using participatory approaches and Student’s Voice methodologies emphasised the value of involving students and adults as “experts” in addressing peer bullying.

## **2. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN SHARED CONTENTS**

This paragraph summarises the main contents presented and discussed during the panel. We emphasise that some of the contributions received were not presented and discussed due to the absence of the panellists.

### **2.1 The size and forms of the phenomenon**

Among the works presented, Scierra and Batini trace the data of the national research framing the phenomenon and confirming some research hypotheses, namely that bullying between girls manifests itself mainly between school desks and online, within the peer group of the same gender and school year and is often verbal and relational. Quantitative data show that bullying affects boys and girls equally, without greater female victimisation. However, there is a greater involvement of girls in episodes of verbal abuse and exclusion from the peer group. These specificities were confirmed by Genova and Quadrelli, who, through an action-research project carried out in the Marche Region (Central Italy), employed creative methodologies and thus stimulated students’ imagination through drawing. The drawings show a representation of bullying with a male prevalence in the role of the perpetrator, but also a complex phenomenology of female bullying, in which girls exercise psychological as well as physical violence towards both girls and boys.

### **2.2 Anticipation of the age of female bullying**

Peroni showed how even school-age girls are subject to female bullying, pushed to conform to models of adult “femininity”. The absence of reference adults and the self-sufficiency of the young participants suggest a potential for resilience and self-empowerment in the face of intra-gender-based violence.

### 2.3 Itineraries for teachers and families

Caso and Altamura underlined how teachers and parents are essential in recognising and combating bullying, with the risk that ineffectiveness in the role makes them inadequate.

A guideline of interventions for adults has been proposed to improve support and prevention.

### 2.4 Social stigma and mutual recognition

Landuzzi and Dusi, examining the dynamics of social stigma, highlighted how female bullying reflects stereotypes that crystallise and impose themselves with the force of stigma. Experiences of abuse can profoundly influence the victims' self-perception, underscoring the need for an educational perspective of mutual recognition and respect.

### 2.5 Counteractions co-designing

De Vita and Vittori, on the other hand, presented the last step of the national research that involved some schools in Verona in the co-design of actions to prevent and combat female bullying by employing participatory and self-awareness methodologies such as the Theatre of the Oppressed and the 16 Attitudes, intending to create a compelling and replicable pedagogical model capable of promoting and increasing the emotional awareness of female students and teachers through a peer-to-peer approach.

### 2.6 Coping strategies for girls

Disalvo, based on the focus groups carried out in Foggia (Southern Italy), explored girls' coping strategies to contain peer bullying. The results of her research indicate that, although bullying negatively affects the social-emotional growth of adolescents, female students can draw on and build resilient devices from themselves. However, they need more outstanding educational support from adults to cope with the phenomenon.

### 2.7 Invisible spaces and cyberbullying

Emmanuele analysed how female bullying manifests itself in the so-called "invisible" spaces, offline, such as the corridors of a school or the locker room of a gym, and online, such as Instant Messaging and social media platforms. The "strategic" use of these spaces by those who perpetrate prevarication, together with the complex and articulated set of hetero-normative dictates of conformity to the gender culturally assigned to the subjects, makes the bullying

phenomenon less visible, more challenging to identify for adults and, ultimately, difficult to predict and control.

## **2.8 Responses to bullying in Irish schools**

Rutherford's contribution has brought an international point of view to the discussion, which has so far centred on the Italian case. Focusing on the Irish case study, the researcher explored "girl-to-girl" bullying, showing how the use of a post-human approach highlights how the incidence of everyday contexts and tools can influence bullying dynamics. Therefore, Rutherford proposes adopting an "intra-action" perspective that focuses on the material dimensions of the phenomenon and the effectiveness of actions located in context to prevent and combat girl-to-girl bullying.

## **CONCLUSION**

Female bullying often manifests itself in less visible ways than male bullying, as demonstrated by the analysis of invisible spaces "onlife". This feature requires greater awareness and training of reference adults to identify the phenomenon and intervene effectively. The contributions highlighted how teachers and parents can be both part of the solution and the problem. Training programs and participatory educational strategies can fill skills gaps. Female bullying reflects and crystallises gender stereotypes that impose standards of femininity and relational power. The studies suggested the need for interventions that challenge these norms, fostering an environment of growth that promotes diversity, counteracts stigma, and encourages inclusion and well-being of students. Girls can develop forms of resilience through self-empowerment processes and educational support among peers. Involving students and teachers in the co-design of counteractions, as shown using participatory methodologies (Student's Voice), can lead to greater awareness and more effective interventions.

The panel showed that addressing female bullying requires an integrated approach, including education, adult training, and participatory strategies, as well as a gendered and intersectional review of the bullying narrative from a gender perspective.

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# LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF ADOLESCENCE BETWEEN SOCIAL STIGMA AND THE NEED FOR RECOGNITION: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF FEMALE BULLYING

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This essay is based on the analysis of data collected as part of the research “Female Bullying at School: An Intersectional Mixed-Method Investigation” conducted in the city of Verona. Five comprehensive institutions were involved, and ten focus groups were conducted with female students aged 16. The data analysis, carried out using the CCM method, revealed small glimmers of hope within a phenomenon that causes significant distress among younger generations, such as bullying. Furthermore, the students also proposed potential intervention strategies aimed at supporting the victims of bullying from an empowerment perspective.

female bullying; social stigma; recognition theory

## INTRODUCTION

Bullying arises and develops within social relationships among peers (Novara and Regoliosi, 2007), and in Italy, it affects up to 25 percent of student (Menesini and Salmivalli, 2017).

Nevertheless, it became an object of research in a systematic mode only in the early 1970s (Olweus, 1978). We know that it is a complex, multifaceted, and evolving social phenomenon (De Vita and Burgio, 2023), characterized by a power asymmetry, a specific intentionality and a prolonged reiteration over time (Olweus, 1994). Two main roles are “staged”: the victim and the bully, enacted in front of a third party, the audience composed of peers. Their interactions create a complex relational dynamic that particularly affects the pre/adolescent period, during which the need for approval and friendship from peers emerges

forcefully. Characteristic of this life phase are the definition of one's position in the social hierarchy and the management of one's own reputation (Emler and Reicher, 2000). The mutual recognition among group members is crucial in determining belonging, and one of the fundamental objectives of the bully/ies is the victim's marginalization (Olweus, 1994).

The target of bullying – in the majority of cases – are “those who differ from their peers” (Sharp and Smith, 1995, 145). Among peers, any deviation from the “norm” constitutes a potential risk factor, which increases as the perceived degree of “diversity” grows, leading to possible stigma and rendering adolescents potentially vulnerable (Attawell, 2012) to aggression. This paper is based on the evidence from the national research “Female Bullying at School. An intersectional mixed-method investigation” coordinated by Antonia De Vita and Roberto Burgio and involving multidisciplinary research units belonging to six Italian universities: Verona, Enna “Kore”, Perugia, Genova, Foggia, Milano-Bicocca. The research, through qualitative and quantitative methodologies, has allowed a deeper understanding of female bullying from a gender and intersectional perspective by collecting data in cities in northern, central and southern Italy and involving school population (De Vita and Burgio, 2023).

The object of this essay is to understand how, in aggressive relationships between girls, the social stigma (Goffman, 1963) deriving from diversity is intertwined with the need for recognition (Honneth, 2002b) since, in this delicate transitional phase that is adolescence, the possibility of appreciating the new self that is advancing and of identifying oneself in it, depends to a large extent on the gaze of peers.

## **1. FEMALE BULLYING**

Female versus male bullying is still an under-studied topic because it is a particularly complex phenomenon, consisting of multiple elements (De Vita, 2018; 2021; De Vita and Vittori, 2021; 2022) although some elements are common.

Firstly, bullying takes place in a public context i.e. school (Menesini, 2000); that it often unfolds in groups (Emler and Reicher, 2000, 12-13) and that it arises and develops within social relationships among peers (Novara and Regoliosi, 2007). Indeed it is a phenomenon that has a close correlation with age (Rivers and Smith, 1994) because it is during childhood and adolescence that the definition of one's identity and social role represent fundamental developmental tasks that require confrontation especially with the peer group, thus becomes the

container par excellence of models to which to refer in order to define one's position in the social hierarchy and negotiate one's reputation (Emler and Reicher, 2000). It is also to gain recognition and approval from the group that the adolescent uses the body – e.g. clothing, posture, jewellery, tattoos – both as a means of expression and as a criterion for defining the “us” and the “other” (De Vita and Burgio, 2023). Specifically, female bullying has an “educational” function by teaching through violence and exclusion, the norms of “correct” femininity and group membership (De Vita and Burgio, 2023). In addition, while boys are more likely to use direct aggression, both physical and verbal (Viljoen et al., 2005, 523-524), girls use relational bullying significantly more frequently (Robson and Witenberg, 2013) by enacting behaviors such as gossiping about the victim when she is not present, making her confidences public, turning their backs on her when she approaches, using insults or nicknames to humiliate her in public, “stealing” her friends or boyfriends (Catanzaro, 2011). Indeed, this correlates with the need for approval, belonging and friendship from peers emerges forcefully (Emler and Reicher, 2000) and which characterizes adolescent girls who are searching for their identity at this stage of life. Teenagers, are so caught in a paradoxical situation in which they have to be the same as others to be accepted/but also unique to express themselves. Given this, the target of bullying is “those who differ from their peers” (Sharp and Smith, 1995, 145), and the kind of diversity that catches the attention of bullies mainly concerns the aesthetics of the body, for example, the weight (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002) that become the stigma domains of stereotypes and discrimination (Goffman, 1963). Stigma is not just a physical sign, but rather an attribute related to social disapproval that leads to a ‘spoiled social identity’ (Goffman, 1963). It's associated with the enforcement of social norms (Phelan et al., 2008) and it has negative consequences for the victims' well-being (Stutterheim et al., 2009) who may experience depression, anxiety and isolation.

## **2. METODOLOGY**

For this essay the researchers analysed 10 group interviews, corresponding to a sample of approximately 60 female high school students in Verona, carried out within the framework of the national research mentioned above. The tool of Web-Based Focus Groups was adopted for group interviews (Daniels et al., 2019), carried out through online meeting platforms (Zoom and Google Meet) and recorded. The duration of each Focus Group was approximately 2 hours. The participation of female students was voluntary, subject to the presentation

of the research and consent by parents.

The focus groups were verbatim transcribed and the coding process was conducted following the procedures indicated by the seven steps provided by Retrospective Constant Comparative Method (CCM) (Olson et al., 2016).

### 3. FINDINGS

Analysis of the group interviews revealed several themes characterising female bullying among which the researchers for this study highlighted: stigma and denial of recognition.

#### 3.1 Female bullying: three types of stigma

The girls interviewed state that they are bullied because of their weight, skin colour and the stigma attached to their ethnicity. Following Goffman's (1963) typology, stigmatization among female peers is thus related to: a) *the body* namely regarding standards of beauty, weight, and phenotype; b) *individual character* perceived as weak namely regarding weakness, fragility, shyness, being a "bad girl"; c) *ethnic belonging* namely regarding nationality, religion, being strangers or foreigners. It frequently occurs that these three stigmas are being attached to the same girl at the same time, and this reinforces the girls' poor body image to the point of creating conditions of fragility and isolation that are fertile ground for both 'social' aggression by peers and 'individual' self-aggressive behavior such as anorexia, bulimia, depression or even suicide.

I was bullied for a long time, for four or five years. (...) if I touched something they told me not to touch it because I had Ebola, since I was from Africa. (...) My classmates, when there was group work, always excluded me, they never touched my things, they didn't take my paper, they threw it on the ground. One of the moments that hurt me the most was when my companions took the broom and threw it at me, saying: 'Clean up, you are dirty'. (P. 2-15)<sup>1</sup>

Through stigmatization, the girls' words evoke the negative forms of recognition identified by Honneth (2002a; 2002b).

Even when I was in primary school I was teased (...) Then in fourth and fifth grade my classmates also started to tease me, so everyone teased me, just

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<sup>1</sup>The identifying terms of the young female interviewees included in this work have been replaced by acronyms known only to the researchers. The identification code refers to the school to which the interviewee belongs (e.g. P.) and the number to the word turn assigned in the interview transcript.

because I was a bit curvy, I was a bit overweight. They were always teasing me about that. Even in middle school (...) they used to tease me and make comments like ‘look at that whale’, things like that. (M. 1-10)

### **3.2 The denial of recognition: the “elemental” forms of contempt (*Mißachtung*) among female peers**

The three negative forms corresponding to the three positive models of recognition-love-friendship, esteem-social solidarity, and rights are what Honneth calls the three elementary forms of contempt (*Mißachtung*) of the human being and his dignity, which involve the experience of humiliation (Honneth2002a; 2002b). These are: the denial of love and friendship (physical and psychological abuse), the denial of social esteem and solidarity, and the denial of the rights of the other. The narratives collected from the girls highlight how bullying moves along the negative line of misrecognition to its extreme form, contempt.

To describe bullying, I would say it is a form of humiliation in which a subject is targeted by one or more individuals who make the victim feel uncomfortable through humiliation, and, perhaps, even leading to the subject’s death if the situation escalates. (M. 2-40)

## **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In the present work, the collected data are interpreted through the constructs of social stigma and recognition. The analysis (through the CCM) revealed that there are not only shadows (manipulation, competition, destructiveness) in the bullying phenomenon, but also lights(complicity, support, friendship).

### **4.1 Shadows of Adolescence Between Social Stigma and the Need for Recognition**

The main shadows emerging from the girls’ words tell of significant exposure to psychological violence, in which a key role is played by the ‘weight of words’, used by the ‘bullies’ to stigmatize, humiliate, marginalize.

Exposure to these forms of attacks generates in the target-victims the emergence or growth of negative emotions towards themselves: from guilt to wounds to self-esteem to self-loathing. The outcome of these prolonged attacks and negative perceptions of self can lead to the onset of physical and psychological forms of self-aggression and generate great suffering in them at a time of existence when everything is upside down, and everything in their existence has to be redefined (Dusi, 2024a; 2024b).

The narratives of the girls interviewed highlight how the partners are well aware of this identity, psychological and emotional fragility, and choose 'weapons' intentionally designed to destroy the victim's self-esteem and self-confidence.

#### **4.2 Lights of Adolescence Between Social Stigma and the Need for Recognition**

In adolescence, the desire to be socially accepted is especially vivid, as is very painful the rejection (Crone 2012, Pietropolli Charmet, 2018), but the stories of these girls highlight not only the suffering, but also how facing the shadows sometimes leads to the discovery of one's own value, the importance of authenticity and solidarity in peer relationships. As one young girl states: "The three key words are: 'never give up'" (P. 2- 10). The students also indicated possible ways of intervention to support the 'victims' of bullying from an empowerment perspective. To tackle bullying and the stigmatisation that results from it, it is important to promote female solidarity: 'There should be a common solidarity among women' (E.1 -77). According to their experience, this is an effective tool to counteract bullying and stigma. The interviewees report a sense of isolation and loneliness, in which adults appear to be absent. According to these girls, it is important to foster experiences that help young people discover their own worth, nurture self-esteem, and promote friendly relationships among peers.

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# GIRL-TO-GIRL BULLYING IN IRISH SCHOOLS: A CALL TO INTRA-ACTION & RESPONSE-ABILITY

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Girl-to-Girl bullying drama is high stakes and ‘unsolved’ in an Irish school context. This paper interrogates concepts of intra-action and response-ability, to consider the human materialities at play in girl-to-girl bullying. The paper will draw on examples from qualitative research with preservice and qualified teachers in Ireland, exploring the shaping of posthuman gender and ‘school bullying’ together with human agentic, matter such as place/space, objects and time, as co-constitutive processes. It will explore the key discursive-material agential intra-actions through which ‘girl’ materialize in school- space-being-mattering’s and re-mattering’s with a specific focus on skincare, skirts, sexting and swots. The paper will conclude with recommendations on how a focus on new materialism offers the potential to transform the focus and response to gender bullying in our schools. How does response-ability challenge bullying or actions that lack com-passion, feeling, caring?

intra-action, response-ability, girl-to-girl bullying

## INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed an intensification of bullying discourses, which are often framed around a binary logic of protection (‘victims’ of bullying) and vilification (pathologizing ‘the bully’). It is time to challenge the traditional, essentialist psychological understandings of bullying. We must move away from deficit model of making better anti-bullying policies and support young people who are actively negotiating & challenging gendered & sexualized inequalities in school spaces/places. The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2018 has found that 29.2% of school children in Ireland report having been bullied (29.8% of boys and 30.2% of girls). This figure has increased since 2010 (24.3%). The percentage of girls who have been bullied is higher among girls in the 12–14-year-old category (31.9%, 31.5% of 10–11-year-

olds and 27.2% of 15–17-year-olds).

And while attitudes to school are broadly stable among boys, girls become somewhat less positive about school in general, apparently because of the impact of greater emotional difficulties (Smyth, May 2024). Preliminary analysis suggests this is at least partly related to increased emotional difficulties among girls (Smyth, May 2024).

The emotional impact of being labelled bully/victim is too often passed over in the classroom setting and as a result anxiety, anger and defensiveness surface.

In Ireland, the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science published its report on School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health in 2021. The Department of Education's Action Plan on Bullying and related Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post Primary and identified it as need to be urgently audited and updated in line with current policies on child protection, wellbeing, and Relationships and Sexuality Education, and benchmarked against UNESCO's recently published recommendations on tackling bullying and cyberbullying in schools.

In the report, the Committee makes a total of 28 recommendations. Several key platforms contributed to the report on school bullying, identifying it as a major concern. SpunOut is Ireland's youth information and support platform. The SpunOut submission refers to the findings of a survey of 430 young people, (91% of whom were aged between 14 and 21), conducted in February 2021. Of the respondents who reported being bullied, 54% said it related to weight or appearance.

Jigsaw, the national centre for youth mental health, submission refers to the 2019 My World Survey 2, which was developed by Jigsaw and the University College Dublin, School of Psychology and was completed by 19,000 young people. My World Survey 2 found that 39% of adolescents in secondary school in Ireland have experienced bullying.

Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI) submission refers to research they carried out on adolescents' experiences of sexual harassment. This found that adolescents reported high levels of sexual harassment within their school communities. 63% of respondents disclosed that they were subjected to unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures to or about them in the last year. 23% felt that sexual harassment within school is common, often overlooked or not adequately disciplined by school authorities. 47% stated that they would not know how to report sexual harassment within their school. 36% reported receiving no formal education pertaining to sexual harassment while at

school

The Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) submission refers to a study of 6- to 11-year-olds, 14.3% of children were identified as bullies, 18.2% were identified as victims, and 19% were identified as both bullies and victims.

In this paper, I interrogate the concept of bullying as ultimately more than an individual and intentional acting out of aggression from bully to victim. It is more than a binary bully/victim (typologies of bullies/victims). Bullying reflects the situational & socio-cultural dimensions of power along the lines of gender, class, race and sexuality. It is characterized as a messy landscape which makes navigating it incredibly difficult and challenging for adolescent girls.

### **'BULLYING' IN AN IRISH CONTEXT**

Contemporarily, the Irish Second-level Students' Union (ISSU) identifies types of bullying to include physical bullying, which involves, but is not limited to, hitting, pinching, spitting, vandalizing someone's property or belongings; verbal bullying, which can range from constant passing of comments to unrelenting verbal abuse; exclusionary bullying, which involves deliberately leaving someone out or excluding them specifically; sexual harassment; gesture bullying, which involves threatening or intimidating signs and gestures from one individual or group to another, and prejudicial bullying and racism.

O 'Moore (2014) defines cyberbullying as

...aggressive, willful behavior that is directed by an individual or group against another individual or group with the help of technological devices, primarily mobile/smartphones and the internet.

CyberSafeKids Ireland in their eight annual 'Trends and Usage Report' for 2022-2023 conclude that cyberbullying continues to be a persistent issue that children report as a concern as they navigate the online world. Almost 3 out of 4 children owned a smartphone at age 12 (74%), before they made the transition into secondary school, when ownership rose to 97% for both 12 and 13 years old. Over a quarter (26%) of younger children 8-12 report experiencing something upsetting online, with just under a third saying that they kept it to themselves. 25% of children aged 8-12 told us they had experienced one or more common cyberbullying behaviors. 12-16-year-olds, 40% of whom reported experiencing cyberbullying. Bullying peaked in primary schools at ages 11 and 12, with 28% citing one or more experiences. The numbers were much

higher for the older children but peaked at the age of 15 with 45% of children in this age group citing at least one experience of cyberbullying (CyberSafeKids – Ireland, 2023).

Some examples of bullying include exclusion from chat groups; receiving hurtful messages, threats to share ‘stuff about me’; ‘nasty comments posted about me’; ‘my photo/video posted without permission’ and ‘fake profiles used to target/scare me’ (CyberSafeKids – Ireland, 2023).

There can be no doubt that bullying, in its many guises, represents ‘a pervasive part of young people’s education in Ireland’ which impacts on students’ learning and their wellbeing (An Everyday Lesson: #ENDviolence in Schools).

At the core of the issue, are the realities of young people at school, experiencing exclusion, silence, violence and harassment that manifests in ‘ill-being’, including academic attrition, depression, self-harm, substance mis use and, in some cases, suicide. Recent international research confirms the associations between emotional wellbeing on the one hand and perceived schoolwork pressure, parent-adolescent communication, and bullying victimization (ill-being) was stronger for girls than for boys (de Looze *et. al.*, 2020).

The Irish Primary Principal’s Network (IPPN) caution

...that bullying can cause significant mental health issues including stress, anxiety, depression, psychotic episodes, and suicide as well as physical health issues including an increased risk of heart disease and other illness (Irish Parliamentary Hearings, House of the Oireachtas, 23 Aug 2021).

Barnados children’s charity warns that

...the physical psychosomatic health problems linked to bullying, including headaches, poor appetite, poor sleep, abdominal pain, dizziness, fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, sore throats, and cough and colds (Irish Parliamentary Hearings, House of the Oireachtas, 23 Aug 2021).

In April 2023, Education Minister, Norma Foley TD launched Cineáltas, an action plan on bullying, an implementation plan 2023-2027. The document is grounded in the Department’s Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice and UNESCO’s whole education approach to preventing and addressing bullying and cyberbullying.

Cineáltas has drawn on the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2019, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO’s) Whole Education Approach, as well as national and

international research and best practice to develop a robust strategy that places the student at the centre of the school community and at the centre of national education strategy and policy development.

Chair of the Steering Committee, Dr Noel Purdy Director, Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement, Stranmillis University College, Belfast warns:

We have a collective responsibility as a society to prevent and address bullying behaviour in all its forms. I am also reminded of the challenge set at national level in United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund's (UNICEF) *Innocenti Report Card 7* which states that: The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born (UNICEF, 2007, p. 1).

Yet, despite the growth in policies at a macro level, bullying remains a *taboo* topic. Silences and institutional failures to tackle gendered and sexualized violence in schools endure. Unfortunately, developmental psycho-educational discourses of bullying are accepted both formally and informally. There is urgently a need to engage with how anti-bullying policies operate at the level of school practice and discourse.

### **RETHINKING GIRL TO GIRL BULLYING: LOOKING TOWARD A POST HUMAN LENS**

Posthumanism decentres the 'human' as a separate, bounded, individualistic category to situate the human in relation – with other humans and nonhumans. Cary Wolfe (2016) notes that 'posthuman theory creates new, imaginative ways of understanding relations between lives'. Posthuman approaches offer some new insights which 'extend traditional conceptions about what matters' (Taylor and Fairchild, 2020). This paper argues that post human theory provides new insights into how we see 'girl to girl bullying', intra-actions and material contexts.

Concepts of *intra-action* (Barad, 2007) and *response-ability* (Haraway, 2008, 2016) offer possibility in this discussion of 'girl to girl bullying'. The concept 'intra-action' refers to that which is simultaneously materially & discursively produced. The 'self' comes into being in relation with and through the entanglement of oneself with others, whether human, non-human or environmental. And the concept of 'response-ability' refers not to the paternalistic version or *being* responsible for another which intimates a *power-over*, rather it's a relational process, our ability to respond, to act & how we

might *learn* to be more responsive to others. The hyphen indicates the relationship between the material & the discursive, not privilege one over the other. These key concepts allow us to think about ‘becoming’ in a material-discursive rewriting of subjectivity.

The discourse ‘bullying’ operates to individualize complex gendered power relations and dynamics embedded in children’s school-based cultures. Materialities are always discursively produced and the discursive is always materially produced. This leads us to think about how discourses (*Mean/IT girl*, *SWOT*) function and how they materialize? How do they work? Drawing on the work of *Karan Barad*, and other ‘new materialists’ or ‘material feminists’ – it’s clear that girls ‘intra-action’ with other bodies, human and non-human, produce subjectivities and performative enactments in school-based cultures.

The shaping of posthuman gender reflects a fashioning ‘...that brings the material back in without rejecting the legitimate insights of the linguistic turn’ (Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge*, 7). It is a set of linkages and connections with other bodies and other things. Agency is an enactment, rather than something than someone possesses. Therefore, agential realism ascribes agency to matter as well.

Agential realism creates dynamic and shifting entanglements. It

...provides an understanding of the role of human and non-human, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other socio-material practices (Barad, 2007, p. 23).

Agential realism provides for the intersection of real and socially constructed, co-constitutive processes that include human, agentic, matter (place/space, objects and time) hold relevance. The term diffraction, referring to patterns of difference, ocean waves passing through an opening & spread differently offers possibilities within discourse around bullying. Fundamentally, school bullying is shaped by entanglements of discourses, places, materialities, embodied practices that are all inter-connected within the school landscape. Culture, class, race/ethnicity and other axes of identity & power and (gender-) normative behaviors regarding friendship, conflict, and bullying all inscribe the everyday and process heterosexual identity construction.

## **WHAT ARE THE KEY DISCURSIVE-MATERIAL AGENTIAL INTRA-ACTIONS THROUGH WHICH 'GIRL' MATERIALIZES IN SCHOOL- SPACE-BEING-MATTERING'S AND RE-MATTERING'S?**

Primary data collection was drawn from research where the key aim, was to examine the impact of the University College Cork, Professional Masters of Education programme and master's level qualification on the development of pre-service post-primary teachers. Together with data that emerged from a 'body image' research module on an undergraduate programme qualification on the development of pre-service post-primary teachers. Overall, the research sought to understand the experiences and perceptions of both the graduates of the programme and the school principals of the schools in which students undertake their professional placement component and engage with their primary research projects. Ethics are guided by the School of Education Research Ethics (SERE), UCC. Themes that intersect with bullying appear sprinkled throughout many of the transcripts. Like Braun, I draw on this rich yet 'accidental data' (2011, p. 276). The analyses point to five main themes that specifically frame this paper – these themes resonate with me and hold 'an affective force' (McLure, 2013). The themes are are 'mean girl'/'kind girl' discourse; swot; skincare; skirts; social media and sexting.

### **Swots – 'mean girl'/'kind girl' Discourse**

Two conflicting discourses of girlhood emerge: good girls are kind, should be friends as per the traditional school ethos. The 'mean girl' discourse (Ringrose, 2006) is strikingly at odds with the 'nice girl' narratives. Rather girls are naturally bitchy and mean. This discourse offers a complex and confusing set of ideals for girls to negotiate.

Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) touch on concepts on 'bitchiness' & 'meanness' as expected counterpoints to female 'niceness'.

My all-girl School Placement (SP) environment was naturally 'bitchy' and very different to my 'all-boys' school placement experience (Eliza, 2024).

Girls are sneaky... they know all about you and then use the information against you when they need to (Maud, 2024).

Mean girl or secondary school attitude (Eliza, 2024).

Meanness is intricately entangled in performing normative subject position of girl. The mean -nice binary within femininity is certainly evident and powerful

but it leads us to question the social and cultural expectations of *niceness* at all costs?

### **SWOT**

A 'swot' refers to a person who studies very hard and is not interested in other things (Collins Dictionary). To label a classmate or colleague a SWOT serves to subjectify into SWOT position. This is a form of policing.

Data shows the negotiation of power hierarchies among girls that tend not to be categorized as bullying and are passed over in the classroom and playground. However, they illustrate how competition emerges amongst girls. For example, a PST tells me

Labels are seen quite frequently in school. What I have noticed, in an all-girls school is that students will not call the students a name to their face, but they will say it to their friends subtly in the class and laugh about it. Often the cliquy groups frown upon people answering questions in class or studying as it is seen as 'uncool'.

This would happen a lot in my fourth year class, the cliquy group in the class would always make comments about the quieter girls answering or trying in the class, for example, 'oh here she goes again', but they would not really say it to the other student, instead they would say it amongst themselves, but just loud enough so the other student would hear and know that it is about them (Lily, 2024).

The PST continues, it

...seems to be a trend in general that studying, doing your homework and trying to do well at school is laughed at. I have seen it myself in my own...classes, that students who are in the 'popular group' actually lie about how much study they do so as not to be labelled a 'SWOT', but then they do well in their tests, and they too keep this a secret, or play it down to their friends, when it is something that they should be proud of (Lily, 2024).

... the students who are in the 'popular group' and who are also smart and ambitious at school try to downplay it, which is quite sad... (Lily, 2024).

The vignettes show girls as socially sanctioned to express meanness. It's subtle and ambiguous. These typical modes of intersubjectivity, of negotiated power hierarchies among girls are rarely 'called out' as bullying. There is little questioning of these practices unless they transgress beyond the classroom.



## Skincare

Skincare is central to the intra-active process through which the bullying phenomena around gender and sexuality materialize. Social media influencers play a huge role in the promotion of specific skincare trends and skincare routines. Snap Chat, Tik Tok, Instagram, WhatsApp are listed as the most used social media amongst sixty-one Irish students (all-girls school), aged 12-16 years old' (Lily, 2024). Cybersafe confirms that girls used image-focused apps more than boys. These include Instagram (13%) and BeReal (9%)' (Cybersafekids, 2023). These represent forms of image management for girls who are especially pertinent to the demands of post-feminist culture, in which women's self-esteem and confidence are closely linked with physical attractiveness (Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, 2007). Against this backdrop, skincare cannot be dismissed in importance as material, dynamic force agents in contemporary feminist research.

PST Lily notes

I have noticed the popularity of tan, nails and make-up in school since I started in September. From about second year up, quite a lot of students come into school every day with a full face of makeup: foundation, eye-shadow, lipstick, fake eyelashes (Lily, 2024).

Another PST comments:

The girls wear tan at all costs... [they often] arrive in blotchy tan instead of tights (Eliza, 2024).

And,

There is huge competition between them [the girls who are] ... setting the trends...There are certain students who I have never seen without a full face of make-up and tan in school...it seems there has been a standard created in the school and students now feel pressure to conform to this standard. Certain students always conform to these standards, they always have a full face of makeup on, tan, eyelash extensions, nails and hair is always perfectly done (Lily, 2024).

It seems that it is normative for girls to position themselves and others in sexual hierarchies. What is significant is how sexual competition and shaming emerges among girls. This invariably creates conditions where bullying flourishes.

## Skirts

The skirt has agentic force, intra – acting with the body in spacetime matters. In Ireland the ‘skirt’ was historically closely linked to class, race and culturally specific notions of feminine sexual respectability. In 1926 readers of *Irish Monthly* were warned that ‘modern girls’ needed ‘refinement’, given their unashamed ‘vulgarity’,

The modern girl (...) smokes like a chimney (...) She talks loudly (...) she speaks without the slightest reserve (...) she flings herself into the chair and throws one knee over the other, which, owing to the brevity of the skirt, is neither aesthetic nor edifying. She goes into a public restaurant and finishes up with ‘something’ to wash down her ‘smoke’ (...) She gloats over sensational, emotional, erotic novels, of which...after reading them, you had better go and wash yourself seven times in the Jordan (...) She is either incapable or unwilling to help her mother in the management of the house (...) The question of female costume has reached its nadir in women’s bathing and athletic dress, which is simply revolting, a gross outrage of decent society. It is paganism, pure and simple, naked and unashamed, reminding us of Eve and her figleaves! (Rutherford, 2018).

A history of control over girls and women’s bodies is represented in an apparatus of being *ladylike*. Clothing and uniform specifically were powerfully enforced in schools via rules that positioned girls in specific ways along gender, class and sexualised expectations of respectability (Rutherford, 2015).

School skirts are a material reality that intersect with historical dualisms. Contemporarily, the skirt presents students with an identity dilemma: ‘some students don’t bother changing their skirt... some roll them up, others won’t’ (Maud, 2024). Whilst, ‘some girls have a fear of exposing their skin, for fear of negative bodily comment rejection’ (Maud, 2024).

Another PSTs notes that

They [the girls] are hyper-aware of their image... competition between them around whose skirt is the shortest...who is setting the trend...who are the cool girls’...The length of a student’s skirt in a way can indicate what ‘class’ they fall into, in the social ranks of the school

Skirts and skirt length are an issue in school. Students are constantly rolling up their skirts and making them extremely short and because there is a slit in the skirt, it gives the illusion of being even shorter

Even though teachers are constantly policing the issue of skirts being very short, students continue to roll them up... (Lily, 2024).

There can be no doubt that skirts represent the ultimate material object that can be stylized and embedded with meanings for girls in schools. Skirts implicate significant agential force upon the wearer. Its location transforms a girl's body. Skirts cannot be dismissed in importance as material, dynamic force agents in feminist research on girl-to-girl bullying.

### **Social Media & Sexting**

Digitally circulated media, including sexting or the exchanging of nude, semi-nude, or sexually suggestive images and texts of and between peers via mobile phones or on social network sites, is a normalized practice in peer cultures. It offers a space that can lead to bullying for some individuals. School Principal, James notes that because of social media 'the problems now that we are dealing with are off -the-scale compared to what they were... (SP, James, September 2023).

Cybersafe kids illustrate that girls posted videos of themselves online more than boys and this became even more pronounced for 12-16 year olds, with 1 in 2 girls reporting that they had posted. When online girls were more likely than boys to indicate negative feelings, including "jealous of others", "afraid", "anxious", "inadequate", "like I'm missing out" (Beresford et al., 2023).

'Harmful content can sometimes be distributed in large messaging groups and once seen by group members, it can't be unseen' (Beresford et al., 2023). Snap Chat, for example, represents a potential weapon to spread rumors quickly and does not involve face-to-face confrontation. It provides a space for ambiguous acts such as tagging, posting unflattering photos, and posting photos at an event from which somebody had been excluded. The features of such as defriending, blocking, emoticons, tagging, sharing and strike rates are all designed to be ambiguous.

Online spaces represent sites of control, surveillance and social policing by and among young people. Disrupting control and power via an emphasis on digital sexual ethics & rights to one's body are necessary to reduce risk and harm (Setty, 2019). As one School Principal notes:

I just think our younger generations have had such wonderful exposures that we haven't had but equally then they will see far greater knocks because of the speed of the What's App, the speed of the social media...they are not prepared sometimes for the knock that can come and, while you can't prepare them for every incident, maybe some [resilience] awareness raising [is what is needed] (SP, Edith, November 2023).

## **A CALL TO INTRA-ACTION**

This paper makes a case for a focus on new materialism as it offers the potential to transform the focus and response to gender bullying in our schools. As teacher educators, we need to expand our research in profound ways that revalues matter as well as discourse. We need to explore how these concepts change the analysis of bullying, a critical educational model. Bullying phenomena constitutes more than discourse rather incorporates powerful agentic forces that include skincare or skirt, social media, classrooms, school corridors, school bathrooms, school playgrounds – words, silences, texts, snaps, sounds, smells and feelings, they ALL matter. These concepts are intricately overlapping and co constitutive. Bullying within this frame can be seen as emerging as we materialize it – discursive and material agents intra-act in *space-time- matterings*.

If we shift the focus and show how the individual, the human agent is only one part of the bullying drama. We move away from the ‘conscious, willful human master’ towards a broader landscape that combines *intra-acting* material and ‘discursive actants’. We are materializations entangled in other materializations; we happen in our mattering. So, the agentic force of skirts, skincare, tan, make-up, lashes, all need to be taken into consideration in understanding instances of sexual shaming and positioning of girls. If we attend to the intra-actions of non-human agents, materialities and discourses we can create awareness around ethics necessary to expose and deal with bullying phenomenon and bullying events in schools.

## **A CALL TO ‘RESPONSE-ABILITY’**

This is not a call to the paternalistic version of *being* responsible for another, intimates a *power-over*, rather it’s a relational process, our ability to respond, to act and how we might learn, to care, to be more responsive to others. As Haraway puts it, it is in getting to know detailed relationships that the ability to respond emerges (Haraway, 2016).

Response-ability as a concept is seen as being potentiated by sensibilities and practices such as attentiveness, politeness and curiosity, rendering each other capable, openness to encounter, and iteration or *on-going-ness* (Bozalek, 2023). This concept allows us the potential to address the intersectional complexities at play in girl-to-girl bullying. This type of bullying cannot be in a specific individual, nor a specific event, place or time. It is not straightforward or easily apprehended. We must attend to the intra-actions of non-human agents,

materialities and discourses to produce what becomes known as caring and ethical responses to bullying phenomenon and episodes.

A ‘whole education’ approach is needed (UNESCO, 2023). It is incumbent upon policymakers, initial teacher education (ITE) providers and schools to develop their understandings of how issues of gender and sexual violence continue to underpin school cultures. So, how could compassion, feeling, caring pedagogies and ethical practices challenge and deconstruct bullying and regulative discourses and recognize the material forces that intra-act with the discourse?

Seeing caring pedagogies as intra-active (Barad, 2007) or intra- woven ensures in Haraway’s term ‘multispecies flourishing’ (2026) and ultimately transformative classroom experiences. By mapping relationality rather than a binary, we can expose the complex entanglements at play in G2G bullying. We begin to understand force relations differently and move from a deficit model to support young people, and preservice teachers to challenge gender and sexual inequalities.

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# A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON BULLYING. FINDINGS FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY

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Bullying represents a global issue and a fundamental violation of human rights. UNESCO estimates that one in three students is a victim of bullying. The prevalence of this phenomenon highlights the importance of continuing to study its modes of expression and strategies for counteraction. While male bullying has been extensively researched, female bullying has received less attention, possibly because it is less visible and, in some respects, more complex than male bullying, involving intricate, cross-sectional, and multidimensional interactions. To gain a better understanding of the gender dynamics underlying bullying and to deepen the knowledge of female bullying, a national project was conducted, involving multidisciplinary research units from six Italian universities and adopting a mixed-method research design. The purpose of this contribution is to present the results of the quantitative study regarding the assessment of the extent and characteristics of bullying across the national territory, with an exploration of potential gender differences in the interpretation of the phenomenon.

female bullying; gender perspective; secondary school; bully survey

## INTRODUCTION

Bullying, traditionally defined as unwanted aggressive behaviour, repeated over time and characterised by a real or perceived power imbalance between perpetrators and victims (Olweus, 1996), is both a global issue and a violation of human rights (Greene, 2006).

According to UNESCO (2019), one in three students worldwide experiences bullying. In Italy, estimates suggest that the prevalence of bullying ranges from 5% to 25%, depending on the measurement tools, population, cut-off criteria, and timeframes considered, while cyberbullying affects between 5% and 19% of the adolescent population (Menesini et al., 2017). The ISTAT survey (2015)

indicates that 50% of adolescents aged 11 to 17 report experiencing offensive or violent behaviour from their peers, with 19.8% being recurrent victims (at least once a month). The third monitoring report on bullying and cyberbullying in Italian schools (Elisa Platform, for the academic year 2022/23<sup>1</sup>) highlights an increasing trend in systematic face-to-face bullying, with 25.3% of students reporting victimisation (21% occasionally, 4.3% systematically) and 7.9% experiencing cyberbullying (6.6% occasionally, 1.3% systematically).

These figures emphasise the importance of ongoing research into the modes of expression and strategies for preventing and addressing bullying. While male bullying has been extensively examined, female bullying remains less visible and, in some aspects, more complex, involving relational, cross-sectional, and multidimensional interactions (De Vita, 2021; De Vita & Burgio, 2023; Owens et al., 2000; Varjas et al., 2008).

The literature suggests that female bullying is primarily relational (Espelage et al., 2004), predominantly intra-gender (Duncan, 1999; Mavin et al., 2014), and has significant psychological consequences, including depression, anxiety, and an increased risk of self-harm and suicidality (Baier et al., 2019; Hay & Meldrum, 2010; Kim et al., 2019).

To better understand the gender dynamics underlying bullying and to deepen the knowledge of female bullying, a national project was conducted. This paper presents the quantitative findings, focusing on the prevalence and characteristics of bullying in Italy and offering insights into gender-specific differences in the interpretation of this phenomenon.

## 1. NATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT

The national survey was conducted between 2020 and 2022, involving multidisciplinary research units from six Italian universities<sup>2</sup>. The research had three main objectives: to achieve a more in-depth understanding of female bullying; to investigate the incidence of female bullying compared to male bullying in terms of frequency and intensity in Italy; and to develop intervention and prevention strategies in the participating schools, alongside launching an awareness campaign (Batini et al., 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.piattaformaelisa.it/risultati-monitoraggio-a-s-2022-2023>

<sup>2</sup> University of Verona (A. De Vita, F. Vittori, P. Dusi, M.G. Landuzzi, L. Ghirrotto), University of Enna "Kore" (G. Burgio, S.R. Emmanuele, S. Peroni, A. Di Lisi), University of Perugia (F. Batini, I.D.M. Scierri), University of Genoa (A. Traverso, M.G. Gibellini), University of Foggia (A.G. Lopez, R. Caso, A. Altamura, A. Disalvo), University of Milano-Bicocca (S. Magaraggia, M.G. Gambardella, B. Fiore, A. Dordoni).

The quantitative data collection aimed to achieve the following objectives: to identify the prevalence of bullying at the national level and its characteristics; to explore gender differences related to the phenomenon; to compare the various forms and specificities of bullying across different urban contexts, identifying significant differences between the cities studied; to contribute, together with the qualitative part, to understanding the perceptions and experiences of students regarding this phenomenon.

A mixed-methods research design was employed to achieve these objectives. The target population consisted of students attending the first two years of upper secondary school in the cities of Arezzo, Foggia, Palermo, Perugia, and Verona, selected as sample cities. The sampling strategy was non-probabilistic, and the sample included girls and boys who, after the schools' preliminary agreement to participate in the project, volunteered to complete the questionnaire.

For the quantitative part of the research, the *Bullying Survey* questionnaire (Swearer, 2001) was used, involving 2,481 students with a mean age of 14.8 years ( $SD = 0.73$ ). Of the participants, 64.3% were *female*, 35.0% were *male*, and 0.7% identified as *other*. Of these students, 44.0% were in their first year of secondary school, while 56.0% were in their second year.

## **2. RESULTS**

### **2.1. Prevalence of School Bullying**

The first question in each of the initial three sections of the questionnaire asked participants whether they had been victims, bystanders, or perpetrators of bullying. In response to the question, *Have you been a victim of bullying in the last 12 months?*, 7.4% of participants answered Yes.

To examine gender differences in bullying, a gender-based analysis was conducted: 8.6% of girls identified as victims of bullying, compared to 4.4% of boys ( $\chi^2(1) = 15.075$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $V = 0.078$ ).

Regarding the role of bystanders, 26.6% of the sample reported witnessing another student being bullied, with no significant gender differences.

In the section focused on perpetrators of bullying, 2.8% of participants admitted to having bullied others, again with no statistically significant differences between genders. However, a slightly higher percentage of boys identified as perpetrators compared to girls (3.2% vs. 2.6%).

At the end of the questionnaire, seven additional items were included to

describe different types of bullying behaviours. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they had experienced these acts over the past 12 months. These questions provided more detailed insights beyond the general query, *Have you been a victim of bullying in the last 12 months?*, and allowed for more specific responses.

A combined analysis of the responses enabled the calculation of the prevalence of systematic bullying (defined as bullying experienced frequently over a year), which was found to be 8.4% (6.1% for boys and 9.6% for girls) ( $\chi^2(1) = 9.172$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $V = 0.061$ ). Although these percentages are not substantially higher than those of participants who explicitly identified as victims, they remain notably greater.

In addition to assessing systematic bullying, the items also allowed for the calculation of occasional bullying, defined as infrequent but still present occurrences, which affected 45.3% of respondents (44.6% of boys and 45.7% of girls) ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.270$ ,  $p = 0.603$ ,  $V = 0.010$ ).

Regarding the frequency of bullying incidents, victims most commonly reported experiencing them *Once or more times a month*. Girls reported a higher frequency of victimisation compared to boys, both as victims (35.0% of girls vs. 10.5% of boys reported being bullied once or more times a week) and as bystanders (19.0% of girls vs. 9.1% of boys reported witnessing bullying incidents multiple times a day).

## **2.2. Characteristics of Bullying and Gender Differences**

Regarding the locations where bullying incidents occur, it is noteworthy that the most frequently mentioned physical space for such episodes is the classroom (67.4%). However, virtual spaces (cyberbullying) surpass physical spaces, with 76.6% of respondents reporting online bullying. No significant gender differences were found in relation to the locations of bullying.

Concerning the perpetrators, bullying is predominantly carried out by peers from the same school year (Fig. 1).

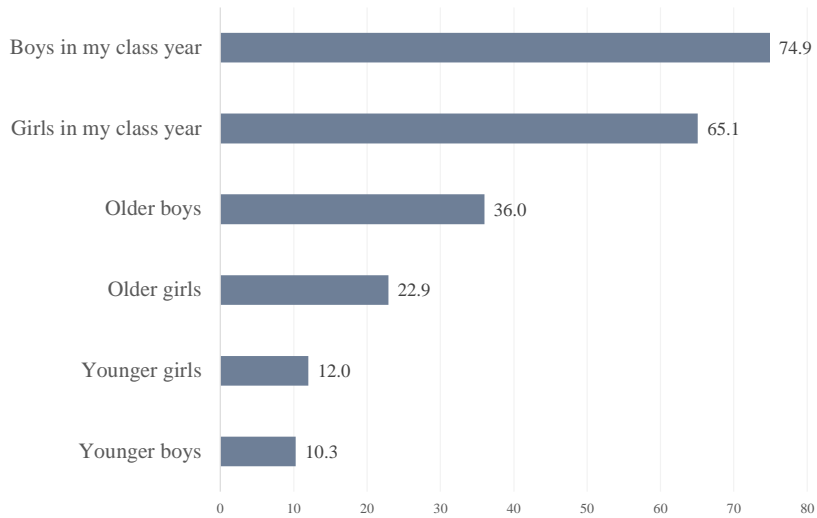
A gender-based analysis reveals that bullying is primarily an intra-gender phenomenon: boys tend to bully male peers, while girls are mostly victimised by other girls. However, a substantial proportion of girls also report being targeted by boys (Fig. 2).

Verbal and relational bullying are the most common forms, whereas physical bullying is the least frequent (Fig. 3).

Verbal and relational forms are more prevalent among girls (Fig. 4). The only

form reported more frequently by boys is pranking (40.7% vs. 7.2% among girls).

Fig. 1. Perpetrators of Bullying (Aggregate Responses from Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators;



Percentage Data; n = 911)

Fig. 2. Comparison Between Genders in Identifying Perpetrators of Bullying (Percentage Data; Female, n = 137; Male, n = 38; \*p <.05, \*\*p <.01, \*\*\*p <.001)

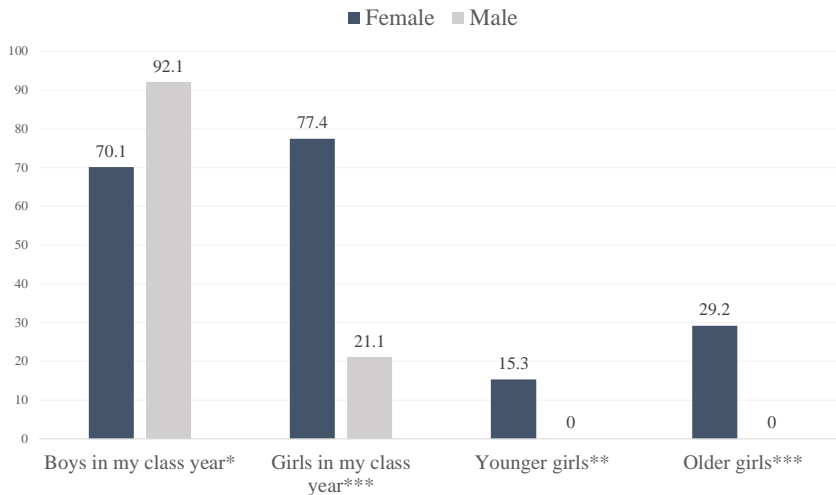


Fig. 3. Forms of Bullying Experienced as Victims (Percentage Data; n = 180)

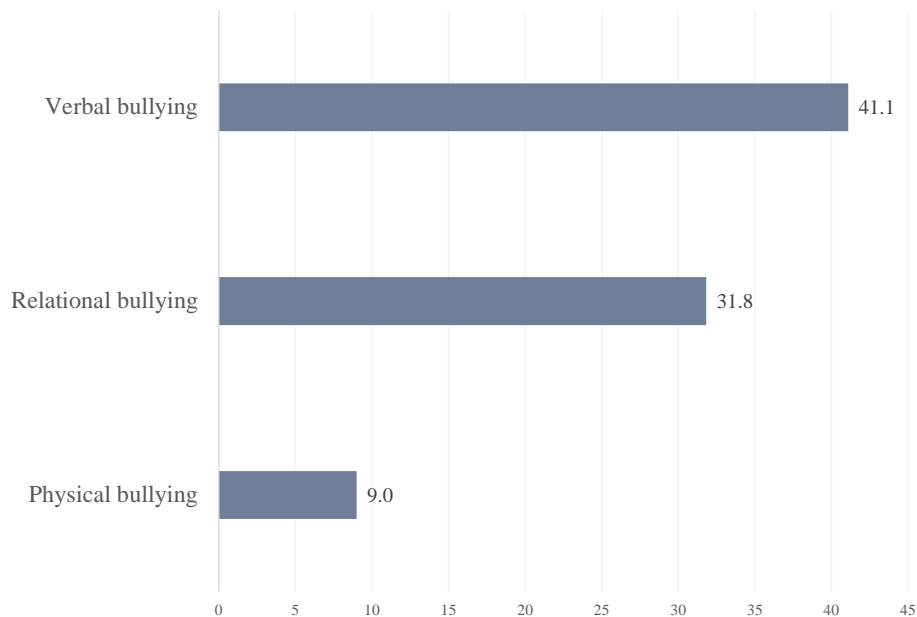
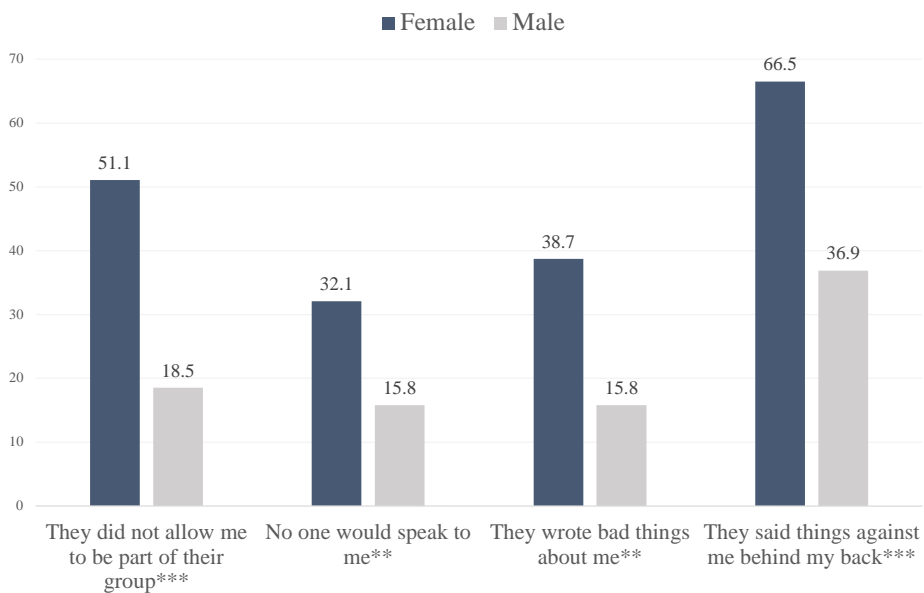


Fig. 4. Comparison Between Genders in Verbal and Relational Form of Bullying Experienced as Victims (Percentage Data; Female, n = 137; Male, n = 38; \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001)



In terms of the reasons attributed to bullying, as reported by victims, bystanders, and perpetrators, the three most frequently cited reasons are: *Being clumsy*, *The way of dressing*, and *The way of speaking*. Certain reasons are reported more frequently by girls, specifically: *They think I am fat* (48.2% vs. 23.7% for boys), *Because of the clothes I wear* (51.1% vs. 28.9%), and *Because I am different* (48.9% vs. 23.7%).

Another critical aspect to highlight is the impact of bullying. Overall, the most frequently reported consequence is *Feeling sad*, with female victims and bystanders perceiving the negative consequences more intensely than their male counterparts. For instance, 75.1% of female victims reported *Feeling sad*, compared to 31.6% of male victims.

With regard to the school's response, only 26.5% of victims reported that teachers and school staff were aware of the bullying incidents, and 25.4% believed that the school staff handled the situation inadequately.

Finally, regarding attitudes towards bullying, the majority of respondents condemn bullying. However, this attitude is more pronounced among girls. Specifically, girls show a greater capacity for empathy towards bullying victims compared to boys (e.g., *I feel sorry for the victims of bullying*, 96.4% vs 92.8%; *Bullies harm others*, 92.1% vs 89.2%). Girls are also more likely to recognise bullying as a problem (88.8% vs 82.8%) and tend to disapprove of bullies more than boys (93.7% vs 90.9%). On the other hand, boys demonstrate a greater understanding of the motivations behind bullying behaviour compared to girls (31.6% vs 24.7%).

### 3. DISCUSSIONS

The data collected allow for the achievement of the study's objectives and contribute to expanding knowledge on the prevalence and characteristics of bullying phenomena in the national context. First, the analysis reveals an incidence of 8.4% for systematic bullying (6.1% among boys and 9.6% among girls) and 45.3% for occasional bullying (44.6% among boys and 45.7% among girls). The characteristics of bullying acts confirm findings established in the literature, particularly with regard to bullying:

- It primarily occurs in classrooms and online;
- It takes place within peer groups;
- It is predominantly an intra-gender phenomenon;
- It manifests mainly verbally and in relational dynamics;
- It remains a phenomenon that is still "invisible" to the adults involved.

Regarding gender differences in bullying, the research has revealed several notable disparities, including:

- Girls more frequently identify as victims of bullying;
- Girls report a higher frequency of bullying acts, both as victims and as bystanders;
- Girls report experiencing verbal and relational bullying to a greater extent than boys;
- “Pranking” is the only form of bullying more commonly reported among boys;
- Reasons linked to aesthetic aspects are more prevalent among girls (e.g., being overweight or clothing);
- Girls, both as victims and as bystanders, perceive the negative consequences of bullying more strongly than boys;
- Girls show greater empathy and concern for victims of bullying and are more disapproving of bullies. Boys, on the other hand, tend to understand and tolerate bullies to a greater extent than girls.

When interpreting the results, the self-report nature of the questionnaire must be considered, highlighting the perceptual nature of the bullying acts examined here. In this regard, particularly among boys, there may be a lower tendency to recognise themselves as victims, rather than a lower incidence of the phenomenon. Conversely, girls may have a greater ability to “see” and recognise bullying in its various forms, while boys may tend to minimise the acts as simple “pranks” and recognise bullying primarily as physical dominance.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Despite certain limitations, primarily stemming from the non-probabilistic nature of the sample, the study offers significant contributions to bullying research, with a particular focus on the gendered aspects of the phenomenon. It reaffirms the relevance of bullying and underscores the distinct perspectives of girls, highlighting the importance of adopting a gender-sensitive approach in both studying and addressing the issue. In light of these insights into the dynamics of bullying, including a gendered perspective, the development of co-constructed, shared prevention and intervention strategies is recommended. These strategies should incorporate the viewpoints of all stakeholders and foster a safer, more inclusive school environment for everyone.



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# BRIDGING GENDER GAPS IN STEM EMPLOYMENT: INSIGHTS FROM LA SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

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The research project at Sapienza University of Rome, conducted by the UNI.CO research group, investigates the transition of STEM graduates into the workforce, integrating administrative university career data and compulsory communications from the Ministry of Labor. This innovative approach, diverging from traditional interview-based research, provides a diachronic view of the entire target population's employment contracts. Focusing on STEM disciplines' crucial role in contemporary society's technological and socio-economic advancements, the study aims to evaluate the alignment and impact of STEM education on job market demands. The target population includes approximately 70,000 graduates from 2008 to 2019, analyzed for contract types, professional qualifications, and employment duration. The research also explores the effect of employment during university studies on academic experience and subsequent job trajectories. Additionally, it incorporates an analysis of gender disparities, aiming to uncover potential differences in the career outcomes of male and female graduates, addressing the gender gap as a crucial factor in employability and labor market integration. Expected results aim to offer insights into improving STEM graduates' employability, addressing the mismatch between academic achievements and labor market valorization, thus contributing to educational and employment policy formulation

STEM; Workforce transition; Employment; Gender gap

## INTRODUCTION

This work, carried out by the research group of the *Laboratorio sulla Transizione al Lavoro*, is part of the research stream of the Uni.Co. group at Sapienza University of Rome. For over a decade, this group has developed a research model on labor market transition processes based on the integration of

university administrative data on academic careers and data from the *Comunicazioni Obbligatorie* (mandatory notifications) of the Ministry of Labor.

The Uni.Co. model relies on the integration of selected information from databases on student careers and mandatory notifications. This integration involves a complex process of data cleaning and anonymization, resulting in the construction of two matrices for analysis: the “contracts” matrix, which catalogs and analyzes the various types of employment contracts, considering aspects such as duration, type (subordinate, quasi-subordinate, etc.), and employment sector; and the “graduates” matrix, which collects demographic data, academic paths, and employment outcomes. These matrices provide a comprehensive and detailed view of employment dynamics and contractual characteristics, highlighting trends over time and differences in labor market transition pathways among different groups of graduates.

However, some limitations of the adopted approach are worth noting. The main limitation is that the employment data only cover subordinate and quasi-subordinate work. Consequently, data on self-employment, freelance work, scholarships, research grants, and employment abroad (if contracts are not signed in Italy) are excluded from our analysis.

In this specific study, we aim to focus on the analysis of gender differences, particularly within STEM disciplines. The choice to emphasize STEM fields stems from the persistent gender disparities observed in these areas, both in terms of academic enrollment and subsequent employment opportunities. By leveraging the Uni.Co. model, we will examine how these disparities manifest in the transition to the labor market, taking into account key variables such as contract type, employment sector, and time to job placement.

Our analysis will pay special attention to identifying patterns that highlight the challenges faced by women in STEM, including potential barriers to accessing stable and high-quality employment. Additionally, we will explore whether certain academic and demographic factors can help mitigate these disparities or, conversely, exacerbate them. This gender-focused lens allows us to contribute to the broader debate on how to promote more equitable access to and outcomes within the labor market for graduates in traditionally male-dominated fields.

## **1. UNI.CO POPULATION AND TARGET POPULATION**

Our research focuses on graduates from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) degree programs at Sapienza University. The

identification of STEM degree programs was based on the classifications provided by Sapienza’s INFOSTUD system.

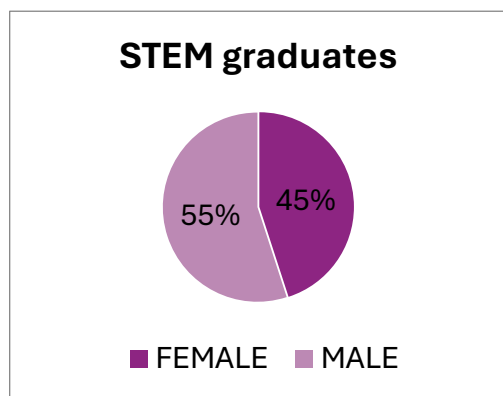
Graduates in STEM disciplines amount to 60,625 individuals, of which 31,960 completed bachelor’s degrees, 22,407 completed master’s degrees, and 6,285 completed single-cycle degrees. The gender distribution, presented in Table 2, reveals a shift in representation: women, who constitute 61% of the entire graduate population, account for only 45% of STEM graduates, while men increase their representation from 39% to 55%.

Sapienza University maintains the grouping of degree programs into faculties, and STEM degree programs are offered in 7 out of the university’s 11 faculties (Table 3). These programs are predominantly concentrated in four faculties, which account for 96.8% of all STEM graduates.

For the purpose of analyzing labor market transition pathways, we have decided to exclude bachelor’s degree graduates. This is because their transition to the labor market is significantly influenced by whether they continue their studies, a factor that is not fully traceable at present. There is a risk of classifying as unemployed those individuals who continue their education at institutions outside Sapienza.

The target population of this study, therefore, consists of all Sapienza University graduates who have obtained a Master’s or single-cycle degree in STEM disciplines under the 509 and 270 academic regulations. This population comprises 28,665 graduates.

Figure 1 – Gender Distribution of STEM Graduates



## **2. EMPLOYMENT INDEX AND COHERENCE INDEX**

To evaluate the labor market transition of master's degree graduates, we used two indicators. The first, the employment index, calculates the percentage of working days net of overlaps within the observed period. This indicator allows for the comparison of individuals observed over very different timeframes by standardizing the measurement. The second indicator, the coherence index, calculates the number of working days aligned with the field of study of the master's degree, relative to the observed period.

The data analysis highlights a more favorable transition for STEM graduates. The average employment index for STEM graduates is nine points higher than that of graduates from other fields, while the coherence index is a significant 24 points higher. The median employment index for STEM graduates exceeds that of non-STEM graduates by 12 points, while the median coherence index for non-STEM graduates is 0 compared to 53 for STEM graduates.

A different trend is observed when examining the modal values. For the employment index, the mode among non-STEM graduates is 100, compared to 98 for STEM graduates. However, when it comes to the coherence index, the mode for non-STEM graduates is 0, while for STEM graduates, it reaches 100.

In the STEM field, male graduates with grades between 90 and 99 show the highest employment index (46.7%) in the top range of master's graduates working 67–100% of the time. Female graduates with grades between 80 and 89 follow closely with 45.4%.

Outside of STEM programs, the highest employment percentages in the top range are observed among male graduates with grades between 90 and 99 and 100, at 46.7% and 44.0%, respectively. Female graduates with grades of 100 reach 36.5% in the top employment range.

In STEM programs, male graduates with a high school diploma grade of 100/100 exhibit the highest percentage in the high coherence range, at 19.4%, while female graduates with the same grade show 14.4%.

In non-STEM fields, the high coherence range is also led by male graduates with a diploma grade of 100, at 7.8%, whereas female graduates with the same grade achieve 5.6% in the high coherence range.

Overall, in STEM programs, both the employment and coherence indices tend to increase with higher grades in both diploma and degree, especially among male graduates.

Table 1 – Sapienza Master’s Graduates 2008-2018: Comparison by Categories Between Coherence Index and Degree Grade

Degree Grade	Employment Index 67-100%		Coherence Index 67-100%	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Up to 95	29,2%	40,1%	6,7%	11,5%
96-104	30,5%	41,8%	9,1%	14,1%
105-109	30,2%	43,0%	10,2%	16,0%
110	28,6%	39,7%	10,3%	16,2

### Employment Index

Among graduates with a degree grade of 110, the percentage in the high employment range (34–66%) is 37% for both STEM and non-STEM programs. This stable result does not reflect an increase with higher grades.

Graduates with grades from 105 to 109 and 96 to 104 in STEM programs show a higher percentage in the high employment range, at 44% and 45%, respectively. This highlights that a high grade is generally associated with better labor market integration in STEM fields.

### Coherence Index

Graduates with grades from 96 to 104 in STEM programs achieve 17% in the high coherence range, the highest among the categories, indicating that an excellent grade can be associated with greater alignment between studies and employment.

Despite high grades, graduates with a grade of 110 in STEM programs reach only 15% in the high coherence range. This result is slightly lower than those with slightly lower grades (96–104 and 105–109), suggesting that achieving the highest grade does not necessarily guarantee the best match between education and employment.

We can observe that, despite higher grades, there is no consistent increase in either the employment or coherence indices for the highest grades, particularly for a grade of 110.

The maintenance of similar or lower percentages of coherence and employment for the highest grades may reflect market dynamics or sector-specific characteristics that do not exclusively value academic excellence but instead require additional skills or experiences.

Table 2 – Sapienza Master’s Graduates 2008-2018: Comparison by Categories Between Employment Index and Diploma Grade

Diploma Grade	Employment Index 67-100%		Coherence Index 67-100%	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Only 60/100	20,8%	27,1%	3,7%	6,9%
61-69	22,1%	31,6%	4,7%	9,7%
70-79	25,9%	39,1%	7,4%	13,8%
80-89	26,2%	41,8%	9,2%	16,3%
90-99	31,3%	44,5%	11,3%	17,4%
Only 100/100	32,3%	42,3%	11,9%	18,0%

In the STEM field, male graduates with diploma grades between 90 and 99 show the highest employment index (46.7%) in the top range of master’s graduates working 67–100% of the time. Female graduates with grades between 80 and 89 follow with 45.4%. This indicates that men with higher diploma grades tend to achieve better employment outcomes in STEM fields, while women with slightly lower grades also demonstrate strong results in the same context.

Outside STEM programs, the highest employment percentages in the top range are observed among male graduates with grades between 90 and 99 and 100, at 46.7% and 44.0%, respectively. Female graduates with a grade of 100 reach 36.5% in the high employment range, showing a lower rate compared to their male counterparts.

When it comes to coherence between education and employment, male graduates in STEM programs with a diploma grade of 100/100 exhibit the highest percentage in the high coherence range, at 19.4%, while female graduates with the same grade reach 14.4%. This indicates a gender disparity in how well academic backgrounds align with job roles, even at the highest diploma grades. In non-STEM fields, the high coherence range also sees male graduates with a diploma grade of 100 in the lead, at 7.8%, compared to female graduates with the same grade, who achieve 5.6%. This suggests that coherence between studies and employment is generally lower outside STEM fields, but the gender gap persists in both areas.



### 3. CONCLUSION

The analysis presented highlights persistent gender differences in both employment and coherence indices among Sapienza University master's graduates, particularly in STEM fields. Male graduates consistently show higher percentages in both employment and coherence indices across various grade categories, while female graduates demonstrate lower outcomes despite comparable academic performance. These disparities point to systemic issues that go beyond individual achievements, suggesting the influence of structural barriers and market dynamics that differentially affect men and women in the transition from education to employment.

In STEM fields, male graduates with high grades, especially in diploma scores, achieve better alignment between their studies and employment, as well as higher employment rates in the top range. Conversely, female graduates, even with similarly high grades, often face more challenges in achieving the same levels of employment and coherence. These findings reflect broader societal patterns that underscore the need for targeted interventions to bridge gender gaps, particularly in fields traditionally dominated by men.

It is important to emphasize that this study is part of a broader effort to shed light on gender disparities among university graduates in Italy. While the current project focuses on Sapienza University, it represents only a starting point. In the near future, this initiative will expand to include additional regions, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the gender dynamics affecting graduates across the country.

By incorporating data from diverse geographic and institutional contexts, future studies will provide a richer and more nuanced picture of the factors contributing to gender differences in education-to-employment transitions. This expansion will also help identify best practices and inform policies aimed at promoting equity and inclusion in the labor market, ultimately fostering a more just and balanced society.

Through this ongoing research, we aim to contribute to the academic and public discourse on gender disparities, highlighting the importance of addressing these challenges not only as a matter of fairness but also as a crucial step toward fully leveraging the potential of all graduates in Italy.

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# A CODING WORKSHOP AGAINST GENDER BIAS

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In the STEM disciplines, as in many other areas of society, a strong gender inequality persists, because of the cultural survival of gender bias, that lead girls to believe they are not “suited” to study scientific subjects. To defeat this inequality, which could result in future wage disparities, it is essential to eradicate stereotypes from the early years of education. This is the goal that the comprehensive institute of Laives has set with its Coding workshop. It was organized in vertical continuity between primary and secondary education, using the “job shadowing” model. A secondary school teacher, an expert in educational robotics, worked alongside a primary school teacher and a group of students from a 5th grade class, in order to prepare the pupils for Lego League. The teachers provided all students with the same opportunities and methodological strategies, encouraging them to work together to build an effective team and bring out their natural leadership and problem-solving skills. During the workshop, the boys expressed greater skills in building competition robots, while the girls focused on writing the programming code, collaborating to find an effective solution. Through mentoring from female teachers experienced in STEAM subjects, they found motivation and overcame gender stereotypes.

coding workshop gender bias, gender equality, gender gap, educational robotic activities, empowerment, leadership, STEAM, job shadowing.

## INTRODUCTION

In order to describe the project, which the school I lead has supported, I will start by pointing out the vision that sustains us every day and inspired our school’s logo: “A Glance into the Future”. This motto means that school must always have the courage to keep its gaze on the future and summarizes the six ideas that guide our school planning:

- gender equality: the removal of obstacles to self-actualization, as stipulated in Article 3 of the Constitution, requires overcoming psychological and social barriers that limit women's free expression, which is often conditioned by fear of negative judgment;
- team working: only a coordinated team effort can initiate the necessary change, valuing the group as a democratic space for discussion, sharing, mutual support and growth through analysis, synthesis and constructive dialogue;
- the leadership of ideas: schools must cultivate winning ideas, because they are able to positively and creatively impact the future. I prefer to speak of winning ideas and not of winning people, because we cannot accept the replication of unethical models of success in the future, which imply the affirmation of the few at the expense of the many. We advise the pupils to feed their minds and imagine new solutions to today's problems;
- The enhancement of making: no idea is successful if it cannot imagine itself concrete and realisable. Schools must overcome the idealist paradigm whereby ideas are superior to making and must recover a craft dimension of study and learning processes.
- The centrality of the STEAM disciplines: science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics delineate the fields of knowledge of the future, where computational thinking, artificial intelligence and robotics will be the means of change that we can already see powerfully creeping into our present. If we want this change to be inclusive, women must be given the opportunity to choose it, to experience it and to shape it according to their point of view. Otherwise, STEAM disciplines will continue to be the field in which mechanisms of exclusion and domination continue to be perpetrated;
- The school as a revolutionary place: the school revolution is based on two principles: rebel, overcoming rigid mental patterns and building an inclusive narrative, and study, to base change on solid knowledge and skills.

School as a place of revolution also implies the need to transform it from the ground up. Change cannot be promoted without accepting that it involves the school itself, challenging us and asking us to evolve. The school revolution is not only within it, but concerns its essence and the way it is experienced. A collective step forward is needed to make change possible.

## **1. ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEXT: THE NATIONAL RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLAN**

The Istituto Comprensivo Laives took the opportunity offered by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, particularly with the Next Generation Classroom measure, to renovate spaces and teaching. This intervention responded to needs that emerged from the self-assessment report, which indicated: a decline in students' math skills, a gender gap in math achievement, and limited digital skills of teachers and pupils. The goal was not just to purchase goods, but to initiate change toward an innovative, inclusive, and creative school built on the six key ideas initially introduced.

## **2. THE LAIVES TEAM PROJECT**

### **2.1. Teacher Training**

According to Edgar Morin, a well-made head is one that is able to connect different knowledge together, to intercept problems in order to solve them, to accept the challenges of the present and to think strategically; paraphrasing Morin, I maintain that a well-made project is one that has the following characteristics:

- it knows how to connect and make people with different experiences work together, overcoming sedimented professional barriers;
- it knows how to intercept real needs and identify solutions to meet them;
- is brave in saying yes and putting itself to the test;
- acts in the short term, but projects itself in the long term.

The Istituto Comprensivo Laives created a project to form “well-made heads,” as described by Morin, using Recovery Plan funds to implement the six key ideas. The goal was to unite the various elements, like pieces of a puzzle, since, as Martha Rosler says, “there are no fragments without a whole.” The whole is represented by the school, with students and teachers linked by training, which occurs through the teaching/learning process. We have invested in teacher training, starting with refresher courses on the use of technology in the classroom, particularly educational robotics. By joining the STAAR network, which offers field training workshops, teachers experiment with computational thinking, robotics and team building and then apply these skills in the classroom with students. This approach reflects the key ideas outlined in the introduction:

- gender equality: the teaching team was composed of men and women fairly equally;

- team working: the lecturers worked together in mini-groups of 5-6 people;
- leadership of ideas: the group work based on peer learning included moments of comparing ideas in search of the most effective ones for solving the problems posed or carrying out the tasks assigned;
- the enhancement of making: workshop participants had to work with Lego robots within playgrounds to be built together;
- the centrality of STEAM disciplines: the workshop made the participants, who came from very different teaching backgrounds and different school orders, aware that there is no future of the school without them;
- the school as a revolutionary place: change in the school starts with ourselves and the question: what can we educators, together now in this classroom, do to go beyond our usual practices and overcome the logic of 'it has always been done this way'?

## **2.2. Pupil's Involvement**

The LaiveSteam project developed during the school year within the value framework, which the head teacher described, with the following goals:

- to put into practice with class groups what has been learnt in the field of educational robotics in the refresher courses run by the Rete STAAR;
- contribute to the drafting of a vertical digital curriculum;
- push the cooperation between teachers of different school grades through job shadowing;
- working in authentic learning contexts;
- strengthen an inclusive perspective;
- make this activity the pivot of a broader stakeholder engagement project.

In order to achieve these goals, the project was set up by selecting two groups of pupils from the last class of primary school (1st group: 7 boys; 5 girls; 2nd group: 7 boys; 6 girls). This selection was made by requesting the families to join in, in order to encourage the full involvement of our stakeholders and without requiring anything other than motivational support for our activity. Within the two groups there are two students with special needs and one student with a migrant background. The inclusiveness provided by the project allowed all participants to demonstrate their potential in the various activities.

The project was divided into two time fractions:

- From September to November 2023: it was focused on the main notions of computational thinking, Coding and Educational Robotics highlighting their educational value within a teaching process in a non-homogeneous group;
- From December 2023 to May 2024: it was dedicated to ‘making’, as we moved on to the more craft-based aspect of the project.

The goal was to participate in the First Lego League – Explore competition, held in mid-May at the Bruno Kessler Foundation in Povo (TN). This event was an authentic learning environment, in which we worked for a year to form a 6-member team ready to compete in the field of educational robotics with other national teams.

The First Lego League Explore is a competition category for girls and boys ages 6 to 10, focusing on STEAM themes to stimulate self-esteem and critical thinking. Participants apply math, science and technology knowledge to create innovative and inclusive solutions. Specifically, we used the Lego Spike kit to design and build an original playground inspired by the values of gender equality, inclusion and creativity.

The design arose from a real situation: there is a 10-year-old girl in the class with severe sensory difficulties. Her classmates, who have learned to communicate with her in Italian Sign Language (LIS), asked themselves a question: how to make a concert inclusive, so that even those who cannot hear the music can appreciate it?

From this reflection came a project that imagines a concert: singers play and move on a stage, while light sensors follow the rhythm of the music. Thus, the children worked synaesthetically, transforming music into light to make it accessible to all.

In the second part of the activity the students wrote a computer code to connect the robot with the PC. During the various tests, they discussed and looked for the most effective solutions, inspired by the idea of leadership model.

The third phase involved the design and the creation of a paper ‘poster’ in which they show the path they have followed to arrive at the resolution of the challenge, proposed by competition.

Eventually we come to the last phase: the competition, that took place on 11th May and we took part as LaiveSteam with a mixed team of 6 pupils, who challenged 10 other teams and won first prize in the Core Values category, which inspired us: inclusion and gender equality.



### 2.3. The Role of Girls

As we said, gender equality is one of the key ideas of our lab and we have implemented it through several strategies:

- the model of two female teachers engaged in science, who demonstrate with their example that STEAM are “girl stuff” and can therefore become in the future a possible choice of study or work. Teachers become so the first and most visible tool of female empowerment, especially in that age group in which learning occurs mainly by observation;
- The motivational approach: we must, from the beginning of the school career, motivate girls and future women to break through the so-called “glass roof” that at some point in their lives prevents them from performing prestigious jobs, traditionally considered “boy stuff”, although they have also been more successful students than males during their schooling. It is a phenomenon globally defined “leaky pipeline”: so after university, the presence of women in the post-university world and work begins to drastically reduce, due to the difficulty of managing at the same time family and social life;
- The importance of team building and the lab approach based on doing using technology: in the design work in mini groups, the girls had to learn not only to make their voice heard but to hear it themselves. In every activity the vision of girls was decisive to write the code. All have completed the tasks, sometimes before the deadline, and they succeeded in explaining their choices, during the first phase of design and last of computer writing. The initial critical issues, mainly due to the belief that Lego and robots are purely for males, have been mitigated by the tenacity and precision that the girls have put to complete the tasks;
- The deconstruction of gender bias: the laboratory ended with satisfactory results and all proved to have learned the fundamental parts of the programming. It was interesting to note the ease with which the girls entered into interaction with the group of boys making improvements and simplifications necessary for the development of the project. The boys, initially by gender bias conditioned, have reconsidered on the skills of the girls and constantly supported their ideas and their participation in the race of robotics, encouraging them to express their opinion in every context. To scratch the “Crystal Rood” above all, in the scientific field we must deconstruct the gender stereotypes that Elena Gianini Belotti already reported in her famous

essay, *On the side of girls: the influence of social conditioning in the formation of the role of women in the early years of life*. If the school system aims to be effective, it must “give back to each individual who is born the possibility of developing in the way that is most congenial to him or her, regardless of the sex they belong to”. In order to succeed, the school must help to affect those psychological structures that make women feel inadequate and “not talented”, even before testing themselves, especially when they have to interact in groups with boys. At the beginning of our journey, the girls were already defeated and resigned to the idea of not being able to participate in the race: at 10 years for them the “crystal roof” was already a limit to their chances. We worked with them to break through it and to channel their energies towards achieving a goal, which they thought they could not achieve. We used their tenacity and precision to convince them that Lego and robots don’t have gender preferences. We as human beings, invented these superstructures to simplify our approach to reality, but our intelligence and motivation can be so broad that it embraces complexity. This has been understood by whole group, that so changed its mind and its attitude.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

If we now return to reflect on what the photographer Martha Rosler suggested, that there are no fragments if there is not a whole, we can observe that the whole is in a school the pedagogical framework in which we insert our projects. The coding lab, which we explained, was born from a basic assumption: to abolish within the class gender differences, to educate the students as individuals with specific talents and make them able to share them with others. This perspective is the only one that allows us to make the revolution at school and to transform the school in a revolutionary place.

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# ENSURING GENDER EQUITY IN PROMOTING COMPUTATIONAL THINKING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL. A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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This paper is part of a wider review about the effective pedagogical strategies aiming at developing Computational Thinking (CT) in primary school (K-5). Within this research, we focus here on those studies who specifically focus, directly or indirectly, on gender equity. Its relevance is based on the awareness that Computer Science is stereotyped as a male-oriented field right from the earliest school grades. In our review, we selected journal articles and proceedings papers, in 10 well-known databases, from 2006 to 2022, with specific inclusion criteria: Among the 31 studies that met those criteria, 12 papers dealt with gender equity to some extent: 7 of them mentioned “gender”, “girls”, “equity” either in the title or in the keywords, the other adopted the gender difference among the criteria of analysis. As a general result, all the papers, although proposing different pedagogical approaches, don’t detect a significant difference of CT development between girls and boys. Nonetheless, we can find some interesting information related, for instance, to group composition or to the scaffolding type. These results can give further directions to research and educational practices on how to properly structure educational activities aiming to develop CT in primary school able to promote gender equity.

Computational Thinking; Primary School; Gender Equity; systematic review

## INTRODUCTION

This paper refers to a wider research regarding the most effective strategies to develop Computational Thinking (CT) in K-5 children, within which it focuses specifically on gender equity. Its relevance is based on the awareness that Computer Science is stereotyped as a male-oriented field right from the earliest school grades (Cheryan, Master & Meltzoff, 2015; Master, Meltzoff & Cheryan,

2021). This is an issue for several reasons, related to different points of view; we will present them from the most functionalist-oriented to the most emancipatory-oriented. First, in countries whose economy depends on highly skilled workers in computing fields, the underrepresentation of females in computing has resulted in shortages of qualified workers (National Research Council, 2010; Mouza et al., 2020). Second, a lower computational literacy may result in lower job opportunities, as computing is becoming essential across many fields (Barker & Aspray, 2006; Mouza et al., 2020). Women may therefore miss out on high-status lucrative jobs (Cheryan, Master & Meltzoff, 2015). Third, an underrepresentation of women in teams dealing with innovation in computing products may also imply that those products are less responsive to the needs of female consumers (Cukier, Shortt, & Devine, 2002; Mouza et al., 2020). Lastly, from the most macroscopic sociological viewpoint, computer scientists design tools that shape modern society, and therefore such designs should be appropriate for the broadest population (Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Cheryan, Master & Meltzoff, 2015).

For these reasons, institutional policies aim at broadening participation of women in STEM (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2007; European Commission, 2020), and research on the effectiveness of CT development programs and/or activities in Primary School often deals with gender equity as well. In this paper we discuss the results of 12 papers emerging from a wider Systematic Review about the effective instructional strategies for the development of CT in primary school (K-5) (Ugolini & Kakavas, *forthcoming*). In the next paragraph we will present the inclusion criteria both of the main Review, and of the sub-review which is the specific focus of this paper. We will then present and discuss the results.

## 1. METHODOLOGY

In our main Review, we selected journal articles and proceedings papers from 10 well-known databases<sup>1</sup>, from 2006 to 2022, with the following inclusion criteria:

- explicit reference to CT in title and/or abstract and/or keywords;
- English language;

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<sup>1</sup> Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) *SpringerLink*, Education Resources Information Center (*ERIC*), *Bio-Medical Library*, *IEEE Xplore Digital Library*, *Wiley*, *Taylor & Francis Online*, *Ingenta Connect*, Learning & Technology Library (*LearnTechLib*) and *Science Direct*.

- the typical form of a scientific full paper;
- focus on CT in K-5 school;
- a sound methodology, with at least a pre- and post- assessment and at least one assessment tool of CT, valid and reliable to some extent, which considers CT as a thought process (i.e. not only as an acquisition of Computer Science knowledge).

Thirty-one studies met those criteria.

For the purposes of this work, from among those papers, we selected those that dealt to some extent with gender equity. We found that 7 of them include “gender” references (“girls”, “gender studies”, “gender difference”, “equity”...) in title, abstract and/or keywords, while 5 other studies adopted the gender difference as a criterium of analysis. We therefore analyse here 12 papers.

We can identify three sub-groups of studies:

- 4 studies specifically focus on possible differences between boys and girls in terms of effectiveness of the proposed instructional strategies, presenting a reference to gender both in their Research Questions (RQs) and in the theoretical premises;
- 4 studies propose diversification of the instructional strategies for girls; more precisely, two of them focus on group or pair composition and the two others on the scaffolding type;
- 4 studies slightly address this issue when presenting the results of the research.

In the next paragraph we will present the results and the discussion according to these three sub-groups.

## **2. PAPERS WITH A SPECIFIC FOCUS ON GENDER DIFFERENCES**

### **2.1. Results**

The first paper (Del Olmo-Muñoz, Cózar-Gutierrez, & González-Calero, 2020) deals with 2<sup>nd</sup> grade children, and evaluates the effectiveness of unplugged activities in terms of CT (by Bebras<sup>2</sup>), but also on motivation. This is not surprising: studies addressing the lower grades of Primary School, or even Kindergarten, address first access to CS activities, and, as such, they also focus

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<sup>2</sup> Although the CT assessment tools are not a specific focus of this paper, we must point out that there is still no full agreement on how to assess CT (and therefore on its operational definition); for this reason, when speaking about effectiveness on CT, we feel it is needful to explain//specify the assessment tool being used. See (Román-Gonzalez, Moreno-León, & Robles, 2019). for further details about this issue and about the main CT assessment tools.

on dimensions other than CT, and the instructional strategies addressing these grades almost always focus either on educational robotics or on unplugged activities. One of the RQs explicitly states: “Are there significant differences in the effectiveness of the approaches in terms of CT skills or motivational outcomes related to the gender of the students?”. The study shows no significant difference in terms of motivation between boys and girls when they start approaching CT with unplugged activities.

The three other studies of this subgroup address 5th grade pupils (or, in one case, both 4th and 5th grade).

Ma et al. (2021) evaluate the effectiveness, in term of CT (by CT Test) and Self-Efficacy (by CTLs), of an advanced Problem Solving model (the IGGIA Model). It includes one specific RQ related to gender equity: “Can the problem-solving instructional approach for primary education promote girls’ CT performance as well as boys’ CT performance?”. According to this study, the girls belonging to the experimental group show a significant improvement both in terms of CT and self-efficacy in respect to those belonging to the control group.

Mouza et al. (2020) evaluate the effectiveness of a one semester long out-of-school program, addressing one single-group of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, with a mixed-methods approach: referring to the well-known Brennan and Resnick (2012) operational definition, only CT Concepts are assessed in a quantitative way, while CT Practices and CT Perspectives are examined qualitatively. One of the RQs states: “How does repeated participation in an after-school computing program influence student learning of CT concepts related to programming? Are there any gender differences among student outcomes?”. While CT Concepts were significantly higher in boys than in girls both in pre- and post- test, the learning gain is not. Moreover, 50% of the students who returned for further participation in the programme were girls.

Lastly, Noh & Lee (2019) also evaluate the effectiveness of an advanced problem solving model (the Creative Problem Solving Model), applied to Educational Robotics, which aims to develop both CT (by Bebras) and Creativity (by the Torrance Creativity Test). One of the RQs is “Does a course in programming a robot improve CT and creativity when prior skills and gender are taken into account?”. No difference between girls and boys in terms of CT was found, while girls improve creativity significantly more than boys; the authors suggest that this is due to the collaborative activities within the model (e.g. brainstorming).



## **2.2. Discussion**

Among the 4 studies, only one deals with a “first access” to programming (2<sup>nd</sup> grade) showing that an unplugged approach, though puzzle-based, can help in limiting the gender differences, especially about motivation, which is crucial for this specific age-group.

The three other studies show that well designed programs, typically including collaborative activities, imply a significant learning gain both in boys and in girls without significant gender differences. This is not to be taken for granted, because, in referring to our Review as a whole, we have to point out that the approaches concerned here were among the most advanced: a constructionist-based long-term out-of-school approach, the Creative Problem Solving Model and the IGGIA Problem Solving Model. Therefore this systematic study confirms that an accurate instructional design is recommended in order to meet the gender equity goal in educational activities aiming at developing CT in primary school.

## **3. PAPERS WHICH FOCUSED ON DIVERSIFICATION BASED ON GENDER DIFFERENCES**

### **3.1. Results**

The four papers focusing on diversification of the instructional strategies we found in this review can be further grouped into two sub-categories.

Two studies (Taylor & Baeck, 2019; Wei et al., 2021) focus on the composition of groups or pairs in activities aiming at developing CT.

Addressing 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade children, Taylor and Baeck (2019) evaluate the effect on both CT (by CT Test) and motivation, of group composition (by gender and by role) within an educational robotics activity. They found that composition by gender (all female, all male, mixed) has no effect on CT and motivation, while assigned roles, whether they are fixed or rotate, have.

On the contrary, Wei et al. (2021) found some differences related to pair composition, evaluating the effectiveness of a Scratch-based constructionist program, on both CT (by DrScratch) and self-efficacy: girls in girl-girl pairs do not improve their CT, while those in a boy-girl pair do; the results related to the self-efficacy in programming are even less encouraging, as girls improve neither when paired with a boy nor with a girl.

Two other studies focus on the scaffolding type.

Angeli & Valanides (2020) address Kindergarten children (5-6 y.o.) in an

educational robotics program (using Bee-Bot robots). They explicitly compare the effectiveness on CT (by CT Assessment Rubric) of two scaffolding types on the same Problem Solving Scenario (see RQ3: “Do the two scaffolding techniques differentially affect boys’ and girls’ computational thinking?”). The study found that boys benefited more from an individualistic, kinesthetic spatially oriented, manipulative-based activity with cards, while girls benefited more from a collaborative writing activity.

Jin et al. (2021), on the other hand, address a sample of all girls belonging to a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, comparing an extensive scaffolding with a limited one, in a Scratch-based Program, regarding their effect on CT (by CT Test and CTLS). The study found that an extensive scaffolding improves both CT Skills and Self Efficacy.

### **3.2. Discussion**

Gender doesn’t seem to have a great effect on group composition, at least in educational robotics activities addressing 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade pupils. We must anyway point out that this results from a single study, related to groups composed by 3 or 4 students in a 14-week-long programme; further research is therefore needed, to strengthen this result in term of generalisability.

Even more so, because, in terms of pairs, a different outcome was found: in terms of CT improvement, a constructionist-based on-screen activity was more effective for 4<sup>th</sup> grade girls when paired with boys than with another girl. Much attention must be paid to this result, as pair-programming is a strategy often adopted in coding activities (Campe & Denner, 2020). As an extensive scaffolding appears to be effective on girls in terms both of CT development and CT self-efficacy, we may suggest to adopt it when dealing with girl-girl pairs or groups with a high proportion of girls.

Regarding grid-based educational robotics activities in Kindergarten, it has to be noted that the use of cards, which is often adopted, appears to be more effective in boys than in girls, who on the contrary prefer to be individually supported by the teacher.

## **4. OTHER PAPERS**

In our review, we found 4 other papers who slightly address the gender equity issue when presenting the results of the research.

Jiang & Wong (2021) show no significant difference between 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade boys and girls after a 5-week long programme combining plugged-in and unplugged activities; Jiang & Li (2021), show no significant difference between 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys and girls after a 5-week long scratch-based programme, except for

algorithmic thinking (corresponding dimension of the CTLS), which was more developed by boys. On the other hand, Yilmaz Ince & Koc (2020) show a benefit for girls in problem solving (corresponding dimension of the CTLS) after a 2-week long programme, though it must be said that this study addresses only 3 5<sup>th</sup> grade pupils (the remaining of the sample belongs to 6<sup>th</sup> grade).

In the last paper (Tran, 2019), gender equity is overall mentioned as a context element for a 10-week long unplugged programme, addressing an early exposure to coding, for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade pupils.

These studies don't provide particularly significant results; they nonetheless support the idea that coding medium-to-long programmes addressing upper grades pupils do not substantially amplify the gender gap in CT development.

## CONCLUSION

Our review shows that there is not huge evidence assuming that activities aiming at developing CT are more effective in boys rather than in girls. On the contrary, well designed programs, typically including collaborative activities, imply a significant learning gain both in boys and in girls without significant gender differences.

We nonetheless can identify some interesting indications:

- at K level, girls benefited more from the collaborative writing activity scaffolding;
- Early exposure can help narrowing the gap about motivation;
- There are some differences in self-efficacy: girls in pairs do not improve self-efficacy; some research show an improvement in boys of the algorithmic dimension and an improvement in girls in problem solving dimension; extensive scaffolding helps in improving self-efficacy.

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<sup>3</sup> \*indicates the studies emerging from the review.

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# GENDER, INTERCULTURE, EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVES. ANALYSIS AND CONTRAST OF GENDER AND ETHNIC-BASED VIOLENCE DYNAMICS

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## 1. KEY FACTORS

This panel intends to place itself at the intersection of the following macro-themes: "gender inequality and sexist education" and "intercultural education and non-racism". The issues considered are manifold and briefly outlined here.

### 1.1. Gender-based violence

The issue of gender-based violence is trans-historical and trans-cultural: it affects everyone and, unfortunately, is still topical. We define gender-based violence as

all those forms of violence from psychological and physical to sexual violence, from the persecutory acts of so-called stalking to rape, up to femicide, which affect a vast number of people discriminated based on sex<sup>1</sup>.

Violence plays a significant and widespread role in the universe of women, masquerading in many ways and always taking on new forms, including self-harm and self-destruction (Durst, 2012, 53). All these forms of violence know no boundaries of religion, age, or social group.

### 1.2. Gender inequality

The inequality between men and women, the lack of recognition of women's identity, and the fact that women are 'second' to the male role and, therefore, subject (in the sense of subjugated) (De Beauvoir, 1961) are specific causes of violence. To achieve true equality between men and women, to overcome

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/sicurezza/violenza-genero#:~:text=Con%20l'espressione%20violenza>

female subordination, however, there is still a need today for ‘unequal equality’ (Benadusi et al., 2009), i.e. to compensate for the persistence of women being ‘second’ to men. The overcoming of subordination would bring them out of anonymity, not because women are nameless but because they are not named other than through an interposed person, that is, dissolved in the “universal neutral declined into the masculine” formula that is still struggling to disappear. Gender inequality is more frequently present in contexts where social justice is absent, the relationship of subalternity has been internalised, and the stimulus to develop theories of social transformation is lacking. Still, it can certainly present itself, more or less explicitly, even in democratic contexts that aspire in principle to equity, even between genders.

### **1.3. Gender and colour discrimination and the intersectional perspective**

Similarly, inequality and discrimination based on ethnicity and, in particular, towards dark skin colour still present themselves as a significant critical issue of social coexistence. The most frequent areas of inequality and forms of discrimination, as studies in the field show (Tria, 2015), concern ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age (young and old), disability, and religious beliefs (anti-Semitism, Islamophobia). We identify at least two different levels of discrimination. Multiple discrimination: this refers to the simultaneous membership of several disadvantaged social groups, which makes people potentially victims of events detrimental to their dignity, placing them at a disadvantage.

These forms of discrimination increase cumulatively due to the co-presence of different risk factors in the same individual (Makkonen, 2002). The different factors act concurrently but separately. Intersectional discrimination: Discrimination is based on several factors that interact so that they can no longer be distinguished and separated. The concept of intersectionality constitutes an interpretative paradigm introduced in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American jurist and activist, who highlighted how, in society, the different manifestations of oppression and exclusion (racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia) do not act independently but are interconnected and create a system of oppression/exclusion that reflects the intersection of multiple inequalities and discriminations (Crenshaw, 1989).

Thus, dark-skinned women may experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by light-skinned women (as women) and in ways that are both similar to and different from dark-skinned men (as dark-skinned men). They often experience the combined and mutually

reinforcing effects of discrimination based on the intersection of gender and skin colour, i.e. as black women (Crenshaw, 1989). In this latter respect, their situation (at the crossroads of several social categories: gender and colour) is qualitatively different (Crenshaw, 1991) from that experienced by light-skinned women as well as from that experienced by black men or privileged black people (Crenshaw, 1989; Bello and Mancini, 2016; Bello, 2020). This specific condition can only be understood by considering the interplay between several identity factors. It indicates how categories co-construct each other by creating no longer separable situations into individual categories operating separately (Bello, 2020).

The focus here is on specific aspects of discrimination that may be directed at the female gender, particularly dark skin colour or the synergy effect of their combination.

Gender and skin colour share a strong visibility. Their immediate prominence in a person's distinguishing features can make the risk of discrimination particularly pronounced. Due to the cognitive mechanisms of inference and generalisation that preside over the formation of categories and the activation of stereotypes and prejudices in individual mental processes (Lorenzini, 2018), the perception of these peculiarities leads to categorising an individual as female/woman (not male/man) or in the case of dark skin as foreigner/foreigner (not native), according to real automatisms.

## **2. EDUCATIONAL PROPOSALS FROM AN INTERCULTURAL, ANTI-RACIST AND ANTI-SEXIST PERSPECTIVE**

The Istanbul Convention (2011) on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence stipulates that the contracting countries (and Italy ratified this Convention in 2013) shall take all necessary actions to include in school curricula at all levels of education, teaching materials on topics such as gender equality, non-stereotypical gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, appropriate to the cognitive level of pupils (Istanbul Convention 2011, a.14, c.1).

The next comma, 2, invites the Parties to take the necessary actions to promote the principles enunciated in comma one also 'in non-formal education facilities, as well as in sports, cultural and leisure centres and the mass media'.

This Panel, considering this and our country's commitment, intends to focus on the contexts of extracurricular, non-formal and informal education, and



therefore on family life, religious contexts and territorial educational services, on a target audience of adults and young adults, and through the presentation of the results of research carried out in Italy and abroad, it aims at 1) highlighting the different forms of the manifestation of violence with respect to gender and sexual orientation in the specific contexts of extracurricular, informal and non-formal education 2) to analyse if and how heterogeneous actors in the field of extracurricular, informal and non-formal education, can be personally affected, as women/men/other, by forms of symbolic and non-symbolic violence in relation to particular types of users; 3) to bring out if and how heterogeneous actors in the field of extracurricular, informal and non-formal education, can in the performance of their role, break or (re)produce dynamics of symbolic and non-symbolic violence with respect to gender and sexual orientation.

For these thematic areas, the intersectional perspective will provide the theoretical and methodological tools to consider the inseparability of racism, capitalism and patriarchy. In this way, each research will be able to reveal itself as a contribution to a social transformation that changes the way everyday life is lived, putting an end to white supremacy to the growing social and economic apartheid that separates black and white, rich and poor, men and women; putting an end to sexism and class exploitation. Such was also the revolution in values that bell hooks (2020, 55-66) wanted to bring about by using the intersectional perspective as a tool for analysis.

Studies on women writers or life situations that have carried out anti-racist and feminist struggles, elaborating an alternative pedagogy, will also restore knowledge's transformative value.

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# SCOUTS AND GUIDES' EXPERIENCE OF COEDUCATION TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AND BUILD POSITIVE GENDER

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The aim of this article is to deal with the issue of coeducation in the scouting experience, proposed by Agesci (Catholic Scouts and Guides Association of Italy), founded in 1974 through the merger of the male and female associations. Co-education is not a simple coexistence of the two sexes under the banner of promiscuity. In Agesci, the intuition behind the choice of coeducation stems from the conviction that it is possible for boys and girls to grow together, to live together an educational project beyond any pre-established roles. The educational aim is to help them mature in their relationship with themselves and others through the Scout method. In this way, Agesci proposes to combat gender-based violence with an educational proposal that offers the opportunity to experience mutual recognition of the richness of diversity and to build positive relationships between men and women. Agesci has opted for diarchy, which means that at all levels of the association, the sharing of tasks and educational responsibilities is entrusted to men and women together, with equal dignity and responsibility. For the boys and girls, this is a tangible testimony of how men and women can work together.

Co-education; Scouts; Guides

## INTRODUCTION

In the fight against the dynamics of gender and ethnic-based violence, a preventive action can be carried out at an educational level. In this sense, this contribution intends to present the reflection and experience of co-education lived by the Association of Italian Catholic Guides and Scouts (Agesci), a reality born 50 years ago from the merging of the male association of scouts (Asci) and the association of guides (Agi).

## **1. THE ASSOCIATIVE PATH TOWARDS CO-EDUCATION**

Various scouting experiences began in Italy as early as 1910. In 1916 the Italian Catholic Scouting Association was founded which, as a result of the dispositions of Fascism, was forced to terminate in 1928 only to be reborn in 1944, while, addressed to girls, the educational proposal of Guiding began on 28 December 1943 with the establishment of the Italian Guide Association. In the Holy See's letter of approval (8 December 1944) Monsignor Montini had stressed the Pope's wish that "a clear separation be maintained between the Association of Italian Guides and the other similar one of the Young Explorers" (Morello & Pieri, 1991, 98).

In the Italian socio-cultural context, women's awareness of their rights and the need for their recognition matured between the 1950s and 1960s: the feminist movement and the post-conciliar atmosphere contributed to this. Also young women and the leaders within Agi became aware of the equal dignity of men and women, of the equality of rights and consequently of the need to educate them to overcome pre-constituted roles corresponding to the psychological and biological nature of male and female. The latter were educated to traditional 'values', such as submission, silence, and self-giving.

Gradually the need to merge Agi and Asci matured, though there were conflicting positions and opposition in both associations. It was feared that Agi ran the risk of being suffocated numerically by the Asci and risked losing its specific originality, while in Asci there were those who warned that the method could be watered down. In Agi, the decision to form a single association also involved painful personal choices to the point of leaving the association. Overcoming difficulties and resistance, in 1969 Agi approved Asci's proposal to set up a mixed commission to deepen the theme of co-education, and the following year the creation of Asci-Agi leaders communities. In particular, Agi experienced a very lively ideological debate in its central structures: associative tensions and criticism in some ways reflected the contradictions and divergences present in society, which led to moments of true disbandment, chaotic and lacerating discussions.

It should be borne in mind that, on the other hand, on a local level, during the 1960s many leaders and leaders, rovers and scolte – boys and girls between the ages of 16 and 20 – were in fact working together. It can be said that in a certain sense the unification of Asci and Agi was actually experienced before the

decisions that officially led to the establishment of Agesci (Italian Catholic Guides and Scouts Association) on 4 May 1974. The unification was approved by Agi thanks to 98.8% of the votes in favour and 76.5% by Asci. As a matter of fact, the merging process of the two associations was essentially managed at the leadership level, while it was promoted by the drive of a large part of the grassroots, i.e. the groups and units that, having been ahead of their time, applauded the fusion.

The unification was not an easy, simple choice and there was no shortage of difficulties with the episcopate; furthermore, during the path that led to the decision to establish Agesci there was no lack of contrasting positions and opposition, which led to painful decisions. In fact, disagreeing with the choice of coeducation, the Italian Association of Catholic Guides and Scouts of Europe, known as Scouts of Europe – ESF, was founded in 1976. This reality was divided into groups separated by sex and led by leaders of the corresponding sex.

If at the time of the merger between Agi and Asci there was a fear that the former would be ‘swallowed up’ by the latter, if only from a numerical point of view since the numerical ratio was 1 to 3, after 50 years of Agesci’s life, it can be noted that in the year 2023-’24, the 191,881 members are distributed in the various age groups almost equally between males and females and among educators the former are 16,080, the latter 15,427 (Scouts, 175).

## **2. EDUCATIONAL INTENTIONALITY**

Fifty years ago, at the time of the birth of the Agesci, the choice of coeducation was not understood as putting boys and girls together, a simple mixing of scouts and guides. The insight behind the choice of coeducation (Galli, 1994) arose from the conviction that it was possible to bring boys and girls together, to educate together by living a common proposal, beyond any pre-established roles. The aim was to help, through the scout method, children and young people to become autonomous and aware of their sexual identity in their relationship with themselves and with others (Lucchelli & Patriarca, 1994).

The associative choice of co-education made by Agesci is expressed in the Associative Pact, the document that summarises the ideas and experiences matured in Asci and Agi, accepted and developed in Agesci:

The Agesci leaders share the responsibility for education and bear witness to the enrichment that comes from reciprocal diversity. While respecting the concrete situations of local and personal realities and the different rhythms of growth and maturation, they offer girls and boys common educational

experiences, beyond any imposed or artificially constituted roles. Growing together helps them discover and welcome their identity as women and men and recognise in it a call to full self-realisation in love. Co-education opens up and founds education to welcoming the other (Agesci, 2002, 32).

Agesci proposes an educational pathway in which boys and girls live meaningful educational experiences together, under the guidance of educators who are attentive to their integral development, who accompany them and make the difference between the sexes a resource that allows them to get to know themselves and each other, fostering collaboration and respect.

Of course, from an educational point of view, scout leaders do not always take care to identify what are the attentions, the conditions to make the coeducational situation really meaningful. At times, coeducation is confused with being together between people of both sexes, under the banner of promiscuity, a simple coexistence, so much so that in some scout groups it is limited to proposing common activities to boys and girls. This ends up by proposing an undifferentiated, amorphous, depersonalised model, in which everyone does the same things indiscriminately, everyone is asked to achieve the same performance, almost as if to miniaturise, erase and abolish differences, which are mostly considered a cultural fact and the cause of inequalities. In this way, there is a danger of standardising the educational proposal.

Agesci has grasped the educational value of coeducation, which consists in boys and girls being together (Centro Documentazione Agesci, 2010), with the concern to create the conditions so that each person can find space and a way to express their personal characteristics, making sure that they can express what they are in their specific originality.

At the educational level, this implies that the realisation of the human person - whether man or woman- is effectively guaranteed, and that the peculiarities, talents and potentialities of each person are valorised while respecting their individual peculiarities, differences and needs. It is a question of promoting in children a process of identification with their own sex and, at the same time, of serene integration with the other sex, for a harmonious and balanced development of the male and female personality (Lorenzini, 1993).

To achieve this, simply being together is not enough, but an educational intervention capable of nurturing knowledge, acceptance, and appreciation of oneself and of the other as a person different from oneself is necessary. It is a matter of helping the person to realise himself or herself in a global, integral way,

according to that specificity, uniqueness, diversity of being a man or a woman. The educational path should help the person discover and realise the meaning of their own sexual humanity. That is why it is necessary to address issues such as personal identity, self-esteem, autonomy and the ability to be free and responsible, to consciously exercise one's relational and communication skills, to identify and respect a hierarchy of values. Recognition and awareness of each other's originality leads to grasping the value of the other, while consolidating a positive self-image. Experiencing mutual recognition of the richness in diversity, discovering complementarity, makes one happy.

In today's socio-cultural panorama, the task of accompanying children and young people to experience man/woman relationships not in a superficial manner, but in mutual understanding, in deepening knowledge and esteem, within a project of progressive enrichment, is a delicate and complex one. In the experience of participating in the group, each person can learn to live the relationship with the other, to welcome him/her by respecting him/her, and it is precisely this relationship with diversity, which can contribute to discovering one's own identity as a woman or man, accepting it, recognising in it the invitation to full self-realisation. At the educational level, this implies supporting the growth of autonomous persons, responsible for their own sexual identity, capable of meeting others authentically, listening to them, respecting them, welcoming them, developing the capacity to establish positive relationships.

The opportunities of a group life are particularly precious for educating to reciprocity, insofar as they make people experience diversity as a resource and allow them to welcome their own identity, to know it, accept it, value it, meeting each other in their mutual differences.

The scout proposal contributes to the affective and social maturation of the person by offering a training path aimed at educating to relationships, to respect between males and females, to mutual esteem, recognising themselves as bearers of specificity, of their own sexual humanity to be promoted. For the developmental phase during which the question of one's own sexual identity arises with greater urgency, particularly for the 11-15 age group, the scouts/guides, the Agesci educational method provides for separate training and socialisation moments: the squadrons – small groups – are single-sex, also offering a certain autonomy of activities. Separate activities between the two genders are also planned, precisely to enable the boy and girl to live out their identity, to foster a more complete development of their sexual identity, to be more welcoming towards the other.

Ultimately, what emerges is the importance of accompaniment by an educator who is mature from a relational point of view, attentive, and capable of offering content, meaningful experiences and stimuli for the progressive elaboration of one's own identity. Accompanying the younger generations in the adventure of becoming men and women means helping them to discover a framework of existential values that will allow them, in addition to strengthening their identity, to build a life project open to relationships and capable of looking to the future.

In short, for Agesci, while respecting the different growth and maturation times of the different local realities, co-educating means proposing common growth experiences, so that boys and girls can be open to meeting, welcoming and getting to know each other, beyond pre-established roles: through confrontation they can better understand their own peculiarities and learn to appreciate the characteristics of the other. In this perspective, the diversity of being male or female, of masculinity and femininity are valued, avoiding the risk of mortifying, flattening differences, or even violently suppressing them, because the specific diversity of being male and female, inscribed in sexual difference, is a wealth. In this way, Agesci also intends to combat the increasingly socially felt problem of gender-based violence.

It is evident how coeducation is not a merely instrumental aspect of the scout proposal, but a qualifying feature of the idea of man and woman to which the educational path tends. At the end of their journey of growth together, scouts and guides come to mature and make their own the value of the complementarity between male and female, in a dynamic of mutual enrichment, in all dimensions of life.

### **3. SOME CONSIDERATIONS**

It should be borne in mind that since 1974 Agesci has chosen diarchy, i.e. to entrust all tasks and responsibilities in the leadership of the association at all levels, to male and female leaders jointly, with equal dignity and responsibility. Therefore, there is the co-presence of a man and a woman, not only in the educational communities, but also at every level of associative responsibility.

For young people, living in a relationship with responsible adult figures with equal capacity and decision-making power, equal commitment to a common project is a tangible testimony of how much a man and a woman can collaborate, correct each other, grow together and have an absolutely equal role. This aspect of the Scout experience also contributes to building positive relations between males and females and preventing violent actions.



It should be noted, however, that in fact there is not always a leader and a leader in mixed units, but for various reasons the former finds him or herself taking on and leading the unit alone, with the consequent educational implications.

So far no analysis has been carried out to evaluate from a historical-pedagogical point of view how, following the unification of Agi and Asci, some methodological differences ended up being lost, at least in part, in the course of the last fifty years, while they constituted a wealth characterising the educational proposal of Guidism. More generally, there was a lack of educational reflection on the effective implementation of the coeducational proposal. In the course of the fifty years of the history of Agesci, the subject has returned to associative attention in the mid-eighties, but has not found continuity in reflection.

It could be an important contribution to reflect at an associative level on the possible contribution in educational terms in preventing violent actions and building positive relations between males and females, also taking into account the fact that in many groups children and young people from other cultures and religions are welcomed.

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# INTERSECTIONAL AND GENDER PERSPECTIVES: A RESEARCH ON TRAFFICKED REFUGEE WOMEN

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This research explores the care of trafficked Nigerian women within the SAI (reception system integration) project of the Municipality of Latina. The focus is on educational pathways oriented to the recovery of psycho-physical well-being, global autonomy, and balance after the migration trauma and violence suffered, and emancipation from the stigma of multiple vulnerability. The research is based on experiences gathered during five years of work and uses Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). The intersectional perspective and gender difference pedagogy are used to investigate the variables that hinder the promotion of resilient behaviour. The aim is to co-construct a grounded theory that stimulates the creation of a resilient and educative community, oriented towards pedagogical hope (Freire, 2014).

Gender perspective; intercultural pedagogy; intersectionality; emancipation; liberation.

## INTRODUCTION

This research investigates the phenomenon of trafficking of Nigerian asylum-seeking and refugee women received in the SAI with particular regard to the processes and practices acted out within reception contexts. Italy represents a country of destination and transit for trafficked migrants recruited and transported for the purpose of exploitation (Easo 2019, Unhcr 2021; 2022). This type of migration features women to a greater extent, thus delineating, a sexual exploitation that is characterized by gender. The human trafficking is a phenomenon that affects both women and men. However it cannot be said to be gender-neutral, (Cotesta,1999) since, vulnerability is conditioned by gender itself, becoming even more pronounced and potentially traumatic.

The gender perspective is an essential element for a complete and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of human trafficking, as it allows, social and economic policies to be monitored and evaluated with women's needs in mind and, enabling the design and implementation of ameliorative systemic actions. The feminization of migration pathways projects us into the perspective of gender and difference (Roverselli, 2015) and suggests that we should delve into the phenomenon by considering the traumatic bearing that configures this target audience as “the damned of the earth” (Bianchi, 2022).

## **1. FOCUS NIGERIA**

### **1.1. Root causes of sexual exploitation of Nigerian migrant women**

Sexual exploitation of Nigerian migrants can be declined through several closely related aspects, of which the first three are borrowed from relevant literature (Easo report, 2015; Unodc, 2006; Carchedi, 2012) and the personal field experience of the writer, the last two are related to the first emergencies of the research in question. We refer to exactly:

- First aspect: the migratory propensity of these young women and their deep-rooted desire to emancipate themselves from conditions of extreme hardship, such as illiteracy, absence of parental figures of reference, domestic violence poverty, breadth of family units, absence of educational/schooling and employment opportunities.
- The second aspect introduces the first actors in the criminal network of trafficking, namely, the so-called sponsors (maman traffickers) those who lend themselves to find money and false documents to make the journey abroad (Ezeh M.D., 2017).
- The third aspect is related to Nigerian ritualism, namely, the juju oath that seals a pact, a contract between the maman/sponsor and the trafficked woman. The practice of juju ritual is a syncretic form that to this day endures in parallel with the Christian and Muslim religions, intersecting and traversing across these monotheisms.
- The fourth refers to the recruitment of Nigerian girls through the device of debt bondage, which traces its roots to debt bondage: which forces victims to submit to severe forms of exploitation in order to pay off a very high monetary debt in exchange for freedom” (Coi Nigeria Report, 2020). The debt incurred takes on an economic, moral and psychological character at the same time, placing these women in an existential

condition that we could well decipher, in the words of Ernesto De Martino, that is, in “a magical existential drama” (2008).

- The fifth aspect can be traced back to the ways in which the victims were enslaved, which are in no way linked to a single component – discernible in the univocity of the juju ritual – rather it is characterized by a contamination of factors that have diverse origins: for example, the deep internal fractures of a corrupt state, the violence of Libyan guerrillas, prostitution on Italian streets.

## **1.2. Context of the research**

SAI is a national initiative aimed at the reception, protection and inclusion of asylum seekers and holders of international protection. It offers integrated reception interventions: in addition to providing board and lodging, activities include legal assistance, social accompaniment, literacy, training, vocational retraining, housing and socio-economic integration. (Manuale SAI, 2018). In the SAI of Latina, to date, there are 111 beneficiaries, of which 23 are adult women. There are 10 declared victims of trafficking: 3 asylum seekers and 7 refugees. L2 teacher. The multidisciplinary team (pedagogists, educators, social worker, psychologist, cultural mediators, Italian L2 teacher), as a result of the now stable presence of women victims of trafficking, was invited by the Ministry of the Interior to continuous and specific training to meet the socio-educational needs of the beneficiaries. It was necessary to acquire transversal/intercultural skills aimed at fostering an understanding of the specific vulnerability experiences of trafficking victims, facilitating the mastery of tools useful for designing educational interventions.

### **1.2. Slide of trafficking into asylum**

In the 2015-2019 period, the phenomenon of human trafficking has become intertwined with the flows of asylum seekers and international protection, asylum seeking has become the main channel of access for victims in our country. The phenomenon has mainly affected women and unaccompanied foreign minors of Nigerian nationality, who, according to the International Organization for Migration are among the most trafficked individuals (IOM 2020). The Geneva Convention represented the starting and reference point for the connection between trafficking and asylum, a reference that, however, was connoted only in form and not in substance, in fact, if one delves into the historical-legal course of this normative device, one can highlight how the definition of the refugee condition addressed in the abstract a target

representable in the adult male, political dissident, fleeing from an oppressive regime after World War II. One can well note the lack of reference to gender, sexual orientation.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Gender, intercultural, intersectional perspective**

The general framework of this research is systemically and complexly placed in the groove of cross-cultural, gender and intersectional pedagogy. Women's migration is not thought of as a generalized indistinct; rather, it is taken up with its full range of specificity, vulnerability and revolutionary charge. Migration has already been considered as a total social fact (Sayad, 2001); women's migration is a total social fact to be analyzed also from a gendered perspective: the damned of the earth are doubly fragile migrants, they have bumpy routes much more than those of male migrants and are, in fact, the new Sisyphuses. (Vaccarelli, 2019). As argued by Fiorucci, the underlying idea that gives rise to this thesis embraces the idea that pedagogy can only be intercultural per se, and that:

Interculture if it does not want to become rhetoric is an essentially political task, intertwined as it is with cultural conflicts, socioeconomic differences, diversity management, migrant rights, democratic development and the promotion of equal rights among all citizens (Fiorucci 2020, 43).

The intersectional perspective, in hooks' engaged and feminist pedagogical interpretation, appears to be a good frame of meaning in which to move and position oneself and from which to draw in theoretical references.

### **2.2. Methodological note**

Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) appears to be a good methodology for this context: flexible, antidogmatic, open-ended, recursive, and, above all, constructivist, that is, connoted in a sense that is inclusive and oriented toward enhancing the target's experiences. It is a flexible heuristic strategy that turns an ever-watchful eye to the researcher's theoretical sensibility and the ways in which meanings are constructed. It suggests that we study the context of the reception of trafficked women starting not from an epistemic question, but from a socio-educational problem perceived as relevant by the components of the community involved: operators, mediators, educators, social workers, psychologists and beneficiaries.

### 2.3. The research process

I was involved in the data analysis along with a theoretical sampling that was channelled into over 40 intensive interviews, 2 focus groups and analysis also of interviews with privileged witnesses working in the anti-trafficking network. In the open coding phases I elaborated about 500 labels, through a process of abstraction and comparison, then I arrived at the focused coding with 30 provisional categories in total and, finally, at the 9 categories identified through the process of focused coding propedeutic to the theoretical one. Finally, the 5 core categories emerged, in a process that lasted 3 years.

- Becoming competent in/for SAI. Several properties converge within this category that refer to the training needs of the multi-professional team, their need for intercultural and gender pedagogical training, the need to approach and be aware of acting a committed militant pedagogy. Furthermore, as an explanatory property to this category, the SAI is configured as a true educating community, a microcosm within which dynamics and relationships coexist for a goal of good, improvement and emancipation.
- A language to be and a device to act. This category gives an account of the explanatory properties relating to the training needs of the target group with a specific focus on learning Italian L2 and of the design tools. Literacy is configured as a complex path of emancipation, which is 'much more' than learning a language or obtaining a qualification. Mastery of the Italian language must not be instrumental and colonising but capable of guaranteeing autonomy and reorienting one's education. The learning paths are all tied to the certainty, not only of the immediacy of the moment, but to the acquisition of skills aimed at full and effective inclusion and the reconquest of one's individual autonomy, understood as effective emancipation from their need for temporary assistance (Catarci, 2019).
- It is never how we would like it: co-constructing in a challenging context. The explanatory properties relating to anxieties, unexpectedness, difficulties and emergencies, the frustration of an area that is set up as pretending to be welcoming and the fear of failure on the part of both the pedagogically oriented professions and the target group converge in this category. The economic and social devaluation of those who work in the SAI, the prejudices against the beneficiaries but also against the professionals. The theme of being born out and the materiality,

sometimes very different, from what one has read and studied in manuals and the hyper-procedurality of bureaucratic practices that are sometimes dehumanising.

- Juju ritual and migration trauma. This category recalls ancestral and hyper problematic issues that come to the fore as an impediment to pathways to well-being and health. It recalls the avoidance of clandestine voluntary termination of pregnancy one of the most painful issues but also one of the most challenging from an educational point of view because it goes to the crossroads of culture, traditions, use of one's own body, vision of oneself and vision of the social status linked to motherhood. It is a category in which powerful conceptual knots come together that are difficult to untangle and that are still very much tied to a traditional rituality and syncretic spirituality that we cannot disregard and that the educator must necessarily take into account.
- Nigerian's fighters. In the latter category we find properties such as pedagogical hope (Freire, 2014), resilience and resistance (Lopez, 2018), the ability to redefine trauma (Beneduce, 2010), and one's agency. Thus, the ability to know how to reinvent oneself, to be able to bet on oneself anew. There is a clear reference to emancipatory practices that must not be imposed from above but shared with the beneficiaries: their motivation to want to regain possession of their own existence.

### **3. THE EMERGENT THEORY**

- The emergent theory arises from a comparison and recursive dialogue between the five core categories; as in the best auspices of CGT an attempt was made to elaborate a grounded theory that would put all the categories that emerged into dialogue by valorising their intersectional bearing. Essentially, the theorisation suggests 'what not to do', i.e., not to trivialise beliefs and experiences and, above all, to value a critical vision in educational processes, i.e. not to lower projects from above but to make actors, figures with pedagogical value, capable of forming themselves and being immersed in the work that takes place on a daily basis. This interpretative theory suggests that we aspire to be operational: uniting theories and practices to become a tool for facilitating and improving work and projects in the SAI, enhancing the aspirations of the entire sample involved, imagining and acting as an

educating community: becoming competent, continuously training, meta-thinking, supervising and involving the entire team in all the steps: going round the world while standing still. This means deconstructing our cultural clothes that lead us to act education in a sometimes ethnocentric and uncritical sense and to act in a decolonial way. Not imposing a pedagogical colonisation, imagining what the beneficiaries need without considering their point of view and without giving them a voice. To avoid this colonising drift, it is necessary to redefine processes, practices and concrete proposals together on the basis of what is really useful and what is really shared.

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# ALIAS CAREER AND NON-BINARY STUDENTS IN THE ITALIAN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

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This contribution describes the challenges non-binary students face in Italian secondary schools by analysing the alias career (*carriera alias*) regulations of 344 secondary schools. This school policy ensures that trans\* students can use their chosen name on unofficial school documentation. While some tertiary institutions with the alias career have removed pathologising requirements, such as the requirement for a diagnosis, secondary education remains fragmented. As a result, non-binary individuals, especially those who do not pursue a medicalised transition, are particularly affected. The analysis found significant variation in eligibility criteria. Moreover, only a minority of schools used gender-neutral language within the regulations, with most institutions opting for the generic masculine or binary endings. Additionally, access to gender-neutral spaces, such as bathrooms and locker rooms, is severely lacking and sometimes not offered to the broader school community. To conclude, the study highlights the barriers non-binary students face, including the lack of nationwide standards, gatekeeping practices, and insufficient understanding of their needs.

non-binary; trans; education; *carriera alias*; Italy

## INTRODUCTION

Since the 2018/2019 school year, Italian schools of all levels have started to adopt the alias career (*carriera alias*). This school policy aims to allow trans\*<sup>1</sup> pupils to use their chosen names and pronouns through a confidentiality agreement. A minority of schools also allow trans\* students to use their chosen

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the word 'trans\*' will be used as an umbrella term for people whose gender identity is not congruent with their gender assigned at birth. When only binary or non-binary identities are relevant, the distinction will be specified.

bathroom and locker room, train their teaching and non-teaching staff, and educate students on LGBTQIA+ issues.

The University of Turin first established the alias career as a substitute for the *doppio libretto*. In this similar policy, trans\* students were given a second (physical) student's record book with their chosen name. During the last years, it faced many changes in some universities under the request of trans\* students, such as at the University of Bologna, the University of Palermo and the Sapienza University of Rome, where the mandatory requirement of a diagnosis of gender incongruence/gender dysphoria was abolished. This demand stemmed from the need to eradicate pathologising requirements and to allow access to all trans\* students, including those with non-binary gender identities. Even though there have been significant steps forward in tertiary education, the pathologisation of the alias career persists in most secondary schools, with 75% requiring a diagnosis as of August 2023 (Bourelly, 2024). As a result, many trans\* students face difficulties in accessing support at school. In particular, non-binary pupils may not qualify for the alias career, especially those not wishing for a medicalised gender transition. This demand also excludes all those who live in a city or region without gender clinics and LGBTQIA+ associations and do not have the economic means for a private psychologist specialising in gender incongruence or travel to access public care.

This contribution, part of a larger doctoral research project, describes the accessibility issues of the alias career for non-binary pupils through the regulations of secondary schools that have adopted the policy by August 14, 2024.

## **1. NON-BINARY PEOPLE AND EDUCATION**

The school experience of trans\* pupils is usually defined by bullying, marginalisation and victimisation. Macro and microaggressions also characterise their experience, usually by denying the use of their names and pronouns. As a result, mental health, academic performance and classroom engagement might suffer, leading to absenteeism and dropping out (McBride, 2021).

Non-binary students face further unique challenges (Johnson et al., 2020) related to their gender identity, which usually is not recognised as authentic due to gender binarism. The invalidation of their identities also stems from adultism, as adults within the institute usually position themselves as more knowledgeable than learners and thus do not believe they can comprehend their

gender.

Non-binary students can also encounter difficulties when navigating gender-segregated spaces such as bathrooms, locker rooms, and physical education, as most schools in Italy do not provide gender-neutral facilities. Indeed, the binary nature of gendered spaces in most schools can lead to non-binary students feeling excluded, uncomfortable, or forced to conform to an identity that does not align with their own (Johnson et al., 2020; Paechter et al., 2021).

Additionally, the lack of gender-neutral pronouns and endings in Italian contributes to isolation (Johnson et al., 2020), as students may not find their identities reflected in the language used by their teachers and peers. While options like gender-neutral symbols (\*, @), the ending in 'u' or the *schwa* (singular ə and plural ɜ) have emerged, they are mainly used in queer spaces and often face resistance from the broader community (Manera, 2021).

## 2. METHOD

This contribution draws from the author's extensive exploratory mixed-method research project (Bourelly, 2023; 2024). The project aimed to map schools adopting the alias career, analyse the regulations of 344 upper secondary schools, and gather insights from binary trans\* students, principals, teachers, parents, and activists with first-hand experience with the policy. While direct interviews with non-binary students would have provided critical insights, limitations in accessibility and participation meant that their perspectives were not represented through first-hand accounts. Indeed, further research is needed to explore non-binary students' experience with the alias career comprehensively.

This study qualitatively analysed the regulations of 344 upper secondary schools to explore how the alias career is designed to support non-binary pupils, *de iure*. The analysis focused on identifying themes and examining potential implications for non-binary students seeking support at school. Particular attention was given to various aspects of the alias career regulations, including the language used (binary or gender-neutral), schools' specific requirements for accessing support and gendered spaces.

The analysis reveals potential challenges and barriers non-binary pupils might face before or after requesting the alias career. These findings represent a preliminary step in addressing broader questions of inclusivity, representation, and the perceptions and pre-conceptions schools hold regarding the trans\* population.

### 3. CAN NON-BINARY STUDENTS ACCESS THE ALIAS CAREER?

The school regulations governing the activation and implementation of the alias career can vary significantly across institutions. Due to the lack of an official stance from the Ministry of Education and the discretionary authority granted by School Autonomy (Benadusi et al., 2020), no national regulations or best practices are recommended to schools. As a result, the alias career school regulations are fragmented, with no standardised support for trans\* students across institutions.

Starting with the language used within the regulations, of the 344 institutions analysed, only 15 adopted gender-neutral language using the *schwa* or asterisks. Most schools, however, use both masculine and feminine endings, while some use the generic masculine. Even when gender-neutral language is used in the alias career regulations, it is often not extended to other documents and information available on schools' websites. This disparity suggests that gender-neutral language is primarily intended for information dedicated to trans\* pupils and not the broader school community. The only known exception is Liceo Cavour (Turin), which stopped using gendered language and adopted the asterisk for official communication, such as school circulars (Sandrucci, 2021).

As a result, non-binary people who do not use gendered language for themselves may perceive the use of the alias career regulations as problematic and that the policy is aimed only at binary trans\* students. This sentiment is also reflected in the differing requirements for activating the alias career. While most schools require a diagnosis of gender dysphoria/gender incongruence to access support, some institutions impose even more stringent conditions. For instance, Istituto Via delle Sette Chiese (2022) requires students to undergo gender-affirming hormone therapy before receiving support. Liceo Benedetti-Tommaseo (2023) sets even more extreme conditions, requesting that students initiate legal proceedings to change their name and gender marker. These unnecessary demands add psychological and financial burdens to families and adult students, reinforcing cisnormative and medicalised views of trans\* identities and excluding those unable to meet such standards.

Further gatekeeping exists in some institutions (e.g., Istituto Olivelli-Putelli, 2023), where the school principal may decide on a case-by-case basis whether to grant the alias career. Personal values, such as whether a student appears 'feminine' or 'masculine' enough to be considered trans\*, may influence decision-making. This particularly impacts non-binary individuals and those

with diverse gender expressions (Johnson et al., 2020; Paechter et al., 2021).

Binary gender biases are also evident in gendered spaces, such as bathrooms, changing rooms and physical education classes (Mcbride, 2021). For instance, while some schools allow students to use the bathroom corresponding to their gender identity, many do not provide a gender-neutral option, thus excluding individuals not wishing to use gendered facilities. Some schools, such as Liceo L. Manara (2022), have instituted gender-neutral bathrooms accessible to all students. However, others allow only students with the alias career to use these bathrooms (e.g., Liceo S. di Giacomo, 2022), which can severely compromise their privacy and safety.

The documents examined show that the variation in school regulations concerning the alias career, from the language used to activation requirements, highlights significant barriers to inclusion and support for non-binary students. While some schools attempt to provide gender-neutral spaces and use gender-neutral language, most institutions reinforce binary gender identities and norms. These discrepancies between institutions demonstrate the need for a unified and inclusive approach to support all gender identities within the Italian educational institution. This should begin with comprehensive training on the diverse needs of the trans\* community, leading to policies that consider these differences.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

To conclude, despite some schools' favourable regulations and practices for non-binary pupils, the landscape is highly fragmented, with many students facing gatekeeping. Indeed, there are several limitations to the alias career, as most schools aim the policy at binary trans\* students and not the broader trans\* community.

To ensure that all students, regardless of gender identity, feel included and supported at school, it is essential that the Ministry of Education establishes national non-pathologising regulations and provides best practices to implement in all schools. In the meantime, schools' alias career regulations must be revised to include gender-neutral language. Additionally, gender-neutral language must not be used only in documentation addressed to trans\* students but also to the broader school community. It is also important to emphasise that the policy is aimed at all trans\* pupils and provides gender-neutral spaces for all students. To ensure that non-binary students' needs are addressed, their families (and transgender associations) must be consulted to

explore and understand their needs.

Lastly, training on trans\* identities for both teaching and non-teaching staff and education on gender diversity for students in alignment with the National 2022-2025 LGBT+ strategy (Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali, 2022) is essential. These educational initiatives are vital to address the lack of understanding of trans\* identities and gender binarism within the educational institution (Johnson et al., 2020; Paechter et al., 2021).

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# LEARNING ABOUT THE QUEER. DECONDITIONING IMAGINARIES AND EDUCATION

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Five years after the research study conducted in Italy and Spain by Vaccarelli, Fiorenza, Di Genova (2021), aimed at studying the attitudes of future teachers and social workers towards educational issues related to sexual orientation – my proposal intends to deepen and explore through a qualitative methodological approach how again the social background, the level and quality of the information possessed correlate with attitudes linked to educational issues related to sexual orientation. The research will be based on focus groups aimed at university students from the degree courses in Educational Sciences, Primary Education and Social Services at the University of L'Aquila. The focus groups will collect qualitative data through comparison and open dialogue between male and female students of the indicated study courses on some specific themes regarding their level of awareness of the LGBTIA+ reality. We will also try to understand whether they are aware of the need for education to assume a queer perspective (Burgio, 2012) that takes the principle of complexity (Borruso, Gallelli, Seveso, 2023) as a shared basis and question ourselves about gender education (Butler, 2014; Nanni, Di Genova, 2023).

LGBTIA+, training, Focus group, pedagogy, queer

## INTRODUCTION

The research presented at the Third International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” is the result of some reflections generated by the ongoing debate in both the political and the cultural public sphere on gender discrimination, civil rights of LGBTQI+ people and educational and pedagogical principles to be followed in that regard. From many sides, attempts have been made to propose such guidelines with the necessary openness related to the

historical time we live in, in which the freedom of expression of personal identity – including sexuality – has become the new frontier in the affirmation of human rights.

In the world of education, the attack is aimed not only at materials used in teaching, but also at institutional documents that *simply* talk about gender equality and equal opportunity in the prevention of discrimination and unequal treatment. For example, some passages of the so-called “Legge della Buona Scuola” (*Good School Law*) (Law 107/2015) that explicitly call for ensuring the education for gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination, or the guidelines that the Ministry of Education has issued on this matter (MIUR, 2015a) have come under attack. Under attack, moreover, are certain World Health Organization documents proposing new *standards* for sex education in Europe (with Italy being dormant on this issue in the European scenario) or focusing on educational problems related to homophobic bullying as well.

In recent years, attempts have been made to construct the idea that an alleged gender ideology was circulating (see Accolla, 2015; Grimaldi, 2015), which constitutes a true social danger, aimed at confusing and undermining the ground of both girls’ and boys’ sexual identity. This operation has silenced many voices that, even from below, have experienced embarrassment over this issue. It put school administrators and teachers in a situation of indecision, bewilderment and fear, even where certain pedagogical intentions could have been expressed, and affirmed the paradigm of silence that, according to Pietrantoni, Prati and Saccinto (2011, p. 75), processes the homosexuality as a too delicate and unapproachable taboo subject.

## **1. WHY SHOULD EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH BE INTERESTED IN THESE QUESTIONS?**

Why should pedagogical inquiry – both the more reflective and the experimental one – care about such questions, at the risk of seeming inconvenient? How much do the resulting problems affect those dimensions of education and training that concern educators, teachers and professionals working in social services?

- The pedagogical inquiry should be more concerned with such issues because, in the face of forces that are hostile to change, there is a world in motion. This world is real and manifest in its contradictory nature, and raises every day stringent questions about which substantial actions are needed (let us think about the homophobic bullying in schools and the

discrimination and harassment of LGBTQI+ people);

- Even today, in common sense and social interactions, as gender studies and pedagogy demonstrate (Burgio, 2015; Ulivieri, 2015, Burgio&Lopez, 2023), there is a tendency to naturalize those differences, which are instead the result of a long process of historical, social and cultural construction, implicitly mediated by the education in all its expressions (Nanni, 2023). One can think of “boys” and “girls” games, educational models that are never gender-neutral (Biemmi 2017), conditionings that eventually permeate the body, identity, future perspectives and interpersonal relationships. This is where the – implicit, unaware, “conditioned” – education becomes pedagogy, when it succeeds in reflecting, knowing and deconstructing, with the aim of becoming conscious education again, free from conditioning and respectful of individual inclinations.

The deconstruction of binarism occurs through a process of decolonization of the imagination of professionals with the aim of deconditioning education from gender stereotypes and prejudices – even (or above all) implicit ones.

The researches on this focus were conducted by the pedagogy group at the University of L’Aquila and presented in February at the CIEG (Centro Interdisciplinar de Estudos de Género) International Congress “Social Gender, Feminist and Women’s Studies: knowledge, public policies and social justice” at the University of Lisbon.

From these considerations and five years after the research conducted in Italy and Spain by Vaccarelli, Fiorenza, and Di Genova (2021) – aimed at studying the attitudes of future teachers and social workers towards educational issues related to sexual orientation – the following research framework and design are constructed.

The latter started from the assumption that the processes of education and socialization are to some extent predictive of the future construction of attitudes. It was hypothesized that the type of education received at all levels (formal, informal and non-formal) plays an important role in the social reproduction of the *status quo* or, on the opposite, in the establishment of more open and change-oriented positions.

The research focused on the need to explore the level of knowledge of female and male university students – from the degree courses of Science in Primary Education, Science in Education and Science in Social Service at the University of L’Aquila – and how much their level and quality of information about gender

studies were related to educational issues connected to sexual orientation.

## 2. EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ON GENDER ISSUES

The research was carried out from February to May 2024; for data collection, it involved three focus groups targeting male and female students of the three Bachelor’s degree courses. This was followed by three structured interviews with one member of each group on a voluntary basis to implement some dimensions that emerged from the thematic analysis carried out with the MAXQDA software.

The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews, each lasting about one hour, were conducted via videoconference using a structured outline that addressed the following questions:

- Does the social background influence the attitudes and opinions related to educational issues connected to sexual orientation? If yes, in which way?
- How would you rate your own level of knowledge on LGBTQIA+ themes?
- Do you think that access to information on the topic is easy and affordable for everyone in any setting (school, university)?
- Do you know the meaning of the term intersectionality?
- As a future educator, teacher, social worker what do you believe is the role of gender education and what practices would you put in place? What do you propose?

The process of content analysis of the texts led to the creation of a codebook (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, McCulloch, 2011) (Tab. 1)

Tab. 1. The Codebook

Category code	Subcode	Excerpts
Considerations about one’s academic path	The internship as an educational experience Need for more practice in the university Positive experiences with courses, workshops or seminars Perceived need for more specific courses Desire to keep the university open to the territory	The internship as an educational experience “Personally, as you say, the internship is the thing that has helped me the most. I’m now in my third year, I’m almost finished, and the

	Need to train trainers/educators	<p>internship is the experience that has helped me the most, because it allowed me to put in place the not only theoretical teachings that we have learned in this course of study and, at the same time, it allowed me to see how some issues are not dealt with or preferred not to be dealt with to avoid any problems. Yet maybe the problem begins right there, as educators we should experiment more, inform ourselves more and then try to put in place new practices that can involve everyone.”</p> <p>Perceived need for more specific courses</p> <p>“Well, maybe I would include a course in gender pedagogy also in the three-year degree course that at any rate can give you at least the basic training to then go further on specific dynamics in the Master’s degree course. I think it would be good, useful, necessary,</p>
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		<p>and could arouse personal interest from each of us”</p> <p>Desire to keep the university open to the territory</p> <p>“Debate is also important because then, I mean maybe, those who come to the university have the opportunity to access certain topics, while still those who do not come to the university risk to be left without this knowledge.”</p> <p>Need to train trainers/educators</p> <p>“In my opinion, before introducing it at the educational level, there should be some training of the people involved on these issues. What I mean is that you can’t disregard something like this, otherwise the education obviously fails, so for sure an investment needs to be made primarily on us and then on those who have to receive and learn these teachings, if we really want a change from this point of view and therefore a greater inclusion.”</p>
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<p>Proposals for educational practices</p>	<p>Use of game-play and drawing during workshops  Use of illustrated books  Updating textbooks  Educating adult parents about gender  Implementing the curriculum  Addressing issues on a daily basis  Starting with children  Admitting lack of ideas for educating about gender</p>	<p>Implementing the curriculum/Addressing issues on a daily basis  “I think that in the curriculum of any subject, or rather of the subjects that most allow it, like literature, history, art, music, perhaps also mathematics, there have been personalities like Alan Turing, who could be food for thought. It’s good to include them in the curriculum, without bringing them out as exclusive events, but as foundational elements, also talking about personalities or events or works of any kind that relate to the LGBTQ+ world. That could certainly work anyway, because you put it into the curriculum and then it can be passed to the children as something on the agenda, not just as something exceptional. This can be done also with racism, with the Shoah.”    “(…) especially, maybe, not to be</p>
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		<p>reduced to just a lecture, on a given day, without a continuation, because in the end that's what it is, but it should be also something a little bit structured and lasting (...)"</p> <p>Admitting lack of ideas for educating about gender  "Honestly, I wouldn't be the one to start this."  "I couldn't really tell what tools are actually used"</p>
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For all the constructs (supercodes), subcodes have been developed that, in the economy of this paper, will not all be explored here and will relate to:

- Participants' perceptions and sensitivity;
- Participants' statements and stances;
- Biographical experiences;
- Analysis of the emerging topics that demonstrate a familiarity with LGBTQIA+ issues.

The evidence that questions the pedagogical world at various levels is the need for more training and, at the same time, the inability to formulate a structured response to the need itself. The impact this scenario may have in the educational and social professions of the future is evident and requires scientific answers. It is imperative, as this research briefly illustrates and demonstrates, to demand teachers, educators and social workers who have theoretical awareness and adequate knowledge, free from prejudices and pathologizing views related to the gender issue. Academic training must necessarily consider this, and it is necessary to equip oneself (Batini, 2011) regarding modalities, themes and methodologies, especially by decolonizing views and beliefs.

There is a need to reflect on and deliver education from a queer perspective



(Burgio, 2012) that takes the principle of complexity (Borruso, Gallelli, Seveso, 2023) as a shared basis and that investigates the gender education (Butler, 2014; Nanni, Di Genova, 2023). By bearing in mind that there is no single theory of gender, nor a single way to do gender education, and that the debate about genders, identities and intersectional oppressions is in constant evolution, as it is the process of deconstruction and co-reconstruction, educating for genders thus results in educating for multiplicity as an openness to intersectionality.

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# HOMOSEXUAL SONS AND DAUGHTERS: WHY WE SHOULD UNDERSTAND, SUP- PORT AND LOVE THEM

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This essay is divided into three parts. The first part consists of a theoretical overview: it is a reflection on the problem of parents' 'non-acceptance' of homosexual sons and daughters through a targeted psycho-pedagogical analysis. The focus is not so much on the different sexual orientations considered by the LGBTQ+ community, but on the specific case history of homosexual orientation perceived by the parent or declared by the child. The second part focuses on the collection of statistically irrelevant and purely experiential data through research-stimulus of two classes of students at the University of Macerata. The research-stimulus, conducted by the administration – on a voluntary basis – of a questionnaire, makes it possible to activate a circuit of projective mediation which, starting from the requisite return of the results and simple classroom debate on the data collected, makes it possible to imagine and to see oneself in the circumstances envisaged and to elaborate representations of oneself, with oneself and with others, should the circumstances turn out to be true. The third and last part reports on some of the countless intellectual stimuli that emerged during a long-distance interview with Dr Fiorenzo Gimelli, Honorary President of AGEDO (Association of Parents, Families and Friends of LGBTQ+ People), on the subject in question.

family; school; education; inclusion; homosexuality

## 1. HOMOSEXUAL SONS AND DAUGHTERS: “NON-ACCEPTANCE” AS AN EDUCATIONAL PROBLEM

Although society is evolving in terms of the accumulation of knowledge, openness towards homosexuality is still not a given. In some countries, homosexuality is still considered a crime (<https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2024/05/2024-rainbow-map.pdf>). Monotheistic religions deny the possibility of same-sex relationships. In Italy, homosexuals

are discriminated against in terms of both social policies and civil rights. Within this framework, the first problem we should ask ourselves is with regards to the reception of homosexuals by their families, especially their parents. Parents are the point of reference for every child. If they indirectly communicate to the child, through the words and gestures they exchange with each other, judgments of intolerance or fear of homosexuality, the child will learn that homosexual people are unworthy and that one must “be afraid” of them. If we look at the comedies of the 1970s and 1980s, sarcastic jokes aimed at male homosexuals are abundant: in those societies, being attracted to people of the same sex is considered ridiculous, if not downright despicable. In the 1980s, among other things, male homosexuals were perceived as carriers of HIV because it was believed that the virus was more easily transmitted through intimate contact with anal mucosa. On the contrary, extensive research on the subject has shown that, at least up to ten years ago, most male homosexual couples have anal intercourse infrequently or not at all (cf. Stramaglia, 2015a). However, anal intercourse is also present in heterosexual couples. The problem of preventing risky behaviour does not concern homosexual orientation, but the correct dissemination of information. The long wave of intolerance and discrimination only crashed hard against the rock of the LGBTQ+ community (which includes homosexual people) in the late 1990s, a time when young people attracted to people of the same sex began to express class consciousness, claiming their right to love. It is no coincidence that it was not until 1990 that homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In the 2000s, there is talk on many fronts of the “normality” of homosexual orientation: it is finally understood, awakening consciences from the torpor of the bourgeois, classist and patriarchal education of the previous decades, that homosexuality is not a pathology and not even a perversion.

Parents, however, do not always accept that their child is homosexual, and the child does not feel accepted for this reason. Accepting their child’s homosexuality means to become aware of it, to stop wondering: “Where did I go wrong?”, recognising the dignity of their child’s sexual orientation and wanting what is good for them. The real issue is not whether the child is homosexual, but whether they are at peace. Many parents (most often fathers) pretend that their children can be happy by pretending to be heterosexual: this is an act of arrogance, which hides a deep parental egocentrism and, above all, a feeling of shame and guilt for what the child may represent in the eyes of others (cf. Terriaca and Baiocco, 2019). The truth, on a psychological level, is another. All of us as human beings fear death (cf. Malavasi, 1985). Those who are unable to

produce works of the spirit or are not at peace with the idea of death may come to believe that they become eternal through their children who prolong the lineage. When a son or daughter declares themselves to be homosexual, the most common scenarios are as follows:

- in the case of an only child, parents are concretely confronted with the idea of death and end up blaming the child in order to not admit that, sooner or later, they themselves will die;
- in the case of families with several children, homosexuals are perceived (in some cases) as “black sheep”: as those who have more problems than their brothers and sisters (who will generate, or have generated, grandchildren) or as symbols of their own “failure”, because life that does not generate life is “death”, or decline (radicalisation of emotional blackmail).

Not accepting homosexual children means deluding oneself that one is eternal: if the father and mother are not self-aware parents and have chosen to have children because “that’s what people do,” the result is that homosexual children are marginalised, not recognised, nor loved to the full. On the contrary, they need their parents’ love even more, because their life can only be fulfilling if they feel understood *from the very beginning*. Another “excuse” used by parents for not accepting homosexual children goes something like this: “I accept you, but society does not accept homosexual people”. In reality, on a psychological level, this is nothing more than a projection, i.e. a defence mechanism that consists of attributing personal thoughts to others. The projection, often unconscious, hides the parental inability to take responsibility (cf. Freud, 1961). If the child is homosexual, the correct statement is: “I welcome you: therefore, you will *also* be welcomed by society”. A parent who welcomes, recognises and loves their child convinces them of their worth, and this positively influences their social contacts. In contrast, a child who is not accepted by their parents will think: “If my father and mother do not understand me, how will anyone else understand me?”. In this way, parents become the children’s tormentors. Most probably, these are parents who themselves were not loved as children. But this is not a justification. As the historian Badinter (2012) states, psychological justifications for our actions do not apply when there are common sense reasons. To not accept a homosexual child is to give them death: here is the reversal of the above projection. “You, son/daughter, are telling me that you will not give me any more children, that I will not be eternal; I prefer, therefore, that it is you who will die”. Parents can be supported in the

development of an accepting attitude by means of a few measures.

First of all, avoid exaggerated reactions: these block the communication process, so a more rational and less emotional approach is preferable. Of course, the parent will feel bewildered at first, but the bewilderment should not affect the relationship with the child, otherwise there is a risk of remaining entrenched in one's own positions and communicating nothing meaningful or conciliatory.

Secondly, asking oneself what is really frightening about homosexuality: beyond the child, what *actually* changes in *one's own* life if they discover that they are homosexual? Very often, parental fear stems from the difficulty of facing the opinions of others: "What will they think? What will they say?". Well, everyone, even if we behave impeccably, always has "something to say" about us. Starting from the assumption that we are still subject to judgement relieves us of the fear of others' prejudices. In a scale of values, however, the child should come first, then the others. A child who does not feel accepted by their parents will find it difficult to accept themselves and others, will tend to isolate themselves, and will seek insubstantial social relationships with all the attendant risks. We learn to love our children: we do not judge them. We brought them into the world, something they never asked us to do.

## 2. THE EXPERIENTIAL DATUM: A RESEARCH-STIMULUS EXAMPLE

The research-stimulus presented here was conducted with two classes of students at the University of Macerata on a voluntary basis. A short questionnaire was administered to the students and filled out within ten minutes. The small and statistically unrepresentative number of the sample made the research an *opportunity to reflect* together on the topic in question, without any claim to exhaustiveness. The data were returned and accepted. The instrument chosen to be administered was the following:

Sex:  
.....

Age:  
.....

Degree course:  
.....

Sexual orientation:  
.....

1. Would you like to have a child? (only if you do not have any)

- YES
- NO
- MAYBE
- I DON'T KNOW

2. If you answered YES or MAYBE to the first question, would you rather have a boy or a girl?

- BOY
- GIRL
- I WOULD BE HAPPY EITHER WAY
- I DON'T KNOW

3. If you answered YES or MAYBE in the first question, would you like to have only one child or more than one child?

- ONLY ONE CHILD
- AT LEAST TWO CHILDREN
- AT LEAST THREE CHILDREN
- I DON'T KNOW

4. If one of your children, male or female, told you when they were 15 that they were homosexual, how would you react?

- I WOULD ACCEPT THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION
- I WOULD NOT ACCEPT THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION
- I WOULD ASK MYSELF WHERE I WENT WRONG
- I DON'T KNOW

What do you think about homosexuality?

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With regard to gender distribution (male or female), as is the case for humanities courses, the representation of the male sex is radically low. The average age for males is 24; for females, 21. With regard to males, the average betrays the objective fact: one male is 21, another is 27. Here, we prefer to omit mentioning the specific degree courses in which female students are enrolled for obvious reasons of confidentiality.

None of the students are parents. Although this is an insignificant and statistically unrepresentative sample (27 students), there are 4 “minority” sexual orientations (1 “homosexual”, 1 “bisexual”, 1 “pansexual”, 1 “transgender”). In one case, however, the student confused gender identity with sexual orientation (“transgender”). To the question: “Would you like to have a

child?”, 0 students answered NO. To the question: “Would you rather have a boy a girl?”, 0 students answered I DON’T KNOW but 24 students answered: “I would be happy with either way”.

The age of *coming out* was set at 15 years in order not to distract the students’ attention from other factors (such as moral judgments, etc.): indeed, it is commonly believed that, at 15 years of age, a teenager can at least have an *idea* of their sexual orientation without being treated as a child by the adults concerned. When asked: “How would you react to your child coming out?”, there were 4 students who stated that they did not know how they would react.

When asked the open-ended and general question: “What do you think about homosexuality?”, 25 students described it as a “normal” variant of sexual orientation, while 2 heterosexual students “do not know what to think”. Nevertheless, 2 heterosexual students who consider homosexuality a “normal” variant of sexual orientation do not know whether or not they would “accept” a homosexual son or daughter.

Some of the open-ended responses provided are worth mentioning, as they open up the need for an *open and clean debate* on this issue both within the family and within the school and the entire civic community, expressing, however, some contradictions in terms:

Personally, I consider homosexuality to be a normal aspect of human nature. Anyone is free to live their sexual orientation openly, without fear and/or reservation (male, heterosexual, does not know how he would react to a son or daughter coming out)

...loving a person of one’s own or the opposite sex does not harm or disturb anyone. I think that homosexuality is also *an issue to be dealt with in the family* (female, heterosexual).

Homosexuality, in today’s society, is still a taboo. (...) *strategies of awareness and respect* should be applied *from an early school age* (female, heterosexual).

In addition to the limitations already pointed out, the research-stimulus carried out presents further limitations: it is a small sample of male and female students, who may have felt “conditioned” in their choice to fill in the questionnaire by the authoritative role of the lecturer; the lecturer has a very clear orientation in favour of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and this may have influenced them in their choice of answers. It should also be noted that these are students attending humanities degree courses and, therefore,



“inclined” towards issues related to a culture of inclusion.

### 3. INTERVIEW WITH FIORENZO GIMELLI: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

This last paragraph aims to elaborate on some of the cultural stimuli that emerged from an interview with Dr Fiorenzo Gimelli, Honorary President of AGEDO (Association of Parents, Families and Friends of LGBTQ+ People), in line with the theoretical elaboration and the experiential data outlined so far. What parental *awareness* should be emerges from the interview: Gimelli states that a homosexual child, in the mind of a parent, “will have a harder life than others”. The stimulus is important to reflect on the interpretation of this awareness. It is true that being part of a minority makes life more difficult; it is also true that, in life, it is sometimes unavoidable to side with a minority position. The need for parents of a homosexual son/daughter to have a non-judgmental and supportive attitude towards their offspring is reconfirmed, precisely because of the greater harshness (a fact of life) that an “other” sexual orientation such as the one in question entails. According to Gimelli, “We need to move the issue from the level of value (ethics) to the level of identity (person): 1) it is pathological that coming out in Italy still exists; 2) we need sex and affectivity education in schools and in curricular form for everyone”. The stimulus provided allows us to move from the logic of inclusion to that of *normalisation*: it would be a civilisational step if no one were to declare their sexual orientation to anyone anymore; at the same time, today’s schools cannot avoid the task of educating on sexuality and affectivity – not in an ideological form, but as a *preventive* measure against the development of forms of social unease. He also states, “Young people claim their relationships, not just their human dignity, which belongs to everyone”. The problem is not only and not so much sexual orientation, but the *right to be a couple legitimately*, without incurring more or less covert or overt forms of discrimination (Stramaglia, 2015b). Gimelli notes the value of the most recent scientific discoveries: “(...) the variability of the human being is much greater than we once knew; now that knowledge has advanced, we must respect it”. Finally, according to Gimelli: “Very young people have less influence on the formation of laws than adults, they have little affection for politics and therefore, although they are open, they struggle to break down barriers”. The tasks of a democratic school are thus manifested in all their complexity: to promote socio-cultural integration processes through the promotion of a culture of *otherness* and *difference*; to enable all students to feel accepted and understood, providing them with the tools to understand reality in a non-doctrinal and non-politicised, but conscious manner (cf., for example, Burgio, 2022; Fiorucci,

2023); and engage in fruitful dialogue with families, in order to foster processes of shared growth and guarantee all sons and daughters the right to become healthy and happy adults.

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# STEREOTYPED SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER VIOLENCE AND MAFIA

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Gender violence is substantial and structural to mafia power, useful to the reproduction of dynamics and hierarchies. The paper will share the results of the research on subjectivities when crossed by gender-based violence and mafia violence, in different contexts. The study also aims to contribute to the debate on actions and policies to contrast the mafia system, highlighting the relationships between the social dynamics of gender-based violence and those linked to the specificity of mafia violence, starting from the deconstruction of the imaginary and myths, to build paths linked to the liberation of bodies and the self-determination of subjectivities. The research was conducted with an intersectional approach, creating a specific matrix of domination to read and analyze the materials, through judicial sources, life stories and semi-structured interviews.

violence, mafia, women, human right

## INTRODUCTION

The contribution is part of a research project whose main objective is to analyze how mafia power legitimizes and supports gender-based violence, in contrast to the large number of stereotypes and prejudices on which the power of the mafia itself is based. On the other hand, the result of this work is that gender-based violence is also substantial and structural to the Mafia's power, functioning as a means of reproducing dynamics and hierarchies. This work is based on two premises: the first is the definition of the Mafia as a negation of democracy, specifically in terms of rights and freedoms; the second is the definition of gender violence as a violation of human rights. It is therefore possible to interpret the phenomenon of gender-based violence within mafias through the lens of political analysis, emphasizing how both gender violence and mafia violence are understood as violations of democracy. Consequently, it becomes

possible to activate measures of prevention and counteraction to violence that simultaneously serve as pathways toward the promotion of democracy.

## **1. VIOLENCE IN MAFIA ORGANIZATIONS**

In particular, the case study focuses on the ‘Ndrangheta, chosen for its specific characteristics as a power organization based on territory and family, with dynamics tied to the control of territories and bodies. The ‘Ndrangheta is characterized by a strong dialectic between elements linked to tradition and highly modern aspects. At the same time, it manages to maintain a strong connection with its territories of origin while organizing illicit and financial trafficking at a transnational level. Unlike other organizations, the ‘Ndrangheta builds its power on concepts such as honor, where mafia power itself—coinciding with male power—is constructed through female behavior. As mentioned in the introduction, it is necessary to change the perspective on the ‘Ndrangheta to deconstruct the founding stereotype of power itself and understand how the intersection of these two levels creates different dynamics and pathways of subjectivity. The stories analyzed and the common categories used can be read as a cross-sectional overview of the ways in which violence—both mafia and gender-based—is enacted, reproduced, and deconstructed. At the foundation of this reflection lies the necessary shift in perspective regarding the ‘Ndrangheta, which allows for the deconstruction of the founding stereotype of mafia power—‘women and children are untouchable’—while revealing the dynamics through which these two levels intersect, creating different subjectivities and pathways. The stories of women analyzed in previous studies on gender and mafia are silently permeated by the underlying thread of gender violence, which intersects with the dynamics of mafia violence. Where violence is understood as a foundational experience of mafia power, it triggers various dynamics that also influence gender relations. It is thus possible to observe the unfolding of a strategy that does not renounce violence. Silent dynamics of violence are employed to reproduce power strategies in everyday life within a ‘conditioned’ context. Alessandra Dino writes:

Violence creates bonds and relationships; it takes root in bodies, acts as an identity factor, a tool for the symbolic display of power, and a means to demarcate the boundaries of belonging and legitimacy. Yet it also pervades everyday life, intersecting the emotional sphere and the most significant issues of mafia identity: secrecy and power, death, fear, pain, guilt, repentance, and shame. (Dino, 2017, 255)

In this sense, violence is also used as a cognitive tool to identify the dynamics underlying recognition and disdain associated with women's subordination in mafia contexts. Consuelo Corradi states:

Violence, with its burden of injustice, opens a window onto the understanding of other social phenomena: family structures, child abuse, the improvement of social policies, women's emancipation, domestic deviance and crime, gender roles, and services for the reception and care of victims. (Corradi, 2016, 103)

By using violence as an interpretative category within the intersectional approach, the body and the link between the body and mafia power become central: a variety of different material conditions weigh on the female body when it becomes the performative site for the production of identity and mafia ideology.

The bodily dimension becomes crucial to the analysis. As previously discussed in the preceding chapter, control over bodies is an expression of power itself. Corradi (2016) further states: 'Violence gives shape to the victim's body,' in a clearly situated space and time, which become loci of control, interpreted in various forms.

Graziella Priulla (2016) adds: 'Social control is therefore founded on female sexuality. By regulating and domesticating it, society is effectively regulated on familial, political, economic, and symbolic levels.'

The bodily space thus becomes, as in the case of the women discussed in the previous chapter, a public space:

The female body is thus configured, unlike the male one, for its fertility potential, as a public place exposed to the scrutiny of the community, burdened with a series of objectifiable potentials, separable from the one who possesses them, and appropriable by the community itself. (Priulla, 2016, 172)

Violence, therefore, is not merely a tool for asserting power in Weberian terms: 'It is at once both a tool and the substance of action and identity (...) the subject (political, collective, or ethnic) who chooses violence is shaped by violence.' (Corradi, 2016, 19)

The mafia organization can thus be identified as a group that reproduces customs and processes of legitimation within an identity framework.

By considering the various explanatory theories of gender-based violence, it is

possible to identify the diverse ways in which violence can be interpreted and read in the everyday lives of the women analyzed. Firstly, this is represented as the socialization of men and women into traditional roles. This socialization occurs in a context where violence remains a silent backdrop, even within family history, identified as:

Violence silenced over the course of family history, which—just like the rigid behavioral codes that men, women, children, and adolescents must adhere to without the possibility of questioning them—strongly binds the process of subjectivation within a specific structure of these worlds. (International Journal of Psychoanalysis and Education – IJPE 2013 vol. V, n° 1)

It is important to draw on psychological analyses to understand how ‘mafia culture is all-encompassing, leaving no mental space unoccupied. It infantilizes and enforces concepts of care and protection that satisfy deep needs for attachment and security, sacrificing subjectivity and personal responsibility.’ Growing up in mafia contexts represents a complex process where socialization into gender roles leads individuals to perceive their situation as ‘natural,’ and therefore right and inevitable. The distinction of roles and the specificity of expectations are distinctive features of mafias, which ‘regenerate themselves in those who will come’ and engage in activities linked to ‘educational trafficking’ and the transfer of knowledge and practices.

The socialization processes of male and female roles, themes widely addressed in literature from various perspectives, can be understood here as acts and methods aimed at developing an idea of masculinity as hegemonic. In mafia contexts, it becomes evident that: Women are precious assets because of their essential capacity to procreate.

From the perspective of theories defined as ‘acquired vulnerability,’ central to this analysis is the self-perception of women as weak and men as strong. Socialization processes contribute to constructing an imaginary in which women are represented as weak subjects in need of protection, and men are portrayed as strong, violent, and justified in their actions. This legitimization aligns with theories of control and social exchange, where male impunity enables violent actions without the threat of sanction. The absence of sanction is also supported by masculinity theories, as highlighted by Connell (2015), which manifest in three forms:

- Social disdain for women, resulting in stereotypical views of them;
- Hegemonic masculinity, which emphasizes power, domination, and a

perceived right to exercise unlimited power both inside and outside the family;

- An environment that supports violence.

In this reconstruction of literature on gender-based violence in relation to mafia power, we must also consider patriarchal-gender theories, which argue that societies are: “Dominated by men and constructed in their image (...) Violence against women serves the unequal and unjust distribution of roles.” (Belmonte, Saccà 2022).

This interpretation, valid for organizations such as the ‘Ndrangheta, aligns with gender-power theories, which describe violence as instrumental to maintaining power through an unequal and hierarchical gender distribution. The objective of this contribution is to make visible how gender-based violence in mafia relationships is structural in its various forms and methods, and how it is necessary to give voice to survivors by reconstructing the stories of women murdered by the mafia, whose biographies speak through their erased bodies.

## **2. FROM LIFE STORIES TO POLITICAL PROPOSALS**

The research conducted in areas traditionally influenced by the ‘Ndrangheta, as well as in secondary infiltration contexts such as northern and central Italy, highlights acts of violence that fall under the definitions of gender-based violence. Such violence manifests in forms attributable to sexual, economic, physical, and psychological violence.

Testimonies of this specific violence are found in all stories, where the domination of women’s bodies, imposed by the logic of honor, translates into daily practices of isolation and control, ultimately limiting their personal freedom. Segregation and violence are intertwined elements driven by the imperative to control bodies, with acts of violence often experienced at a young age as a pedagogical tool for punishment. Family relationships are marked by violence, which also manifests as domestic violence in its various dimensions and forms. One woman recounts: “He beat me because I rebelled, because I said what I thought, and he attacked me to shut me up”.

An other important reflection can be linked to studies on the theme of recognition. To speak of violence in the terms of “denied recognition”, or of “missed recognition” can offer a further starting point for analysis and, above all, for the identification of new perspectives. In addition to defining violence as a violation of human rights, as evidenced by the Istanbul Convention and international treaties, the experience of women in the ‘ndrangheta contexts can

be read as a continuous reproduction of acts of contempt and humiliation, denial of dignity. Honneth writes: “The experience of contempt implies the risk of violence that can lead to the collapse of the identity of the whole person”. What we read in women’s stories is the denial of subjectivity, from isolation to femicide. Continuous offense and ‘contempt’ can be traced in biographies studied in continuous dynamics that also cancel what is identified as ‘spiral of violence’, defining simultaneously alternate forms of construction of tension, of explosion of violence and more or less reduced ‘honeymoons’. An element little treated in the literature is linked to the feelings of humiliation and mortification that lead subjectivities to activate mechanisms whereby the annulment of the self occurs gradually until resignation. The centrality of the bodies and the violence suffered as persons returns with force, as Honneth (1993) says “Forms of ill-treatment which by violence deprive a person of any possibility of freely disposing of his body represent the most elementary form of personal humiliation”.

The analyzed stories reveal different types of violence, from beatings to individual and group sexual violence, culminating in the killing of women for reasons tied to honor. All of this has roots in mafia socialization models and role expectations—particularly within the ‘Ndrangheta—operating within a patriarchal and male-dominated logic of power.

From this reflection, the contribution seeks to identify new tools within the educational sphere to promote prevention and counteraction strategies. This reflection focuses on activities and projects in schools, at the intersection of two themes: the fight against the ‘Ndrangheta and the fight against gender-based violence.

This analysis must consider the mediatization of the women and ‘Ndrangheta’ theme, which has created a thematic trend influencing public debate in Calabria. In addition to television fiction on the subject, the past three years have seen the production of journalistic investigations, narrative texts, and theatrical works. While these initiatives have shed light on the stories of women victims of mafia violence, they have also reinforced stereotypes of women within ‘Ndrangheta families.

Gender education initiatives in schools are based on the assumption that adopting this perspective in education means dismantling the way reality is organized through fixed categories that assign precise roles to individuals based on gender. This requires structured pathways that expose asymmetries and discrimination between men and women, starting with their relationships.



Additionally, it re-centers intimate relationships, which are founded on gender-based behavioral norms. These norms generate power dynamics that often underlie violent behaviors, as they create relationships rooted in possession and control.

Power and control are central to mafia dominance itself, encompassing roles, the exercise of power over bodies, socialization agencies, the production and reproduction of a social system, violence, and fear.

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# THE ROLE OF ITALIAN LGBTQ+ CENTRES AGAINST DISCRIMINATION (CAD) IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE. A CASE STUDY

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In Italy, violence against LGBTQ+ people is constantly increasing, but despite this, policies implemented to address these issues have, so far, been fragmented and weak. After a harsh political clash, 37 projects were funded across the country in 2022 to create CADs and two shelters for victims of violence. This paper focuses on the political role of these activities: we present the first results of a research conducted with a qualitative approach (in-depth interviews, interviews with key informants) in a specific case study, a CAD in Reggio Calabria (Southern Italy), a particularly fragile area of the country from a political and economic point of view. Since the rates of violence alone do not explain the violent experiences suffered by LGBTQ+ people, the objective of this research is to analyze the actions and working methods of this organization to verify its social and political role and identify how these activities contribute to the construction of a public sphere capable of unveiling asymmetric power relations and, finally, highlight appropriate policy indications to reduce gender inequalities.

Gender-based violence; LGBTQ+ communities; Homophobia; Centres Against Discrimination; Shelters.

## 1. VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBTQ+ PEOPLE AS THE INDEX OF DEMOCRACY DEFICIT

Gender-based violence represents a form of victimization of patriarchal origin, which translates into producing and reproducing structural gender inequalities. It is exercised not only against women but also against lesbians, gays, transgenders, and gender non-conforming people. LGBTQ+ people, in addition to being the object of stereotypes and prejudices, increasingly suffer forms of physical violence (Tomsen and Mason, 1997; Mason and Tomsen, 2001; Meyer, 2015; Gahan and Almack, 2020; Lund, Burgess and Johnson, 2021). When discussing violence, we are referring to the marginalization, exclusion, and harm

experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals and those with non-normative or socially unacceptable sexual or gender orientations, behaviors, or expressions. This can range from subtle, implicit violence that occurs daily to more overt and direct forms.

In Italy, this phenomenon is constantly increasing, but despite this, policies implemented to address these issues have, so far, been fragmented and rather weak.

In the absence of official statistical data, the most authoritative source at European level is the annual Rainbow Map of ILGA-Europe, a report that – using seven indicators: equality & non-discrimination, family, hate crimes and hate speech, legal gender recognition, Intersex bodily Integrity, Civil Society Space, Asylum – measures the level of democracy of European states. According to this report, Italy in 2024 is 35th out of 48 countries monitored (Fig. 1), even behind Orbán’s Hungary, known for his radical positions against LGBTQ+ people (Nuñez-Mietz, 2019; Kovàts, 2020).

Fig. 1. The human rights condition of LGBTQ+ people in Europe. Source: ILGA- Europe <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org>



According to this study (ILGA, 2024), the areas in which Italy is particularly behind the European average concern, on the one hand, the lack of legal control relating to the protection of the integrity of the bodies of intersex people, understood as the exclusive recognition of a person’s control over their own body (in particular, the prohibition of medical intervention before the child can express informed consent and the opportunity for victims to obtain justice in the competent courts) (Bauer, Truffer and Crocetti, 2020). On the other hand, the lack of law to protect LGBTQ+ people who are victims of hate speech and crimes perpetrated against them precisely because they are sexual minorities (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Hate crime and hate speech against LGBTQ+ people in Europe. Source: ILGA- Europe <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org>



On this point, despite LGBTQ+ associations reporting exponential growth in both verbal and physical violence against members of their communities, the governments that have succeeded one another over the last few years, regardless of the composition of the majorities, have never managed to launch any regulatory apparatus. A legislative vacuum for LGBTQ+ organizations is read as the plastic representation of the democratic deficit – understood as the gap between citizen aspirations and their satisfaction, in terms of response from government bodies (Norris, 2011) – which translates into the denial of their rights.

The European Agency (ILGA, 2024) tells us that in Italy, even today, 53% of homosexual people are afraid to hold hands with their partner in public places, 38% say they have suffered at least one episode of discrimination, 18% say they have suffered attempts at conversion practices, that is, someone who tried to treat them from homosexuality. The same report tells us that the number of LGBTQ+ Italian students who declare they have suffered acts of bullying, mockery, or discrimination at school is increasing, they were 43% in 2019, and today they are 68%. 51% of LGBTQ+ students declare they are afraid and keep their sexual orientation or gender identity hidden in the classroom.

On this point, in the past, the Italian Parliament tried to open a political debate. There have been several attempts to pass legislation, but all have proven unsuccessful. The most recent effort also failed: after a long parliamentary process, in 2021, the bill Zan – the law that should have dealt with preventing and combating forms of violence based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability – was definitively rejected by the Italian Parliament. Despite this, through a parliamentary expedient, the left parties, promoters of this law, managed to save part of it and enable the creation of a

program aimed at supporting, assisting, and preventing violence against LGBTQ+ people: “Program for prevention of violence due to sexual orientation and gender identity” achieved by the National Equal Opportunities Department. The idea was to create assistance activities to provide legal, health, psychological, and social mediation assistance to the recipients through CADs and support the shelters already present on the national territory. In 2022, this led to 37 projects being financed across the country to create 35 CADs and 2 shelters for LGBTQ+ people who are victims of violence.

## **2. THE ITALIAN CENTRES AGAINST DISCRIMINATION. A CASE STUDY**

The lack of specific laws to protect people from homophobic and transphobic violence in Italy encourages systemic discrimination and contributes to increasing the inequalities experienced by LGBTQ+ people, who are also denied access to resources and, in general, to citizenship rights. For this reason, Italian LGBTQ+ communities have self-organized to create centers against discrimination and shelters for young victims of violence. The aim is to organize support and assistance for vulnerable people without social protection. These organizations, providing essential services to sexual minorities, carry out political action that enters the public sphere, helping to fight violence and raise public awareness, reaffirming the need for recognition of the rights of LGBTQ+ people.

Through funding provided by the “Program for Prevention of Violence due to sexual orientation and gender identity”, many LGBTQ+ organizations have had the financial resources to set up new CADs. Thus, for the first time, even in smaller or peripheral cities, there was the opportunity to experiment with activities to support members of the LGBTQ+ community.

From that perspective, one of the most stimulating case studies concerns the “Centre Against Discrimination LGBTQIA+ Calabria”, in Reggio Calabria in Southern Italy.

This organization is interesting to study for several reasons: that project was born in an area considered very weak from a socioeconomic point of view and, more specifically, from a political one. This area has weak political participation and is considered afflicted by a widespread poor civic culture. In this direction, studying LGBTQ+ communities in their ability to activate participatory processes can be useful to grasp the stereotypes and prejudices with which Southern Italy is often described. Furthermore, precisely because of the marginalized condition of the area, it can be interesting to verify whether actions

attributable to good practices are prepared and how they are organized.

This research, which began in 2023 and is still ongoing, aims to investigate the political role played by CADs and shelters for LGBTQ+ people. It intends to analyze practices, methodologies, relationships with the local community, and their connection with similar organizations or movements at the national level. A further objective is to identify any good practices that can be useful to propose innovative policies.

For this reason, the approach used is to examine three levels that respond to the specific research topic of our project:

- The “micro-level” examines services’ internal workings and intervention strategies, such as counseling, crisis intervention, case management, community organization, advocacy, and active listening.
- The “meso-level” looks at the relationships between movements.
- The “macro-level” considers how this work can be viewed as “best practices”.
- We have been using a qualitative methodology, specifically:
- In-depth interviews with “key informants” people who are aware of the current situation in the management of these services (we have interviewed all the staff members so far, and we are going to interview local administrators, politicians, social workers, and other experts involved in this project able to give us information about the CAD activities social and political impact.
- Ethnography research approach within the CAD.

This CAD provides many services: the LGBTQ+ advice desk for Orientation to Local Services, Psychological Support, Legal Helpdesk Job Orientation, Health Helpdesk Support for LGBQIA+ Migrants, Training for Administrative personnel and Volunteers. However, it is becoming an important reference point for public health: between the 14th of March 2022 and the 31st of December 2023, they had more than 200 requests for help (in 2024 so far, the requests are around 20), especially for legal support for gender reassignment, and medical support for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or HIV tests.

The staff members define themselves and their projects as part of a national movement. A node of the regional and national network: this CAD was born within Arcigay (the most popular Italian LGBTQ+ organization), but mostly, they recognize an important political role in their work:

When the CAD project was written, they never considered only Reggio Calabria. The lack of services for LGBTQ+ people concerned not only our city but the whole Calabria region. This is the reason why it was called “CAD Calabria”. We wanted to be a reference point for all Calabrian people. For this reason, we also created a service point in Cosenza, another important city in our region. The most important thing is networking because it is the only way to overcome the marginalization of LGBTQ+ people. (Silvia, Legal consultant)

From the beginning of the project, the CAD has tried to propose itself as a local actor, carrying out activities aimed at citizens within it. Therefore, it has attempted to find allies outside and promote good practices. They transformed “bad practices” into “best practices”. Even in the public health aspect, which should be routine, such as the respect of privacy for everyone needs an HIV test:

Until last year, in violation of all legal provisions, in our Local Health Department, to get a free HIV test, you needed a doctor’s prescription, or you had to go to a private practice for a fee. That’s incredible! We reported the matter, and we opened a negotiation with the new manager – who is much more sensitive – and quickly established a new agreement that respects the principle of anonymity without charge, and which also provides us the chance of having a doctor who cyclically comes to our office for testing. (Francesca, member of the staff)

Beyond the health role, the CAD has arranged events around the city aimed at LGBTQ+ youth. They involve citizens promoting a culture of respect towards LGBTQ+ people. It is the purpose of Space-Q:

We created Space-Q with a specific idea: to put everything that each young Calabrian needs in it. It is a traveling Queer community space. Every month we establish events across the city, at clubs and bars that host us, and we organize training sessions on queer history, the rights of LGBTQ+ people, sexual education, and sometimes watching films to then discuss together. We often invite prominent figures (mostly Calabrian people) to tell us their story and their experience because often the youngest think they are alone, the only queer in the city, who must necessarily escape from here. We want to offer them another point of view, another chance (Alice, member of the staff)

Regarding the difficulties encountered in their activity, the cad staff underlines some critical issues related to the context in which they operate. One of the most important problems concerns a few reports of homophobia cases. For the staff of CAD, there is a double interpretation: on the one hand, it could be

understood that LGBTQ+ people fear, don't trust the police, and don't feel protected by the law. On the other hand, it is a sad signal: many people who live in violent contexts are not aware of being the object of abuse.

### **3. FIRST FINDINGS**

According to the people interviewed, the results we have got so far are considered satisfactory despite the difficulties underlined. As far as we are concerned, for the initial questions we asked ourselves, the first results that emerged from the research reveal data of great interest: the CAD's ability to act as an institutional actor to produce good practices, a local actor able to understand the needs of LGBTQ+ citizens.

At the same time, however, they are recognized by LGBTQ+ people, but they struggle to be recognized by the whole city or region.

This still raises strong questions concerning the issue of civic culture, which deserves to be further explored.

On a more general note, it should be underlined that without specific laws that support systemic change, these projects may not have the necessary longevity. To achieve long-term results, these CADs must be able to work in a network with all the other institutional actors, as demonstrated by their experience with the local health service. If these centres fail to establish a strong network among themselves and with the political institutions, it could disrupt the development of best practices required to improve policies.

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# DISCRIMINATION AS A FORM OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: CONSEQUENCES OF SEXIST STEREOTYPES ON THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

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Gender-based violence operates as a systemic mechanism for maintaining hierarchical social structures. The hetero-cis-sexist ideology at its core significantly impacts the everyday lives of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals, producing specific forms of discrimination, such as transmisogyny, pathologisation, and health disparities. In this context, the voices of TGNC people and activists are marginalized, and their knowledge is often downplayed. This paper examines some instances of oppression experienced by the trans and non-binary community as forms of gender-based violence. The analysis draws from literature, data collected through ten semi-structured interviews with non-binary activists in Italy, and my personal experience as an activist in a trans\* association that provides trainings in high schools. The aim of this paper is to highlight harmful prejudices faced by TGNC people, emphasizing how the educational system can contribute to dismantling these stereotypes by learning from queer experiences and allying with activists.

transgender community, gender discrimination, heterosexism, cisnormativity.

## INTRODUCTION

The Council of Europe defines gender-based violence as “any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity” (Pandea, 2020). Gender-based violence (GBV) is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, it is eminently instrumental and deeply embedded in specific economic, political, and historical contexts. GBV serves a ‘corrective’ function, to maintain power relations and hierarchical social orders, as it is intertwined with other axes of

oppression, such as race, disability, class and neurodiversity. GBV can be conceptualized as a pyramid, with oppressive ideologies – for example, patriarchy, heterosexism, colonization, cisnormativity and ableism – at its basis. These systems nourish institutional and systemic discrimination, gendered expectations, stereotypes, unjust or inadequate laws, and disparities in access to resources and life opportunities.

Heteronormativity plays a crucial role in the construction and reproduction of the gender binarism as a social institution (Lorber, 1994). It can be defined as the normative assumption that human beings can be categorized into “two mutually exclusive categories” (Rubin, 1975) sexually attracted to each other. Heteronormativity is institutionalized and naturalized, concealing “the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order” (Wittig, 1980). As a society, we raise children through this lens, teaching them a presumed nature that hides the arbitrariness.

At the core of gender binarism stands cisnormativity, the assumption that the standard human experience is that of cisgender subjects. For gender non-conforming individuals, this results in a systematic oppression that is reproduced in discriminatory cultures, lack of adequate legal protections, increased socio-economic vulnerability and disparities in wellbeing levels (Scandurra et al., 2020). Within an heteronormative framework, as sex is assigned at birth, and as one is expected to have a “coherent” gender identity, any other identification becomes “unthinkable” (Butler, 1990): not simply repressed, but marginalized and constructed as unnatural.

Since gender is not truly the natural result of anatomy, maintaining a “conforming” identification requires constant surveillance (Foucault, 1976). In this light, violence against trans\* and intersex people can be understood as part of the institutionalized mechanisms of regulation, control, and teaching of the gender binarism that sustain power relations. In this terms, including in the definition of GBV discriminatory narratives about trans\* and gender non-conforming (TGNC) people, cisnormative medical standards, pathologizing legal procedures, and failures to respect the right to health of trans\* and TGNC people, allows for a deeper understanding of GBV as a corrective and policing apparatus.

Building on the theoretical framework of queer theory, the reflections presented in this paper are based on data collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between February and April 2022 with ten non-binary people who live in Italy. These individuals engage in activism – in associations, collectives, or

individually – around LGBTQIA+ issues and broader human rights concerns. One of the aims of this paper is to make space for non-binary self-narration, recognising that non-conforming knowledge and practices can be “a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives” (hooks, 1989). Lastly, I am personally an activist in an Italian trans\* and intersex association, so this reflection also draws on my experience of delivering trainings on gender stereotypes at a high school, both with students and the staff.

## THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

As Rubin argues, “far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities” (Rubin, 1975), a repression that Mario Mieli defined “educastration” (Mieli, 1977). Shame and stigmatization (Goffman, 1963) play a significant role in the process of teaching and learning gender binarism, determining what forms of self-affirmation are acceptable, and what behaviours would provoke violent responses. This process requires a continuous work of gendered socialization, which shapes our interactions and perceptions so that we incorporate (Bourdieu, 1998) cis-hetero-normative categories, enacting them without reflexivity. As the writer and artist Alok Vaid-Menon wrote: “I learned about gender through shame (...) You no longer need the people at school telling you not to *dress like that*; you already do it to yourself” (Vaid-Menon, 2020).

In schools and educational environments, gender practices are often taken for granted, leading to the ignorance or denial of trans\* students’ identities. Acts of misgendering, the segregation of bathrooms and locker rooms by sex, and various physical and psychological violences affect their well-being (Bourelly, 2022). This is often due to a lack of awareness or consideration, which makes microaggressions and other forms of ‘unconscious’ violence more pervasive and difficult to dismantle. In other cases, identity denial may stem from a normative opposition. Bullying can occur not only from peers but also from the school staff (Datta et al., 2017), who rarely is adequately prepared to address LGBTQ+ individuals’ needs. According to data about LGBTI equality from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2020), in Italy, 52% of trans\* respondents reported having been ridiculed, teased, or threatened during their time at school. When asked if anyone at school supported or defended them, 44% indicated “never” and 28% “rarely”.

Finally, it’s important to remember that schools are also workplaces for trans\*

adults, exposed to stigmatization and public judgment. This is exemplified by the well-known cases of the discriminatory dismissal of the teacher and poet Giovanna Cristina Vivinetto, and the tragic suicide of Professor Cloe Bianco after experiencing repeated discrimination and mobbing on the workplace.

## **CIS GAZE AND STEREOTYPES**

Another mechanism through which this state of surveillance operates is the pathologization of trans\* experiences and the production of discourses like the “wrong body” narrative. TGNC experiences are represented through the lens of cis gaze. Similarly to how the “male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure” (Mulvey, 1975), the cis gaze imposes cisgender ideas of femininity and masculinity onto trans\* and intersex subjectivities. This results in a hierarchy of legitimacy between trans\* and cisgender identities, and in a pyramid of validation within the queer community. TGNC people are held accountable to the hegemonic medical model, which treats being trans\* a psycho-pathological condition that requires to be “fixed” medically. For instance, some schools and universities in Italy still require a medical certificate diagnosing gender dysphoria to activate the alias career to change name on the badge and the register.

To be considered valid and “trans enough”, it is necessary to comply with the trope of being born in the wrong body, in order to access social and legal recognition as well as healthcare (Johnson, 2015). Even non-binary experiences are understood through a binary lens, depicted as a third identity, ignoring it is an umbrella containing infinite possibilities. Non-binary is frequently understood as something “in the middle”, 50% male and 50% female, an exceptional third category that reinforces and leaves intact the social order of the gender binary. There is an expectation that non-binary individuals present with an androgynous look as proof of their identity, “without the possibility to flow, even on the same day, or to contain within oneself different aspects” (T., interview). The “non-binary stereotype” is a queer identity coded to be understandable within the framework of gender social recognition – outside the norm, but in a conforming way. The stereotypical representation typically is white, assigned female at birth, with an androgynous aesthetic, short hair, and dressed eccentrically or “weird”.

The problem is that there is a non-binary stereotype, and if people (...) don't really know what being non-binary means, (...) they will see it as the third

gender. (...) but there are thousands of ways to be non-binary. (...) To be trans does not mean that you have to *cross* into another gender (G., interview).

Stereotypes rooted in the medical model have discriminatory consequences for the practical everyday lives of TGNC people. These include the worsening of living conditions and psychosocial well-being, minority stress (Hunter et al., 2021; Meyer, 2003; Scandurra et al., 2020), the so-called “impostor syndrome”, and gatekeeping practices that deny access to gender-affirming care when individuals fail to meet binary standards (Spade, 2003). Pathologization gets even harsher when someone is not only queer in terms of gender identity but is also non-heterosexual, neurodivergent and/or disabled.

My existence challenges existing rules, also rules made specifically for trans people. (...) The system for trans people, medical, legal, and legislative paths, it’s all extremely binary (...) so a non-binary person ends up trying to cling to the least worst of the situations for everything they want to do. It makes a lot of people invisible, because they’re not supposed to exist, there is no way legislation, laws, or even the medical sector decide that you can exist (A., interview).

Expectations become standards of visibility, causing social dysphoria when they are not met. This sense of inadequacy is often described as “impostor syndrome”, a phenomenon reported by all interviewed participants. It involves the feeling of “not being trans enough” – not experiencing enough dysphoria, not encountering enough violence (whether it corresponds to reality or not), or failing to conform to expectations of what it means to be trans. As M. said in the interview: “Sometimes I don’t feel trans enough (...) it almost seems like I haven’t suffered enough”. These criteria select who can be seen, standardising the complexity of feelings and desires.

It’s okay that I’m trans only if I feel that the way I am now is wrong. That is the only trans experience accepted and recognized by cis people. (...) I can’t solve this thing, because it’s not a problem (...) Our bodies are not equations to solve (L., interview).

[Dysphoria] is the result of an imposition that comes from the cis-hetero-normative universe we live in, so that when you’re not conforming to the normality, which means cis, they make you feel uncomfortable, wrong, not valid. Dysphoria doesn’t really exist, it’s a discomfort feeling that comes from an oppression, this feeling is called like that because weird and queer people like us need a scientific explanation (G., interview)

## CONCLUSIONS

Cis-sexist stereotypes cause numerous forms of violence beyond the examples presented here. According to TGEU, Italy has the highest rate of transphobia-motivated murders in Europe from 2008 to 2024<sup>1</sup>. In response to this violence, queer activism serves as a powerful means to reclaim their right to exist, through mutual aid, exchanging knowledge, and raising awareness to make a social change.

There is a sense of individual and collective liberation in activism that pushes me every day. (...) Beside what you've been through, it's a collective trauma. (...) It's a trauma we've been through as a society, a rape-culture society, an abusive society (...) So, my daily job is a little bit about that, finding common points to work together with people who want to free themselves from these chains (MG, interview).

Since educational systems are places of knowledge production and reproduction, it is crucial that the voices of TGNC people and activists – who are often marginalized and dismissed in their knowledge about social reality – are heard and valued.

[We should] push so that people can be educators in this field after studying gender studies, it would be fundamental (...) Who better than someone who experienced it on their own skin and also studied it, can teach it? (M., interview)

Collaboration between schools, universities, and activists is a crucial step to create a culture of equality and dismantle harmful stereotypes. This joint fight could also involve transgender students, by actively listening what support they need from educational institutions (Bourelly, 2023). The alias career, which in Italy remains at the discretion of single institutions, is a vital tool proven to improve mental health (Russell et al., 2018), and it must be implemented based on a self-determination approach to avoid reproducing a pathologized view of trans\* experience. Other necessary measures include the introduction of gender-neutral bathrooms and locker rooms, the integration of LGBTQIA+ history into curricula (Bourelly et al., 2022), the promotion of comprehensive sex and emotional education, and the recognition of all identities in institutional documents and certificates. Good practices like these should be implemented so that schools, universities, and educational systems can create a

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<sup>1</sup> [https://transrespect.org/en/map/trans-murder-monitoring/?submap=tmm\\_relative\\_numbers](https://transrespect.org/en/map/trans-murder-monitoring/?submap=tmm_relative_numbers)

participatory culture that fights the stereotypes causing GBV against the LGBTQ+ community.

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# SOCIAL CONFLICTS AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE. THE USE OF GENDER STEREOTYPES BY POLITICAL PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS IN ITALY

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In a critical review of the model of public sphere designed by Habermas, Nancy Fraser invites us to read the conflictual feature that is determined by the plural context that characterizes contemporary publics. With respect to the progressive demand for recognition of new civil rights, there are real convergences that can be observed between movements and political parties whose aim is to re-establish cultural hegemony in the context of civil rights. The purpose of our analysis is to highlight the rise of such convergences in Italy. To this end, we focused on the one hand on the two main parties of the Italian radical Right (Fratelli d'Italia and Lega per Salvini Premier) and their respective leaders. On the other, we considered the Italian Men's Rights Activism (MRA). The result is highlighting principles on which links are established between the analysed groups based on an imaginary characterised by a view of traditional society, whose gender roles are conceived hierarchically and, therefore, establishing a misogynistic and sexist front with which to take action in the public sphere.

gender stereotypes; manosphere; men's rights activists; far-right parties

## 1. PUBLIC SPHERE AND SOCIAL CONFLICTS: RADICAL RIGHT AND GENDER ISSUES

In critically re-reading the model of public sphere designed by Habermas (1989), Nancy Fraser (1990) invites us to analyse the conflictual character of the contemporary context characterised by the rise of a plural context. According to Fraser, in fact, this model is based on the establishment of a "power base of a stratum of bourgeois men, who were coming to see themselves as a universal

class” (Fraser, 1990, 60). This universalist model, based on a process of (male) distinction, is characterised by a regulatory framework set on a series of gender exclusions. As participation in the public sphere is excluded, attention must be focused on the conflicts arising from the claims and recognition of rights by social groups and classes.

In this plural context, however, not only is the progressive demand for recognition of new civil rights becoming increasingly present in the political landscape. In fact, the conflictual character of the public sphere is characterised by the presence of a cultural backlash (Norris and Inglehart, 2019) caused by the belief that privileges taken away by the progress of gender claims are disappearing. In contrast to the demand for rights a series of movements and subcultures committed to the defence of male domination are rising. The attempt to re-establish a universalism based on male dominance therefore enters into the plural context of voices that are part of the contemporary public sphere.

The rise of such gender universalism is closely related to radical right-wing movements and parties (Ignazi, 1992; Mudde, 1996; Rydgren, 2007; Akkerman, 2015). While for such political groups the defence of the nation’s traditional culture is a decisive factor (Laruelle, 2022), gender issues represent a privileged field of political action (Spierings, 2020; Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Hall, 2023; Meo and Tramontana, 2024). Moreover, the ways in which proposals, policies and campaigns are developed make gender a category through which – like a kind of empty signifier (Sauer, 2020, 34) –, to articulate a series of convergences with which to form a united front against the demand for rights by pluralist movements.

## **2. RADICAL RIGHT MOVEMENTS AND PARTIES IN ITALY AND GENDER ISSUES**

Starting from this context, Italy also knew first a gradual start, then the rise and finally the institutionalisation, of radical right-wing parties and movements. With the progressive centrality of the radical right in the public sphere, there has been an increasingly articulated use of gender issues to mobilise people and create large alliances (Mudde, 2020; Schmincke, 2020; Dietze and Roth, 2020). Establishing themselves as forces aiming at the revival of traditional gender distinctions, over the past decade they have built themselves as a constellation aiming to hegemonise the political field and finalise an identity politics (Saccà and Massidda, 2022). Since 2010, in fact, a complex combination of actors – consisting of family-rights associations, anti-abortion groups, religious

conservatives and far-right groups – united in ‘anti-gender’ campaigns has become increasingly clear (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2018). While initially, in the name of opposition to the LGBT+ movements, some coalitions whose aim was to oppose bills in favour of same-sex marriage rose, following the victory of the radical right in the general election of 2022, this coalition became an organic governmental alliance, where social actors and protagonists converged in the parliamentary majority and in the Government.

Besides organic alliances between parties, conservative Catholics and Pro-life movements, convergences also are evident with misogynist movements represented by the Manosphere. Understood as forums and online communities dedicated to a variety of male interests (Ging, 2017), the Manosphere is an articulated galaxy composed by Involuntary Celibates (Incels), Pick Up Artists (PUA), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), and Men’s Rights Activists (MRA). Regarding this galaxy, MRAs, being “focus on men-related social issues and institutions, which they argue discriminate against men” (Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021), are the ones having more connections with political parties and movements of the radical right (Vingelli, 2019).

### **3. CONVERGENCES BETWEEN MISOGYNIST PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS: THE ITALIAN CASE**

In order to observe the ways in which convergences aimed at re-establishing the traditional character of gender relations are set in the public sphere, some results of a piece of research conducted on radical right-wing parties on the one hand and on MRAs in Italy on the other will be reported. Due to the peculiarities of the two groups examined, thematic cores dedicated to gender issues have been taken into consideration, based on recurrence and using the methods of Qualitative Content Analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Schreier, 2012). In the case of the parties, we analysed on the one hand the 2022 general election programmes for Fratelli d’Italia (Fdi, 2022) and Lega per Salvini Premier (LSP, 2022). Since both are characterised by the personalisation of leadership (Viviani, 2024), Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini’s Twitter profiles (now X) during the election campaign and their two autobiographical books (Meloni, 2021; Salvini, 2016) were analysed. In the second case, we analysed ‘La Fionda’ ([www.lafionda.com](http://www.lafionda.com)) – one of the most active MRA blogs in Italy – and extended the analysis to their Twitter profile, their YouTube page and their Telegram channel.

### **3.1 Traditional values and gender dichotomies**

Both analyzed groups propose a traditional view of society based on gender distinctions. In the case of traditional parties, family plays a central role. This centrality is emphasised in both election programmes by quoting the words of John Paul II (Fdl, 2022, 5; LSP, 2022, 69) to state the idea that family represents the basis of society, through which the biological, social and cultural reproduction of the nation is safeguarded.

In these two parties the reference to one of the highest Catholic authorities allows them to start a process of sacralisation of the heteronormative family and, consequently, a process of naturalisation of gender distinctions, and in the case of the MRAs the same process of naturalisation of differences through biological criteria takes place. In a video entitled 'The Paradox of Patriarchy'<sup>2</sup>, philosophical, anthropological, psychological and sociological theoretical references are brought together to legitimise gender distinctions from a natural point of view.

### **3.2 Gender stereotypes**

The image of a society based on gender binarism activates a number of characteristic uses of gender stereotypes. These stereotypes, in the case of parties, rise despite the attempt to appear more modern. This is particularly evident in the way gender equality is treated. In both election programmes (Fdl, 2022, 21; LSP, 2022, 121), the issue is introduced as a generic proposal for policies to prevent stereotyping. The progressivism put in play by the analysed parties is on the one hand strategic, since the way in which the issue of gender equality is conceived must be related to the idea of society based on the binary distinctions mentioned above. On the other, it starts a form of female empowerment based on the celebration of women detached from the structural causes underlying gender inequalities.

If in the case of the mentioned parties the celebration of women as such starts a process of neutralisation of claims, in the case of MRAs the denial of structural conditions takes the form of hostile sexism. Particularly significant from this point of view is the way in which the phenomenon of feminicide is framed. In this regard, a daily work of denial is carried out. On their homepage, in fact, there is a 'statistical observatory'<sup>3</sup> in which, by means of a debunking operation, on the one hand the phenomenon of feminicide is downplayed, on the other hand

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmsYKcFVKjE&t=244s>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lafionda.com/losservatorio-statistico-de-lafionda-com/>

accusations that later ‘prove’ to be false, cases of female violence against men, the elderly and children, are narrated.

### **3.3 Polarisations**

The process of sacralisation and naturalisation of the family is based on the centrality of traditional values. The protection of these values is often emphasised as a struggle against the threat represented by pluralism. Parties and leaders analysed introduce themselves as forces whose aim is to defend the pillars and roots of national identity, in direct opposition to Lgbtqi+ movements and feminist activists (Meloni, 2016, 150; Salvini, 2016, 89).

In the case of the MRAs, the opposition front appears more narrowly circumscribed, but not different from parties. “Nazifeminists” and “Angri vigines” are described in their manifesto as categories able to embody all the evils of society. In fact, they claim that “Feminism is waging a war of annihilation against the figure of men and fathers, in order to gain privileges, primacies, and advantages for an ideological minority. They are the main source of imbalance and the greatest barrier to achieving full and harmonious gender equality”<sup>4</sup>.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Although there are peculiarities among the analysed groups, complementarities are evident, on which possible convergences can be designed. Fdl and LSP, despite their openness, present an image of traditional women based on gender distinctions. For their part, MRAs promote a post-patriarchal image of masculinity based on the idea of a man whose aim is to re-establish positions of privilege and restore the traditional social order. In our opinion, both cases are an attempt to restore universalism of the public sphere based on gender exclusion.

A future line of research could build on these complementarities and analyse possible organic alliances between the two groups. A political integration of misogynistic expressions in society would involve a further process of radicalisation of society caused by a rightward shift of the political forces under examination.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.lafionda.com/manifesto/>

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