PROCEEDINGS

Cultures, Practices, and Change 02

Education never stands still—it moves, adapts, and transform in response to new realities, while reshaping society in turn. This collection explores some forces defining learning today: digital tools, intercultural dialogue, artistic expression, and the call for ecological responsibility.

At its core, education remains a space for negotiation and reinvention.

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TOWARDS AUTHENTICITY: THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY AS AN EDUCATIONAL METHOD TO FIND FREEDOM AND SECURITY WITHIN

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Education is a process of primary and secondary socialization that involves learning and reproducing patterns of thought and behavioural norms from social groups and contexts. Additionally, education is viewed as a process that enables individuals to emancipate themselves, discover their unique and authentic selves, and generate new meaning. This is particularly true for adult education, which must foster perspective transformation and deep awareness. However, such transformations occur infrequently, typically triggered by a "disorienting dilemma" – often sparked by a life crisis or major life transition (Mezirow 1991). These transformations also rely on individual motivation and a willingness to re-learn (Knowles 1980). In the context of transformative learning, the narrative structure of the Hero's Journey (Campbell 1949; Pearson 1991; Vogler 1992) can be proposed and reinterpreted as a valuable educational method for guiding personal transformation and individual empowerment. This approach helps individuals move from a state of stagnation and helplessness to one of growth and hope (Zimmermann 2000).

adult education; transformative learning; self-awareness; narrative method; authenticity

THE CHALLENGE OF ADULT EDUCATION IN A COMPLEX SOCIETY

In contemporary society, marked by rapid change and complexity, adult education must promote holistic human development and authentic life paths. Authenticity is the ability to be truly and wholeheartedly oneself. To achieve this, individuals must develop various life skills, such as self-awareness, empathy, social skills, confidence, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Goleman, 1995). These skills are crucial for navigating the complexities of the modern world.

In postmodernity, marked by risk and uncertainty (Bauman, 2000), modern rationality has shifted from rigid norms to greater freedom and pluralism. However, this newfound freedom often leads to confusion and insecurity, as it requires individuals to take responsibility. This challenge is ultimately a personal responsibility, requiring a balance between freedom and security.

To resolve the dilemma of freedom and security, individuals must develop a new

form of rationality, based not on domination over the Other but on trust and inclusion of the Other. This transformation, central to emotional development, involves shifting from denial to acceptance of the Other (Han, 2018), starting to look within themselves. Overcoming stagnation requires confronting deep fears and emotional wounds.

Adult education plays a critical role in fostering self-awareness and understanding the origins of maladaptive thoughts and behavioural patterns (Ellis, 1962) they have subconsciously learnt over the years. Adult education must increasingly support this process by helping individuals become self-aware, understanding their personal biographies, and finding the authentic meaning of their life.

1. THE LANDSCAPE OF ADULT EDUCATION IN ITALY AND THE ROLE OF LIFE SKILLS

Adult education in Italy has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, both in terms of methods and objectives.

Adult education in Italy has deep historical roots, dating back to the early 20th century. However, it was only after the 1970s, with the enactment of Law 517/1977, that the educational needs of adults began to receive greater attention, aiming to bridge the generational education gap. A key development was Italy's integration into European adult education programs, strengthening national policies.

Today, adult education is governed by laws and national programs that promote lifelong learning, such as the "Framework Law on the Right to Study and Vocational Training for Adults" (Law 53/2003), which recognizes continuous education as a fundamental right. The system includes literacy courses, vocational training, pathways for obtaining a high school diploma, and non-formal educational activities.

A central aspect of contemporary adult education is the development of life skills—transversal abilities that go beyond academic and technical knowledge, helping individuals manage daily life, interpersonal relationships, and adapt to changing social and economic conditions. Life skills include cognitive, emotional, and social abilities such as decision-making, emotional management, communication, conflict resolution, and self-awareness. These skills are particularly vital for adults, who often face challenges in work, family, and social dynamics. In Italy, educational programs increasingly focus on developing these competencies, as they are essential for improving quality of life and fostering greater civic and social participation.

The National Program for Adult Education (PNA) is a significant example of this approach, offering modules focused on developing life skills. The European Union's "Skills for Life" initiative has also played a key role in promoting these competencies, which are linked to active citizenship, social inclusion, and employability. The importance of life skills is further emphasized by the WHO, which recognizes them as integral to mental and social health.

Despite progress, Italy's adult education landscape still faces challenges. While relational and emotional education in schools has gained more attention in recent decades, emotional and social skills remain underdeveloped compared to other

European countries. In the 1990s, Italy began integrating emotional and relational education, but significant progress came with the introduction of Civic Education as a mandatory subject (Law 92/2019), which covers topics such as emotional awareness, emotional management, and bullying prevention.

Another milestone was Law 107/2015, known as "La Buona Scuola" (The Good School), which encouraged personalized teaching and promoted relational skills. It also included projects to enhance emotional competencies through school activities, as well as career guidance and vocational orientation. More recent guidelines, such as Ministerial Decree 328/2022, have further opened the door to teaching life skills in schools.

When comparing Italy to other European countries, many nations have more deeply integrated emotional and relational education into their curricula. Scandinavian countries, particularly Sweden and Finland, lead the way by incorporating emotional management and social skills from primary school onwards. In Finland, the concept of "well-being" includes not only academic education but also life skills such as empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution.

In the UK, the "Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education" (PSHE) program formalizes the teaching of social-emotional skills, including mental health, emotional management, and bullying prevention. Since 2020, mental health education has become a central part of the curriculum. In France, while socio-emotional education is not a formal school subject, teacher training includes courses on managing relational dynamics in the classroom, with a focus on bullying prevention and inclusivity.

Italy is increasingly following these trends, making changes in teacher training and allowing regional experimentation with emotional and relational education through Law 2782/2022, which regulates the experimental teaching of emotional intelligence in schools. Despite these advances, Italy still lacks a mandatory program for teaching life skills in school curricula or in university departments.

2. TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AND THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

2.1. Transformative Learning and the Narrative Structure of the Hero's Journey

Recent laws on civic education and guidance have created a favourable context for integrating these topics, although their uniform application remains a challenge. Innovative approaches, such as pilot projects and regional initiatives, are making important strides in improving students' emotional and relational well-being. While efforts continue to extend these experiments and formalize them on a national scale for both youth and adult education, ongoing research and experimentation with new practices, methods, and tools are essential. Alongside established tools and techniques of experiential learning (Kolb, 1980)—such as corporate theatre, simulations, role-playing, and workshops for developing life skills—we propose experimenting with the narrative method, particularly using the Hero's Journey as a transformative learning tool for developing self-awareness.

The Hero's Journey, or monomyth, as outlined by Joseph Campbell (1949), offers a narrative structure that mirrors how humans make sense of their experiences and stories. According to Campbell, this universal narrative pattern is not only a method of storytelling but also a reflection of how we understand our lives, relationships, and the world around us. It can be found across cultures, from ancient mythologies to modern films and novels.

The Hero's Journey is often viewed as a cycle of transformation: it begins with a call to adventure, followed by trials, a confrontation with a central crisis, and ultimately, a return home with newfound wisdom or power. This structure mirrors key moments in life—challenges we face, the growth we undergo, and the wisdom we gain.

What makes the Hero's Journey particularly powerful is its connection to how we perceive our lives and interpret the world. The narratives we construct are framed by our thinking, beliefs, and the relationships we draw between events. When we face a challenge, we interpret it within a specific frame of meaning, comparing it to past experiences, societal norms, and personal beliefs. This framing influences how we react, behave, and understand our role in the larger narrative of our lives.

However, a challenge often arises, and we are rarely conscious of the frames we use to interpret our experiences. These unconscious frameworks influence our behaviour, decisions, and responses, sometimes limiting our ability to see different perspectives or recognize new possibilities. Like the hero who transforms through trials, human beings navigate personal and societal frameworks, often unaware of their internal narratives.

By becoming more aware of these frames, we can shift our understanding and responses, taking a more active role in our personal "hero's journey". This allows us to rewrite the narratives that define our lives and move toward conscious transformation.

2.2. The Narrative Structure of the Hero's Journey

Carol Pearson (1991) has shown that Campbell's monomyth theory can be a powerful tool for personal growth and psychological therapy. Through the hero's journey, individuals can explore their inner archetypes, resolve conflicts, and develop a new sense of self. Thus, the Hero's Journey becomes not only a model for storytelling but also a way to live and transform oneself.

Christopher Vogler, in his book *The Writer's Journey* (2007), reinterpreted and simplified Campbell's theory. Vogler's model, which presents the hero's journey in more accessible language, highlights key stages of transformation. Below are the main stages of the Hero's Journey according to Vogler:

- *The Ordinary World*
  The hero lives an ordinary life before the adventure begins. This stage introduces the hero, their environment, relationships, and problems—representing the "normal" world to be changed by the adventure.
- *The Call to Adventure*
  The hero receives an invitation or challenge to leave the ordinary world and

embark on a journey into the unknown. This call often comes from an extraordinary event or discovery that changes everything.

- *Refusal of the Call*
  Initially, the hero may resist the call, feeling fear, doubt, or unworthiness. This stage reveals the hero's vulnerabilities and the initial challenges they face.
- *Meeting with the Mentor*
  The hero meets a wise figure—often a mentor—who provides guidance, tools, or motivation to face the adventure, helping them overcome doubts and prepare for the challenges ahead.
- *Crossing the First Threshold*
  The hero leaves the ordinary world and enters a new, unfamiliar world filled with challenges. This marks the true beginning of the adventure.
- *Tests, Allies, and Enemies*
  In the new world, the hero faces trials, meets allies, and encounters enemies. These challenges prepare the hero for the final conflict and promote growth.
- *Approach to the Inmost Cave*
  The hero nears the climactic moment of the adventure, representing a major conflict or crisis. This stage prepares for the greatest challenge.
- *The Ordeal*
  The hero faces the ultimate trial, often a life-or-death situation that may involve a symbolic "death" or profound transformation.
- *The Reward*
  After overcoming the ordeal, the hero gains a reward—whether a magical object, new power, or inner realization—symbolizing the growth and transformation achieved.
- *The Road Back*
  The hero begins the journey home, but new obstacles arise, making the return as difficult as the adventure itself.
- *Resurrection*
  The hero faces one final trial, applying newfound awareness and strength. This marks the completion of the hero's transformation.
- *Return with the Elixir*
  The hero returns home with the prize they've earned, whether it's a change of heart, an object that helps others, or new wisdom that enriches the community. The hero is now transformed and ready to improve the world.

Fig. 1. The Template of The Hero's Journey by Vogler (2007)

III Act: Return to a new ordinary world

I Act: Departure from the ordinary world to the extraordinany world

10. **The road back**
11. **The resurrection**
12. **Return with the elixir**

1. **Ordinary world**
2. **Call to adventure**
3. **Refusal of the call**
4. **Meeting with the mentor**
5. **Crossing the first threshold**

II Act: Iniatiation (the extraordinay world)

6. **Tests, allies, and enemies**
7. **Approach to the inmost cave**
8. **The ordeal**
9. **Reward**

2.3. The Hero's Journey as a Transformative Method in Adult Education

The Hero's Journey serves as a metaphor for personal transformation. It acts as a roadmap guiding us to challenge our patterns of thought and confront the parts of ourselves, we have long denied. The Hero's Journey can be seen as an effective method for transformative learning.

In times of life transitions or crises, people can challenge their long-held beliefs and frames of meaning to discover more authentic truths and restore inner balance. The Hero's Journey can be compared to Mezirow's approach (1991), which involves ten steps. While Mezirow's transformative learning follows a cycle similar to Kolb's learning cycle, the Hero's Journey includes three main stages, totalling twelve steps. To illustrate the comparison, it is useful to focus on the key steps:

- *The Call to Adventure* is the first important step. The hero is in the ordinary world but is about to begin their journey. This stage symbolizes a crisis or conflict that calls them to action, similar to Mezirow's concept of a disorienting dilemma, where deep fears and desires clash. The hero crosses the first threshold to discover themselves and confront what fear has prevented them from becoming.

- *Approach to the Inmost Cave* is the second key step. The hero enters the "special world", which metaphorically represents the subconscious. The hero challenges their patterns of thinking and faces their deepest fears, emotional wounds, and unmet needs. This represents a shift from denial to acceptance.

- *The Road Back* represents the return to the ordinary world, but with new-found understanding and balance. The hero explores new roles and ways of acting, learning that meeting the Other (representing his denied parts) is necessary to find personal meaning and purpose. This phase marks the

beginning of authentic inner balance.
- Finally, *The Resurrection and Return* occurs when the hero reintegrates their new awareness into the ordinary world. This is the end of the learning cycle, where the hero demonstrates the integration of new skills and behaviours, having transformed from their former self. They now embrace their authentic self, finding freedom and safety through trust and self-awareness.

By using the Hero's Journey as a transformative learning method, individuals can embark on their own personal journey, navigating challenges, overcoming fears, personal crises and life transitions, and ultimately achieving self-discovery and empowerment.

Fig. 1 – Comparison between The Hero's Journey by Vogler and the Theory of Transformative learning by Mezirow
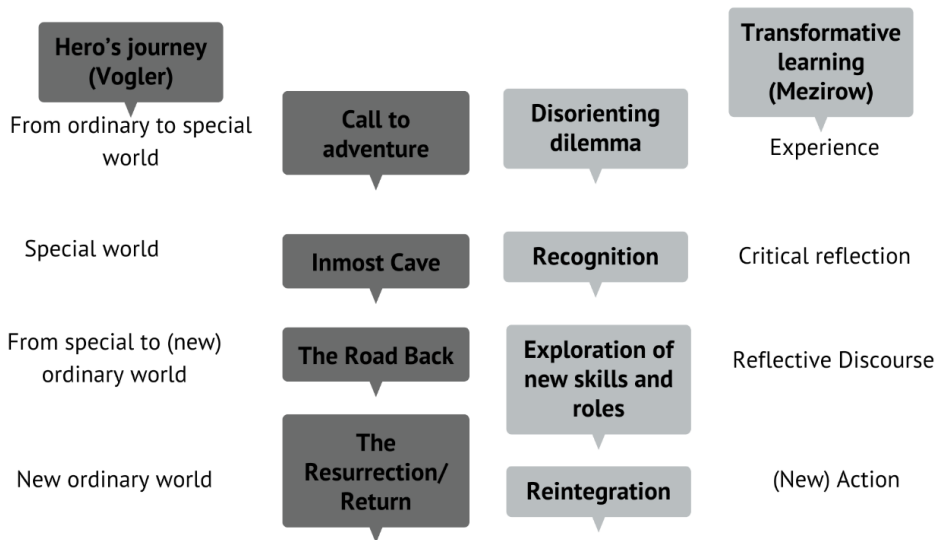
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CALL TO ACTION: NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE AMIDST TRANSFORMATIVE POSSIBILITIES IN TEACHER EDUCATION (TE) PROGRAMS

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Our panel used narrative inquiry, metaphor and story to excavate the living call to action arising from the pursuit of excellence in equity in a post-secondary institution. Narratives address women in leadership that push up against power, privilege and policies that require innovation; emergent metaphors of challenge and hope intended to reshape discursive frames and influence change; and intersectional activist-academic narratives the challenge/resist the norms of the academy.

narrative; teacher education; metaphor; intersectionality

INTRODUCTION

While universities in Canada have released equity-based policies there exists a need to rethink normative practices in teacher education (TE) in Canada. Using dialogic knowledge and self-study we illuminate necessary innovation through inclusive, reciprocal dialogue of policy, privilege, and power. By examining and reflecting upon the small stories that educators often live on the edges, this paper's intent is to capture the complex factors that shape our lives outside the boundaries of policy prescriptions (Ciuffetelli Parker & Craig, 2023).

Our team met three times over a year for two to three hours each time to listen and learn from each other. Our stories leaned towards the role and identity conflicts we experienced as leaders around equity. These focused group meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed. We take these up in turn.

1. WOMEN, LEADERSHIP AND BARRIERS: "EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE, ALL AT ONCE"

I am a female professor, a recent Director of a large TE university program, and currently Associate Dean in a Faculty of Education in Ontario, Canada.

I am a woman in leadership that has forever and since encountered multiple

barriers in the trajectory of my academic career and in the academy. I use various metaphors to depict the conditions that affected both my personal and professional life. One such metaphor is, "everything everywhere all at once". The phrase is usually heard when the frenzy of life gets too much, crumbling down into our body and soul and where life seems irreconcilable. The phrase also refers to a film of the same name (Everything Everywhere All at Once, 2022). The film's heroine, Evelyn, is a Chinese American immigrant who moves through life in a 'metaverse' of complexity, and thus the metaphor for life's messiness, loneliness, of being misunderstood, of generational divides within culture and with society. There are never-ending barriers and unresolved issues to conquer for the heroine as she yearns only for one thing – joy (also the name of her daughter in the film) and to be understood.

In 2023, I wrote about past writings and research in a recent collaborative chapter with my American colleague Cheryl Craig:

> The titles of our three featured articles address unresolved topics. The butterfly under the pin metaphor signals a trapped teacher in a period of mandated curriculum reform; the literacy narratives conjure up changes in preservice teachers' lived personal-professional stories of theory and practice over time...the terms belonging, critical dialogue [are] important... to consider in TE programs...for TCs who are struggling with identifying themselves within educational systems, while their own teacher identities are in discovery mode... Yet, we, as narrative inquirers, did not demur from sharing these paired stories for research purposes, given they were the authentic narratives that our participants' experiences produced (Ciuffetelli Parker & Craig, 2023, p. 97)

1.1. The metaphors

The butterfly under the pin' metaphor captures the feeling of 'being stuck,' like Evelyn in the film, and like many women in leadership roles in their home/personal lives or in their work/careers, and oftentimes both. I use the metaphor of the "big machine" to capture the expansive program I lead. The feeling of enormity engulfs the work we do each day. I use the metaphor "firebombs" to capture how resolving the issues of teacher candidates (TCs) feeling trapped in systems, and teacher educators limited by policies and procedures on how to 'fix' problems, given how big the program is, takes precedence. Trapped systems in K-12 and post-secondary are prevalent in the current fiscal economic and world realities.

Women are rising leaders in our faculty. There is for the first time a team of senior leadership comprising solely of women. We hold the problems of the day, each day, and at the same time, we are pressured to do more with less, but to nonetheless "fix the problem" while enduring "great explosions" of rising enrolment without funding to support the enrolment. We hold the systemic barriers and endure. Why?

1.2. Women in leadership: Caring, niceness, happiness, mothering

The literature on women in leadership underscores attributes that includes caring (Noddings, 2012), niceness (Castagno, 2019), mothering (Forrester, 2022) and happiness (Ruti, 2021) and that women have to be all these things while personifying at the same time a man's stance of authority, compliance with the patriarchy,

and a firm hand on all. In other words, women in leadership must be all things or risk being criticized if not womanly enough while doing it. I shared with my colleagues that I feel like I have a leadership position that brings power and privilege but I'm still marginalized within the power because of my identity and how I operationalize my own leadership.

I feel the barriers within, too, because I am a woman, and endured prejudice on my ethnicity. I'm a woman, and I grew up in poverty, but I now have privilege. I'm a woman, but I don't have privilege, because I'm a woman.

My role includes a mental health and wellness portfolio for undergraduates. But what of faculty and in particular women faculty? These tensions are palpable, and so is burnout. I fear that my budget will be taken away from me to be able to do the job I am tasked with, or to lose staff due to fiscal issues as I keep on top of priority tasks at the same time, and so the caring, niceness, mothering goes round and round, while maintaining a happiness front for all. Does this dilemma become an issue of equity in the workplace? I remain governed by policies that are taken up by senior levels that embrace, still, a white privileged man's world. Even though there are many female leaders, the plight of the marginalized still exists and I happen to be existing in it, by being a woman.

2. UNRAVELLING THE EQUITY "PLOT" THROUGH METAPHORS

My equity narrative is shaped by Latin American Liberation Theologies, and anti-colonial movements. In my roles I paid attention to and tried to seed some new metaphors for thinking about our work as teacher educators. Metaphors are important sense-making and sense-limiting tools individually, culturally and organizationally (Davis & McMurty, 2024). Caution is warranted in fixating on singular metaphors (Sfard, 1998). I point to metaphors of challenge and metaphors of hope.

2.1. Challenge metaphors

"Black Swans, Stealing Bandwidth, Traversing Impossible Figures revealing Hidden Figures and Figure Hiding visible and invisible inequities" represent a constellation of metaphors to describe what I noticed and experienced. Black Swans refers to low probability high impact events and references the multiple occasions when I heard "this has never happened before" as a signal in reference to situations and conundrums involving disability, mental and physical health, economic wellbeing and professionalism of initial TCs. The confluence of Black Swan events contributes to degraded bandwidth which is not conducive to effective decision making (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).

The work of change as a first-time administrator attempting to balance the complexity of schedule revisions, budget cuts, policy changes personal relationships, incivility and so on feels like trying to navigate an impossible staircase. You can't do it in real life but there are pathways that exist by stepping off the page, taking leaps of faith that the system and oneself will re-orient. I believe that is what we have been doing.

Hidden figures is the metaphor that emerged as we interrogated our program budget and acknowledged the hidden physical, intellectual and emotional labour of our colleagues, precarious faculty, administrative support staff, and contract non-unionized instructors. Invisible and uncounted labour and accounting practices for who and what counts or is miscounted and who and what does not is an important equity issue. The most vulnerable figures remain hidden at the intersections where multiple oppressive 'isms' are brought to bear upon identity and experience.

2.2. Hopeful metaphors

"Seeking North Stars to resolve trolley problems by recognizing we are collectives and compounds, braids of circles, squares and fractals and…", these were metaphors I worked at seeding. North stars are guides and in the Niagara region with its connection to the Underground Railroad calls to mind leadership that is value-based and helps people to move to greater degrees of freedom. It was a call for each person to take up their responsibilities as a leader in their own sphere to help other people survive and thrive.

The trolley problem references the conundrum of choices with no perfect solutions. The only solution I have seen involves collective and communal action to stop the trolley from traveling down the track at all and causing harm, i.e. solidarity around ending automated systems of oppression and inequity. Finally, the last set of metaphors is a reminder that we are collectives and compounds, not merely collections with complex intersectional identities and that our lives and stories are braided into each other's.

3. LGBTQ2+ LENS WITHIN TE

While many TE programs have identified embracing equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (EDID) principles, preparing TCs to champion social justice remains an ongoing challenge. For 2S/LGBTQ+ faculty and staff, marginalization and harassment persist (Wright-Mair & Marine, 2021) underscoring the need for transformative change in higher education. This section reflects on the experiences of a gay/queer university faculty member, highlighting the emotional labor involved in equity-focused practices and the aspiration to cultivate learning environments where all students can thrive.

3.1. Challenges faced by 2S/LGBTQ+ faculty in academia

2S/LGBTQ+ faculty frequently encounter isolation, harassment, and insufficient support for LGBTQ+ research and teaching. Such experiences reflect broader systemic inequities (Dirks, 2016; Dozier, 2015). The climate for queer theoretical scholarship is often unsupportive, with faculty facing hostility or lower course evaluations when integrating queer perspectives (Vaccaro, 2012; Wright-Mair & Marine, 2021). These barriers not only stifle academic inquiry but also hinder the ability of faculty to fully engage in equity work.

Queer faculty navigate a precarious balance of visibility. For some, their identities are erased or ignored, while others experience hypervisibility that amplifies scrutiny (Gall, 2018; Harris & Nicolazzo, 2020). Many carefully curate their disclosure of queerness or transness, fearing professional repercussions (Wright-Mair & Marine, 2021). These dynamics exacerbate feelings of marginalization and stress, particularly when colleagues and students perpetuate homophobic or transphobic microaggressions.

While universities may adopt supportive 2S/LGBTQ+ policies, these often fail to translate into positive departmental climates. Faculty frequently lack collegial support, reinforcing feelings of isolation (Vaccaro, 2012). This gap between institutional rhetoric and practice highlights the need for cultural shifts to foster truly inclusive environments.

3.2. Reflective examination: Personal narrative and emotional labor

As a gay/queer faculty member, navigating higher education involves constant negotiation of identity and advocacy. Experiences of marginalization underscore the emotional labor inherent in equity work. Interactions with students and colleagues often reveal implicit biases that require careful intervention to foster understanding and inclusivity.

Unpacking specific encounters illustrates the complexities of this experience. The microaggressions I encounter daily also take a toll. One recurring example is the inability of colleagues—even those on equity and social justice committees—to correctly use 2S/LGBTQ+ acronyms. I know that the queer community employs many variations—LGBTQ+, LGBTQIA+, and specifically in North America, 2S for Two-Spirit individuals. Hearing people fumble through the acronym hits me like a brick every single time. It suggests an underlying assumption: "This isn't important enough for me to get right." These moments reinforce a lack of respect and prioritization for queer identities. In another instance, when discussing the importance of 2S/LGBTQIA+ representation in picture books a student openly equated being gay to being a murderer. This necessitated a measured response to both educate and maintain the classroom's inclusivity. Often, I am hyperaware of my sexuality as a gay/queer man as I am regularly consulted for advice when 2S/LGBTQ+ related topics or resources are needed. I have also been privy to many conversations that look at equity as an "extra" or "add on," despite the fact that my province has laws that require the incorporation of equity. These moments highlight the persistent resistance to equity-focused practices and the burden placed on marginalized faculty to address them.

Engaging with TCs who embrace inclusive practices or hearing from students who felt seen and supported in class reinforces the importance of this work. These experiences underscore the dual nature of navigating academia as a queer faculty member—fraught with both resistance and opportunities for meaningful impact. Equity-focused practices demand significant emotional labor. Advocating for inclusive curricula, supporting marginalized students, and addressing systemic

inequities often come at the cost of personal well-being. The weight of this labor is compounded by institutional resistance and the expectation to serve as a visible representative of 2S/LGBTQ+ inclusion. For me, building resilience involves fostering supportive networks, identifying allies, and celebrating incremental progress. My participation in a network of queer academics has been incredibly important for me to be able to engage with others that have had similar experiences. Further, moments of success, such as witnessing TCs embrace affirming practices, reaffirm the value of this work. Strategies such as setting boundaries and seeking mentorship from like-minded colleagues have helped me sustain the energy required for long-term advocacy.

4. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The narratives explored in this paper underscore the profound need for systemic transformation in teacher education, driven by equity, diversity, and inclusion. Through the lenses of lived experience, metaphor, and intersectionality, this work highlights the challenges faced by women, 2S/LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized voices within academia. The ongoing pursuit of excellence in equity demands resilience, collaboration, and a commitment to amplifying underrepresented voices, ensuring that all educators and students thrive within an evolving and equitable academic landscape. An inclusive climate fosters innovation, collaboration, and mutual respect. By embracing diversity as a strength, higher education institutions can lead societal progress toward equity and justice.

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TEACHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING: EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIALIZED TEACHERS ON SOCIO-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

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The article examines the construct of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) within educational settings, exploring how socio-emotional competencies contribute to shaping the professional profile and teaching practices of specialized support teachers. Employing a qualitative research methodology conducted through focus groups, the study analyses the experiences and perceptions of 17 teachers working with students with disabilities. The thematic analysis of the data reveals the various socio-emotional difficulties these teachers face, the awareness they have developed and their unmet training needs. The implications of this study suggest that socio-emotional competencies are crucial for the professional growth of teachers, enabling them to navigate educational challenges more effectively and foster a supportive learning environment.

Teacher Education, Professional Development, Social and Emotional Learning

1. SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The growing complexity of today's educational environment is characterized by diverse classrooms, varied individual needs and multifaceted relationships with both internal and external stakeholders (Cottini, 2017). In particular, support teachers[1] face increased challenges due to the unique nature of their role. They must manage classroom dynamics and student behaviour, promote learning and inclusion, and maintain effective communication with families, colleagues and specialists (d'Alonzo, 2020).

To address these challenges, teachers must strengthen their relational, social and emotional competencies (Morganti, 2018; Mura et al., 2023). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is relevant for teachers' well-being and professional development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schonert-Reichl, 2019). SEL encompasses a set of

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[1] This term refers to a specific characteristic of the Italian educational context, where it denotes teachers who work in specialized support roles, particularly focusing on students with special educational needs.

interrelated skills, attitudes and knowledge for recognizing and managing one's emotions, building positive relationships and making responsible decisions. Social-emotional education aims to cultivate competencies in five core areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2003; Weissberg et al., 2015; Zins et al., 2007).

These competencies enable teachers to better cope with challenges, improve the classroom atmosphere, and foster positive and supportive relationships. Teachers can recognize and manage their own emotions, as well as understand how their emotional responses impact others, especially their students. Furthermore, these teachers serve as role models for prosocial behaviour, positively influencing both student behaviour and learning outcomes (Blewitt et al., 2020; Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019).

Despite the evident importance of these competencies in educational contexts, the existing literature predominantly focuses on student-centered interventions (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Gimbert et al., 2023; Molyneux, 2021). Moreover, research on teachers' perspectives regarding SEL and its potential effects on teaching practices, learning management and professional growth remains relatively unexplored (Bombieri, 2021; Fedeli & Munaro, 2022; Valbusa et al., 2022).

In light of these considerations, this study seeks to explore support teachers' perceptions regarding the role of socio-emotional competencies in their teaching experiences. Using a qualitative approach, the study examines the varied applications of SEL within educational practice, while identifying teachers' specific training needs and priorities.

2. THE EXPLORATORY STUDY: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To answer the mentioned objective, a study was conducted with 17 support teachers, selected on a voluntary basis. The participants, predominantly female (80%), ranged in age from 26 to 60 years. The majority had 1-5 years (82%) in special education roles, with nearly half having no prior experience in general education settings (47%), and an additional 41% having worked in such settings for up to 5 years. Regarding school levels, the majority of teachers worked in primary schools (39%), followed by upper secondary schools (29%) and lower secondary schools (26%).

Three focus group sessions, each lasting two hours were conducted weekly. Based on their availability, the teachers were divided into three groups of 6 to 8 participants.

The sessions were conducted online via Microsoft Teams from December 2023 to February 2024. Each session focused on different topics, with an emphasis on participants' perceptions, experiences and needs. Teachers were invited to share, discuss and reflect on the role of social and emotional competencies in educational settings, their potential impact on teaching and learning processes, and their influence on professional development. A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcriptions to identify and organize emerging themes, synthesizing participants' expressed ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Nowell et al., 2017).

3. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS: THE EMERGING THEMES

To clarify the study's main findings, this section briefly reviews the shared experiences and highlights key themes that emerged during the meetings. Three central themes stood out as essential to support teachers' daily experiences: socio-emotional challenges, professional awareness and training needs (Fig. 1). The following sections include selected excerpts from the focus group discussions, representing insights gathered during the sessions.

Fig. 1. Main themes and sub-themes that emerged
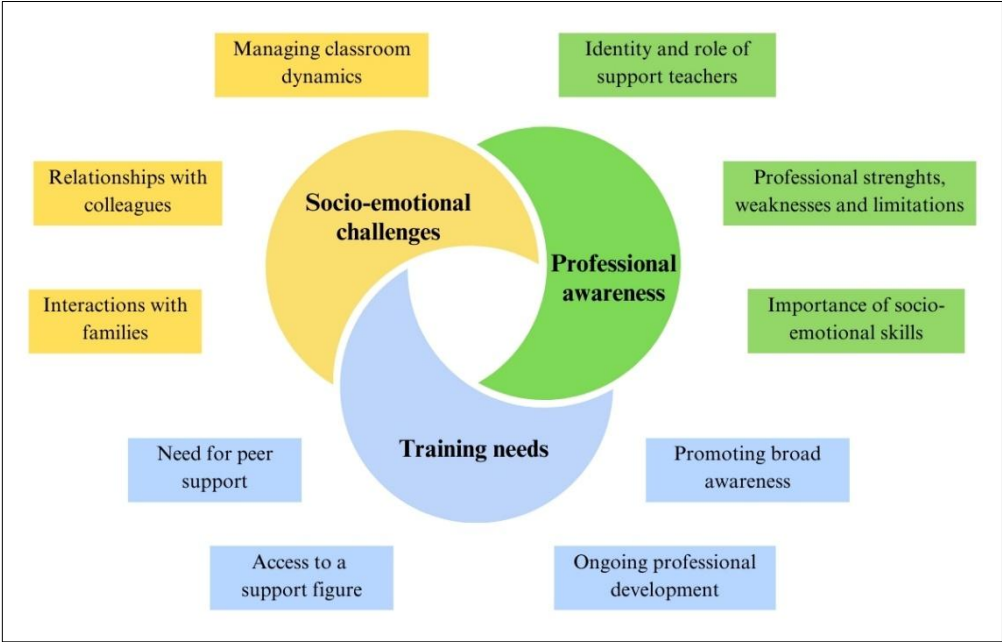
3.1. Socio-emotional challenges

Special education teachers often encounter socio-emotional challenges in three main areas (Fig. 2). These include relationships with colleagues, interactions with families and managing classroom dynamics.

Fig. 2. Frequency of sub-themes related to socio-emotional challenges
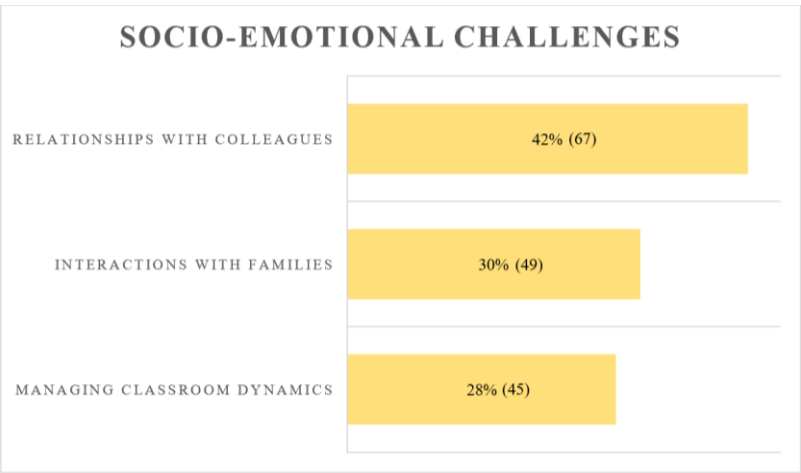
Relationships with colleagues are the most frequently reported challenge (42%), suggesting that these dynamics are particularly relevant for participants. Many support teachers describe feeling like "guests" in the classroom, reflecting a lack of inclusion and collaboration: "As support teachers, we are always guests in someone else's class. Unfortunately, it's just like that" (D12). This exclusion contributes to feelings of professional isolation and hinders effective teamwork.

Interactions with families also represent a significant challenge, accounting for 30% of responses. Teachers often face unrealistic expectations or misunderstandings from families, complicating their ability to collaborate effectively: "From the moment I met the mother, she expected me to solve the child's problems, often asking, 'And what do you, as the teacher, do about it?'" (D7). Such dynamics can create frustration and emotional strain.

Finally, managing classroom dynamics emerges as a key issue (28%), particularly when dealing with students' problematic behaviors. Teachers frequently express a sense of weakness in these situations: "You feel powerless, like there's no solution, that it's just out of control" (D5). These crises are often internalized as personal failures, which can deeply affect teachers on an emotional level.

The distribution of these challenges highlights the complex socio-emotional demands placed on support teachers, with professional relationships and external expectations playing a particularly critical role in shaping their experiences.

3.2. Professional awareness

Teachers' professional awareness centers on three key aspects: their professional strengths, weaknesses and limitations, their identity and role, and the importance of socio-emotional skills (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Frequency of sub-themes related to professional awareness
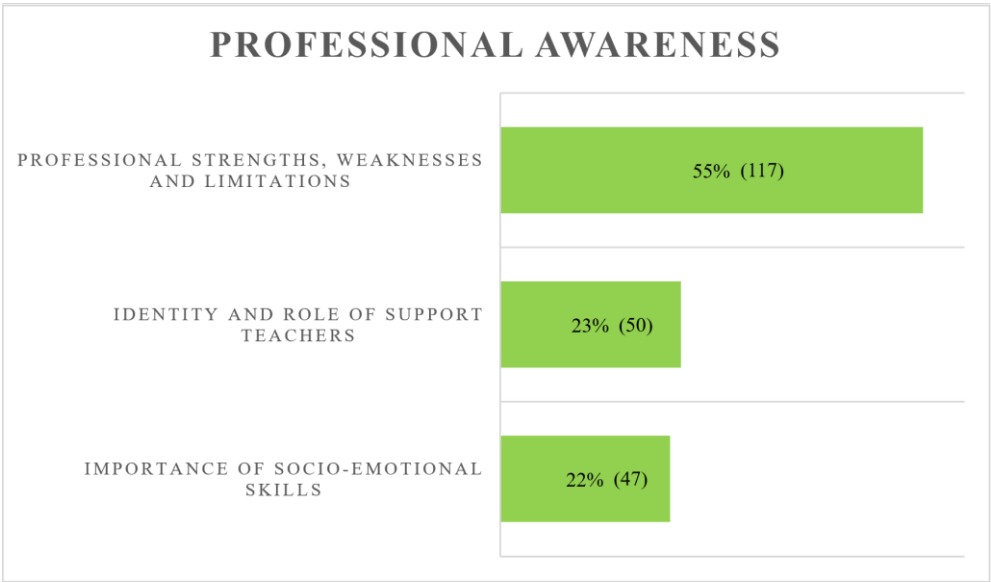
Professional strengths, weaknesses and limitations are the most frequently mentioned theme (55%), highlighting how teachers often reflect on their ability to meet students' needs and manage emotional dynamics. Many recognize their challenges in this area but also view socio-emotional skills as a crucial area for growth: "If we were more aware and had better socio-emotional skills, maybe we could manage challenges better, and feel better ourselves" (D8). This reflects the belief that self-awareness and emotional regulation are foundational to creating a positive and inclusive educational environment.

Identity and role of support teachers (23%) underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of their work. Teachers often perceive themselves as bridges between colleagues, disciplines and activities: "We are the link between colleagues who enter and exit the classroom, between various disciplines and activities" (D2). This highlights the pivotal role they play in fostering collaboration and ensuring coherence within the school context.

Finally, the importance of socio-emotional skills (22%) reveals an awareness of how empathy and relationship-building enhance both personal and professional growth. As one teacher noted: "I realize that building empathy and relationships with others helps me grow and makes me feel good; it's a journey I take with the people I meet" (D17). This underscores the role of emotional competencies in sustaining well-being and professional effectiveness.

The distribution of these themes demonstrates that teachers' professional awareness is deeply rooted in their reflective practices, emphasizing both their challenges and their aspirations for personal and professional development.

3.3. Training needs

Teachers' professional needs center on four key areas: the need for peer support, raising broad awareness, ongoing professional development and access to a support figure (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Frequency of sub-themes related to training needs

TRAINING NEEDS

NEED FOR PEER SUPPORT — 30% (43)
PROMOTING BROAD AWARENESS — 25% (36)
ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT — 23% (32)
ACCESS TO A SUPPORT FIGURE — 22% (31)
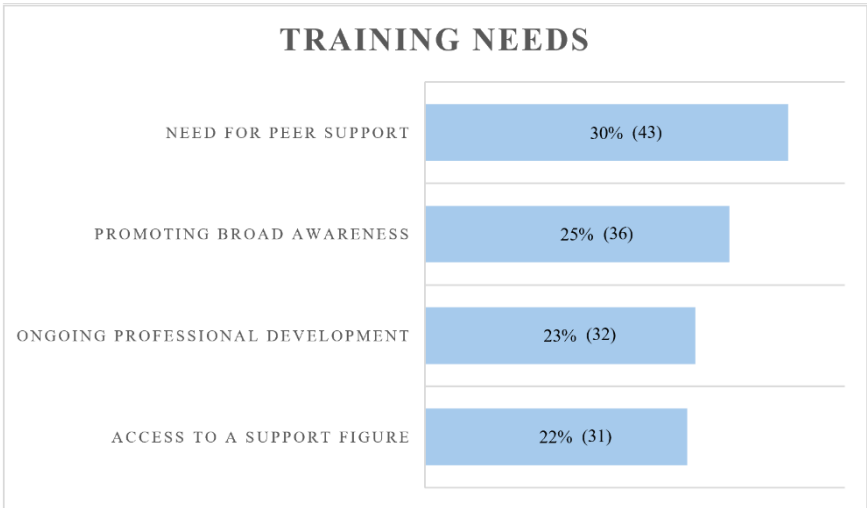
Peer support, the most frequently mentioned need (30%), reflects teachers' desire for collaborative spaces where they can share experiences and reflect on their practices. This collaboration is seen as essential for enhancing socio-emotional skills and teaching effectiveness: "Sharing certain dynamics with the team is essential, as it helps focus on socio-emotional skills" (D3). The absence of these opportunities is perceived as a significant barrier to professional growth.

Promoting broad awareness within the educational community is another key area (25%), focusing on the importance of socio-emotional skills, which are often undervalued: "I think it's considered secondary compared to other responsibilities in school; it's definitely not a priority" (D14). This highlights the need for systemic change to recognize the role of socio-emotional competencies in effective teaching and learning.

Ongoing professional development (23%) is emphasized as a way to keep skills up to date and improve professional effectiveness. Teachers view training as an essential tool for growth: "Training supports our professional development" (D2).

Finally, access to a support figure (22%) underscores the importance of having a mentor or a guide within the school to provide both practical and emotional assistance. This need is particularly evident during challenging moments, as one teacher explained: "Having someone to unload on could help, as it allows you to see things you might not notice in the moment" (D11).

These themes highlight how teachers' professional needs are deeply interconnected, with collaboration, systemic awareness and targeted support forming the foundation for their ongoing development and well-being.

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of SEL in shaping the professional identity, practices and well-being of support teachers. Through an in-depth exploration of their experiences, the findings underscore the multifaceted socio-emotional challenges these educators face, such as navigating complex relationships with colleagues and families, managing emotionally charged classroom dynamics and addressing the unique needs of students with disabilities. These difficulties not only put their resilience to the test, but also underscore the need for robust emotional and relational skills.

A key insight from the research is the high level of professional awareness demonstrated by support teachers. Despite feelings of isolation and the perceived undervaluation of their role, these educators recognize their strengths, limitations and the central importance of socio-emotional skills in fostering inclusive and effective teaching environments. Their reflections reveal an intrinsic motivation to grow and adapt, emphasizing the role of empathy, self-awareness and emotional regulation in enhancing both their professional efficacy and personal well-being.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the broader implications of prioritizing SEL in education. By equipping support teachers with the necessary socio-emotional

tools, schools can foster a more inclusive and collaborative environment that benefits not only educators but also students, families and the entire school community. Teachers with strong SEL skills are better equipped to model prosocial behaviors, resolve conflicts constructively, and create safe and supportive spaces for learning.

By addressing the socio-emotional dimensions of teaching, support teachers can be empowered to meet the diverse needs of their students and thrive within the increasingly complex educational landscape. This approach not only responds to immediate challenges but also sets the foundation for sustainable and positive transformations in teaching and learning practices.

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THE ROLE OF THE EXPLICIT AND THE IMPLICIT IN TEACHER TRAINING. THE CASE OF EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING

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The teacher's profession is studied through implicit aspects (beliefs and attitudes) and explicit practices. Non-cognitive knowledge, essential for classroom management, can be made explicit for reflection and professional growth. Research within Anglo-American educational frameworks has shown the influence of teachers' beliefs on teaching and assessment methods, with support from constructivist theories. Attitudes significantly impact teachers' intentions and practices. This study examines beliefs and practices in formative assessment and student engagement across three schools during emergency remote teaching in the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. The findings suggest that teacher training programs should integrate both implicit and explicit aspects to avoid perpetuating outdated professional models. Sustainable changes in teaching require practice-based, community-supported training that allows feedback and promotes professional growth, preparing teachers for future challenges.

Teacher Change; Implicit; Explicit

INTRODUCTION

This contribution aims to explore the topic of studying teachers' beliefs about the use of formative assessment during the pandemic emergency and their relationship with initial and in-service training.

UNESCO and the Council of Europe recommended formative assessment during the first phase of COVID-19 to support student engagement and learning processes (UNESCO, 2020b). In the most dramatic phase of the pandemic (spring 2020), governments decided to close schools and the sudden switch to distance learning (DL) as measures to combat contagion and not to completely interrupt teaching activities. Distance learning primarily relied on e-learning platforms or videoconferencing technologies (UNESCO, 2020a) with repercussions on education planning. Untrained and unprepared for this type of instruction, teachers have used ordinary methods and tools in an extraordinary context with consequences on student engagement and learning.

1. IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teaching is frequently analysed through its implicit dimensions (such as beliefs and attitudes) and explicit practices. Numerous implicit can be ascribed to non-cognitive forms of knowledge, as van Manen (1999) suggests, emerge naturally within daily classroom life, becoming explicit through reflection. In the Anglo-American context, educational research with a cognitive approach has long investigated the predictive role of these constructs on classroom teaching and assessment methods (Calderhead & Robson, 1991). The connection between beliefs and teaching practices is also supported by constructivist theories (Richardson & Placier, 2002). The identification of beliefs can therefore activate processes aimed at influencing practices and promoting innovation. As mental constructs of an individual, beliefs are fostered by previous knowledge and new experiences (Charlier, 1998); they remain unchanged in the person and can be rebuilt into new conceptions (Tyson et al., 1997) when "the old ones prove to be unproductive and the new ones are perceived as intelligible, plausible and advantageous for their repercussions on people's experience" (Giganti & Viganò, 2023, p. 196). In this regard, for V. Richardson (1996) it is essential to study in depth the beliefs of teachers which interact with practices. Some studies (Lodini & Vannini, 2006) detect the influence of the latter on the change of the former; others are aimed at understanding their construction and change to improve teaching (Gregoire, 2003). Some studies investigate the link between attitudes, beliefs and practices (Guskey, 2002) of teachers and study any changes in the direction of a broader trust of teachers in the power of teaching. Among these are those oriented towards the use of formative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

2. METHOD

The study presented in this paper aims to describe and analyse beliefs and statements of practice of teachers referring to four elements: formative assessment (FA), students' engagement, constructivist learning and emergency remote teaching (ERT, Hodges et al., 2020). The study employed a multiple-case approach to explore school contexts and the identified variables. In the first phase, interviews with school principals and document analysis (Three-Year Plan, Self-Evaluation Report, Circulars) provided foundational insights. Teachers completed a questionnaire addressing socio-demographic characteristics and ERT-related practices, supplemented by eight scales on beliefs and practice statements; a focus group was conducted for each institute with privileged witnesses on the data collected and analysed, during which a discussion was started to interpret them and investigate the relationship between context, beliefs and practices.

2.1. Context

The research was carried out in Lombardy (Italy) and involved, through reasoned sampling (Viganò, 1995), three omni-comprehensive schools (from primary to upper secondary school, from first to thirteenth grade). The first is located in two

provincial towns and has 147 teachers, the second is a state boarding school in the city centre and has 62 teachers, the third is a Catholic institute also located in the city centre and has 69 teachers. The study examines teachers' context, beliefs and practice statements in two specific periods, both part of the broader ERT period: March-June 2020 (so-called DAD period) and September 2020-June 2021 (so-called DDI period). Three research questions were defined:

- RQ1. What are the characteristics of the school context in which teachers might have employed FA during the ERT?
- RQ2. Is there a relationship between teachers' beliefs and practice statements about FA in the ERT context? What kind?
- RQ3. How does school context relate to teachers' beliefs and statements of practice?

2.2. In-depth on the focus groups

The focus groups (FGs) were aimed at sharing the analysis carried out by the researcher and, starting from this, carrying out further reflections with the interested people. The FGs were analysed using the MaxQDA software, using a system of codes structured *ex ante* for reference to the variables identified for the questionnaire and *ex post* based on the recurrence of some themes (Duverger, 1961).

3. SOME QUALITATIVE RESULTS

In this section the results of phase 3 of the research are presented with attention to the investigation of implicit in relation to teacher training.

3.1. Focus group institute 1

The focus group was coded as follows (Fig. 1):

Fig. 1 – Focus group 1 code system
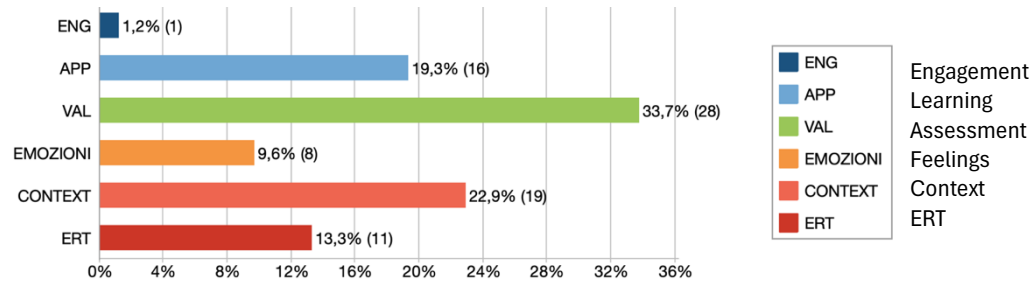
Participants were surprised by the high questionnaire response rate, noting that over two-thirds of the faculty engaged. The small number of students in each grade – and therefore of the teaching staff – encouraged teamwork and mutual help in learning digital technologies. The long-term presence of some teachers was seen as significant because it allowed a strong identification with the institute. In addition, participants stated that the presence of educators was fundamental during the pandemic period because it allowed personalized support for all students.

The participants are convinced that after an initial difficulty, "traditional assessment" has been set aside in favor of formative or soft skills assessment. A primary school teacher states that he is "enthusiastic about the new form of assessment" introduced in December 2020 because it allows to enhance the strengths, identify the weaknesses and offer support for improvement. The secondary school teachers are convinced that traditional assessment also has positive aspects including the stimulus to study and commit to the learning process and prepares them for entering the university or labor market. Even in this case, the strong link with their own experience as assessed students emerges. The Rector says he is amazed by the commitment made by the staff to creatively innovate assessment in a digital environment even though he realized that many "were just waiting to return to in-person" learning to resume traditional methods and, once the emergency was over, he saw "every attempt to assess differently disappear".

3.2. Focus group institute 2

The focus group was coded as follows (Fig. 2):

Fig. 2 – Focus group 2 code system
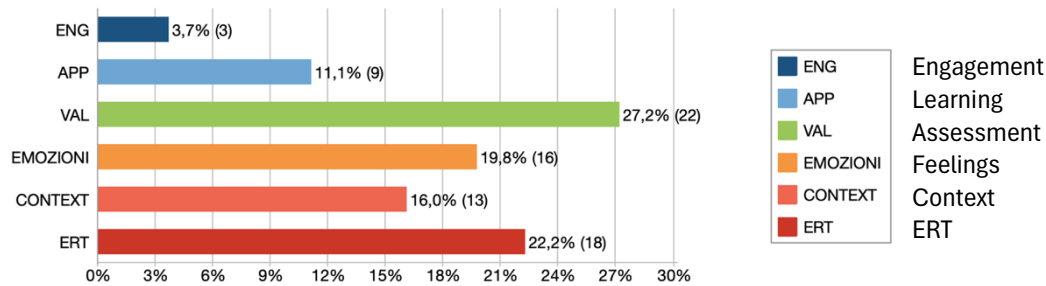
The change requested by the ERT was defined as the "big bang" of the primary school because in "two weeks they had to convert a context that did not operate with multimedia tools" and for everyone "an emergency to deal with". The rector says that the strongest perception resulting from the communication of the data is that ERT was considered "a parenthesis that opened and closed, which must not be discussed until the next calamity".

Some participants state that in the ERT they have privileged formative assessment because they feared "putting students in crisis" with the summative one and believed that it could "support the learning process" even in the presence of "very poor technological training". Others state that the emergency has "deeply influenced the way of assessing, digging into and changing the way of teaching" and has "made us understand that assessment can be flexible, and it is useful to overcome the stiffnesses that were part of training and practice". The primary school teachers specify that the change in model that occurred in 2020 has "further confirmed the process undertaken and shifted the focus from the single test to the entire process". The primary school director states that it was a "training and a de-training" specifying the difficulty of changing one's beliefs and practices.

3.3. Focus group institute 3

The focus group was coded as follows (Fig. 3):

Fig. 3 – Focus group 3 code system
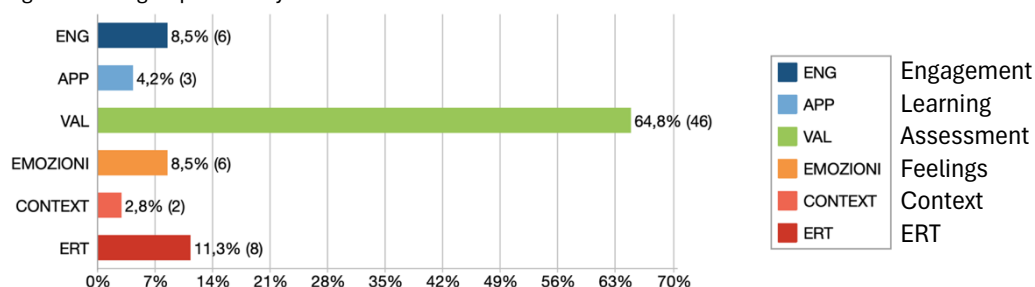
In the specific area of assessment, there are different beliefs according to the teaching order. Primary school teachers declare a "rejection" of assessment as measurement, lower secondary school teachers are convinced that tests are necessary, upper secondary school teachers consider them a complex tool. Some upper secondary school teachers declare that it was "easier" to think of assessment in the traditional sense since there were other emergencies to respond to and that this served to "keep the students in hand"; they specify that, upon returning to the classroom after the closures, they noticed that actually it caused more "fear" than "motivation". A teacher clarifies that his assessment method is conditioned by the one used with him when he was a student. The primary school teacher states that there are problems of interpretation and management of the process because "in the end we always ask ourselves when we should start measuring" and that it would be necessary to support the change to avoid disparities between schools. In relation to training on these topics, teachers state that, despite the many courses they have attended, they are unable to "bring home something to apply with the students". The primary school teachers add that it was not possible to do anything beyond the four webinars proposed by the Ministry of Education in the first phase of the assessment reform.

4. DISCUSSION

Although to a modest extent, it is significant to observe that teachers' age and experience influence their beliefs and practices, as do the order of teaching and emergency. More experienced teachers seem to have no need to use summative assessment to control the class and to gain respect from students. Similarly, primary school proved to be the most suitable context to implement formative assessment and constructivist learning, involving students more than other school levels. According to teachers, this can be attributed to the different training received, and the assessment reform introduced during the pandemic. The school also influenced beliefs about formative assessment and learning. Managing ERT was complex but considered an opportunity to innovate or improve some teaching practices and to stimulate professionalism (Giganti & Viganò, 2023).

From different perspectives it emerges that beliefs and practices are difficult to

change, "especially if conditioned by the experience lived by teachers when they were students" and due to short times and emergency situations. Training is considered useful for this purpose but is often distant from the daily practice, weak in its didactic applicability and not very suitable for a profound transformation. Teachers report a lack of initial and in-service training on the topics of evaluation, except for those in primary school with the specific degree.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Supported by empirical findings, theoretical reflections yield several key insights. In the three cases examined, an evolution of assessment was observed, also influenced by the pandemic; the necessary changes introduced by the ERT led to a redesign of teaching oriented towards greater quality and less quantity. As stated, the implicit aspects of the teaching profession are crucial to guide its practices and, in the cases examined, the investigation has revealed some discrepancies between beliefs on formative assessment, on the ERT and the respective practices, with differences between institutes and school levels. This raises questions about the effectiveness of some models of teacher change.

In general terms, the literature suggests that, in order to design and implement effective teacher training, research should address not only explicit but also implicit aspects; if not properly considered, it is likely that traditional models of professional development will be proposed that have no effect on teaching practice. The changes induced in teachers by contingent situations such as the pandemic are not enough to lead to lasting change. It is necessary to develop processes in line with the training needs and implicit and explicit beliefs of teachers, prolonged over time, in a context of a community of practice in which feedback can be given and received from colleagues and experts, and based on concrete experiences lived in the classroom, to observe the impact on practice. As highlighted by research, only in this way are teachers willing to undertake a process of effective and lasting change, and therefore to be ready to face future emergencies (Giganti & Viganò, 2023, p. 204).

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SYNCHRONOUS SELF-ASSESSMENT: PENDING NEEDS AND CHALLENGES FOR CHANGE IN CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT AT COMPULSORY EDUCATION

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Four secondary teachers teaching in Mexican secondary schools -grades 9 to 11-implemented synchronous self-assessment for the first time in an innovative quasi-experimental project. Interviewing the teachers and capturing evidence from this extraordinary experience and their habitual assessment practices, we identified their conceptions of assessment, pinpointing the needs and challenges for improving assessment practices towards greater empowerment of students in their learning process. In essence, we need much more profound and consistent effort to improve teachers' assessment literacy to open space for the educational potential of synchronous self-assessment.

synchronous self-assessment; students' agency; classroom assessment; teachers' conceptions.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The current educational landscape faces significant challenges in providing inclusive and equitable education, particularly in assessment. One of the critical questions is how to cater to students' needs while respecting their interests and promoting their competencies. This paper explores the impact of Synchronous Self-Assessment (SSA) as a potential solution to these challenges. SSA refers to an internal, subjective assessment phenomenon that synchronises with teacher-led external assessments (Remesal, 2021). Teachers can use SSA as an assessment strategy pursuing a twofold goal: first, to foster students' self-awareness and agency in their learning processes; second, to help teachers gather qualitative and profound evidence of students' learning beyond plain observable performance. In this paper, we present the results of a study exploring the effects of the implementation of synchronous self-assessment at the secondary education level. This is the first time this strategy has been implemented in compulsory education. Prior literature refers only to experiences in higher education.

SSA is grounded in deep subjective emotional (Goetz et al., 2006), cognitive, and metacognitive processes (Boud, 2021; Nicol, 2021) and constructs that favour

students' performance responsibility. By strategically implementing SSA, teachers can enable students to make impactful and effective decisions regarding the assessment of their learning, thereby increasing their agency (Bandura, 1997). Many authors claim that implementing self-assessment practices at all educational levels is key to developing students' competence in self-regulating their learning (Harris & Brown, 2018; Yan & Brown, 2017).

This approach aligns with the formative assessment paradigm (Black & Wiliam, 1998), which emphasises continuous assessment and the development of self-regulated learning (Coll et al., 2012). However, despite the best intentions in academia, the real change in classroom practices is slow and troublesome (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2024; Remesal, 2005). Hence, we must consider teachers' current conceptions and assessment practices as a starting point for every change.

Research Questions
Following the preceding theoretical framework, we set the following research questions for this study:

- What are the participating teachers' perceptions of SSA as an assessment strategy for classroom assessment?
- How did the first implementation of SSA impact teachers' assessment practices?

METHOD
The study was conducted in two public secondary schools in Mexico. The Mexican school context has undergone frequent changes in educational laws in the past years. So that multiple educational acts can easily coexist in the impasse of the first implementation and frame the educational praxis of teachers. This was the case for the participants in this study.

The research employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data gathered from four teachers in charge of 320 teenage students (12-15 years old, grades 9-11) distributed in eight different classes. Each teacher participated in the program in charge of two classes, one for the 'innovative assessment experience with SSA' and one for contrast with habitual assessment practices. The study received approval from the ethical committee of our institution, and all participants gave consent (teachers and legal tutors) and confirmation of consent (teenage students).

Data collection
We collected data for this study via a diversity of instruments. First, a special exam was designed for each grade in collaboration with the participating teachers. This exam followed the conditions of synchronous self-assessment (Remesal et al., 2022), namely presenting two parts, an introductory section aiming at activating more basic cognitive processes (recall, identification, definition) and a second part with complex, realistic activities (Villarroel et al., 2021) where students are

challenged with two decisions to take: (1) choose three out of a set of five proposed activities, and (2) decide about the scoring weight of each of these solved activities, considering in this case two options, either equal weight (all activities scoring for a maximum of 2 points) or un-equal weight (possible maximal scores 3, 2, and 1 point). Eventually, the teachers corrected the solved activities and were responsible for assigning the grades following students' weighting decisions. The students in control groups sat a traditional exam, elaborated individually by the teachers and consisting of multiple-choice items.

Additionally, students in both the experimental and control conditions had to react to an emotions test before and after solving the exams.

Finally, the teachers and a selection of students were interviewed regarding their experience. A total sample of 27 students participated in semi-structured interviews (Guba & Lincoln, 1995), selected by their teachers as low-, average- and high-achievers, also pursuing an equilibrium of gender representation.

For the context of this paper, only interviews with teachers were analysed. Data from the broader project have been presented elsewhere (Estrada, 2021; Remesal & Estrada, 2021, 2023). The participating teachers were one man and three women, aged 24 years old, in his first year of teaching career (T1), 50 years old (with 24 years of teaching experience) (T2), 59 years old (with 37 years of teaching experience) (T3) and 33 years old (8 years of teaching experience) (T4), respectively. All interviews were conducted in individual online meetings and video-recorded.

Analysis

Two interviews per teacher, one prior to the experience and one afterwards, were transcribed and analysed using content and discursive analysis techniques, employing both bottom-up and top-down approaches. Two theoretical models guided the analysis of teachers' responses. Concerning teachers' conceptions of assessment, Remesal's model (2011) oriented our analysis. This model establishes four bipolar continua to organise two macro-conceptions of teachers about assessment of learning, a formative (*pedagogical*) and a summative (*societal*) inclined conception, sub-structured in four categories: impact of assessment on teaching, on learning, on the accreditation of learning and the accountability of teaching (figure 1). Regarding the broader aspect of assessment in classroom practices, we took Coll et al.'s (2012) Multidimensional Model of Classroom Assessment Practices (MMCAP) for reference. In this model, classroom assessment practices are divisible into five different interactional segments, as Figure 2 shows, each focusing on particular assessment processes and goals. In a series of chapters, two analysts, plus a third judge in discrepancy cases, carried out the analysis until complete agreement.

Figure 1. Qualitative model of teacher's conceptions of assessment.

Pedagogical Conception

Assessment Effects Over:
Learning · Teaching · Accreditation · Accountability

Social Conception
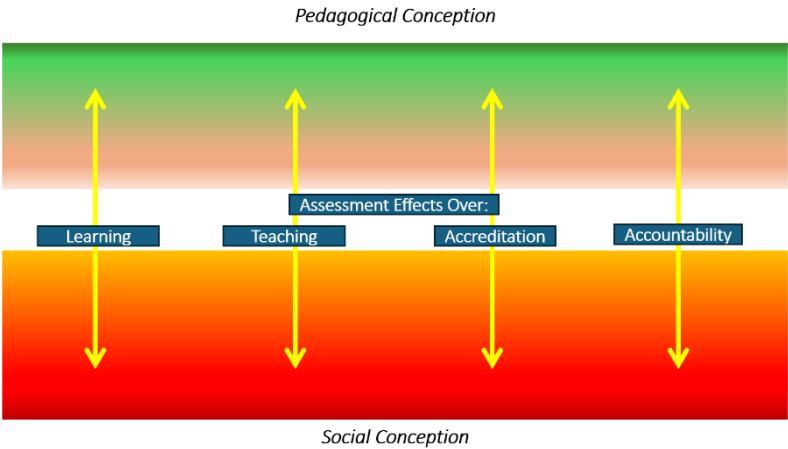
Figure 2. Multidimensional model for classroom assessment practices.
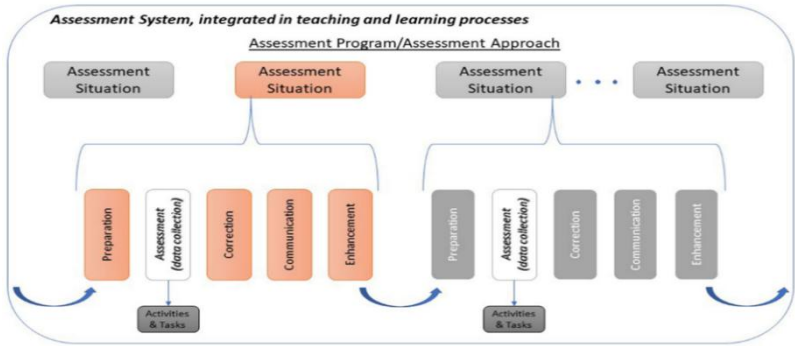
RESULTS

The findings revealed that teachers globally rated the innovative experience positively. However, this global evaluation has to be contextualised in mostly summative—or societal—conceptions of assessment and also over very traditional, non-explicit, and not quite formative practices (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Teachers' conceptions of assessment
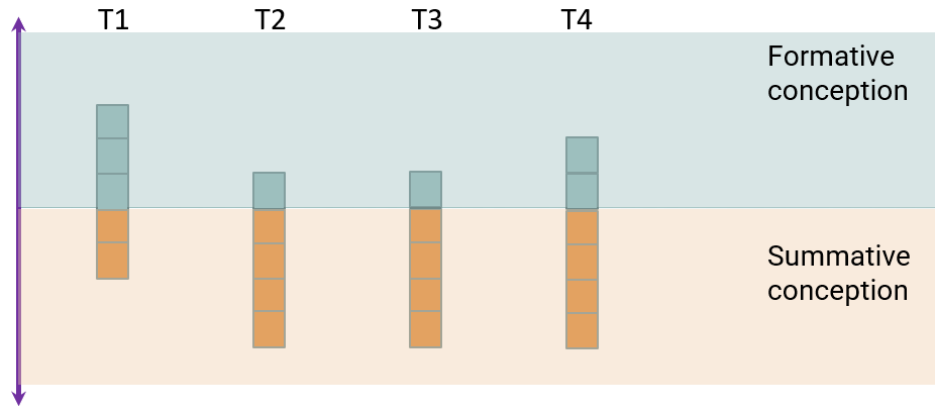
Students in these teachers' classrooms are recipients of learning rather than agents of learning. This first experience of SSA was less impactful than expected in the teachers' classrooms. As a matter of fact, in all cases, teachers' reports of the experience revealed a need for more awareness of the innovative potential. For example, the teachers reported no change in the *preparation* for the exam:

> I did nothing different from usual. (T1)

> With both groups, I did the same: I reminded them of the content to be assessed. (T2)

> I did nothing special; as usual, I provided them with a rubric with what would be graded. (T3)

> Nothing special, I reminded them about the contents of the exam. (T4)

Regarding the second chapter of *assessment* per se, teachers also reported little to no change:

> Nothing abnormal, as always, checking and monitoring. (T1)

> As usual, I was observing and detecting errors. (T2)

> For the new exam, I presented the conditions because they were special. (T3)

> I supervised and monitored, as usual. (T4)

Concerning the *correction* of students' performance, teachers reported some complications, indeed:

> Sometimes I had to read an exam several times, but I always respected their decision. Grading was not difficult, but it was more complex and required more time. (T1)

> Basically, I did the same, reading what they wrote and grading with the answer key. I also took a look at the points they gave themselves to calculate the grade. (T2)

> Depending on their answers, they deserved more or less points, that was the only thing. (T3)

> Yes, there is a difference, mainly when grading; it was more complex due to the choice of activities and also the points; it is an additional burden to our work. (T4)

Relative to the *communication* of results or feedback to students, teachers reported:

> In both cases, I gave them the exams to review and see where they failed. (…) I explained mistakes to them through questions, questioning them regarding the score they chose, why they gave themselves three points, or two or one. (T1)

> With SSA, the exams are exchanged to answer in plenary session; I nominate the

students to participate and give the correct answer, in case of error I allowed another student to answer. (T2)

Usually, I hand out the exam, and they check where they failed. With SSA, we went question by question to identify errors. (T3)

I handed out the exams, I read each of the questions, and voluntary students raised their hands to read their answer, they gave their answers and compared among themselves what they needed. (T4)

Finally, regarding the *pedagogical enhancement*, we found that teachers mainly focused on the correction of errors but missed the opportunity to engage in metacognitive reflection with students:

Well, when I detected that some topic needed reinforcement, I adapted it to my class of the day. (T1)

In both cases, after having the correct answers to the exams, students were allowed to correct their exam to improve their score. (T2)

As usual, I went back to the errors later on in class. (T3)

I went back to reinforce the topics that seemed to be less understood. (T4)

In the end, we can state that teachers in this experience missed the chance of SSA's potential, as represented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. SSA's potential in the MMCAP.
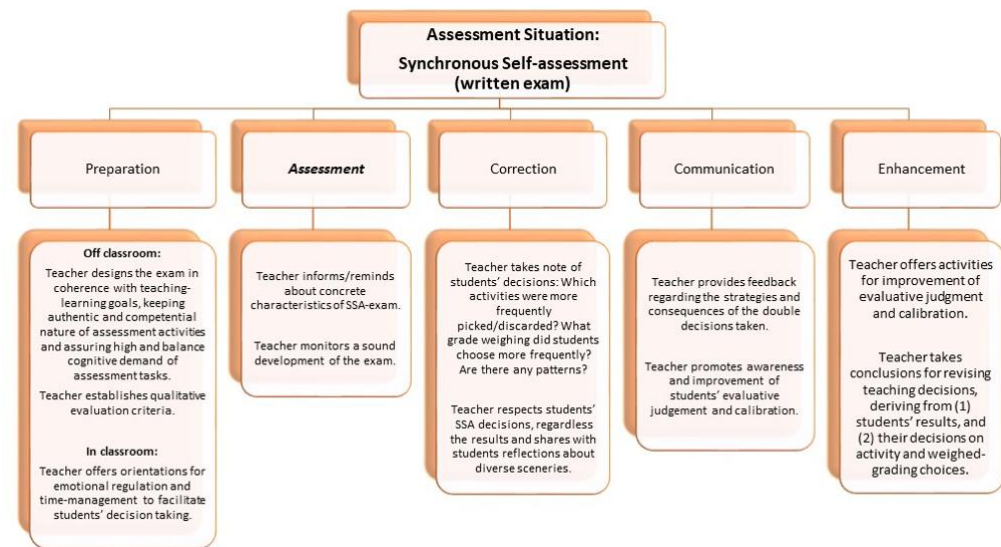
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study explores SSA's potential for the first time at the compulsory school level, concretely at secondary school. In previous publications, we reported promising results regarding students' processes (Remesal & Estrada, 2022, 2023b). In this

paper, our focus is on the teachers' side. Literature on attempts to challenge assessment practices reports about difficulties, so it was in our case as well (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2024; Remesal, 2011). Conceptions underlying practices are resistant to change, and teachers may need extraordinary support to actively reflect on the pedagogical potential of new proposals (Villarroel et al., 2021). In our study, teachers' difficulties started with identifying separate interactive segments in the classroom praxis (Coll et al., 2012). A lack of assessment literacy leaves them, so to say, 'assessment-blind' and insensitive to these particular moments in the classroom that would potentially foster students' engagement in their assessment process and increase their self-regulation competence (Boud, 2021; Nicol, 2021; Remesal & Estrada, 2023b; Yan & Brown, 2017).

Research on SSA presents a promising approach to enhancing classroom assessment practices by fostering students' self-regulation and agency. However, its successful implementation requires addressing several challenges, including providing adequate teacher training and ensuring the sustainability of continuous assessment practices. Future research should focus on developing strategies to overcome these hurdles and further explore the potential of SSA in different educational contexts.

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THE SPECIAL NEED ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY BETWEEN THE 1950S AND 1970S – RELIABLY QUESTIONABLE, DOING DIFFERENCE

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The paper focuses on the Special Needs Assessment Procedure (SNAP) in Germany, which ultimately determines the need for special education, often resulting in placement in segregated special schools through administrative decisions. Within the context of inclusion, the SNAP is criticized for potentially limiting the participation opportunities of all children in regular schools. However, this criticism lacks an assurance regarding the reliability of the schooling decisions made in the SNAP. This desideratum is addressed in the paper from the perspective of educational history. Based on the analysis of professional evaluations about children assessed in the SNAP, the paper provides findings on the reliability of schooling decisions from the SNAP in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) for the period from 1958 to 1977.

special needs assessment; school selection; professional evaluations; participation

INTRODUCTION

If one follows the current educational, social, and political discourse, the discussion about 'participation' appears to be particularly *en vogue*. In the German school system, primary schools, since their establishment, have primarily claimed to provide opportunities for all children to participate. Nevertheless, especially the Special Needs Assessment Procedure (SNAP) presents barriers to this claim. In Germany, it has been and continues to be carried out when determining whether a child requires "special educational treatment" (Rohrmann, 2013, p. 113), often resulting in placement in separate special schools. In the context of school inclusion, the SNAP is criticized in Germany for potentially leading to school segregation, raising concerns about equal participation in education. (Kottmann et al., 2006; Katzenbach, 2015). However, there is a lack of certainty as to how reliable schooling decisions are made in the SNAP (ibid.). This paper contributes to addressing this desideratum from an historical perspective. It presents key findings of a completed

research project that examined the SNAP conducted at the transition between primary and special school in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) between 1958 and 1977 (Sauer, 2024). Based on the analysis of professional evaluations written about primary school students who underwent the SNAP, the project reconstructed and contextualized the consistency of resulting schooling decisions – and, consequently, their reliability (ibid.).

Before presenting the central findings of the project, the paper provides an overview over the SNAP in the FRG in the 1950s to the 1970s within its historical context. Furthermore, it includes a brief summary of the theoretical framework that underpins the project's findings. The article concludes which a resume and an outlook.

1. HISTORICAL FRAMING OF THE SNAP

In the 1950s to the 1970s the SNAP in the FRG was generally carried out at the institutional interface between the special school system and the hierarchically structured tripartite regular school system (Tab. 1). The special school system at the time was characterized by an enormous expansion. In addition to assistance schools for children with learning and behavioural difficulties, it encompassed a total of 10-12 special schools for multiple physical and mental impairments (KMK, 1960; KMK, 1972). The SNAP was to be initiated within the first four years of primary school, with the central aim of assigning the assessed child to the appropriate school system and providing the associated individualized support. Reasons for initiating the SNAP were a two-year gap in performance (ibid.) as well as the suspicion that the regular school "cannot do justice to the child with the teaching and educational methods, means and measures available" (KMK, 1960, p. 27).

Tab. 1. School System in the FRG in the 1950s to the 1970s – own figure. Source: KMK (1960; 1972)

SPECIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

10-12 types of special schools for various mental and physical impairments

SNAP

Board School – Senior Grades (5-8) from 1964 Main School

Board School – Lower Grades (1-4) from 1964 Primary School

Middle School

Gymnasium

REGULAR SCHOOL SYSTEM
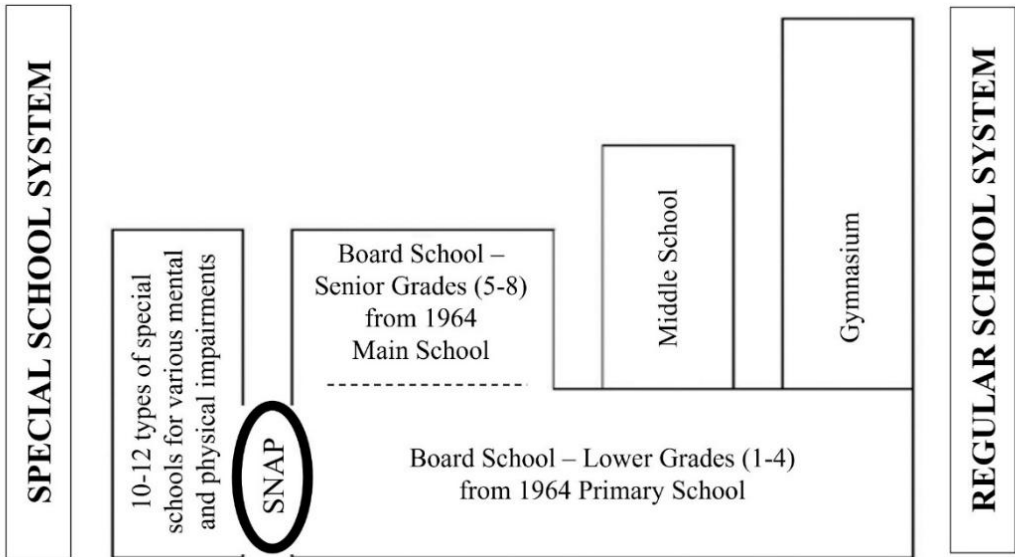
The basic structure of the SNAP in the FRG in the 1950s to the 1970s – with little variation within the federal states – can be described as follows (KMK, 1960; KMK, 1972; Hofsäss, 1993) (Tab. 2): The SNAP was to be initiated by the primary school-teacher, whereas the assessment itself was to be carried out by the special needs schoolteacher as well as a school doctor. Both were entitled to give a recommendation about the further school placement. Although the SNAP formally required the participation of the child's legal guardians, they were not given a decision-making role. Instead, they were only entitled to provide a largely insignificant personal statement. The binding, final schooling decision was ultimately to be made by the local educational authority, however, without having seen the assessed child in person. The decision was based solely on professional observation and assessment results, which were documented in the SNAP as professional evaluations using a standardized form – a special student file. The schooling decision was also to be documented in those student files (ibid).

Tab. 2. SNAP in the FRG in the 1950s to the 1970s – own figure. Source: KMK (1960; 1972); Hofsäss (1993)
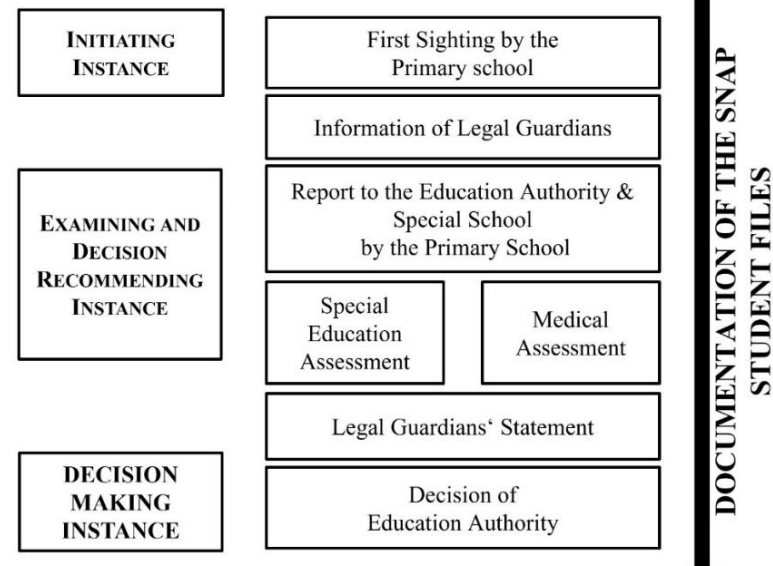
2. PROJECT OVERVIEW

The student files used to document the SNAP containing both the professional evaluations and the final schooling decision served in addition to historical context documents, such as scientific, academic, and educational policy publications as the source base of the project. All together it contained 75 context documents as well as 32 student files from children who were regularly enrolled in primary school and assessed in the SNAP during their first school year due to learning and behavioural difficulties (Sauer, 2024). The files originate from an assistance school in Frankfurt am Main in Hesse/Germany.

By applying the research methods of an a historical-contextualizing content analysis (Vogt, 2015) in combination with a qualitative empirical typification (Gerhardt, 1986), the consistency – and derived from this, the reliability – of schooling

decisions resulting from the SNAP were analysed and contextualized over time from 1958 to 1977. At this, inconsistent decisions were project-specifically understood as a 'border zone' between primary school suitability and the need for special education.

With the concept of the 'border zone', the project was orientated towards Link's (1997) and Treptow's (2009) ideas while methodologically relying on Wittgenstein's (1958) family resemblance. This approach made it possible to group the professional evaluations, referred to as cases, into different so-called 'families' based on similar, though not identical, characteristics in form of evaluation contents – initially without considering the final schooling decision. The comparison of the cases grouped with the respective schooling decision provided information on the consistency of the schooling decisions. Here, those families that, despite having similar combinations of characteristics, included both, cases with a certified suitability for primary school and with a diagnosed need for special education in a special school, revealed inconsistencies in the schooling decisions. Latter families were regarded as manifestations of the 'border zone', from which the unreliability of schooling decisions made in the SNAP was derived. The interpretation of the findings obtained in that way was proceeded with constant reference to social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1969).

3. PROJECT FINDINGS

3.1 The consistency of schooling decision

The qualitative typification initially revealed a basic type of primary school child assessed in the SNAP. Its characteristic consistently attributed by the primary schoolteachers involved in the SNAP remains unchanged over the period under investigation and comprises a predominantly German origin with an affiliation to the social lower class and significant deficits in reading, arithmetic, and writing. Building on this basic type, four types of children assessed in the SNAP could ultimately be identified, also consistently showing in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. Their characteristics are primarily determined by the evaluations of primary school and special needs schoolteachers, which are closely associated with a deficit orientated perspective on the child. This view predominantly aligns with that of the school doctor.

In summary the characteristics of the four types can be depicted as follows (Sauer, 2024):

- Type 1 with multiple personal deficits in the areas of performance, language, cognition, and work behaviour
- Type 2 with multiple personal and environmental deficits in the areas of cognition, giftedness, and development as well as in the family's school support and growing-up conditions
- Type 3 with singular personal and environmental deficits in the areas of language, social and work behaviour, and school-related family attitudes
- Type 4 with multiple personal deficits in the areas of performance, cognition, development, social and work behaviour

Based on those characteristics, the types of assessed children generally receive consistent professional recommendations for further schooling as well as aligned final administrative schooling decisions. Specifically, type 1 and 2 are deemed for needing special education, while type 3 is classified as suitable for primary school. Only type 4 shows discrepant schooling recommendations and in the following inconsistent schooling decisions. While the attendance of a special needs school is typically recommended, in some exceptional cases the special needs schoolteacher recommends, in contrast to the primary schoolteacher, the attendance of a regular primary school – a recommendation that is subsequently supported by the doctor. For type 4, beyond the otherwise administratively determined need for special education, it is precisely in those individual cases with inconsistent professional schooling recommendations that a decision to remain in primary school is made. With those inconsistently made schooling decision the school administration follows the recommendation of the special needs schoolteacher (Sauer, 2024).

3.2 The praxis of reliably questionable, doing difference' in the historical context

With reference back to the subject-theoretical setting, a 'border zone' exists between the suitability for primary school and the need for special education, however only manifesting itself via the single uncovered inconsistent schooling decisions in type 4.

Therefore, the schooling decisions were made consistently by majority and thus reliably. This can be related to a specific mode of the SNAP, which remained unchanged during the period under investigation. This mode was shaped both by its historical context, particularly educational policy requirements, and in a largely decontextualized manner, often disregarding new scientific findings, especially those that critically questioned the SNAP.

This mode of the SNAP is characterized by

- *special professional goals and roles*: main goal of the professions involved in the SNAP is to provide the basis for a legally secure final administrative schooling decision with their assessment results, however, not in professional cooperation and mostly dominated by the involved schoolteachers, rather than the doctors. Therefore, it is the primary schoolteacher, who as the 'gatekeeper' of the SNAP makes an initial selection of those children with a suspected need for special education. By confirming or declining this assumption, the special needs schoolteacher takes on the role of the 'decision influencer' for the school administration as the final 'decision maker' (KMK, 1960; KMK, 1972).
- *the admission of primary school children based on special 'entry characteristics'*: Next to deficits in academic areas those include a belonging to the social underclass with German origin. That academic deficits consistently suggest a need for special education in the diachronic course is on the one

hand linked to the constantly prevailing educational policy understanding of a need for special education as a school failure that cannot be made up at primary school (KMK, 1960; KMK, 1972). On the other hand, however, belonging to the social underclass of German origin does not consider the constant educational policy distance from the idea of a social-related need for special education (ibid.). Neither does it consider the criticism expressed in the pedagogical discourse from the early 1970s onwards both of assumed social class and school performance relations as well as the associated school system disadvantages (Begemann, 1972).

- the distinction between a need for special education and the suitability for primary school based on certain 'signature' characteristics: Even though children examined in the SNAP not only shared similar 'entry characteristics' but also exhibited other comparable deficits, the reliable selection in the SNAP during the period under investigation can be traced back to specific, largely operationalizable personal 'signature' characteristics. Those include the general level of academic achievement, cognitive abilities related to IQ, giftedness, age, and developmental level. However, the fact that, from the late 1960s this deficit-oriented perspective on children requiring special education was increasingly criticized not only by the German Education Council but also by (primary) school and special education pedagogy, and that a dynamic concept of intelligence and giftedness influenced by environmental factors was introduced in this context, had no impact on the SNAP (Deutscher Bildungsrat, 1973; Muth, 1973).

4. RESUME AND OUTLOOK

In summary, the SNAP in the FRG represents a reliable selection procedure in the 1950s to 1970s, however, based on a quite questionable, primarily school system-preserving mode of procedure. This mode was not only used in the SNAP in the period under investigation but has been historically handed down in parts since the founding of the first special schools in the 19th century to the present day (Kottmann et al., 2018; Garz, 2022). With those findings, the study reveals traditional assessment and selection practices, which still shape the school experiences of many children today. Thus, the study highlights the need for critical reflection on those practices, not only from a historical perspective but also regarding current issues of inclusion, participation, and equity. Accordingly, the legitimacy of those practices must be examined, as they create a perceived heterogeneity among primary school children both professionally and institutionally. This calls for a critical engagement in the construction of pedagogical lines of differences and in particular their restructuring based on clearly defined criteria that address pedagogical problems rather than individual deficits (Walgenbach, 2018). By taking a multi-professional approach in this, inclusive learning could be embraced and the ongoing debate about school segregation in the German education system could be put to an end.

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MEDIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of a highly mediatized society (Hepp, 2020), shaped by economic and political logics that drive it toward increasing platformization (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018) and scenarios of profound individualization (Touraine, 2013), education faces extremely challenging issues: both internally (rethinking teaching practices and the institution itself) and externally (the cultural industry system as a competitor in access to knowledge).

The mediology of education emerges as a practical perspective to understand and address these challenges, offering a conceptual framework beyond the mere consideration of media as tools or objects of study, strengthening and expanding the traditional field of media education (Masterman, 1985). Consider, for instance, the concept of media ecology and Neil Postman's thermostatic vision (1979), the modes of reciprocal media interrelation expressed in the idea of the tetrad (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988), up to the importance given to mediation dynamics and the role of institutions in cultural transmission over time (Debray, 2000).

KEY CONCEPTS AND MAIN APPROACHES

Several key themes intertwine and reinforce each other within this conceptual framework, delineating the mediological approach as a prismatic glance at contemporary education. This approach invites educators, scholars, and policymakers to collaborate in developing educational strategies that are simultaneously critical, inclusive, aware of the past, and oriented toward the future.

A central element is, as mentioned, the conception of media not only as tools to use or to be educated about, but as environments that make didactic and educational mediation possible (Maragliano & Pireddu, 2014). Media create spaces where learning occurs through complex interactions between subjects, objects, and representations of reality. This perspective broadens the understanding of education, recognizing that technologies and media are not neutral entities but profoundly influence how people learn, communicate, and construct meanings.

Moreover, technologies are understood as structurally human, an integral part of the evolution of the Homo sapiens species (Mithen, 1998), and, as such, they have continuously operated in our mediation with reality (Grusin, 2017), starting from our own bodies. The mediology of education emphasizes the importance of the body, space, and time in teaching practices (Rivoltella & Rossi, 2019). The digital era has

introduced new devices and technologies, redefining how we interact with the world and each other. Touch, for example, assumes a central role through touchscreen devices, influencing our sensory experience and learning modes. This sensory reorganization requires reflection on how educational spaces can be re-thought (McLuhan, Hutchon, & McLuhan, 1977) to facilitate new forms of interaction and learning, valuing the specific context, corporeality, and movement (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The mediating work allowed by media environments operates not only between the individual and reality but also with the symbolic dimension of the imaginary (Abruzzese, 2001; Ragone, 2015). Cultural and educational imaginaries, largely shaped by media, play a crucial role in shaping expectations, aspirations, and formative practices. The narratives and meanings conveyed by media products can positively influence the collective imaginary, promoting pedagogical values such as play, creativity, and interpersonal relationships. These products become intergenerational learning spaces, highlighting the media's potential to create rich and stimulating educational environments.

At the same time, however, it is necessary to develop a critical attitude, recognizing that imaginaries can perpetuate stereotypes or limit the possibilities of designing alternative futures. Following the path traced by media education, the mediology of education thus invites an attentive yet disenchanted reading of media, promoting the ability to deconstruct imaginaries and use media in a creative and emancipatory way. To fully exploit the potential of media in learning, it is essential to develop competencies that allow for understanding media logic, underlying power dynamics, and ethical and social implications. We are referring to specific and transversal competencies that facilitate the development of critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills. These are essential elements for interacting effectively with digital technologies and participating actively in a mediatized society.

Thus, media education becomes not only a pedagogical objective but a necessity for active citizenship in a mediatized society. On the other hand, integrating specific competencies into the educational system requires overcoming disciplinary barriers and hierarchies that often devalue technical and communicative skills. The mediology of education promotes an interdisciplinary and holistic approach, recognizing that the competencies needed in the digital world are interconnected and that education must adapt to prepare individuals for future challenges.

One of the most evident challenges undoubtedly concerns the advent of generative artificial intelligence, which raises new questions regarding creativity, authorship, and knowledge production. The mediology of education recognizes that technologies are not mere passive tools but can act as co-creators and influence creative and cognitive processes (Gola, 2022). This requires a reconsideration of traditional conceptions of creativity as an exclusively human prerogative.

Embracing this new reality implies overcoming essentialist and anthropocentric views and recognizing the potential of technologies as partners in learning and knowledge creation. Education must, therefore, evolve to integrate these new

forms of intelligence, promoting collaboration between humans and technology that values both capabilities (Moriggi, 2024).

A final issue concerns the discourse of equity, which is the central theme of this conference. The design, methodological, and communicative choices within educational contexts can enable or disable specific modes of relationship, influencing the inclusion or exclusion of individuals and groups. Educational practices are intrinsically linked to power relations that can generate social (in)justice dynamics. Mediology offers tools to analyze these dynamics, highlighting how media and technologies can both amplify inequalities and provide opportunities to counteract them. For example, differentiated access to digital technologies can create new forms of exclusion. Still, at the same time, practices like digital storytelling can promote empowerment and self-efficacy, especially among disadvantaged youth. Therefore, educators and institutions must be aware of these dynamics and adopt approaches that promote equity and inclusion.

In conclusion, adopting a mediological perspective means recognizing the complexity of interactions between media, technology, society, and education, and working to create learning environments that value diversity, promote autonomy, and prepare new generations to participate actively in building a sustainable and equitable future, in contrast to a mechanistic and utilitarian vision of technology and media.

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THE BLUEY VERSION. A CARTOON BETWEEN MEDIOLOGY, EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES AND IMAGINATION

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Starting from the theoretical framework of mediology and specifically from the study of the media within that educational process that makes 'subtle culture' (Colombo, 1998) an indispensable source of learning, especially for the new generations, and through a mainly qualitative methodology, carrying out an accurate content analysis and integrating it with a netnographic part, our research develops towards three main directions: the analysis of the Bluey product, its remediation and, finally, the study of the imaginary that it has generated in the various reference audiences.

Bluey, mediology, educational processes, imagination, remediation

1. BLUEY BETWEEN *SUBTLE CULTURE* AND QUALITY TV: A THEORETICAL PREMISE

In 1998, Fausto Colombo defined as 'subtle' that small culture that influenced generations of Italians: 'impalpable like dust, breathed in like air'. We are talking about cultural products such as Neapolitan songs, the Corriere dei Piccoli, Pinocchio, Sandokan, Mickey Mouse and the Blob, which have been able, at the same time, to narrate and influence mass culture and to insert themselves at the same time into the social and educational processes of a country that has undergone great transformations since the 1980s. In the transition from Paleo-television to Neo-television (Eco, 1983) – also called 'Quality TV' – it is possible to trace the new functions of the television medium, no longer only didactic and educational, but linked to entertainment and the new active role of the viewer. Today, these functions explode and are accentuated in the new dimension of post-television in which phenomena such as post-seriality (Brancato, 2011) and what today could be defined as *pop platform seriality*, a new space of fruition and audiovisual experimentation, not only narrative but also, and above all, cultural, come to life and evolve. Starting from the theoretical plots of mediology and specifically from the study of media within that educational process that makes 'subtle culture' (Colombo, 1998) an indispensable source of learning, especially for the new generations, and looking beyond the disciplines, following the dynamics and aesthetics of pop as indicated by the works dedicated to pop culture by Bowman (2007; 2008) and Reynolds (2011), our work

intercepts, the transformations of 'quality TV' (Thompson, 1996; McCabe and Akass, 2007) characterised since its origins in the 1980s by inter-episodic seriality, hybrid forms, complex storytelling, hybridisation of genres, and broader audiovisual language. Finally, our work analyses certain characteristics of paleo-television in the light of one of the most interesting new educational cultural products of our time: the animated series Bluey.

2. THE BLUEY PRODUCT: A FAMILY HISTORY OF CRAFTSMANSHIP AND INNOVATION

The Australian animated series 'Bluey' was created by Joe Brumm and produced in 2018 by Ludo Studio, commissioned by the BBC and currently in production in Italy both free-to-air on Rai Yoyo and on the RaiPlay and Disney+ platforms. It consists of three seasons, a twenty-eight-minute special episode – a true short film – and a series of minisodes of around four minutes. Mentioned by 'The Guardian' and many other international and prominent publications, it has won critical and public acclaim, winning the title of 'best animated series' at the Keedscreen Awards 2023. It is an auteur product made – almost against the grain – within a media system that increasingly differentiates auteur, platform-based productions from mainstream, formulaic and popular ones. Moreover, if from its origins, when we talk about quality TV we refer to adult TV products, in some cases it has involved some children's productions: examples are *Spongebob* or *Rick and Morty*. However, Bluey was the first serial animation product to bring the narrative style of quality TV into the children's audiovisual universe. The Australian series is not an outsourced product, i.e. it is a 'homemade', handmade series, as much as this is possible. The only scriptwriter is its creator, Joe Brumm, the storyboards are created by his wife Suzy, and the dubbing is handled by, among others, Brumm's mother and brother Dan, who is also responsible for the sound design together with composer Joff Bush. Since the first season, the same team of people has been working on the content, editing, music and everything else. What makes the difference in Bluey is the production process, which by its nature manages to break many unofficial rules. Creating an animated product, be it a film or a series, is a completely different job than producing live action content with live actors. It is a different kind of process, with different timing. You could compare it to an assembly line where you cannot go backwards, where lines cannot be changed at the last moment on the set and, in editing and with visual effects, you cannot change or refine the story. The only way to innovate, improve or change the result, to make higher quality cartoons, is to intervene in the production process itself. This concept had already been demonstrated by The Simpsons, which, thanks to a different production flow devised by Brad Bird, was able to afford innovative shots and solutions compared to the standards of television animation. Similarly, Pixar adopted CG animation from the very beginning and developed a new production flow, which was perfected over time, also thanks to the contribution of Brad Bird, who was hired and put to work with them starting with the film *The Incredibles* (2004).

3. METHODOLOGY AND LINES OF RESEARCH: ANALYSIS, REMEDIATION AND IMAGERY

By means of a mainly qualitative methodology, carrying out an accurate content analysis and integrating it with a netnographic part, our research develops towards three main directions: the first concerns the analysis of the Bluey product, from its educational value to the dimension of the game as a fundamental cultural space, from the aspects concerning the narration of the family reality in the contemporary era to its pop and ultra-pop aesthetics. The second line of research is dedicated to the identification of the various mediological devices through which the series has been remediated and reproposed – from the serial device to the book, from the videogame to the music – up to its branding process and merchandising. Finally, through a netnographic perspective, we delved into the imaginary that Bluey has generated among its various target audiences.

3.1. Analysis of the Bluey product

Almost nothing is erased or sweetened in Bluey. The series tackles issues in the lives of children – and parents – that no other entertainment product addresses and does so through a fresh look. It is rich in narrative layers so that it is usable and understandable for various audiences. This focus on the integration of languages and stories is because Bluey was conceived for adults. Its first version was a series not aimed at children and only after some changes did the focus and tone of voice adapt to the younger audience.

In the episode *Facetalk*, for instance, the narrative layers are particularly evident: while the children are having fun playing with their smartphones during a video call, the parents of Muffin and Socks – Bluey and Bingo's cousins – are arguing in the background about the most appropriate educational methods to use to curb certain behaviours of their children. As the discussion between the parents becomes more heated, Bluey and Bingo's father Bandit turns down the volume on his smartphone to respect their privacy. In the background Stripe and Trixie first clash, then begin to understand each other and finally embrace. Showing complex and delicate situations within the family reality – then enhancing the decisive moment – is one of the main characteristics of the Bluey series and its narrative structure. In the episode Baby Race, Bluey's mother, Chilli, remembers and tells her daughters about the time she felt inadequate as a mother during Bluey's early years, and another mother, after noticing her absence at the weekly appointments with the other mum-friends, decides to join her at home to reassure her with a message, more relevant and powerful today than ever before: 'you're doing great'. The rhetoric of maternal perfection is, in this episode, visibly ignored, leaving room for sentiments such as solidarity, understanding and fallibility: all fundamental values for the new generations that, daily, deconstruct ideas and conceptions on parenting linked to the past that have nothing to do with real life and contemporaneity. Bluey does not simply wink at adults like other entertainment products – think, for example, of *Peppa Pig* or *Bing* – but stages a true parallel narrative that concerns the world of children as much as that of parents. From the very first episode, it is clear that all the characters

will always pretend that the games are reality, as in the episode *The Magic Xylophone* where those who are immobilised by magic do so no matter what, or in the episode *Hide and Seek* where they remain hidden despite the fact that Bluey is easily distracted and stops looking for the other participants in the game. All the characters understand what they are doing is a fiction – a game, in fact – but they all take it seriously because otherwise the magic would be broken. It is an unspoken agreement, and it is on this complicity that the delicate balance of the representation of the game and, therefore, of the series itself is based. The first episode sets up this idea. Bluey turns out to be, in this respect, a much more sophisticated version of the fictional pacts made in other children's products. All the games in Bluey's seasons are those played by Joe Brumm's daughters, whose rules and modalities are the basis for building the plot of the episodes around them. The dimension of play is, therefore, always central in Bluey and represents the starting point for a series of themes that are addressed during the episodes of the cartoon.

3.2. Remediation of Bluey

In addition to the free-to-air channels and platforms on which Bluey airs – from 2018 in Australia, from 2021 in Italy – the series has been rethought, remade and repurposed for many other devices and media and through different languages. Its books, published by Penguin Books, are based on the episodes and main characters of the series and have sold twenty million copies; the video game allows the reader to relive the games and spaces of the series; the theatrical adaptation, a live show called *Bluey's Big Play*, has been touring Australia and the United States for years. It is a show that, as in the series, places play at the centre of the narrative and uses puppets brought to life by world-class puppeteers and original music by Joff Bush, created especially for the stage adaptation.

Its soundtrack has made 350 million streams and was featured as a case study in a New York Times article[1]. There is a lot of classical music in Bluey, sometimes repurposed into brilliant versions and alternating with the jingles and original music created by Joff Bush. Bluey, Bingo and the other characters 'dance' to the notes of Mozart, Bach, Tchaikovsky and these music's are adapted so closely and coherently with the narrative that they experience a new identification and are recognised by the children as 'Bluey's music'. As in the *Ice Cream* episode when Bluey and Bingo *'dance the waltz, tongues wagging'* to taste each other's ice cream at the same time. Contrary to many children's cartoons where the musical riffs are repeated the same every episode, in Bluey we hear a continuous and original choice of music, different every episode and perfectly adapted to the pathos of the story or the performance of the characters. *Gotta Be Done. A Bluey Podcast*[2] is the podcast created by Kate McMahon and Mary Bolling, which takes its cue from the titles and episodes of Bluey but is a highly successful product designed for and enjoyed by adults; *Bluey*

[1] 'Bluey' Is About Everything, Especially Music – The New York Times: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/25/arts/music/bluey-disney-plus-classical-music.html.
[2] Gotta Be Done – A Bluey Podcast | blueypod: https://www.blueypod.com/.

Wiki[3], on the other hand, is the wiki dedicated to the series, entirely managed by fans, on whose contents many users work simultaneously. In addition to the sections dedicated to the episodes, characters, and location, there is a category dedicated to media where all Bluey-inspired material can be found: from books to links to platforms, social media and communities. As far as merchandising is concerned, Bluey's market is currently worth about two billion dollars and is developed in two directions: on the one hand, the official one with many products from toys to clothing, from household items to food and drinks; on the other hand, many famous brands, especially of clothing, have created collections – sometimes in limited edition – dedicated to Bluey, such as Zara, H&M, Kiabi. Another interesting case of merchandising is the one conceived and proposed by Airbnb, which from 18 to 22 February 2022 has made it possible to book two nights in Bluey's house in Brisbane, Australia, and spend an immersive experience in the spaces and atmospheres of the cartoon[4].

3.3. The imaginary around Bluey: a netnographic research

Bluey's sophisticated and complex character has led parents, and consequently also children, to develop a mechanism to cultivate a kind of elitism whereby watching Bluey becomes a positive social and cultural action. In parallel, there are many celebrities who have declared that they love Bluey and have become influencers of it: for example, Billy Joel had a Bluey-themed party for his daughter and Natalie Portman dubbed a character for an episode to please her daughters. A lot of content about Bluey is conveyed on social media: excerpts of episodes, memes, videos of parents watching the cartoon with their children, adults laughing and being moved while watching the series, and all these products fit within the cartoon's narrative, constantly influencing and feeding it. These are autonomous contents that develop their own, parallel narrative line, but could not exist if not linked to the pilot content (Amendola and Masullo, 2022).

Amongst the analysed content, we looked at a short 14-second video posted on Tik-Tok by Bluey's official channel which has received 14, 9 million views. It is an excerpt from the first episode of the second season of the series entitled Dance mode in which Bandit eats his daughter Bingo's last fry and must pay a pledge. However, what is particularly significant for our netnographic investigation are the numerous comments on the video that demonstrate not only the high level of appreciation on the part of the community ('I love this show without even watching it 🤍'; 'Bluey is my religion'), but above all, it seems clear that Bluey's fanbase is very heterogeneous and includes different generational targets ('It is my favourite children's programme. And I am 29 years old'; 'I go to my little cousins' house just to have an excuse to watch Bluey').

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[3] Bluey Wiki | Fandom: https://blueypedia.fandom.com/wiki/Bluey_Wiki.

[4] Puoi dormire nella casa di Bluey, il nuovo cartone animato australiano appena arrivato in Italia: https://news.airbnb.com/it/puoi-dormire-nella-casa-di-bluey-il-nuovo-cartone-animato-australiano-appena-arrivato-in-italia/.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Recently, the case of the censored Bluey episode made headlines. As reported by Wired, the episode *Dad Baby* has been made available in some passages on Rai Play and in the DVD collections, while on Disney+ there is no trace of it (of the 52 total episodes of the second season on the platform only 51 can be seen). The reason for this is probably to be found in the rather peculiar plot of this specific episode: at the beginning of the story, in fact, Bandit finds a baby carrier, into which Bingo, Bluey's younger sister, immediately jumps. Bandit makes a few jokes about the difficulties of pregnancy, at one point even staging a 'fake' birth in his daughters' baby pool. One wonders, then, how far a cultural product designed for children and adults can go in a contemporary era in which certain taboos related to parenting and romance persist? Although there are still some hurdles to be tackled, Bluey remains one of the most popular animated series for all its target audiences. What can be deduced from the analysis carried out is that Bluey fits perfectly into that flow of new viewing experiences: the viewing of the series does not only take place through TV and apps, but – especially for Generation Z and millennials – through narrative fragments conveyed on social networks. This trend shows how Bluey lends itself to this type of 'broken' and multiplatform fruition, considering the new viewing modes of the new generations and thus trying to reach everyone, having the potential to do so. Finally, it can be argued that Bluey has laid the foundations for the construction of a new model of educational cultural product based on the hybridisation of languages, the contamination of knowledge and the normalisation of many emerging socio-cultural themes.

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MATTERS OF TOUCH: BODY, SPACE AND MOVEMENT IN SCHOOL BUILDINGS OF THE NEW DIGITAL MANUAL SKILLS: A MEDIOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

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This article highlights how new mobile devices, such as smartphones, are altering the balance of human sensory relationships, both individually and collectively, particularly among younger generations. Through a mediological approach, it aims to pose questions about how, in the digital age, this sensory rebalancing—where touch appears to take on an increasingly central role—can and should be considered in educational practices. This is especially relevant in relation to the changing use of manual skills, which are becoming less focused on writing and more oriented towards the use of technological devices. It also examines the consequent reorganization of how the body and the space it moves in—especially the school environment—are utilized, as well as how individuals (and students) interact within this space.

Smartphone; Band Society; Situated Cognition; Embodied Cognition Design; Media Education; Outdoor Education

1. FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MARSHALL MCLUHAN: THE SMARTPHONE AS AN EXTENSION OF THE MIND

Marshall McLuhan (1962; 1964) divides human history into two media eras: the Mechanical Era and the Electric Era. The Canadian media theorist identifies 1901 as the symbolic starting point of the Electric Era, the year the wireless telegraph was invented, heralding the advent of what he calls the "Marconi Constellation", named after the inventor of this new medium. The preceding phase, which he called the "Gutenberg Galaxy", began in 1455 with the invention of movable-type printing. Tracing further back, the phase before this was marked by manuscript culture, which started with the introduction of the vocalic alphabet in ancient Greece during the 5th century BCE. Finally, before this event, there was the phase of oral culture, characterized by natural language.

But when does oral culture begin? McLuhan does not concern himself with this question, as it is not significant within the scope of his argument. However, it is crucial within the framework of this article. It seems fairly evident that oral culture begins with the evolution of natural language, regardless of whether one adopts a

remote or recent timeline. Here, we align with the recent thesis of Michael Corballis (2002), who argues that evolved natural language emerged 50,000 years ago, coinciding with the technological revolution of the Upper Paleolithic. If *homo sapiens*, who appeared around 170,000 years ago, only developed natural language 120,000 years later, how did they communicate before that?

Corballis's thesis, like that of many other scholars, is that early humans communicated through gestures. After all, the areas of the brain involved in speaking are the same as those used for hand movement. This is evidenced by the fact that signed languages follow the same generative grammar laws found in spoken languages. Following McLuhan's framework, we can refer to this phase as the *phase of sign culture*.

Within the theory of the sensorium—understood as the balance of the senses in relation to the media environment—McLuhan places oral culture as predominantly auditory, manuscript culture as audio-tactile, the Gutenberg Galaxy as primarily visual, and the Marconi Constellation, according to the theory of the retribalization of society, as once again audio-tactile: the phase that Walter Ong (1982) refers to as that of secondary orality. But how might we define the sensorium of the culture of signs?

We can define this phase as a tactile phase. After all, for McLuhan, touch represents a simultaneous co-presence of all the senses, especially if we consider the complete immersion of hunter-gatherer humans—not yet tribalized but organized into band societies—in the natural environment, with their hands engaged in "speaking" or producing tools.

The band was a type of social organization characteristic of nomadic societies with a subsistence economy based on hunting, fishing, and gathering. It was a relatively small and self-sufficient group of people defined by structural simplicity and flexibility. In the evolutionary framework of neo-evolutionary anthropology (Service 1962), the band represents the simplest form of society and the initial stage of a sociocultural evolution that progresses through band, tribe, chiefdom, and state (Fabietti and Remotti 1998).

This article aims to argue for the emergence of a new band society, a return to a tactile phase within the electric age, driven by the advent of the smartphone—referred to here as the "Jobs Black Hole", named after the inventor of this new digital device in 2007. Smartphone screens have become the primary vehicle for transmitting visual and verbal languages, both distinct and, increasingly often, converging into a single hybrid text: a secondary form of writing that is multi-coded, interactive, hypertextual, and thus inherently hybrid and non-linear (Roncaglia 2016).

A text that shares the same characteristics as the gestural communication of pre-linguistic societies: simultaneously sequential and simultaneous, as well as multimodal and multimedia. After all, isn't it through manual gestures that we communicate tactually via the smartphone screen? Moreover, McLuhan (1964) had already intuited that screens would be tactile in nature, referring to the television many years before the invention of the touch screen. With the advent of the smartphone,

Homo sapiens once again has its hands actively engaged in communication.

As Darian Leader (2016) observed, the digital era has undoubtedly transformed many aspects of human experience, but its most evident—and often overlooked—feature is that it allows us to keep our hands occupied in entirely new ways. Wherever we look, everyone is busy handling their phones, and even in social situations, its use barely diminishes. This clear increase in manual engagement with technology likely coincides with the emergence of new social spaces, where the range and duration of interactions are accelerated.

Contemporary society, which we might define as a new band society, is simultaneously an individualized society (Bauman 2001) characterized by weak ties (Granovetter 1998), as Bauman conceptualizes the current liquid modernity, and a society of communal nomadism, as Michel Maffesoli (1997) describes the world we live in. While the former emphasizes the solitude of the global citizen (Bauman 1999), the latter highlights how, precisely because of these weak ties, there exists a solitude that fosters integration into the community.

Manuel Castells (2004) synthesizes Bauman's and Maffesoli's perspectives into a single framework by arguing that our societies are characterized by the simultaneous development of two opposing tendencies: individualism and communitarianism. By individualism, he refers to the focus on personal projects, interests, and imagination—essentially the biological system of personality. By communitarianism, he means the emphasis on shared identity, the system of values and beliefs upon which all other forms of identity depend. Social reality, of course, exists only as a compromise between these two trends, functioning as an interface between the individual and identities mediated by institutions.

Moreover, pre-tribal band society was indeed an unstable grouping of individuals who came together based on relationships of friendship or enmity, as long as the surrounding environment allowed it (Bonte and Izard 1991). However, it was egalitarian, and the powers of each individual were highly limited, as they depended on the influence one managed to gain by putting their skills at the service of the group (Fabietti and Remotti 1997).

These characteristics align perfectly with Maffesoli's (1988) description of the society we live in, where the formation of micro-groups—new bands—that punctuate spatiality is driven by a sense of belonging, shaped by a specific ethos, and framed within a communication network. The only notable difference, a defining feature of the Electric Age, lies in the temporality of these groups, which can be entirely ephemeral and organize themselves according to emerging opportunities. Through multiple pathways, groups are formed around sports, friendship, sexuality, religion, or other interests; each has a variable lifespan depending on the level of investment of its participants. This dynamic applies equally to everyday life and to the virtual realm typical of social media.

McLuhan defines mechanical media as extensions of our body and electric media as extensions of our central nervous system. Here, it is argued that the advent of networks and digital media, particularly the smartphone, represents an extension

of our mind.

The extended mind thesis was introduced by Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) and posits that the mind does not reside exclusively in the brain or body but extends into the physical world. The thesis suggests that certain external objects that store information can become part of a cognitive process, thereby functioning as extensions of the mind itself. Today, what object has a greater capacity to store information than the smartphone?

The extended mind thesis aligns with embodied cognition and, more specifically, with situated cognition. This approach is so defined because it studies the mind and knowledge by situating them within the environment in which the individual operates. This means that the external scenarios where human activities take place assume a crucial role (Palmiero and Borsellino 2014). Knowledge is a capability activated through a sequence of sensory-motor coordinations, based on continuous external feedback (Clancey 1997). What could be more *situated* than a band society, whether prehistoric or digital?

2. EMBODIED COGNITION DESIGN, NEW EDUCATIONAL SPACES, AND MEDIA EDUCATION

Maria Montessori introduced the concept of freedom of movement for students within the classroom and the entire school space, so that they could independently apply the principles they had acquired through spontaneous elaboration. This takes shape in free work activities aimed at bringing out individual concentration abilities, leading the student to a state of absolute focus (Borrelli 2019). If we see students as new hunter-gatherers, then freedom of movement within the school must be absolute.

If the environment, and therefore space, are fundamental as a basis for forming our body schema, then it is only right that a new educational practice requires new spaces. Spaces that invite action and movement and promote social interaction (Borghi 2019). Architectural space, depending on how it is configured, can shape and qualify the ways in which individuals conduct themselves and relate socially, as they experience it corporeally and immersively (Gomez Paloma 2019).

A school that adapts to the new ways students learn must make its environments flexible so that spaces are always accessible to the school community for educational activities, service use, and even informal purposes. These should be spaces where the exchange of information occurs in an unstructured way, where students can study alone or in small groups—the new bands—where they can delve deeper into certain topics with the teacher, review material, or relax (Buonopane 2019).

In relation to spaces, the external area of the school building should not be excluded—not only the courtyard and green spaces surrounding the school but also the street, the city, the countryside, and therefore nature: *outdoor education* (Di Bari 2023). As early as 1977, McLuhan conceived a manual aimed at teachers to guide them in organizing field research. It was the first manual to address the issue of media education in a modern way, not only from the perspective of learning how

to use media but also from a critical approach.

McLuhan's work envisioned dividing students into working groups focused on exploration and research outside school buildings, with much of this research involving the use of media such as cameras and video cameras. Media, therefore, as new tools for hunting and gathering.

In this regard, still in relation to schools, Neil Postman (1979) discusses media ecology, which refers to the study of the informational environment. Media ecology seeks to understand how communication technologies and techniques influence the form, quantity, speed, distribution, and direction of information; and how, in turn, these characteristics and trends in information affect people's perceptions, evaluations, and attitudes.

For Postman, ecology in general concerns the rhythm, scope, and structure of change within an environment; the way balance is achieved in the mind and society, as well as in the forest. The stability and vitality of an environment depend not on what is present within it, but on the interaction of its elements, that is, on their various dynamics and complementarities.

For the American sociologist, media education means investigating the media and discovering how our thinking and behavior are controlled by our communication technologies. In short, in a new society—and thus in a new school of bands—spaces, environments, and outdoor education cannot be separated from media education.

CONCLUSIONS

Digital media, and particularly the smartphone, are changing our habits in relation to the senses, language, space, and movement. Our society is shifting toward a new band society, where a new form of digital hunting and gathering is emerging. In light of this, it is necessary to conceive, design, and construct school buildings that take these changes into account to facilitate learning for new generations.

Pushing beyond what has been previously stated, in the future, we could envision classrooms without traditional rooms and the possibility not only of allowing student work groups to form with complete freedom of choice but also of making these groups flexible. Students could belong to more than one group, shifting between them based on their individual interests and inclinations.

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CODING AND PUBLIC SPEAKING: OLD SOFT SKILLS FOR A NEW CHALLENGING DIGITAL WORLD

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In a rapidly evolving world, education is undergoing profound changes as the traditional model struggles to prepare students for 21st-century challenges. Technology is making much traditional knowledge obsolete, creating the need to teach specific skills early on. However, superficial learning of technology can lead to a loss of essential skills and educational disparities. To address this, two key cross-cutting skills are proposed: coding and communication skills. Coding, not just as a standalone subject but integrated into all disciplines, fosters creativity, problem-solving, and adaptability—crucial qualities in a digital world always more hinging on AIs. Communication skills, including public speaking and verbal expression, are essential for effectively conveying ideas, especially after the pandemic, which has heightened presentation anxiety. These competencies, ideally taught by qualified teachers, aim to develop well-rounded and confident individuals. Focusing on them means preparing students to think critically, communicate effectively, and navigate the digital world, creating an educational foundation that meets modern societal needs.

coding; public speaking; debate; soft skill, AI, prompt

INTRODUCTION

In a world that evolves at an unprecedented pace, the realm of education finds itself undergoing profound changes. The conventional educational model is no longer enough to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. On one hand, technology seems to render much of the knowledge, which was crucial in the past, obsolete. Furthermore, there is a recurring need to teach the use of specific software/hardware from an early stage. On the other hand, it is evident that the same technology, when presented superficially, or when it is informally learned outside of educational institutions, leads to a depletion of essential and cross-cutting, crucial and relevant skills. The outcome is the emergence of disparities that transcend the level of formal education. As an antidote to this risky situation, and in line with the holistic approach advocated by the theme of this panel, we propose, by way of examples and case studies, two areas of important cross-cutting skills: coding and public speaking.

1. CODING: A NEW LANGUAGE FOR A NEW WAY OF LEARNING

The first area of skills is coding, intended not only as a standalone discipline but also proposed across all disciplines, as it is now the lingua franca of the digital age, playing a pivotal role, especially with the raise of AIs, that is increasingly governed by technology. Understanding how to code is akin to possessing the keys to unlock countless doors of opportunity. This capacity goes beyond mere computer programming; it nurtures problem-solving abilities, creativity, and adaptability, skills that are invaluable in driving innovative solutions.

Since 1990, the rise of the internet encouraged people to learn how to use personal computers to access news and products, and, later on, to access social media. However, starting in 2015 (Galluccio, 2015), widespread mobile devices like smartphones and tablets reduced these skills, limiting digital interactions to touching, swiping, and dragging. While in early 2000s, computer science courses only required giving students instructions on which app to launch and understanding basic operations, in recent years students struggle with fundamental concepts like folders, file duplication, scrollbars, contextual menus, and similar basics. While mobile devices are highly effective for completing quick and simple tasks, they become less useful when advanced information processing is required. For example, applying a filter to a photo or editing a video is now straightforward with popular apps. However, performing edits that go beyond what the app developer planned can be extremely difficult or even impossible using everyday mobile devices. With the evolution of technology, that brought us to use AIs for our everyday needs, even using an AI the way we really need it requires to know how to create a script or how to edit a script to use it via an API (Application Programming Interface). Even if AIs evolves very quickly, so that they are able to perform tasks increasingly more complex, when we have very specific or customized needs, we have understood the basic concepts of computer programming. Today, with exponentially growing information, end-users face countless opportunities to access and use valuable data. The bar has risen. Platforms like IFTTT (www.ifttt.com) or Microsoft Power Automate (www.microsoft.com/power-platform) allow for a dataflow paradigm to be applied to a huge amount of data, by creating pipelines that start from the available information and process it in order to refine and integrate it at each step so to get the desired result. But, at each step, concepts of computer programming like sequence, branching, decision, and loop come into place. Collecting many documents and applying to them a specific processing cannot be done by simply selecting a few options in our apps. The same is true for exploiting moderns AIs. When AIs raise their bar by proposing new no-scripting tools, such as AI today's customization (openai.com/index/custom-instructions-for-chatgpt/), users in their turn raise their needs by asking for more advanced possibilities. So, in the lapse of time when these possibilities are not available yet, scripting skills are welcome and needed.

Just to give an example, to build -today- a personalized news aggregator for sentiment analysis we can exploit the scripting possibilities of a modern AI like ChatGPT to perform the steps listed in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. Script steps

STEP	CONTENT
Fetch News Articles	retrieve the latest articles from news APIs
Summarizes Content	generates concise summaries of the articles
Sentiment Analysis	analyse sentiment to label articles e.g. as positive, negative, or neutral
Topic Categorization	categorize articles by custom interests like politics, tech, sports, etc
Delivery	send the personalized daily digest via email or chatbot

All the steps in this pipeline (that requires to fetch data from the web and then summarize, label and categorize them) requires some sort of programming or scripting. Scripting skills that if are basic for expert programmers, are instead beyond the possibilities of everyday end-users. Just to give an example, the "simple" Python scripts that can get the above result on ChatGPT are the one shown in figure 2.

Fig. 2. Script code

- Fetch News Articles:

```
from newsapi import NewsApiClient
newsapi = NewsApiClient(api_key='YOUR_API_KEY')
top_headlines = newsapi.get_top_headlines(language='en')
```

- Sentiment Analysis:

```
def get_sentiment(text):
    openai.api_key = "YOUR_OPENAI_API_KEY"
    response = openai.ChatCompletion.create( model="gpt-4", messages=[
        {"role": "system", "content": "You are a sentiment analysis assistant."},
        {"role": "user", "content": f"Analyze the sentiment of this text: {text} and classify it as
Positive, Negative, or Neutral."}
    ])
    sentiment = response['choices'][0]['message']['content'].strip()
    return sentiment
```

- Summarizes Content:

```
def summarize_article(content):
    response = openai.ChatCompletion.create( model="gpt-4", messages=[
        {"role": "system", "content": "You are a news summarizer."},
        {"role": "user", "content": f"Summarize this article: {content}"} ])
    return response['choices'][0]['message']['content']
```

- Topic Categorization:

```
def categorize_article(text):
    openai.api_key = "YOUR_OPENAI_API_KEY"
    response = openai.ChatCompletion.create( model="gpt-4", messages=[
        {"role": "system", "content": "You are an article categorization assistant."},
        {"role": "user", "content": f"Categorize this article into relevant topics such as Politics, Tech, Sports, Health, or Business:
{text}"}
    ])
    category = response['choices'][0]['message']['content'].strip()
    return category
```

What could be surprising, is that much of this code can be generated by an AI itself. Even though, there are parts of the code (e.g. the ones highlighted in italics) that require the user to understand and use concepts such as *Application Programming Interface*, *API keys*, etc. As said, even if the support of automatic intelligent systems will get more and more efficient, so that much of this code will require less and less rework and customization, the possibilities of the AI -and then the needs of the users- will keep raising. As a consequence, the skills of the end-user will have to raise regarding their ability to understand and use automation. That is, to use scripting.

Getting proficient in scripting by starting to learn a scripting language is not easy in a short amount of time. Instead, getting proficient in coding can be attained in a very short time even by users that are not self-motivated or interested in computer programming *per se* (Federici et al. 2019a). Moving them to scripting after having learned how to code is a much easier path.

1.1. What students can get from coding

Learning how to code by means of using visual, block-based programming environments is a very straightforward task. Even students of human studies courses (the kind of students that are more easily interested in communication and media than in coding) can get extremely good results in a very short time, even without any previous knowledge of how a computer or a coding environment works.

In an introductory computer science course designed for students of Communication Studies at the University of Cagliari, after having initially started with textual languages such as Visual Basic, Logo and PHP, the focus has then been moved to more visual tools using block-based programming such as Macro Recorder for Visual Basic, Scratch, Snap or App Inventor. By using these visual tools, students can get -in three-month courses- to understand how to process text documents by visually creating Visual Basic macros in their MS Office documents; the base concepts of computer programming; how to develop multimedia interactive tools for educational purposes or mobile apps. As a bonus, they learn the basics of the usage of a PC -that is how to manage the content and the apps of a PC- in a task-oriented way when managing multimedia objects and the files stored in their PC.

As for the feedback that we got during the last 15 years from our students, we can say that they didn't just learn how to code, but they learned how to think in a more logical and organized way, they got an enhanced opinion of their skills and of what it is really difficult to them; and, even when affected by Specific Learning Disorders (such as ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia), they see that these LDs don't prevent them from learning how to use a computer in a way that were led to believe it was impossible to them.

1.2. From Coding to Scripting

If coding in a block-based programming environment can be thought of as too simple and somewhat pointless task, using just block-based programming environments students can create relevant digital products without the burden of having to learn a full-fledged scripting language if they are not self-motivated to do so. Indeed, the knowledge of Scratch, Snap and App Inventor that they acquire in three-month courses, allows them to create multimedia animations with sounds and images to be embedded in their social media, to apply powerful processing concepts and to create full-fledged mobile apps.

The first step of learning how to create scripts for classic text-based programming languages can then be done by creating mods of programming environments such as Scratch or Snap (Federici et al. 2019b). Only when this step has been -in a short time- completed we will then move to standard IDEs (Integrated Development Environments) to develop scripts for text-based programming languages of our choice.

In this way, students learn the logic of classic text-based languages without having to worry about syntax or compilation errors, and without the need to have to remember the specific instructions. Everything is readily available in lists organized by

categories. After having learned the logic of a language, we can then move to its text-based version, just concentrating on the little amount of remaining syntax errors. With this two-step process, even end-users without a solid tech knowledge get to know and use their chosen language quiet easily, finally getting to acquire the necessary knowledge of scripting languages that will allow them to interact in a more meaningful and useful way with an AI like ChatGPT.

1.3. Coding and Communication

Coding and Public Speaking are linked in even more meaningful ways. At the University of Cagliari, coding courses have been introduced in the Communication Studies degree not only to give students the essential skills in digital communication, but also to improve their skills in communicating educational knowledge in science, languages, coding itself, and more. As their end-course project, students are required to create short multimedia interactive projects to teach their peers their chosen subject. To create short and clear multimedia, animated, and interactive explanations they have to use at their best the instruments of both communication and coding.

1.4. Coding and Learning

Coding has been proven to be an excellent tool to learn not only how to automate important tasks by means of a computer, but also to better understand whatever school subject (Federici et al. 2020). By modelling topic-specific block-based languages, students at the elementary and middle school level were found to better understand topics such foreign languages and mathematics. Those students that, when taught in a standard way (frontal lessons with blackboard, book reading, exercises) had the worst performances were found to get almost perfect score when the same topic was explained by allowing them to create their own explanation of mathematical concepts by using a block-based language whose elements where images of numbers and mathematical symbols, or when using task-specific block-languages where they could manipulate 3D elements to express mathematical concepts or to assemble (part of) foreign words and phrases.

2. PUBLIC SPEAKING

2.1. An increasingly essential soft skill

The second area, almost a counterpart to the first, focuses on the natural communication skills of human beings. Communication has also undergone radical changes with the proliferation of social platforms and technologies that mediate interpersonal relationships, including educational relationships. Fostering public speaking skills enhances an individual's capacity to express thoughts effectively and cultivates self-assuredness, a crucial trait in both personal and professional life (Gola & Mottola, 2019). Despite its importance for the personal and professional lives of young people in school, this skill is not included in the curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Education. In early education levels, such as preschool, it is addressed through extracurricular theatre activities, which are sporadic

and left to the discretion of individual teachers. Even when reading is taught, the focus is primarily on text decoding, with little attention given to expressiveness.

2.2. What students can get from public speaking training?

The "training" program on public speaking, which we experimented at University of Cagliari in about ten years of teaching, offers significant benefits in personal and professional development:

- Counteracting the Mediation of Media and Screens, providing participants with the opportunity to engage in direct, interpersonal communication.
- Managing Communication Anxiety: participants learn techniques to address and reduce anxiety related to speaking in front of others.
- Enhancing Expressiveness and Skills, by focusing on vocal dynamics, body language, and non-verbal cues.
- Enhancing Argumentation Skills through applying argumentation strategies in debates.

Specifically, participants reported significant improvements in several areas, such as managing their speaking speed, becoming more expressive, and effectively handling posture and movement during communication. These skills are crucial for engaging an audience and delivering messages with clarity and impact.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We found that good communication skills are essential in order to create good multimedia educational projects. Moreover, even if you don't want to learn how to create or use scripts, to get good results from an AI we need at least good prompts, a skill that can be powered by public speaking and argumentation strategies. Indeed, putting together speaking and writing domains, has been demonstrated to be highly beneficial. Studies (Kimura, 1998; Rousch 2015) suggests that the debate, which requires lots of clarification and elaboration throughout the process, is really effective when teaching writing. In this paper we contend that the same advantage can help specifically in writing prompts, if the two domains addressed are coding and public speaking (Hafifah & Sofi 2019). Indeed, the need of good prompts to get good results has been thoroughly investigated (Bozkurt 2024; Nazari & Saadi 2024)[1].

The two competencies of coding and public speaking are a mix of theoretical and practical in nature, and must be possessed primarily by teachers. Challenges in both areas, such as understanding the profound nature of media and rhetorical-communicative skills, stem from the lack of communication between disciplinary areas and a hierarchical ranking entrenched in our educational system. Technical knowledge and communicative competence are considered somewhat "inferior" by teachers. By focusing on these cross-cutting skills in education, our work aspires to forge a comprehensive educational framework that molds students into well-

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[1] See also: https://www.restack.io/p/prompt-engineering-answer-optimizing-chatgpt-cat-ai?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

rounded, capable individuals, equipped to tackle the complexities of our rapidly evolving world. The aim is to redefine education in a manner that not only imparts knowledge but also empowers students to think critically, communicate effectively, and navigate the digital landscape with confidence. The future of education hinges on the development of these skills, and our perspective represents a stride toward that very future, one that readies students to excel in the ever-evolving world they are poised to inherit.

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ADDRESSING INEQUALITY. FOUR PATHS FOR A MEDIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

We rely on a long tradition: the mediology reflection on education has been going on for half a century now, and the issue of inequality has arisen on many occasions. Marshall McLuhan in *City as Classroom: Understanding Language & Media* (1977) explored the interconnectedness of language, media, and urban environments, as dynamic spaces where language and media play pivotal roles in shaping human experiences, and where communication technologies intersect with diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes. Therefore, considering the city itself as the key educational resource, where media interactions foster deeper comprehension and critical thinking skills, he placed accessing to that resource, in terms of media understanding and educational method, implicitly as an opportunity and an obstacle. "If all the answers can be obtained outside the classroom, is it a good strategy to ask the questions inside the classroom?" McLuhan's positive answer reevaluated the function of school if it becomes the site of a guided experience in a mediological understanding of the environment. In his celebrated *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (1995), Neil Postman described the traditional goals of education as being undermined by societal changes and the influence of modern technologies; namely transmitting knowledge and fostering critical thinking, while fragmented subjects, a void of meaningful context and a loss of a coherent narrative are thwarting vocational training and the cultivation of character and citizenship. So, focusing on efficiency and utility to achieve economic success rather than wisdom and understanding, doesn't work anymore. Hence, Postman proposed a shift towards an "inquiry-based learning" where students are encouraged to ask meaningful questions and engage in collaborative exploration of ideas, and towards the integration of technology into education emphasizing its potential to enhance learning rather than merely serving as a tool for information consumption. Fifteen years later, Henry Jenkins in a collective work with Ravi Purushotma and others, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (2009), examine the participatory culture, characterized by widespread access to digital tools and platforms, and reshape the way individuals engage with media and each other. The authors also advocate for a shift towards a media literacy education empowering individual to critically analyse and create media content. An entire tradition, in fact, since 2000 identifies some key skills such as collaboration, networking and problem-solving as essential for thriving in participatory culture. In a parallel direction, a good paradigm of an ethnographic research

exploring how young people navigate the complexities of digital media within the context of their everyday lives and schooling is the famous *The Class: Living and Learning in the Digital Age* (2016) by Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green, focused on the experiences of a diverse group of London teenagers. Understanding the "fluidity" of teenagers' digital practices, which encompass a wide range of activities including social networking, gaming and content creation, within the broader socio-cultural contexts in which they occur, Livingstone identifies a "digital class divide", which refers to the disparities in access to and usage of digital technologies. Therefore, even a traditional media education could pose a risk if it neglects the social and political dimensions of media, reinforcing existing power structures and inequalities, according to Douglas Kellner, Jeff Share and others (*The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education*, 2019).

In Italy, Roberto Maragliano proposes a vision for an inclusive digital educational environment that caters to the diverse needs of all students, regardless of their background or abilities, emphasizing the importance of ensuring equitable access to technology and digital resources, and personalized learning experiences, accommodating different learning styles and preferences (*Zona Franca: Per una scuola inclusiva del digitale*, 2019). Mario Pireddu (2014) emphasizes the role of social context in shaping educational experiences. Stefano Moriggi (*Postmedialità. Società ed educazione*, 2024) examines the emergence of postmedial forms of expression and interaction. Again, in this sense, inequality is conceptualized as the failure to master the current potential of communication by individuals, groups or entire educational communities.

1. EDUCATION, SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE MEDIAMORPHOSIS

In this sense, four questions should be examined: 1) Is there and what is the correlation between the weakening of education as a factor of social mobility and the processes of mediamorphosis? 2) What are the specific processes inherent in media environment transformation and the current structuring of living media environment fostering inequality? And what forms do they take from this perspective? 3)Can we identify lines of application of mediology in educational experiences that seem promising about countering the reproduction of inequality? 4) And in general, since there is a specific educational "vocation" of mediology, in what terms does this affect its repositioning in the dynamics of social science development?

A partial weakening of educational institutions as a factor of social mobility seems to be an established fact. While especially after the Second World War school was decisive for an intense dynamic of access to professions and better wages by the weaker classes, since the end of the twentieth century the social mobility has significantly slowed down. In addition, the gap in its speed between Italy and Northern Europe has widened further. In Italy there are fewer and fewer opportunities for individuals to move up to higher socioeconomic levels than the status achieved by their parents. Compared to Denmark and other Scandinavian countries, where it

takes only two or three generations to attain more advantageous income conditions, in Italy the attainment of better wages requires – for those from disadvantaged families – the passage of four to five generations (Barone & Guetto, 2016). But is this also related to mediamorphosis, i.e. the transformations and development of media environment? Indeed, yes. The fast transition from the industrial mode of production to the informational one (Castells) is changing the basis of the social pact on which democratic societies were founded, especially in Western Europe. Three aspects of this trend are especially relevant: a) the restructuring of social classes composition, b) the prevalence of non-formal education, c) the orientation towards the consumption of skills useful for orienting in social life.

(a) In fact, in the "network society" there has been a profound restructuring of the composition and balance between social classes. In Italy, specifically, over the past 20 years the upper class has become richer, while all other strata, middle class, blue collar and precarious workers have become poorer. The network society has benefited entrepreneurs and certain categories of skilled professionals and knowledge workers, and has subjected all other strata to continuous challenges and problematic adjustments (Barbagli & Pisati 2020). Therefore, the relevance of the traditional alliance between middle-class intellectuals and lower-middle working classes in shaping policies of income redistribution and access to universalist services collapsed. Education systems, where in the welfare state that alliance was continuously re-produced, have been marginalized.

(b) Corresponding to the diminished relevance of the traditional twentieth-century prowelfare alliance and the emergence of a new economy and desocialization (Touraine), the balance between formal and nonformal activities has been tipped in favour of the second term in every processes involving learning, with a strong weakening of the role of education systems.

(c) Finally, the informational mode of production has further reinforced the dominance of consumption, which is decisive in the networked world over production and labour. "Cultural capital" is not predominantly reproduced in schools, as it's redirected mainly through informal channels, to train skills aimed at consumption. The traditional function of introjection and legitimation of dominant class norms theorized by Bourdieu thus passes through informal channels far more than schools.

2. SPECIFIC MEDIA ENVIRONMENT PROCESSES ACCENTUATING INEQUALITY

On the second point, several factors have been described exacerbating the inequality, however induced by the general transition to the informational world outlined in the framework. In particular, 4 main factors:

a) the lack of accessibility to devices and the Internet. But the gap due to social starting conditions, especially skills and knowledge available in families, which is impressive in Italy (more than 40 percent achievement gap in middle school: Agnelli Foundation 2021), is not closely related to the digital

devices divide, which is definitely a matter of social inequality, but rather to the digital competences divide, on which the economic factor affects less than the educational capacity of the institution (Marangi 2020) and self-education of the individuals, by the way immersed daily in digital environments in Italy among teenagers in 92 percent of cases in 2023.

b) the passive and serial or "flat-formed" learning and use of communication technologies (Rabardel 1995; Rivoltella & Rossi 2019).

c) the insufficient learning and use of MIL skills (Capaldi & Ragone, 2019 e 2020; Ragone & Ceccherelli 2021).

d) the non-collaborative-design approach to work, self-education, communication (or in other words the lack of "learning organizations").

Basically, only the first can be correlated to a fairly large extent to inequality in starting social conditions. The others are to be linked to inadequate empowerment of the media environment and methods of expanding knowledge by individuals, and inadequate method in education by formal institutions. Joining factors related to family income, those media processes create the basis for substantial output inequality in the formal educational system, which manifests itself in all its harmfulness especially at the end of secondary education (Ragone & Capaldi 2020). Basic recommendations have been proposed for years to restart the function of school as a social elevator, but they are not effective without a profound change in the method of learning, including the hybridization of formal and nonformal activities, and the centrality of the project-work within small groups (Fondazione Agnelli, 2021). In addition, inequality may worsen or lessen over the course of a lifetime in the absence of adequate educational experiences.

3. MEDIOLOGY AND CONCRETE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

With respect to the third line of research (i.e.: what applications of mediology to?), many field experiences are under active consideration, and indeed several case studies are presented in this conference that are referrable to this theme. As far as we are concerned, we have been experimenting for years with a survey of university students' orientations regarding MILs and a collaborative learning model based on the application of mediological knowledge to the valorisation of territories (Capaldi & Ceccherelli 2020). In extreme summary, the analyses reveal students' perspectives on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) skills across three stages: the transition to university (what is considered as *crucial*: fig. 1), their acquisition during secondary school (what has been *actually acquired:* fig. 2), and their potential acquisition during their degree course (*aspiration* for the future: fig. 3), taking into consideration answers from about 3870 students in six and half years (September 2017 – May 2024).

Fig. 1. Crucial skills.

*Keys: 1 – a little or not at all; 2 – to some extent, but not sufficient; 3 –
to a sufficient degree; 4 – to a high degree*

MILs
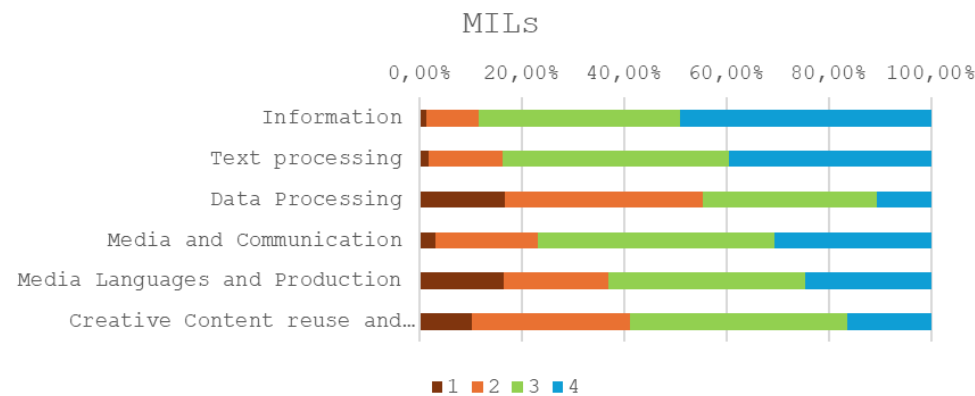
With regard to what has been acquired from students during secondary school, overall, they feel moderately confident in their acquisition of information and text processing skills, with more than half rating their skills as good or very good. However, there is a noticeable lack of confidence in their data processing skills, with the majority rating them at the lowest level.

Fig. 2. To what extent do you think you acquired these skill areas during secondary school?

MILs
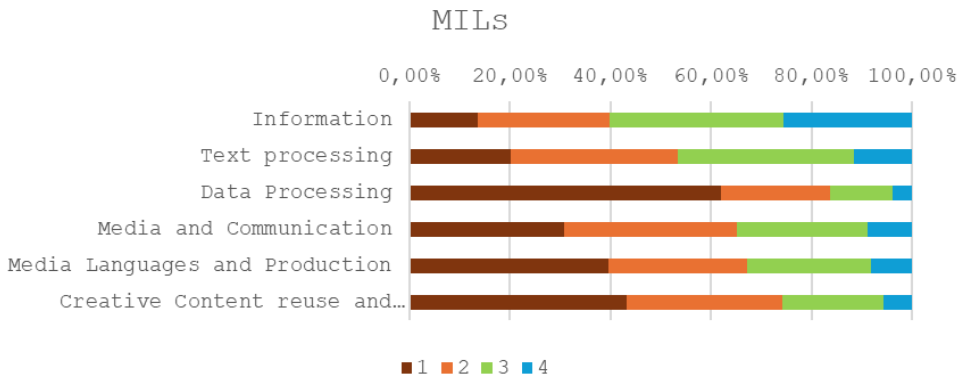
Finally, as for the perception about what can be acquired at the university, students are highly confident in their ability to get information and text processing skills during their degree course, with over 90% rating these skills at the highest levels. Media and communication skills are also seen as attainable, with over 80% expressing confidence. But there is a notable percentage of students who feel less certain about their ability to acquire Data Processing and Media Languages and Production skills.

Fig. 3 – How much can you acquire during your degree course?

MILs
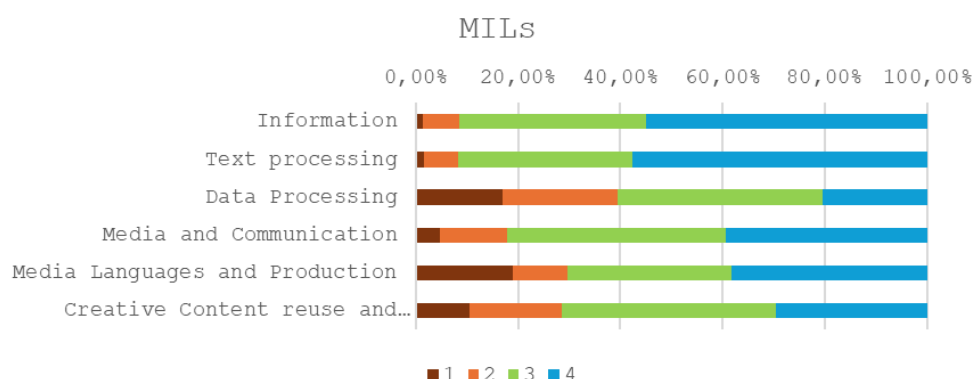
4. REPOSITIONING MEDIOLOGY TOWARD AN ACTIVE VOCATION IN SOCIETY

Key-Concepts are: exploring transmedia environment; creating medial cognitive artifacts; experimenting groupwork and constructivist/constructionist approach; developing formal and informal skills through practical project works; transferring network collaboration as a large artisanal knowledge workshop. Collaborative learning models mediologically oriented are being texted at Sapienza, Tor Vergata, and Cagliari Universities. A practical example is the creation of a moodboard, where students make short video trailers using existing audiovisual material to present an original idea, emphasizing the creative process and network collaboration as a large artisanal knowledge workshop. Or otherwise, in heritage and territorial communication courses, the creation of semi-professional communication projects and materials by groups of students performing real inquiry with local stakeholders.

The concrete repositioning of mediology in education calls for a forthright discussion, starting from the obvious ineffectiveness of many lines of sociology of communication, or even worse of research practices that merely sanctify the "empirical method" under the illusion that knowledge can be reduced to "data" and "description" of the phenomenon, without too many epistemological problems and without reconstructing learning processes in its development and socio-media genesis. Mediology is not a closed discipline: it's an interdisciplinary development of knowledge, founded on the "investigative" paradigm, continually seeking to construct "anti-environments", and vocated to form awareness about the mediamorphosis processes, together with useful skills at various levels in media production. Therefore, we should orient ourselves to convert it into a fundamental resource for individuals and social groups.

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POTENTIALS AND LIMITS OF EDUCATIONAL MEDIATION WITH DIGITAL STORYTELLING

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The paper presents the outcomes of qualitative research conducted using case study methodology within the European Erasmus+ project with a small-scale partnership: PRESTO Peer education and digital storytelling for young people. PRESTO promoted the use of digital technologies by young people in disadvantaged situations for editing storytelling about the future they desire. The aim was to promote development of digital skills as defined by the European guidelines (Official Journal of the European Union, 2018) and to support young people in the promotion of transversal competences such as the ability to work in team, to practice self-observation, to promote self-efficacy and agency (Bandura, 1995; 2012), to identify desirable goals for their future. The research highlights the decisive role of the educational mediation promoted by educators for achieving the project's educational goals.

Digital storytelling; competencies; education; digital technologies

INTRODUCTION: PEER EDUCATION AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN A EUROPEAN PROJECT

PRESTO (Contract No. 2021-1-IT01-KA210-VET-000034545 – KA2) is a European project developed with small-scale partnerships, mainly aimed at training educators in the methodology of peer education (PE – FHI 360, 2014) and digital storytelling production (DS – Robin, 2008; 2012; 2016) as cognitive artefacts which can be significant for the educational processes of young people in marginalised social situations. The project ran from February 2022 to July 2023 and involved two Italian and one Portuguese organisation.

The project actions were aimed at training first-level beneficiaries in the two methodologies and, secondarily, involving teenagers in fragile conditions. The educators were the first-level beneficiaries: at them was aimed the training phase regarding the use of said teaching methodologies. The second level involved teenagers (between 14 and 19 years old) in a disadvantaged or marginalised social condition, who were involved in non-formal learning activities.

This part of the activities pointed at creating DS about their desirable future and took place within the peer group with the facilitation of educators to explore prior skills, potentials, aspirations, and potential life paths. The educational project was

characterised by the promotion of narrative skills, by the editing of the story on multimedia technological support and by collaborative activation within the group.

The future they desire was the horizon of meaning within which to imagine individual stories with the aim of helping participants identify future life paths. At the same time, the work with digital technologies for finding images, sounds and software or apps for constructing the digital version of one's own story stimulated the reasoned – and at the same time creative – use of digital knowledge and skills, which matured during the course of the activities, both in educators and teenagers.

The link between peer education, desirable future and digital storytelling approach was adopted in order to create a model of educational intervention aimed at enhancing different skills, from digital to transversal.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted using the case study method (Domenici, Lucisano, Biasi, 2017; Trinchero, 2004) embedded single-case study (Yin, 2012) with qualitative orientation techniques. The research started by reconstructing the theoretical framework on the main project topics in order to identify the investigation focuses and research questions.

The investigation focuses, which inspired the guiding questions and the interpretative categories, concern the role of technologies in teaching and learning processes; participative and socio-constructivist-inspired educational methods and tools; and digital competence as an element for promoting individual and social growth, in connection with European policies and guidelines that identify this as one of the key factors for making citizenship concrete and widespread.

The case study examined all the project materials; interviews and focus groups were conducted with the project designers, educators and some external experts; moreover was considered the participation in training and supervision phases of educators from the partner countries involved. The material was analysed through a structured operationalisation process for defining the indicators (Marradi, 1987; 2007).

The produced digital storytelling, on the other hand, were analysed using the method of multimodal analysis (Alonso Belmonte, Molina, Dolores Porto, 2013) and explored independently from the present paper (Spinelli, 2024).

The research activities included moments of direct observation and supervision of the educational work and all material was transcribed and analysed as part of the case study.

Following items were considered:

Tab. 1. Documents analysed

Project documentation	Training course for educators
	Educators' trailers
	Monitoring and evaluation documents
	Platform interactions during the training phase
	Agendas and meeting reports
	Interim and final reports
	Documents of PE activities in the two countries involved
	Territorial educational plans
Non-standard interviews	Designers
	Local contact persons/managers
	External experts
Interviews and focus with educators	Senior educator interview
	Focus groups with educators
	Supervision activities
Questionnaires for educators and local contact persons/managers	Input questionnaires; *in itinere*; final
Analysis of documentation produced by second level beneficiaries	Youth trailers
	Setting/context analysis

2. DATA ANALYSIS

The PRESTO project case study had three investigation focuses. The first focused on the role of technologies in teaching and learning processes; the second on participatory and socio-constructivist-inspired educational methods and tools; and, finally, the third on digital competence as an element in promoting individual and social growth. Starting from these focuses the guiding questions and interpretative categories for observation and data analysis were developed. The relationship between research focus and guiding questions are summarised in Tab. 2.

All document material was analysed by defining conceptual and operational categories and indicators. The conceptual categories were defined according to the reference literature; the operational categories considered the meanings assumed within the project and the indicators were used to map the documents and processes under investigation. Thanks to the use of indicators, all texts were analysed and mapped with the support of NVivo software processing. The decision to use this software was made mainly to guarantee transparency in the analysis activity (Pacifico, Coppola, 2010).

Only the elements of the research useful for analysing the potential and limits of educational mediation with DS, quoted in the first two survey questions, are considered here.

Tab. 2. Relationship between empirical survey *focus* and guiding questions

Investigation Focus	Guiding Questions
Role of technologies in teaching and learning processes	What relationship/connection can exist between participation and digital competence in non-formal learning?
Participative and socio-constructivist inspired educational methods and tools	Does the educational use of digital *devices* and products influence personal growth in terms of social capital, identification and explication of one's own needs and desires, identification of possible individual and professional paths?
Digital competence as an element for promoting individual and social growth	Is the definition of digital competence, as defined in the 2018 Recommendations, a useful reference for designing educational pathways?

3. RESULTS

For the purposes of this paper, we report on some of the evidence identified concerning the educational mediation carried out using the peer education method and the production of digital storytelling.

Between the technical, technological and pedagogical preparation of the educators and the DS formats a clear link is noticed. Educators with more technical preparation promoted technically better products, but with little connection to the feasibility of the future project desired. Conversely, educators with less digital skills but more pedagogical preparation promoted an educational and reflective approach. It is noticeable how the directions and instructions for the production of the digital influence the narrative, pushing it in different directions. The stories oriented by an educational work of re-signification of one's experiences and approach to the future are linked to aspirations that tend to be feasible and concern one's professional future or personal growth. They contain an analysis of the characteristics of the self that make them feasible or at least desirable. Conversely, stories produced with a greater focus on technical aspects are more appealing, their DS more enjoyable, but they are disconnected as much from the starting conditions of the teenagers as from their eventual feasibility. In fact, they are dreams or fantasies, very much embedded in the youth media imagination, rather than possible future life paths.

Didactic mediation was instrumental in sustaining motivation and inclusion within the peer group and promoted a highly relational approach linked mainly to PE.

Research shows indeed a clear link between PE and the promotion of transversal competences, identified in the ability to work in team, to solve problems, to express oneself and one's own point of view. The peer approach proved to be the beating heart of the project, which influenced the young participants' storytelling, the development of the DS and the engagement of the educators. PE was identified as qualifying educational action in a more incisive and consolidated way than the use of digital technologies. Its centrality, in the professional experience of educators, also emerges from the connection that they make between peer education, intra-

group collaboration, participation and the facilitating role of the educator. In this framework, participation is the result of work carried out within the peer group, very much linked to the non-formal dimension of the learning experience and – on the other hand – little linked to the use of one's own devices or other digital products. An important facilitating role was played by the educators, who assumed a proximity position to the teenagers, guiding the activity in a non-directive manner, delegating certain choices to the group, supporting reciprocal knowledge and intervening directly only to respond to explicit requests, from the individual or the group, concerning technical issues related to the task of writing the story and producing the digital storytelling.

The use of different linguistic codes within the same artefact facilitated the elaboration of the stories, offering opportunities for individual reflection even for teenagers less familiar with written production. This was an opportunity to use apps and software and to start using metaphors as a mode of expression and representation.

No link emerged between participation and the use of digital technologies, which instead proved to be an element capable of motivating teenagers to take part in the proposed activities and were an opportunity for experimentation aimed at an innovative use of digital technologies rather than their usual everyday use. Therefore, the strongest link is not between participation and the use of digital technologies, but rather between technologies and the creation of a story of biographical orientation, aimed at one's own desirable future. In the experience of educators, technologies are not indispensable for participation, which is instead supported by educational dynamics oriented towards collaboration within the peer group. The value of technologies, clearly expressed in the documentation, lies rather in the possibility they offer of enhancing knowledge and skills regarding their conscious use and that intersect, imply and involve also the set of so-called transversal skills. Their use, within non-formal educational processes involving boys and girls in disadvantaged situations, is unanimously recognised as an added value, essential for growth and cultural maturation.

All the educators involved expressed a willingness to continue using DS either with an autobiographical approach, as in the project, or by experimenting with different topics such as, for example, gender, ecological or racism issues. In both cases, however, the peer education methodology is retained as a valuable element for the promotion of socially oriented transversal skills.

3. CONCLUSION

Regarding the focus of this article, which explores the potential and limitations of digital storytelling, it should be noted that the most valuable variable turns out to be the orientation promoted by the educators. In fact, during the process of educational mediation aimed at creating meaningful stories for the desirable future, when the relationship with the autobiographical approach and with the analysis of the skills possessed was maintained, the DS was consistent with potentially feasible life trajectories.

This element, on the contrary, was less present in cases where the educational mediation was primarily aimed at creating technically correct and aesthetically appealing artefacts.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the decisive variable for the educational use of digital storytelling in the PRESTO project is to be found in the nature of the educational mediation promoted by the educators.

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS AND INCLUSIVE TEACHING: DEVELOPMENT OF A FORMATIVE SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

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Based on results from the Erasmus+ project Enabling eXtremely Creative, Inclusive, Inspiring Teachers for Europe (EXCIITE), which aims to assist educators from primary to secondary school, we present a tool to support teacher PD concerning inclusion. From our analysis of existing models of PD and educational practices in partner countries, we have derived the "Good Practice Elements" (GPE), which are relatively independent of their socio-cultural contexts, thus enhancing reproducibility across different settings. These components reflect the concept of "inclusion" as a process of reducing obstacles to learning and participation for all students and involve: the design of educational spaces; the creation of supportive environments; building collaborative relationships; fostering a vision of learning in which everyone is engaged; encouraging student agency; rethinking organizational aspects; and creating a democratic environment. As reflection constitutes a continual posture that enables teachers to experiment with reasoning to recognize regularities and register changes, the tool is designed to accompany teachers—reflective practitioners—through PD aimed at improving the quality of inclusion in the classroom context and inclusive education teaching.

teachers' professional development; self-assessment; quality; inclusive teaching; good practices;

INTRODUCTION

Teachers' professional development is a key component for improving and innovating the education system (MIUR, 2016) and for supporting change concerning knowledge systems, attitudes and beliefs in a democratic way. This contribution outlines a tool to support professional development starting from some actions that emerged in the three-year European Erasmus+ project Enabling eXtremely Creative, Inclusive, Inspiring Teachers for Europe (EXCIITE), which focuses on enhancing the competencies of primary and lower secondary school teachers, starting from the analysis of their training needs, in the areas of inclusion, creativity, digital and innovation. An important aspect of the Project, which offers significant elements for reflection and implementation on and of the research, is the identification of 'Good Practices Elements' (GPE) that are relatively independent of the socio-cultural

context from which they emerged, therefore with a greater possibility of being re-produced (Mellone et al., 2019). This outlines a path addressing the limits of research tied to good practices (GP) while enhancing their potential to improve professional quality and teaching-learning processes. In the pedagogical perspective underlying the EXCIITE Project, it is necessary to recall the need for the critical consideration of a construct emanating from the managerial economic culture (GP), in the context of educational action. More generally, the issue of effectiveness closely related to the topic of GP has opened up several fronts for reflection and research: from a teleological perspective, it poses at least three types of problems inherent to the epistemological, ontological and practical dimensions of the discussion (Biesta, 2010), strongly connected to the framework of our project. Indeed, in addition to the problem of ecological validity and transferability, GPE as relatively context-independent elements, requires attention from an epistemological perspective about the very idea of context. The concept of context is central to research on the development of inclusive educational practices and its open relational and dynamic nature is placed at the basis of this work. It is therefore necessary to reconsider, from a research perspective, also the 'physiological' dependence on the sociocultural (but not only) contexts from which good practices originate and develop. As Michelini (2018) argues, scientific findings should not be reduced to rules of action: GP reflects complexity, requiring a dynamic approach that bridges theory and praxis, context-specificity, and the formalisation of solutions, integrating diverse aspects of reality and problems. The self-analysis tool was developed for this reason: starting from the valorisation of the shared knowledge on GPs co-constructed with the European partners, supporting the skills and agency of individual teachers and specific contexts.

1. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In aiming at enhancing and extending the EXCIITE Project's idea of inclusive education, the scientific principle underlying this paper refers to the extended, dynamic and connected nature of the learning environment[1]. This principle makes it a priority to support teachers' awareness of its implications on GP for the quality of inclusive teaching. Franco Frabboni highlighted the Italian emphasis on the environmental dimension and the school's openness as key achievements. Drawing on Winnicott's "mother-environment", the pedagogical approach incorporates affective and relational dimensions into the complexity of education. More recently, the focus on expanding learning times, spaces, and modes has elevated lifelong and life-wide learning as central global paradigms (Jackson, 2011).

Realising an equitable, inclusive and effective learning environment is an indispensable condition for achieving a quality school (UNESCO, 2015). Educational neuroscience, in particular Embodied Cognition (EC), contributes to enhance the

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[1] The term *learning environment* is used here in its commonly understood meaning as the context in which the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and competencies takes place.

complexity of the interconnected dimensions characterising learning environments. The construct of the 'Wide EC Environment' (WEE) (Damiani, Gomez Paloma, 2018; 2021), identifies these dimensions in a threefold perspective: personal (mind-body of the subjects as an internal environment); physical-material (spaces and places of learning as environments outside and inside the school); pedagogical-didactic (EC-based educational and didactic devices). The quality of the school and the educational success of its pupils are influenced by the characteristics of these elements and, above all, by the quality of the relationships between them. The characterising aspect of the EC perspective is the continuous interconnection between the three dimensions (internal, physical and pedagogical environment) and the constituent elements; In line with the model of the International Classification of Functioning (WHO, 2001), the key element is the interconnected context of personal and environmental factors. It represents the physical, psychological and relational dimensions where the educational process develops.

Inclusion, understood as change, aligns with a dynamic vision of the learning environment. The *Index* serves as both a theoretical and methodological framework, emphasizing active inclusion by leveraging contextual resources, diverse dimensions, and collective agency for the ecological application of GP. The general structure and the reflective-transformative Index method provided the framework for the development of our tool. The GPEs outcome of the EXCIITE project were reinterpreted through the Dimensions and Indicators on the three macro-areas (cultures, policies, practices), identifying targets of inclusion with a focus on teaching practices at class level.

The multidimensional construct of learning environment is a magnifying glass to broadly explore the processes involved in everyday teaching, in the interaction between the teachers and the class.

The use of GPE reinterpreted, and framed in the Index approach mitigates the risks of their uncritical use, decontextualised and with little respect for the differences and limitations and the different dimensions, explicit and implicit, that intervene at the level of the learning environment. In this way, a process of democratic change is supported, which is characterised as a true transformative research-education process (Viganò, 2002):

> A democratic research method allows for the democratic dimension to be voiced and fostered in all research and action; it motivates the researcher and practitioner to make explicit the intentionality, strategies, and powers they exercise over their context, thus allowing for the singularity that is in every research or intervention instead of placing emphasis only on what is uniform and generalisable. There is no single good way of doing research or acting. Intervention is linked to an epistemological and political choice that defines an operational model based on a certain representation of the world and regulates the role of subjects (p. 135).

2. INCLUSION TOOL'S STRUCTURE: DIMENSIONS, INDICATORS AND QUESTIONS

The choice of constructing a tool for the self-analysis of inclusive teaching practices at class level is based on a twofold objective: 1) to adapt and enhance the GPE as a resource for teachers, elaborating the targets of inclusion; 2) to intervene at the micro level, in the awareness that the Index is based on a relational ecological approach at school system level. The objective is not to replace the Index but rather to complement it, focusing on essential dimensions to guarantee inclusion and change in the perspective of removing obstacles to learning and participation at the level of planning and action in the classroom, which is one of the levels of a broader system of relationships and is also the one in which teachers mainly operate, most of the time and generally alone. The use of GPE reinterpreted as target of inclusion, and framed in the Index approach mitigates the risks of their decontextualised use.

In particular, the inclusive targets for promoting inclusive teaching concern: designing educational spaces; creating supportive environments; building collaborative relationships; supporting a vision of collective involvement; encouraging student agency; rethinking organisational aspects; creating a democratic environment (Bertolini et al., 2022).

The questionnaire thus provides enrichment for the use of the Index, justified by the flexibility explicitly acknowledged by its authors and by the examples of use already implemented in a field for which the Index appears to be less equipped, with only a limited number of indicators and questions. The aim is also to support teachers in improving aspects that define their professional role (classroom teaching) within the Index's perspective of authentic change. This focus is particularly significant as the literature highlights the persistence of pedagogical biases, and prejudices in this domain, which lead to phenomena of micro-exclusion.

To develop the questions, a literature review was conducted for each target of inclusion, identifying key scientific concepts that informed the selection of indicators and questions. The questions included in the questionnaire are simple, focused, and unambiguous, presenting meaningful content designed to ensure that respondents do not feel negatively judged (Roccato, 2023). Due to space constraints, we present only one of the seven targets of inclusion, focusing on the dimension of Creating a welcoming environment, which entails making schools supportive and stimulating places for both adults and children while embracing individuality.

Evidence-based literature identifies "Creating a safe, positive, and motivating classroom environments" one of the effective strategies for fostering inclusion (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2022). Classroom climate is linked to the psychological climate of the environment and the cultural atmosphere of the class institution. The quality of classroom climate is established through two fundamental actions: creating an emotionally safe environment through meaningful relationships and supporting personal growth and improvement. The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012) highlights inclusive environments as both welcoming disadvantaged students and valuing heterogeneity. Trust and embracing mistakes as learning opportunities create a climate fostering effective learning

(Hattie, 2012). This target of inclusion is thus connected to the relational context dimension (Damiani, Gomez Paloma, 2021; Cottini, 2021) and the evolution of inclusive practices. The questions developed for the questionnaire reflect these core aspects (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1. Creating a welcoming environment – Questions.

Indicators		Questions
Building meaningful relationships	1	I check the emotional state of all students before starting an activity
	2	I address any emotional difficulties expressed by students before starting or continuing the learning activity
	3	I take into account how students emotionally perceived a completed activity
	4	I strive to convey to all students the awareness that they are valued and accepted individuals, regardless of any difficulties they may encounter in their learning journey
	5	I know how to use humor to make learning enjoyable and ease tensions
Sustaining personal development	6	I believe that all students can learn, without exception
	7	I reflect with students on their progress toward achieving their goals
	8	I help students believe in their own abilities
	9	Students' interests, knowledge, and independently acquired skills are valued and incorporated into the lesson
	10	Learning activities highlight the characteristics of each individual, promoting an understanding of social, cultural, linguistic, gender, ability, and religious differences, among others

Inclusion is conceived as a dynamic process triggered by a reflective-transformative cycle that involves the participation of all stakeholders and leverages the resources of the context, fostering a reflective stance (Schön, 1983). Given that the primary goal of adult education is "to help those whom society deems fully responsible for their actions to become more reflective in formulating and solving problems, to participate more fully and freely in rational discourse" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 107), the aim is to support democratic and critical participation in dialogue. This process initiates transformative learning, defined as the re-elaboration of both implicit and explicit elements of communication to acquire meaning perspectives open to diverse viewpoints and generate new meaning structures capable of guiding future actions through the reworking of problematic frameworks. The tool supports teachers in a training pathway aimed at enhancing the quality of inclusion in the classroom and teaching by fostering a reflective posture through opportunities that help teachers identify patterns and track changes (Nigris, 2018). Reflection, a

fundamental characteristic of professionals, enables the identification and resolution of problematic situations, reinterpreting them through a heuristic and generative perspective via reflection during and on action. The training pathway for using the tool aligns with the process identified by Booth and Ainscow (2002) and is designed as a Research-Based PD approach (Vannini, 2009; Nigris et al., 2020) consisting of several phases: Familiarization with the tool through an introduction to the framework and inclusive values (I); Exploration and group discussion of the findings to surface hidden elements and analyze differing perspectives (2); Identification of training objectives, based on recognizing the needs of stakeholders, areas for improvement, and co-designing an inclusive plan (3); Collaboration between teachers and researchers as co-developers of the process, supported by shared/co-created tools (4); Reassessment of the process using the questionnaire to highlight changes in inclusive dimensions related to the initial objectives (5). The training path is embedded in the framework of the transformative development model, as it is based on shared responsibility and the assessment of training needs starting from the specific context.

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SELF-NARRATIVE AS AN ORIENTATION TOOL AIMED AT PROMOTING THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIALIZED TEACHERS: RESULTS OF A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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This paper describes a training and research experience in the field of Special Needs Education, emphasizing the significance of autobiographical narratives as a tool for self-reflection and professional development among educators. The study analyzes a corpus of over 500 autobiographical narratives, collected across multiple cycles from 2020 to 2024, to explore how participants recognize both their own needs and those of others. By engaging in self-narration, educators undergo an introspective process that enhances their individual awareness and provides opportunities to address external demands and pressures. Qualitative analysis, conducted using NVivo software, reveals a complex set of motivations underlying the renunciation expressed by participants. The predominance of internal, controllable factors over external ones suggests that many educators are strongly influenced by reciprocal expectations and socially recognized models. These elements play a significant role in shaping their professional choices, personal identities, and aspirations. The study particularly highlights the role of familial and social expectations, showing how educators – as influential figures – can have a substantial impact on the trajectories of emerging generations. This dynamic underscores the importance of a pedagogical approach that acknowledges and values both individual and collective dimensions.

Teacher training; narrative pedagogy; inclusion; self-construction; qualitative analysis-NVivo

INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

The experience described here forms the core of activities within a SEN (Special Educational Needs) Workshop. The primary goal of this research and training was to use narrative techniques as a pedagogical tool to promote dynamics of acceptance and inclusion, foster reciprocal educational relationships, and, crucially, help teachers design experiences that support students' development of self-orientation skills.

Autobiographical writing activities are essential for professional and identity development in both formal and non-formal educational settings (Biffi, 2016; Travaglini, 2016; Giaconi et al., 2021; Raimondo, 2021; Sicurello, 2021; Di Carlo, 2023). The increasing significance of these activities lies in their role in preparing individuals for transitions across various contexts and in helping them navigate existential challenges and changes (Muschitiello, 2008; Muscarà & Romano, 2023).

From the perspective of life planning pedagogy (Malaguti, 2007; Pavone, 2008), individuals are seen as evolving beings who undergo changes that require thoughtful reflection. During transitional phases, narrative serves not only as a methodology but also as a key tool for self-reflection, self-replanning, and personal orientation toward self-realization (Cambi, 2014).

According to Jedlowski (2000), narratives provide a privileged means of connecting with oneself, one's desires, and personal talents. A critical aspect of storytelling is its emancipatory potential, enabling individuals to understand, interpret, and, if necessary, correct their actions.

The act of narrating one's story plays a vital role in psycho-social development, particularly in the process of identity formation (Bertaux, 1980). It activates a process of subjectivation and helps individuals reposition themselves within their social and personal contexts. Through storytelling, individuals engage in self-formation (Clark & Rossiter, 2008), critically reflecting on their lived experiences and the dynamics of change (Papastephanou, 2014; 2018), while navigating ongoing intrapersonal and interpersonal comparisons.

The objective of this training was to guide participants through actions, practices, and dynamics that mirrored classroom planning. The aim was to immerse participants fully in the educational process, while pursuing three key goals:

a) To promote reflection on lived experiences, helping participants rediscover their interests and motivations.
b) To activate and enhance personal and collective resources, contributing to the creation of a new professional and life plan.
c) To connect each individual's experience with the recognition and addressal of their own needs and those of others.

METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

The training course, totalling 20 hours, has been offered across multiple cycles, engaging a total of 544 teachers from primary and lower secondary schools. While the sample is predominantly female, the distribution is representative of overall teaching staff demographics (OECD, 2017).

The training activities were designed to help participants develop awareness of key workshop concepts, connecting them to their own experiences (Alberici, Serreri, 2009; Alheit, 2018; Alheit, et al. 2005). This approach allowed participants to create meaningful and personalized learning spaces.

Tab. 1. The research sample

Year	Grade	Women	Men	Teachers
2019-20	Primary school	51	24	75
2020-21	Primary school	54	16	70
2021-22	Lower secondary school	87	27	114
2022-23	Lower secondary school	61	23	84
2023-24	Lower secondary school	157	44	201
Total		410	134	544

A central component of the narrative process was analyzing Andrea Canevaro's influential work, *The Children Who Get Lost in the Forest* (1999), which emphasizes the educational and symbolic value of storytelling. Canevaro reexamines classic fairy tales (e.g., *Peter Pan*, *Little Thumb*, *The Ugly Duckling*, *Snow White*, *Pinocchio*) from a pedagogical perspective, offering new insights into their symbolic meanings.

The forest metaphor in these stories represents a space for identity construction, where one can either thrive or lose themselves. Peter Pan, for instance, highlights the role adult expectations play in shaping identity – expectations that may compel individuals to conform to prescribed models, potentially sacrificing their desires and authenticity.

In this context, school functions as a metaphorical forest: it can provide a safe, guided space where diverse identities are valued or serve as an experimental environment for personal growth. The teacher's role is crucial in fostering a narrative perspective on knowledge, creating an inclusive learning environment that nurtures self-orientation skills and a deeper understanding of students' existential contexts (Castiglioni, 2011; 2014).

After engaging with Canevaro's work, participants were asked to respond anonymously to a narrative prompt via a Google Form, reflecting on themes of personal growth and identity. Responses were then catalogued and distributed randomly among groups, who were tasked with creating a new fairy tale based on the autobiographical narratives. The objective was to construct a collective story that highlighted 'excluded parts' of the self, focusing on their uniqueness within the narrative structure. Finally, participants used their stories to develop an interdisciplinary learning unit that integrated the workshop activities with their real-life classroom experiences (Castellana, 2021; Bocci et al. 2023).

RESULTS

A total of 418 teachers, from various cycles of the program between 2019 and 2024, contributed to the research. The qualitative analysis of the responses is ongoing, utilizing NVivo software for precise categorization. The analysis integrates both top-down and bottom-up approaches – top-down to classify responses according to theoretical frameworks, and bottom-up to identify categories reflecting types of renunciation and motivations behind these sacrifices.

A preliminary 'pencil-and-paper' analysis revealed that renunciation was primarily attributed to internal, controllable factors, rather than external circumstances like family issues or unforeseen events. Many participants reported aligning with socially recognized models or responding to family expectations, underscoring the influence of others' expectations on personal development and future trajectories.

Table 2. Top-down and Bottom-up Categories

Code Name	Description	References
WHY	Motivation for renunciation	
External Factors	Causes related to unforeseen events or family demands	37
Internal Factors	Causes related to personal choices or characteristics, including fear of disappointment, desire for approval, etc.	73
WHAT	Aspects of the self that were renounced	
Character Traits	Carefree attitude, shyness, creativity, fear of making mistakes, etc.	41
Diversity	Non-identification with gender stereotypes or societal norms	1
Denied Childhood/Adolescence	Premature assumption of adult responsibilities due to family illness or neglect	7
Freedom to Express	The freedom to be oneself, make choices, and act without fear of judgment	12
Artistic Passions and Talents	Renunciation of music, drawing, dance, etc.	7
NARRATIVE AS A TOOL	The function of autobiographical storytelling	
Connecting with One's Past	Recovering and sharing experiences, memories, and suppressed desires or talents	77
Re-signifying and Re-evaluating	Reflecting on actions, emotions, and decisions, attributing new meanings to past experiences	170
EMOTIONAL CONTEXT	Emotional involvement and willingness to open up	76

The most common renunciation involved giving up artistic talents (e.g., drawing, music) and aspects of personality (e.g., creativity, emotional sensitivity, spontaneity). The loss of childhood or adolescence, often due to family pressures or trauma, also emerged as a frequent theme. Many narratives reflected the impact of societal or family expectations on the participants' life paths, including experiences of family violence or pressure to conform to prescribed roles.

After completing the training, participants were asked to evaluate their experience through a Google Form. The questionnaire included 11 closed-ended questions (using a 5-point Likert scale) and one open-ended question for further comments. The key areas assessed were:

1. Personal and group evaluation of the experience.
2. Effectiveness of storytelling in reconnecting with personal experiences and enhancing self-identity.
3. Applicability of the training to teaching practice.

Table 3. Results of the Activity Evaluation Questionnaire

Question	Average Rating
1. How would you evaluate your overall experience of working in the group and developing the fairy tale?	4.56
2. How effective was the narrative prompt in helping you reflect on and reinterpret aspects of your personality?	4.21
3. Did you find sharing your personal story liberating?	3.87
4. How emotionally engaging did you find the activity?	4.31
5. Do you think these experiences helped you recognize your transversal skills (communication, creativity, etc.)?	4.58
6. Did sharing experiences with others benefit you?	4.40
7. Did you appreciate that what you (or your colleagues) shared was valued by the group?	4.26
8. Do you believe focusing on transforming personal weaknesses into strengths is beneficial for education?	4.60
9. How would you assess the overall value of the training?	4.55
10. Do you believe narrative-based teaching could help create a classroom climate where diversity is valued?	4.67
11. Do you think this training is applicable to your teaching work?	4.60

Overall, participants rated the training experience positively, particularly valuing its applicability to teaching practice and its ability to use narrative as a tool to transform personal weaknesses into strengths.

The open-ended responses highlighted the value of using storytelling to unlock and reassess personal experiences. Participants also viewed it as an opportunity to gain greater self-awareness, recognize their talents, and foster an environment of open dialogue and mutual listening. Another key point was the role of the group as a supportive space for interpreting individual life paths and valuing diverse experiences.

CONCLUSION

The activities carried out during the workshop significantly contributed to the development of emotional and relational skills among participants (Demetrio, 1996;1998; 2008).

By engaging in reflective practices, teachers were able to analyse complex situations, explore practical solutions, and increase their awareness of personal resources. These experiences fostered a deeper sense of self-awareness and supported participants in reimagining their professional and personal trajectories (Formenti, 1998; 2004).

The study's limitations include the specific nature of the sample – teachers enrolled in a specialization course for support activities – which may influence the results due to their professional focus on education and care (Baldacci, 2006). Additionally, the gender imbalance in the teaching profession, though reflected in the sample, could have impact on the findings (OECD, 2017). Future research could explore how gender influences the types of renunciation made, such as in the abandonment of personal passions or career paths. Investigating how men and women differently use autobiographical writing for self-reflection and professional redefinition would be an interesting direction for further study.

Overall, the findings suggest that narrative-based activities can be a powerful tool for personal development, both for teachers and their students. They can encourage a more reflective, inclusive approach to teaching, which values diverse experiences and supports the development of self-orientation skills – a crucial aspect of both professional and personal growth.

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TRIGGERING A VIRTUOUS CYCLE: ENHANCING ARGUMENTATIVE ABILITIES IN SFP STUDENTS TO ENHANCE THEIR ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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In the face of the low levels of linguistic and mathematical literacy in students enrolling to Scienze della Formazione Primaria (SFP, the Italian degree training and qualifying perspective pre- and primary school teachers), we elaborated activities and teaching strategies aimed at supporting the development of basic math and language skills in these students, including argumentative skills. The article presents a programme developed during academic year 2023-24 in the framework of remedial activities organised for first-year SFP students with additional learning requirements (OFAs). The aim is to contribute to the discussion on possible strategies to reduce school (and university) dropout and guarantee academic success for a larger number of students. These activities were focused on basic grammar, text comprehension, arithmetic, algebra and argumentation. Argumentation has been given relevance, not only because knowing how to argue and being able to understand and assess argumentation is necessary for daily life activities and is essential for a successful university career, but also because SFP students will have to teach it to their pupils. The paper presents preliminary data collected during these remedial programmes, focusing on the activities proposed, the results obtained and the participants' opinions.

argumentation; preservice teacher education; university dropouts; transdisciplinary skills

INTRODUCTION

Being able to argue, to understand our interlocutors' argumentations and to assess whether a statement, opinion or demonstration is sound, is necessary for many daily life activities and is particularly important for a successful university career. The Italian school curriculum gives great attention to the development of argumentation skills in all school cycles, starting from preschool through to secondary school. However, despite this attention, various data on university students' (in)abilities highlight unexpected difficulties in producing and understanding argumentative texts.

Argumentation abilities are doubly important for students in Scienze della Formazione Primaria (SFP), since they study to become preschool and primary school teachers and need these abilities not only to proceed successfully in their academic career, but also to be able to foster these skills development in pupils when they become teachers (Dunst et al. 2020).

As members of a university department involved in the education and training of SFP students, we have decided to tackle the issue of argumentation in the framework of a department research, with the intent on the one side, at supporting the development of argumentative skills in SFP students and, on the other side, at providing tools for the development of argumentative processes in present university students and their future pupils. The approach is transdisciplinary, ensuring a plurality of viewpoints thanks to the presence in the team of researchers in linguistics, mathematics education and teaching methodologies.

This paper focuses on the tackling of educational poverty and on possible strategies to reduce school (and university) dropout, to guarantee academic success for a larger number of students and improve preservice teacher training. The data presented are part of this research and have been collected during last academic year (2023-24) in the framework of remedial activities organised for SFP first-year students with additional learning requirements (OFAs).

1. WHO ARE OFA SFP STUDENTS?

Before admission to Italian universities all students have to be tested in order to verify that they have no deficiencies in basic knowledge which might condition their success in the chosen degree. The students who present these deficiencies can enroll, but are assigned OFAs.

In the SFP degree of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia students with OFAs are identified on the basis of their performance in the admission national test. For 2023-24, this test comprised multiple-choice questions across three domains: 40 questions in language and logical reasoning, 20 in mathematics and sciences, and 20 in humanities. Students who failed to answer correctly at least 30 of the questions in language and logical reasoning and/or 13 of those in mathematics and sciences were attributed OFAs in both/either domains. OFA consisted in compulsory attendance of classes and a final exam. The classes took place in the first semester, for a total of 10 weeks, with 4 to 6 hours of on-site or on-line lessons a week for each domain.

In the academic year 2023-24, out of a total of 250 students admitted, 145 scored below threshold. Of those students, given that 63 had exemptions, 82 were assigned OFAs: 36 only in the language domain (OFA 1), 22 only in mathematics (OFA 2), and 24 in both.

These students had attended different types of secondary schools, with the highest percentage specializing in humanities: approximately 43% attended humanities schools, 19% technical schools, 15% scientific schools, 12% linguistic schools, and 10% other types of schools. They can be considered average students

according to high school exit assessments as their median final grade corresponds to [80–89], where passing grades range [60-100].

2. INITIAL ASSESSMENT

For both language and mathematical domains, on the first day of classes the students were offered a further test designed by the research team to better focus the difficulties, design the activities, and prepare an individualised program of attendance for each student, based on their real needs.

Remedial activities included mandatory classes for students with lower testing scores and online classes and exercises for students with higher testing scores.

Throughout the course records were kept of class participation, number of exercises completed, homework accuracy, and quality and complexity of written argumentation

3. ACTIVITIES PROPOSED

The grammar activities (3 lessons and 3 exercise sessions, 12 hours) were focused on a) the identification and characteristics of the 9 Italian parts of speech with a special focus on verb forms, b) the identification of syntactic subject, c) the distinction between simple and complex sentences.

The activities on text comprehension (8 lessons including exercise sessions, 16 hours) concerned basic information on how to approach a text through questioning, clarifying, summarizing and predicting and included comprehension exercises in pair or small groups, applying text-centred strategies, the analysis of a visual text, homework that could be sent to the lecturer in order to have feedback (Cardarello et al., 2020).

The algebra activities (7 lessons including exercise sessions, 14 hours) concerned basic knowledge on a) operations with monomials and polynomials, b) formulating equations, c) solving equations, d) reading formulas, e) inverse formulas, and included exercises and problem-solving activities.

The arithmetic activities (6 lessons including exercise sessions, 12 hours) concerned basic knowledge on a) number sets, b) operations, c) arithmetic expressions, d) prime factorization, e) multiples and divisors of natural numbers, f) fractions, g) percentages, h) direct and inverse proportionality, g) powers and their properties, with exercises and problem-solving activities, to be done individually and in small groups.

As already mentioned, argumentation was considered a crucial part of our remedial activities, for both language and mathematical domains, and was approached combining the perspectives of linguistics and mathematics education with the intent of highlighting for the students the common core of argumentation skills regardless of the topic and scope. On the basis of the data collected in the initial subtest and in previous investigations (Bianchi, Favilla, Maschietto 2022), the team identified as key weaknesses:

1. A tendency to describe rather than argue.
2. A lack of awareness of the need to support claims with data and to make the general rule explicit.
3. Data or general rule, if given, often not relevant for the claim.
4. Scarce use of linguistic indicators of argumentation, both in oral and written productions.

For this reason, the remedial activities on argumentation (18 hours of on-site and on-line lessons) were tailored to a) define argumentation and identify the various elements of an argument; b) present two exemplificative argumentation models (Toulmin model and V-diagram); c) present connections with mathematical argumentation (Douek, 2007); d) analyse and practice the possible uses of connectives; e) present the set theory to support argumentation modelling.

The key theoretical model adopted is based on a re-adaptation by Lo Cascio (1991, 2009) of Toulmin's model (Toulmin, 2003, proposed for the first time in 1958). This model allows to formalize argumentation and its constituent components, characterizing it also from a linguistic point of view, in an attempt of theorization and categorization. It helps to identify the central components of the argumentative discourse: claim, data, warrant. It also identifies the accessory parts: qualifier, backing, rebuttal. The model helps students focus on key argumentation elements, thus articulating more robust argumentation, but also identifying the faultiness of arguments presented to them.

The V-diagram supports visualization of arguments and counterarguments allowing for argumentation styles that take other points of view into account. Using the V-diagram visualisation non-scientific argumentation can be presented through negotiation among different points of view, facilitating a more nuanced and critical vision of reality (Nussbaum et al., 2011).

5. COMPARISON BETWEEN INITIAL AND FINAL ASSESSMENTS

On the last day of classes, the students were offered a test similar to the initial one. The students who did both tests were: 52 for the OFA1 test on grammar, text comprehension; 36 for the OFA2 test on algebra, arithmetic; 72 for the argumentation part of the test (which was the same for both OFA1 and OFA2, so that the students who had both were tested on it only once).

The comparison between initial (T0) and final test (T1) gives indications on the efficacy of the activities.

In the language domain (Fig. 1), for the grammar part, T0 and T1 required an analysis of 4 sentences aimed at identifying the various grammatical elements discussed during the activities. The answers given by the students in T1 show an improvement (average score: 19.6 out of 30 at T0, 24.2 out of 30 at T1).

As for text comprehension, the students had to read two short passages and answer multiple choice questions aimed at assessing the abilities to understand and connect information, as well as to infer implied meanings. The comparison between

initial and final tests shows no remarkable improvement (average score: 22.8 out of 30 at T0, 23.6 out of 30 at T1).

Fig. 1. Comparison between T0 and T1 in the language domain.
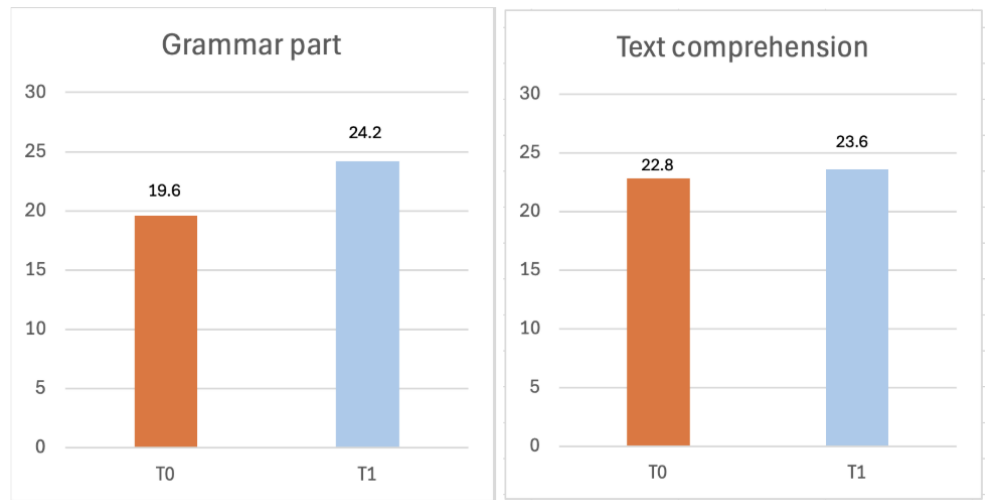
As for mathematics (Fig. 2), the test required solving arithmetic and algebra exercises similar to those proposed during the activities. In both cases, the results show an improvement (for arithmetic, average score: 20 out of 30 at T0, 23.2 out of 30 at T1; for algebra, average score: 18.8 out of 30 at T0, 21.9 out of 30 at T1).

Fig. 2. Comparison between T0 and T1 in the mathematical domain
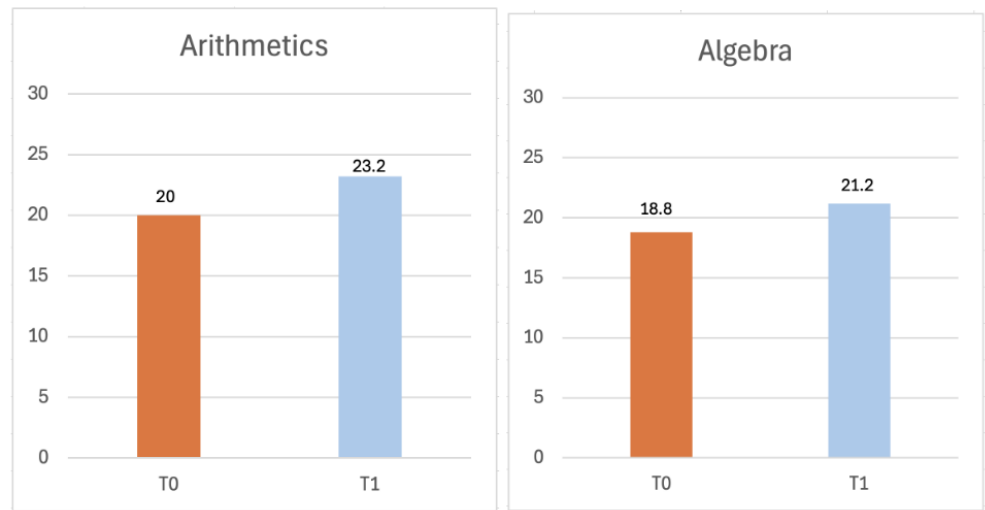
With reference to argumentation (Fig. 3), a first sight comparison between T0 and T1 does not show encouraging results, since out of 72 students, an improvement has emerged only for 34, while 31 have worsened their results and 7 have remained the same. However, among the 34 students who had better results at T1, 31 had participated actively in the classes and 30 had handed in their homework regularly to have feedback on it. On the contrary, among the 31 students who had worse results at T1, only 2 had participated actively in the classes and 4 had handed in their homework regularly.

Fig. 3. Comparison between T0 and T1 in argumentation
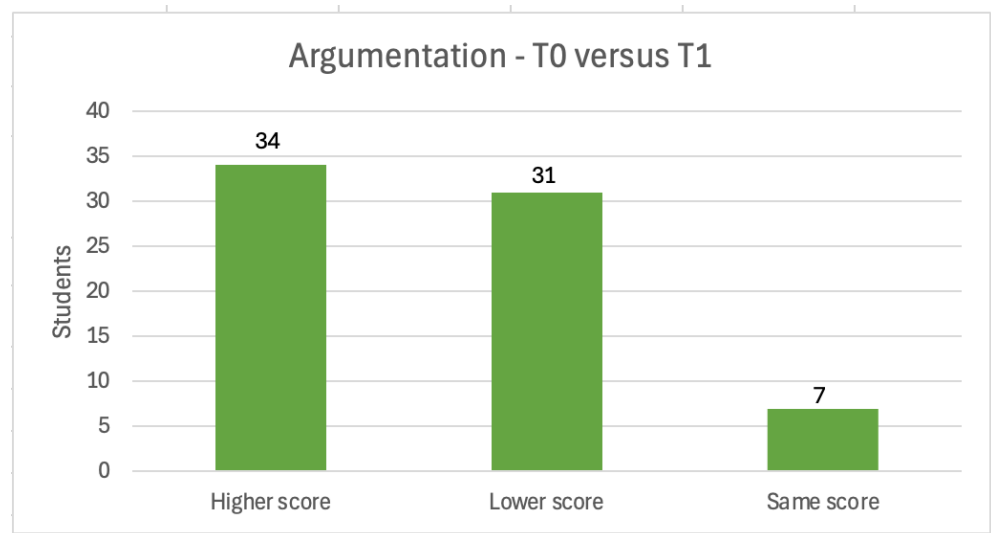
The final test on argumentation included also some specific topics that had not been tested in the initial assessment, but which have been the object of discussions and activities during the course. These topics concerned Toulmin's model, the V-diagram, mathematical argumentation, and set theory. With reference to these topics, set theory emerges as the most difficult, with an average score in the final test was 1.31 out of 3, followed by the V-diagram, with an average score of 1.81 out of 3, while exercises on Toulmin's model and on mathematical argumentation have obtained quite good scores, with an average score of respectively 2.19 and 2.02 out of a maximum of 3.

4. STUDENTS' OPINIONS

In addition to comparing the results of T0 and T1, at the end of the activities we have tried to collect data on the students' attitude and level of satisfaction, through a specific question in the final test ("Was it fair and useful to force OFAs remedial activities on students?") as well as through informal conversations and a final focus group. Some examples of the opinions collected can be found in Figure 4.

Fig. 4. Examples of the opinions collected

1. Although many people find OFAs unnecessary and see them as a waste of time, it must be recognized that in order to succeed in certain new subjects and disciplines, it is important that prerequisites are established.
2. Despite students' disapproval OFAs courses are useful for the preparation of students who, without them would not be able to stand the exams.
3. I myself am thankful that I finally understood some basic rules that should be learned in elementary school.
4. Starting a university course, many of the students are not aware that they have knowledge deficits in several areas.
5. We cannot imagine that what is to be taught is not known by those who must first lead in the process of this discovery.
6. Making all Ofas remedial activities compulsory would be a way to improve it. Attending each class involves a great effort, but one that is necessary to gain a complete acquisition of the competencies that are useful for our future work.
7. The OFAs remedial activities are very helpful, but it would be appropriate to broaden the audience to include students with a bachelor's degree as well.
8. OFAs activities enabled students to make connections with other students with the same difficulties.
9. I particularly appreciated the "informality" used with students, which made it easier for many to start university.

The information collected shows that most attending students recognized the need to recover the skills they were lacking, the adequacy of the course in helping them to do it, and the crucial importance of the core skills proposed in the course for their university studies (e.g. 1-4 in Fig. 4).

Also, the connection between those skills and the teaching profession emerged clearly from students' comments (e.g. 5, 6 in Fig. 4).

It should be noted, however, that only a small part of the students took part in the focus group and that also the answers given in the test might be conditioned by the desire to get good results.

CONCLUSION

Even if further data and more detailed analyses are necessary, our data on remedial activities allow some first general conclusions.

Many students arrive at SFP with unexpected difficulties in language, mathematical and logical domains.

One important problem is making the students aware of the importance of remedial activities, both for their academic success and for their future teaching profession. Even if some recognised the usefulness of the course, some of them felt unduly obliged to attend the remedial activities and did not understand the purpose of working on argumentation. This resulted in lack of motivation and scarce participation in the activities, which in turn did not allow them to gain from the course.

As for actively participating students, ten weeks of activities have proven enough for recovering from their previous studies or gaining basic grammar knowledge and basic argumentative skills, while for other skills, such as text comprehension, the results have highlighted the need for a longer period for real improvement. It is also on the basis of these results that for academic year 2024-25 the OFA course has been planned as a one-year course, with an average of one class per week and online group activities during semester pause.

With specific reference to argumentation, the comparison between T0 and T1 has clearly highlighted the importance of motivation and active participation in order to have positive results. Moreover, the fact that the best results have been obtained in mathematical argumentation and the Toulmin model suggests that difficulties are greater with symbolic representation and non-dichotomous argumentation, maybe because students are not familiar with these representations and few weeks are not enough to learn them.

One final consideration should be made about the overlapping and common aspects between the linguistic and mathematical approach to argumentation, which the students find difficult to perceive and accept, probably because of their being used to too narrow boundaries between school disciplines.

The next stages of our research will be devoted to providing further and stronger data to demonstrate the importance of including argumentation, dealt with in a common linguistic and mathematical approach, among the activities aimed at

improving basic language and mathematical skills in order to guarantee academic success for a larger number of students.

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THE TRAINING SCHOOL OF MAESTRI DI STRADA "CARLA MELAZZINI": A TEACHERS PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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In Italy, school dropout rates are still too high. This complex phenomenon is caused by factors external and internal to the School. The Third Sector implements numerous educational projects to counter school dropout, using experimental approaches. The Association nonprofit Maestri di Strada (MdS) has long implemented interventions to counter school dropout. In the 2022-23 school year, MdS began a Teachers Participatory Action Research with a group of 15 professionals with the aim of gathering their views on an appropriate model to combat school dropout. In this study we present the results of the analysis of the participants narratives. Findings showed that this path allowed them to develop their professional identity, reflect on their practices, acquire effective methodologies against school dropout.

teacher training, reflexivity, T-PAR, school dropout, storytelling

1. INTRODUCTION

School dropout is defined as the outcome of a long process of disengagement and detachment from schooling (Glaesser et al., 2023). In Europe, school dropout is measured through Early School Leaving, whose value in Italy was 10.5% in 2023 (www.cgiadimestre.com).

Recently, scholars have focused on school-related factors linked to dropout including pull and push factors (Dekkers & Claassen, 2001; Vinciguerra et al., 2021; Meryem et al., 2024). The latter refer to how school system push students to dropout and help clarify which aspects of the educational system need interventions. These should explore the organizational culture and classroom climate, focusing on the school's capacity to meet students' expectations (De Witte et al., 2013; Nielsen & Tanggaard, 2015).

In Italy, the Third Sector (TS) implements educational projects to counter school dropout, within a restorative and compensatory framework (Brighenti, 2009). The National Institute for Documentation, Innovation, and Educational Research has

published guidelines to promote collaboration between schools and the TS, stressing the importance of expertise exchange (www.indire.it).

The National Dropout Prevention Center (www.dropoutprevention.org) has identified evidence-based strategies to prevent school dropout, including school-community collaboration and alternative forms of schooling and professional development, which are a crucial starting point for strengthening relational skills (Van Lankveld et al., 2017). In particular, reflexivity represents a resource for changing unsatisfactory professional practices (Pantić, 2001) and a protective factor for teachers' psychological well-being (Murphy et al., 2020).

The non-profit association Maestri di Strada (MdS), which has long worked on school dropout and social marginality in the suburbs of Naples, offers training courses for professionals centred on cooperation, active research, contact with the territory and, above all, reflective questioning of educational practice (Melazzini, 2011; Parrello et al., 2020; Parrello, 2023). In the 2022-23 school year, MdS began a Teachers-Participatory Action Research, the Carla Melazzini School (CMS), in collaboration with our research team.

The study presented here aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of this reflective training, assessing how the training influenced participants' professional skills and teaching practices.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants and procedure

Teacher Participatory Action Research (T-PAR) is considered a useful method to enhance professional training (Parrello et al., 2019; Johnson & Button, 2000;) and it consists of four phases: planning, action, reflection and evaluation. Our research team followed all these phases, described below.

During the *Planning* phase, the manifesto was drafted, a project idea was outlined, and potential funders were identified. The proposal consisted in a 12-month training course (600 hours) made up of psychology and pedagogy lessons, art workshops, reflective groups and internships.

The *Action* phase consisted of three moments: the presentation conference, the Open Week, and the training. During the presentation conference the project idea and the theoretical framework of the MdS were presented. The Open Week allowed various professionals to experience firsthand the different workshops that the Association carries out. These two moments allowed to engage external professionals in the T-PAR. The final group of participants was made up of 15 educational professionals – mostly young adults: 6 teachers, 7 educators, 2 university students. The team of trainers from MdS consisted of psychologists, art-educators, pedagogists. Once the group of participants was formed, the training started. Thanks to a constant dialogic exchange between trainers and trainees, it was possible to adjust certain aspects of the training proposal.

Furthermore, a trainee psychologist was entrusted with observing the emotional

climate within the groups. Following a psychodynamic approach, she silently participated in the activities and wrote observational narratives (De Rosa, 2003).

These narratives were used for the *Reflection* phase, which has been part of the whole process. In fact, reflective groups, conducted by a psychologist, were created since the beginning of the training. In these spaces, participants discussed their experiences in the CMS and the links between this training and their daily work.

Lastly, the *Evaluation* phase was based on both trainee's observational narratives and participants' final reports, written at the end of the training, following a semi-structured questionnaire. These reports resulted in complex narratives, then analysed for research purposes. The results of these analyses were reported to the group after three months from the conclusion of the CMS.

2.2. Data Analyses

Two textual corpora were produced: trainee's observational narratives (C1) and participants' final reports (C2).

C1 underwent Thematic Analysis of Elementary Contests (TAEC), conducted with the T-Lab Plus Software (Lancia, 2012). The TAEC divides the text in elementary units of context (ECUs), each of the approximate length of a sentence, classifying them according to word distribution in terms of co-occurrences; then, it identifies clusters, which consist of a set of keywords (vocabulary) that appear in specific selections of ECUs.

C2 was analysed through Categorical Content Analysis, following a procedure based on Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

3. RESULTS

3.1. Thematic Analysis of Elementary Contexts (TAEC)

C1 consists of 14,648 occurrences, 2,943 forms, and 2,023 lemmas. The TAEC classified 329 out of 333 identified ECUs (stability index: 98.8%) and grouped them into 6 clusters of varying sizes, each with its own vocabulary. The identified clusters will be presented.

*Cluster 1 (*14% ECUs) *– The experience of diving and balancing: building trust.* In this cluster it is described the process of co-construction of the training setting, made up of shared times, boundaries and rules within which it is possible to signify absences, difficulties and roles. Participants begin to reflect on their role as students within a group they can trust.

*Cluster 2 (*21% ECUs) *– From silence and disorientation to possible questions and reflection.* Silence and disorientation in the group seem to generate questions and reflections on what it means to be a student and on the role of teachers. Nonetheless, silence risks to be persecutory and it can be difficult to sustain and to explore. However, within meaningful rituals, such as the reading of reports at the beginning of meetings, the participants create a space in which this frustration can be contained.

*Cluster 3 (*15.5% ECUs) – *From trainees to workers: building boundaries.* The temporary and limited space of the internship is compared to the temporary nature of CMS and education itself. Thus, in the relationship with students it is important to build boundaries.

*Cluster 4 (*7% ECUs) – *Space and time of training: a transformative container.* The word "hands" frequently appears in this cluster, as a metaphor of closeness and contact with the colleagues and as a metaphor of the school trainers' role, who guide and hold. In fact, the trainees critically observe the style of different trainers. Through their relationships with their trainers and colleagues it is possible to signify the whole experience of the training inside the school.

*Cluster 5 (*23.5% ECUs) – *Sharing emotions and constructing meanings.* This cluster describes the participants' experience of connecting with and sharing their emotions within the group, a powerful device that allows everyone to discover and rebuild their professional identity.

*Cluster 6 (*19.5% ECUs) – *The methodological triad: observe, narrate, reflect.* This cluster contains references to observational, narrative and reflective practices, pillars of the methodology of MdS, that the group gradually makes its own and ends up considering fundamental.

3.2 Categorical Content Analysis

The categorical content analysis was conducted on C2 and it allowed the identification of 7 themes: Art-education; Reflexivity; The educator's posture; The power of metaphors; Rituals of the beginning and the end; Mistakes and fragility; Contexts and sustainable change. Each theme will be described below, along with text examples.

Theme 1 – Art-education. Participants describe art-education as a tool for creating safe and creative spaces where new learning possibilities can be explored, self-expression is free from the fear of judgment, and personal growth can be fostered through storytelling and metaphors.

> I think that the best way to explain to someone what art-education is to offer them a workshop, musical, theatre or art, starting from a question of meaning in order to restore their beauty.

Theme 2 – Reflexivity in Group. Participants reflect on the relational nature of reflexivity, describing the exchange of perspectives. They highlight how reflexivity helped them understand and manage the complexity of educational work and activate a process of professional transformation.

> Reflexivity for me is an exchange of glances, of points of view. It allows us to be able to focus on things that we cannot see. It forces us to stop and be.

Theme 3 – The Educator's Posture. Facing challenges, professionals should adopt a stance of suspension, listening, and building meaningful relationships, in a delicate balance between vulnerability and strength.

It is about the way of doing, thinking and being in education, of being in it with sensitivity and intelligence, of practising reflexivity, of pedagogical meaning and posture, of educational caring.

Theme 4 – The power of metaphors. Metaphors and storytelling are important tools to explore and capture new learning and relational dynamics. These "containers of meaning" enable participants to share their emotions and experiences with others in a creative and profound way.

We have worked through metaphors, which are protected places in which to speak about oneself in a mediated, translational way.

Theme 5 – Rituals of the beginning and the end. Participants highlight the role that rituals played in structuring spaces of meaning where they could feel safe, creating frameworks with clear boundaries and build a shared story.

Do we really need to open and close in this way? Yes, we really need it to restore the sense of something that begins and ends, because boxes that are opened need to be closed, because there is a need to define a frame in which we stay and are focused.

Theme 6 – Mistakes and fragility. Mistakes and fragility are described as opportunities for learning and growth. It is from chaos that new ways of engaging in educational contexts can be generated, structuring flexible and welcoming spaces.

Now I want to be, even more, a teacher who welcomes her fragilities, knows her limitations, embraces her imperfections.

Theme 7 – Contexts and sustainable changes. This experience promoted participants' awareness of their capabilities, fostering emotional openness, thus sustaining complexity and uncertainty of this work through collaboration and dialogue with other professionals.

At first I felt cool because of all the cool things we were doing, then I felt lonely and misunderstood, then I felt determined to seek and create alliances, and still enthusiastic and charged with experiencing all that I was discovering, then I slowly started to 'see', slow down, listen, feel.

5. DISCUSSION

As suggested in international literature (www.dropoutprevention.org), this T-PAR aimed to build a training model of education professionals – teachers and educators together – that can represent a cornerstone in countering school dropout. Reflexivity and art-education have been identified as fundamental tools for improving educational practices and relationships between colleagues (Price, 2005; Brown, 2017).

Participants particularly appreciated: immersion in artistic workshops, autobiographical narration to connect the personal Self with the professional Self, sharing emotions and thoughts on educational work in reflective groups. This experience

highlighted the importance of building a safe, trust-based and meaningful school climate for each student, especially in contexts of educational poverty.

On the one hand, the project offers a replicable training model based on collaboration between schools and TS, aligning with national guidelines (www.indire.it). On the other hand, it highlights the importance of a training approach that goes beyond the passive acquisition of technical skills, including profound work on relational and emotional dynamics.

Finally, despite the limitation of a small number of participants, the study's qualitative and participatory nature, along with its duration, offers an original contribution to the research field, enhancing the role of education professionals as agents of social change.

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TEACHING INNOVATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SUPPORTING STUDY AND TEXT PROCESSING SKILLS

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The aim of this contribution is to describe an experience of didactic innovation co-designed with secondary school teachers in order to stimulate the activation of less motivated students and to improve their study skills and comprehension of written texts. This study recognises the importance of supporting the professional capacity of teachers in terms of their ability to create functional, innovative learning environments capable of reaching even the most disadvantaged students. The rationale for the intervention method was as follows: convergence in the identification of objectives to be improved in secondary school students; identification of an eclectic but sustainable methodology that could be applied to multiple subject contexts. The experiment aims to investigate the sustainability of the proposed methodology over time and to monitor its effectiveness. It is hypothesised that there will be a significant improvement in comprehension and summary production, with a more pronounced improvement for low-achieving students, and at the same time progress for all students in terms of an active attitude towards academic texts and discourse.

Secondary school teachers; teacher professional development; didactic innovation; text comprehension

INTRODUCTION

According to the 2018 recommendations of the Council of the European Union, functional literacy is one of the essential skills for personal fulfilment, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion. This competence includes the ability to understand, interpret and express concepts, feelings, facts and opinions in written and oral form (Council of the European Union, 2018) and is therefore essential for active participation in society and for achieving one's personal and professional goals. However, the OECD's PIAAC study (2023) and the recent Censis report (2024) are very worrying, as they both state that around one in three Italian adults can be considered functionally illiterate, with deficiencies in text comprehension. The OECD-Piaac report also points out that the Italian education system does not adequately address the gaps in basic skills, with marked differences between the different levels of education and uneven quality of teaching. Given this premise, there is an increasingly urgent need to devote time and space to the training of teachers, both initial and in-service, in skills related to the ability to comprehend

and produce texts and to think critically, in order to support literacy in a meaningful way and thus to reduce school drop-out and the social divide between pupils. This is intended to provide teachers with useful and necessary tools to help achieve educational goals for all. In light of this, the involvement of teachers in research pathways appears to be crucial for ensuring effective professional development and for positively impacting on student learning outcomes. Studies show that involving teachers in research encourages reflective practice, improves their understanding of educational theories and promotes innovative pedagogical strategies (Kowalczuk-Walędziak & Ion, 2024). In line with the methodology of teacher professional development research or 'Ricerca-Formazione' (R-F) (Asquini, 2018), in the study presented here, the teaching intervention was co-designed not only to identify and address students' educational needs and create an inclusive learning environment, but also to support meaningful professional development for the teachers involved. The "Teacher Professional Development Research" is a methodology for conducting research in schools and with teachers, explicitly aimed at training and transforming teachers' pedagogical and didactic practices, as well as promoting reflectivity. This study recognises the importance of supporting the professional capacity of teachers in terms of their ability to create functional, innovative learning environments capable of reaching even the most disadvantaged students. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to describe an experience of didactic innovation co-designed with secondary school teachers in order to stimulate the activation of less motivated students and to improve their study skills and comprehension of written texts. The study therefore attempts to respond to a dual requirement: to support students' text comprehension as a key skill for academic success and, at the same time, to train secondary school teachers to promote this skill in their subject areas.

1. THE TRAINING AND RESEARCH PATHWAY

The study is part of a multi-year project to promote 'learning to learn' in secondary schools. During the first year, seminars on the study method were provided for teachers (n=140 secondary school teachers) and at the same time an R-F pathway was activated for a self-selected group of teachers who were interested in concretely experimenting with innovative strategies in their classrooms. This pathway consisted of 7 face-to-face meetings plus a teacher's work on classroom implementation and documentation of the activity. In order to involve the teachers and to design a truly meaningful course for them, the course began by asking the teachers to collect the most common difficulties their students faced in their approach to the learning process. The researchers then collected these difficulties and investigated possible training needs of the teachers on these matters. Difficulties reported by teachers were mainly related to language and vocabulary, connecting and reasoning in text comprehension, motivation and self-esteem, mnemonic learning. In the light of these elements, the researchers proposed specific training on the subject of text comprehension and, in particular, on the following topics: identification of key information, text processing, student's activation and autonomy. The researchers then proposed to the teachers, also by means of workshops, different

methodologies and strategies suitable for supporting these skills and discussed with them the potential and risks. The objective was to design and implement a methodology for the promotion of text comprehension and study skills, which can be applied to expository texts of various disciplines to foster identification of key information, text processing, student's activation and autonomy.

Teachers simulated the strategies in the classroom with the researchers, then proposed this activity in their classes and documented the experience. At the end of the course, the documentation was collected, feedback on the activities was given and joint reflection on the usefulness of the model was carried out.

In the second year, the RF course continued with the intention of carrying out an experimental intervention, with control classes, with the classroom application of the didactic 'model' developed and preliminarily tested in the previous year (no. 6 secondary school teachers – 5 subjects – about 200 students). The aim of the experiment was to test the effectiveness of this specially designed teaching intervention for improving text comprehension and study skills. In order to measure the impact and effectiveness of a controlled classroom intervention, the research team identified survey instruments to collect input and output data: Comprehension Test (Giovannini, Ghetti, 2015; Giovannini, Rosa, 2015; Giovannini, Silva, 2015); Study Method Questionnaire (short form) (Friso et al., 2012); Summarising Test (text and assessment tool jointly developed by teachers and researchers). The teachers administered the tests, collected the data and implemented the classroom intervention (6-10 sessions of 15 hours). The teachers attended 25 hours of training with the researchers and worked independently for 50 hours. The researchers accompanied the teachers throughout the experiment, provided opportunities for discussion and tools for monitoring and reflection, and shared the data collection and analysis with them.

2. DIDACTIC PROTOCOL

The researchers jointly developed an intervention model based on the premise of detecting and discussing the needs reported by the teachers and based on previous experiences (Cardarello, Pintus, 2018). The rationale of the intervention method was as follows:

- Convergence in the identification of the objectives to be improved in secondary school students;
- Identifying an eclectic but sustainable methodology that could be applied to different subject contexts.

There are many 'didactics' that can support the ability to understand texts (Cardarello, Bertolini, 2021). What seems to be crucial for text comprehension is the active involvement of the reader, with engagement in open-ended and challenging tasks, and the modelling of thinking by the adult, so that students become more aware of the use of cognitive strategies. In addition, organised work in pairs, with shared verbalisation, enables reciprocal behaviours that are functional for understanding the text and checking one's own understanding (Vezzani, 2023).

Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar, & Brown, 1984), now widely used, is a strategy consisting of several steps that allows teachers to support text comprehension through the practice of specific strategies. The teacher's role is to *model* the use of the strategies, leaving room for students to work autonomously and collaboratively, while providing feedback. The adult acts as a model for the students, showing them by thinking aloud how to think when reading a text. This is also thought to be important for student motivation, a prerequisite for the effectiveness of a teaching intervention (Lumbelli, 1993).

Therefore, the researchers proposed to work on a sustainable model of an instructional intervention for teaching reading comprehension strategies with the following characteristics

- Teaching strategies and techniques: modelling, thinking aloud, feedback;
- Text comprehension strategies: questioning and summarising;
- Didactic setting: paired work.

The experimental working method and teaching methodology involved collaborative work in pairs, as a derivation of Reciprocal Teaching (RT) (Palincsar A.S., Brown, 1984, from the Italian version adapted from SapiE, called Reading Comprehension Reciprocal Teaching RC-RT (Calvani, Chiappetta Cajola, 2019). The intervention provided for the teacher's use of *modelling* and final feedback to assess work in pairs, with the promotion of two classical strategies, *questioning* and *summarising*, which were revisited and finalized in the exercise of producing written summaries applied to classroom textbooks or standard subject texts.

The experimental intervention, for a total of 10 sessions, included an initial phase of teacher modelling with the use of thinking aloud to apply the strategies. The modelling proposed a reading of the passages, interrupted to ask some important questions for understanding, both lexical (What does this word mean? Do I write it down or underline it?) and more complex (What is the relationship with above?). With the modelling strategy, the teacher shows a variety of questions that the reader can ask with/without answers, within the text, beyond the text (McKeown, Beck, 2002). The teacher then shows out loud how to select some main information (summarise) by asking questions and untangling some comprehension knots. The teacher then gradually encourages the pupils to work independently in pairs on the texts, questioning and summarising them. In fact, students then repeatedly used selected text comprehension strategies, questioning and summarising in pairs, orally and in writing, always applying them to 'disciplinary' and study texts. The teacher then gradually withdrew (faded out) but provided constant feedback. At the end of all the pair activities, the teacher gave feedback on the products produced and guided reflection, first on the 'good' comprehension questions and then increasingly on the qualities of the summaries produced. Further teacher *modelling* was necessary during the 10 sessions.

During the training sessions, teachers experimented with and simulated the strategy of modelling the use of the two strategies, such as reading aloud. This activity was highly effective and had a significant impact on the classroom. The audio-

recording of the first modelling activities provided the researchers and teachers with valuable material for comparison and for finding greater convergence in the working group's use of the teaching protocol. Intermediate meetings of the working group made it possible to revise the proposal and to deepen the strategies on the basis of the criticalities and potentials that emerged during the application phase.

The research group revised the course outline and came up with an improved intervention, such as proposing more and more explicit work on large group feedback to address some of the difficulties encountered. In this case, the lecturers worked on how to use this moment of work to analyse more effectively examples of good summaries and good questions.

3. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this contribution was to present the overall picture of the course that was implemented. Data from the experiment are processed, not only pre-tests and post-tests, but also data collected through written records and documentation, including interviews and summaries of students' activities. From the teachers' testimonies and the ongoing review of the proposal, the importance of maintaining students' motivation to learn emerges as relevant. Pair work and repeated work on strategies make the proposal particularly inclusive in that it involves the whole class, and low ability students and students with learning disabilities had positive results, including in terms of participation in activities. The repetitiveness of the pattern was also a critical issue in grades 8 and 9, where motivation for activities tended to decline, and this also affected the quality of questioning. Teachers shared the importance of finding appropriate, challenging and complex learning texts for the application of *questioning* and *summarising*.

On a first qualitative assessment, the model seems to be sustainable and effective for the goals set, in particular for the progress of all students in terms of an active attitude towards academic texts and discourse.

Teachers' involvement in these activities was very high in terms of designing activities and preparing texts, monitoring and evaluating students' performance in the light of the objectives set, and actively participating in the collaborative reflection process. This turns out to be an important element of professional development and a prerequisite for teaching innovation.

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TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY WITH IN-SERVICE AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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The aim of this study is to investigate how teachers and trainee-teachers perceive themselves in terms of self-efficacy, with particular regard to some aspects of their professionalism linked to countering the school drop-out rate, such as the ability to involve and motivate pupils and the differentiation of teaching strategies. Secondly, the training needs of future teachers and in-service teachers are to be monitored over time in order to observe whether and how they change. In order to investigate teachers' representations, a questionnaire based on an Italian elaboration (Cardarello et al., 2016) of the Tsachennen-Moran scale, also known as the Ohio scale (TSES 2001), was used in the reduced 12-item version. Approximately 800 anonymous questionnaires were collected (315 teachers, 461 trainees). Initial descriptive analyses showed a perception of medium to medium-low efficacy, with clearer outcomes when using analysis with four factors (Pintus et al, 2021) that distinguishes student-centered and teacher-centered instructional practices. Moreover, the results highlighted a constant training need in assessment strategies for both teachers and trainee-teachers and a more positively perceived self-efficacy by teachers with more than 10 years of experience with respect to motivating pupils.

self-efficacy; in-service teacher; pre-service teacher; assessment strategies

INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of pupils' educational needs and the promotion of everyone's educational success through appropriate pedagogical and didactic tools is a crucial aspect of professionalism of the teachers, as today they have to deal with particularly complex socio-educational contexts. In the progressive construction of professionalism, from initial teacher training to the different forms of in-service training, the evolution of the perception of self-efficacy is central (OECD, 2020) and particularly correlated with the well-being of students and their educational success (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2007). For these reasons, the degree course in Primary Education Sciences, through its internship courses, can offer useful training and provide opportunities, for both trainee-teachers and teachers in the educational institutions that welcome them. In particular, during the fourth and fifth year of the internship, the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia has set up joint training

courses for students and teachers on different didactic and pedagogical areas, called 'internship projects', carried out under the scientific supervision of academic lecturers in the schools of six provinces in northern Italy. Within the framework of these pathways, the main aim of this exploratory study here reported is to investigate how teachers and trainee-teachers perceive themselves in term of self-efficacy, with particular regard to some aspects of their professionalism linked to countering of the school drop-out rate, such as the ability to involve and motivate pupils and the differentiation of teaching strategies. Secondly, the training needs of students/trainee teachers and in-service teachers are to be monitored over time in order to observe whether and how they change. In order to investigate teachers' representations, a questionnaire based on an Italian elaboration (Cardarello et al., 2016) of the Tsachennen-Moran scale, also known as the Ohio scale (TSES 2001), was used in the reduced 12-item version. The questionnaire revealed age, educational qualification, teaching experience, and a self-assessment of teachers' effectiveness; trainee-teachers (students of the degree course) have been asked for a self-efficacy projection. Moreover, this study intends to highlight training needs and teaching strategies for both teachers and trainee-teachers, and to discuss these needs in light of perceived self-efficacy, considering the variable of years of teaching experience.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The teaching skills of educators, including understanding the socio-educational context and student needs, as well as adopting diverse and targeted teaching strategies, are fundamental for the educational success, because these variables have a significant impact on student outcomes. Scheerens (2020) highlighted how these competencies are essential for creating an effective learning environment and improving student performance. Teachers' professionalism directly affects students' academic success and, in turn, the equity of the educational system. Among the crucial elements of teacher professionalism that significantly influence the quality of teaching and student learning, one of the most important is the perception of self-efficacy, which is the belief that teachers have in their ability to influence student learning positively. Teachers' self-efficacy, as defined by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) based on Bandura's (1997) construct, refers to the belief in their ability to plan, organize, and carry out activities necessary to achieve specific educational goals. Studies have shown that teachers' self-efficacy positively correlates with factors predicting teaching effectiveness, such as student well-being and academic success (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2007). Through a meta-analysis, Klassen and Tze (2014) found that self-efficacy is strongly associated with observed teaching performance and has a significant correlation with teaching effectiveness. Consequently, self-efficacy could be considered an indicator of teaching quality itself (Cardarello et al., 2017). The recent OECD report referred to TALIS 2018 survey (2020), highlights that the teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy tend to use more innovative teaching practices and create more inclusive learning environments. Therefore, perceived self-efficacy is crucial for promoting effective and

sustainable educational practices, as well as for teachers' professional well-being and sense of job satisfaction (Klassen and Chiu, 2010). Accordingly, investing in the development of teachers' self-efficacy through targeted training and professional support is essential for enhancing the quality of education and improving learning outcomes for all students.

Several validated instruments investigate teachers' sense of self-efficacy. Among these, the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES), developed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001), is widely used. It measures three distinct but related aspects of teaching: "Efficacy for Classroom Management", "Efficacy for Instructional Strategies", and "Efficacy for Student Engagement". The scale facilitates the identification of areas where teachers exhibit lower confidence, enabling the design of targeted professional development programs that address these specific needs.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. The sample

The sample included students of the degree course (trainee teachers) and each teacher involved in the training classes. 871 anonymous questionnaires have been analysed; among them, 315 were filled by in-service teachers and 556 by students, considered here pre-service teachers. The students were mainly trainees in their 4th and 5th year (459) at the initial stage of the academic year. However, it is necessary to consider that the main part of the students (348) have already experience of work in schools, because of the lack of teachers in Northern Italy. Among the teachers, 113 have less than 10 years of experience and 215 more than 10 years of experience.

2.2. The analysis

A questionnaire based on an Italian elaboration (Cardarello et al., 2016) of the Tsachennen-Moran scale, also known as the Ohio scale (TSES 2001), in the reduced 12-items version, has been administered to each trainee student and each teacher involved in training classes, at the beginning and end of the academic/school year. For each item the answerer had to declare his/her self-efficacy on a 9-level Likert scale, ranging from 1 (nothing) to 9 (the best mark), to rank their perceived self-efficacy related to 12 teaching- related tasks, referred to three areas of teaching (Cardarello et al., 2016). In particular, according to Moran e Hoy (2001), self-assessment of the effectiveness of teachers and trainees can be analysed considering three aspects: classroom management (controlling classroom behaviour, setting and maintaining rules, handling difficult situations), engagement and motivation of pupils and families (motivation of pupils with low interest, motivation to learn, encouragement of educational success, promotion of educational alliance with families) and ability to use different instructional strategies to support children's understanding (ability to ask good questions, use of different teaching and assessment strategies). Nevertheless, according to Pintus and colleagues (2021), cluster analysis on the validation study showed four factors instead of the three found in

previous studies: the items related to instructional strategies should be considered separately, namely distinguishing *Inclusive and innovative instructional strategies learner-centered* ("Can you provide alternative explanations or examples when students do not fully understand" and "Can you use alternative (multiple) teaching strategies in your classes?") and *Traditional instructional strategies teacher-centered (*"How well can you ask students good questions?", "To what extent do you know how to use multiple assessment strategies?")

3. RESULTS

The answers to the questionnaires for both in-service and pre-service teachers globally considered showed middle/low levels of self-efficacy. At the initial stage, the perception of self-efficacy, as projection of the future job, is quite low, with the averages contained between 6 points and 7 points out of 10. The results are fairly uniform, but lower averages refer to trainees and higher averages, in all items, to teachers with more than 10 years.

Figure 1. Overall results per items. Source: Vezzani, Scipione, Bertolini, UNIMORE, Department for Education and Humanities (2024)
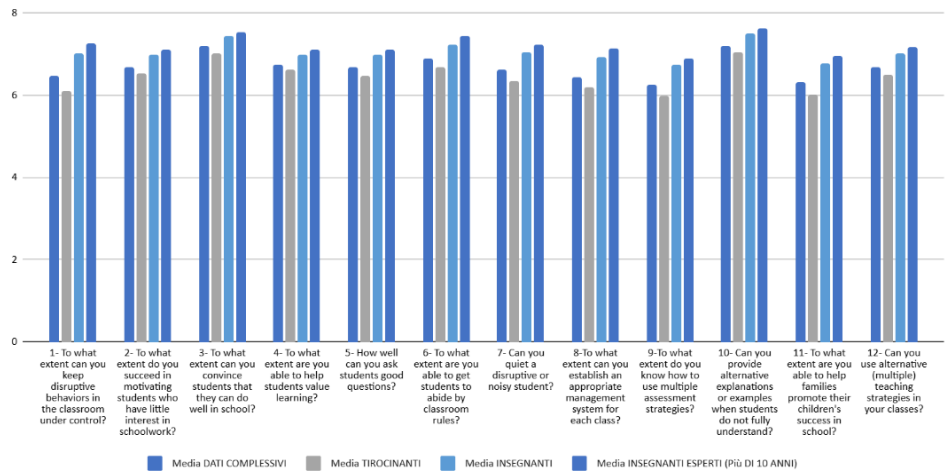
Nevertheless, the analysis conducted considering the above-mentioned four factors allows to see better the differences. It can be noticed that teachers and students/trainee teachers tend to consider themselves as less effective in the evaluation process and more effective in implementing students-centered practices.

Figure 2. Self-efficacy analysis considering three and four factors. Source: Vezzani, Scipione, Bertolini, UNIMORE, Department for Education and Humanities (2024)
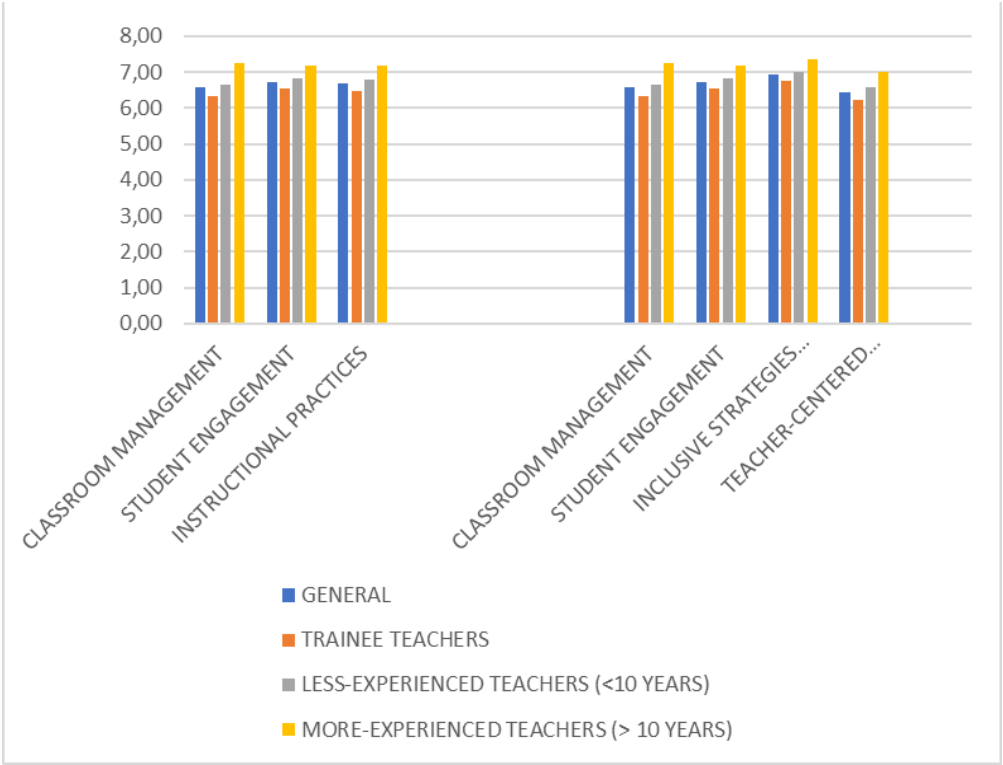
Three years ago, a similar survey was done at the beginning and at the end of a training course on assessment strategies, with a smaller sample composed just by teachers (n. 61). Even if the samples are different, some highlights can be glimpsed. The items similarly denoted the minimum and maximum value in the same items, revealing constant training needs on different assessment strategies (which were considered as typical of teacher-centered teaching posture).

Tab. 1. Longitudinal analysis on initial results 2021/2024 Source: Vezzani, Scipione, Bertolini, UNIMORE, Department for Education and Humanities (2024)

	Asking students good questions	Using multiple assessment strategies	Providing alternative explanations or examples when students do not fully understand	Using alternative (multiple) teaching strategies
Initial Quest. 2021	7,31	6,91	7,11	6,91
Initial Quest. Teachers 2023/24	6,98	6,73	7,49	7,01
Initial Trainee Teachers/ Students 2023/24	6,47	5,99	7,03	6,49

Tab. 2. Longitudinal analysis on final results 2021/2024 Source: Vezzani, Scipione, Bertolini, UNIMORE, Department for Education and Humanities (2024)

	Asking students good questions	Using multiple assessment strategies	Providing alternative explanations or examples when students do not fully understand	Using alternative (multiple) teaching strategies
Final Quest. 2021	7,89	7,39	8,25	7,77
Final Quest. Teachers 2023/24	7,04	6,68	7,38	7,15
Final Trainee Teachers/ Students 2023/24	6,81	6,68	7,49	7,12

It should be noticed that in the last academic year's surveys teachers' self-efficacy has declined slightly, while trainees' self-efficacy has increased, even if the critical items remained the same.

The reasons for this decrease can be perhaps traced, paradoxically, to the more awareness of the difficulty of the assessment task, due to the recent reflections that involved all teachers across Italy about students' assessments, following two different changes in regulations. Also, the periods in the school year when the questionnaires have been administered can be relevant, maybe because of the tiredness and the teachers' worries about difficulty of assessment in increasingly heterogeneous classrooms. Surely, these results should be deepened more, across the years, to monitor and support this crucial aspect of teachers' professionalism.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Experience is confirmed to be a determinant factor on self-efficacy, as shown also in TALIS survey on 2018 (2020). Self-efficacy is overall fairly homogeneous, but on average/medium-low values. This points out an important task both for school leaders and for universities committed to train future teachers, in order to support long-term teachers' wellbeing, job satisfaction and students' outcomes. Looking at more academic issues, the four-factor analysis is confirmed to be an interesting model in order to observe self-efficacy. The analysis shows slightly higher self-efficacy for learner-centered instructional strategies for all categories, while teachers seem to perceive themselves to struggle more with the difference in assessment methods than with other aspects of traditional teaching professionalism. Therefore, formative needs emerge more pronounced for assessment practices, considered among the traditional functions of the education system. As Corsini (2023) underlines, the teacher makes use of power when he/she assessing, in terms of students' inclusion and exclusion, crucial to students' well-being. The power of formative assessment is to be deepened and shared with the teachers, in order to support them with tools and strategies that allow a more student-centered process of learning.

Further research pathways should consider diachronic changes over time for

specific teacher categories (i.e. looking at the different levels of pre-service academic degrees and training) and the effectiveness of instructional pathways for future teachers can be monitored, as indicators of effectiveness of the degree course itself.

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TRAINING OF PHD STUDENTS IN EDUCATION IN ITALY: PHD STUDENTS' IN EDUCATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY OF MILAN-BICOCCA LIVED EXPERIENCE

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The *liminal* doctoral experience (Savva and Nygaard, 2021) sees doctoral students in education with one foot in world of practice and one in academia (Zambo et al., 2015, 234). Defining skills of doing research in the education doctorate is little explored and a recent topic (Milani, 2014; Lisimberti, 2017), which led to a first analysis of the literature in the sector (Lampugnani, 2023). The research question we ask is: How is developing the construction of professional and academic identity develop in the doctoral student's lived experience, PhD course in *Education in Contemporary Society* of University of Milan Bicocca? Participants are 19 doctoral students recruited with a purposive sample. The research methodology adopted refers to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009), in a phenomenological-grounded interpretative process (Mortari, 2009). Themes emerged are: Personal and professional history; Role and identity of PhD student; Awareness and competence in 'developing research'; Protective and risk factors. Research process was experienced by PhD students as a useful non-judgmental listening space. The research seems to be able to constitute a perspective of analysis and reflection for teachers, supervisors and coordinators, to understand situated experiences and processes.

lived experience, PhD students, PhD education

INTRODUCTION

The *liminal* doctoral experience (Savva and Nygaard, 2021) describe doctoral students in education with one foot in world of practice and one in academia (Zambo et al., 2015, 234). Moreover, sensations of intellectual confusion and frustration (Trafford and Lesham, 2009) see the need to integrate one's past experience by redefining one's professional voice and characterize oneself by the themes of becoming and belonging (Savva and Nygaard, 2021).

Defining the skills of doing research in the education doctorate and how to develop them is, in the Italian context, only little explored and it is a recent topic (Milani, 2014; Lisimberti, 2017), which led the author to a first analysis of the literature (Lampugnani, 2023).

1. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

The research question in the present study is: How the construction of professional and academic identity develops in the doctoral student's lived experience, in particular, in the context of the PhD Course *Education in Contemporary Society* (ESC), in University of Studies of Milano-Bicocca?

The research participants are 19 PhD students from the Doctoral Course ESC in academic year 2022-23, recruited with a purposive sample. The participants show a wide distribution about the age of starting PhD course, mainly after working experience in different fields, and they belong from various degree sectors and areas of interest (Lampugnani, 2023).

The research methodology refers to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009), in a phenomenological-grounded interpretative process (Mortari, 2009), enhancing PhD student participating to give voice represents from inside their lived experience and involving them as co-researchers and co-builders in sharing their interpretation of the world with the researcher (Smith et al., 2009).

Semi-structured interviews were developed in July 2023; after a preliminary analysis, participants were returned written interviews (March 2024). Analysis then labelled emerging themes, with progressive aggregation, with common and extended qualities extended qualities, tracking singularities. New cycle of co-interpretation was through a focus group with participants in May 2024, to better define emerging areas of interest also using instant Student Response System (SRS) (Wooclap) and to be representative and reflective of each participant.

2. FINDINGS

Themes emerged are:

- Theme 1: Personal and professional history
- Theme 2: Role and identity of PhD student
- Theme 3: Awareness and competence in 'developing research'
- Theme 4: Protective and risk factors

Fig 1: Themes and sub-themes emerged.
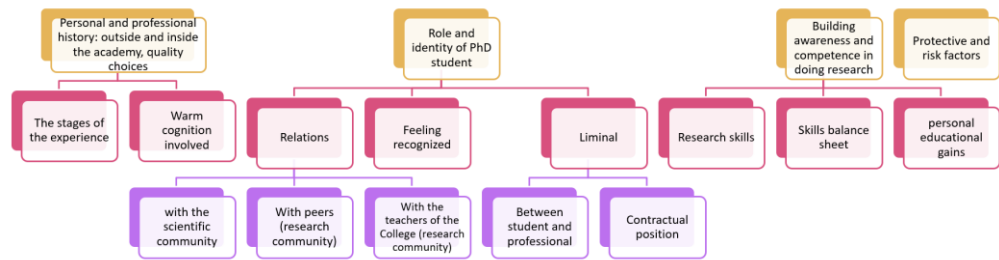
2.1. Theme 1: Personal and professional history

Strong contrasting and new emotional components, different from any other previous experience, emerge: anxiety, confuse expectations, being on the same boat with other 'travel companions', the need to accept the disorientation inherent to research, the difficulty in orienting oneself, the size of the group, beauties and importance of research and privilege of their work. On the other hand, it is clearly perceived the deep crisis that the path of PhD students' lives especially in first year, where objectives and activities give trust but feel them the path too open and not enough guided; somebody goes to the tutor 'only when ready', or encounter many difficulties in academic writing; while in second year start to follow a more organized path, but they miss appointment and lesson, so they felt lost again.

Central is the importance of personal and professional choices and reflection on ethics at different levels, giving importance and valuating: for example, the reason to come back in University or the importance to compare and reflect on experiences in conferences and summer schools that enhance discussion rather than presenting and accumulating credits and the usefulness of research /possibility to drop on reality out of academia.

Importance to human-networking especially with peers is intense, out of competition, seen as support and enrichment.

2.2. Theme 2: Role and identity of PhD student

Role and identity of PhD student is perceived as an 'hybrid' (there are no defined working hours and stop days, making this path pervasive, sometimes invasive; we have a preventive medicine visit as a worker, but we pay fees as students; sometimes I feel like a professional, other times like a student; not really clear what my label is). It is also defined as a liminal position – on horseback. PhD student is also considered at "the base of a pyramid [...] a world yet to be discovered"; but also privileged, as paid for their work.

Central is the wide 'embodied awareness' of belonging to the research/scientific community perceived, explored, expanded and lived through 'key' experiences in the Department (conferences, end-of-year presentations, monitoring meetings, peer informal exchanges); strongly connected the perception of feeling "recognized" as competent and valuable: 'almost on pair' with the teachers; 'of interest', bearers of value in exchanges and conferences. Many of them felt recognized by teachers (almost "on pair"- horizontal – "we are 'almost colleagues'; we are students however, it is a different way of being, we are considered almost on an equal footing with teachers [...] they pay a lot of attention to what we do or say [...] the relationship is almost on an equal footing, they try to involve us as much as possible in initiatives [...] functional to the university but [...] also to us [...] give added value to the University but for us it is an experience").

Significant are metaphors asked and produced about the role of the researcher, that can be classified in three categories:

- Identity and postures of the researchers;
- Supports and tools;
- Complexity of research process.

The 'Identity and postures' can be identified again as an 'hybrid': 'a mixture of different characteristics'; an explorer on ice or in the jungle; a child's reflective thought and curiosity, which belongs to every researcher.

Metaphors grouped as 'Support and tools' find the travelling companion in other PhD students and tutors; a library (you are not isolated from the world but you are in direct and constant communication with it).

The third group of metaphors, 'Complexity of research process', is central: a plant in her process of growth and complex structure; a person on a motorbike Harley Davidson as an idea of travelling; a spiral library with people; a miner hardworking and risking discovering diamonds, only sometimes. Evidence is given to the uncertainty and precariousness of the journey, the difficulty in finding points of reference.

All of these metaphors are resumed in an equipped explorer who knows, based on the routes he takes, to identify tools, equipment and companions.

An important subtheme connected is the research community: recurs in 24 occurrences at 11 different times, for 6/7 different interviews and did not correspond to any asked questions. It is in connection with end-of-year presentations; conferences and summer schools; monitoring moments; relationship and network with peers; identity dimension; community of practices proposed among peers.

2.3. Theme 3: Awareness and skills in "developing research"

A disorientation on the skills to be acquired and acquired is noted. Extendable and specific skills were investigated mainly to understand which were expected and which ones have been achieved in one's perception.

Central skills appears to distinguish the posture of the professional role one interprets from that of the researcher, building another posture, even if connected. Awareness of the theoretical epistemological framework is necessary together with divergent and critical thinking, flexibility, openness, waiting, questioning, low aversion to uncertainty.

The balance of the skills acquired shows some differences compared to those expected. Not only methodological skills do appear to be very lacking.

What emerges, a discrepancy in the scores about expected and reached skills, but also in the objectives, appears of interest for the possibility of developing a reflection and deepening the topic, as well as activating a debate and reflection among the doctoral students themselves.

Fig. 2 – How important do you think the following skills are in a researcher's background?

Fig 3 – What skills do you think you have acquired in your doctoral course?

Transversal to the different themes is the role of the various formal and informal training moments, internal and external to the department. Inaugural conference of the ESC doctoral school seems as an instittive and ritual moment (Lampugnani, 2023).

The proposed curricular seminars appear useful in creating a common pedagogical-educational background for many students who come from other approaches. In the seminars PhD professors solicit and accompany, activate through readings that precede the meeting; they provide indications for continuing independently and deepening the study; the seminar context activate motivation and interest, and provide a safe anchor (fundamental to not lose myself completely. It provided significant anchors in a year in which otherwise everything would have been lonely and extremely unstructured). The seminars also constitute a fundamental moment of human contact and community building, giving a deep sense of formative learning in the relationship with teachers and developing informal networks with peers.

Conferences and summer schools are seen as enriching for the discussion and for

the learning they generate, opportunities to broaden one's gaze, especially on similar topics and the same disciplinary sector, make them feel a greater sense of belonging, particularly if abroad, to the scientific community. These experiences are associated with strong emotions and are described by superlative adjectives ('very precious'; 'super positive'; 'enriching'; 'extremely educational': 'exciting'), chance for exchange, enriching and 'personal' professional and interpersonal knowledge, added with the pleasure of travel and an effect of positive recharge, even if there is a certain anxiety (will I be up to it?). The search for quality is also highlighted by some participants, evaluating different types of contexts that offer personal attention to the proposed research and attentive feedback, useful for professional growth and research, compared to other 'faster' and less enriching contexts, if not in curriculum terms.

About the period abroad, only two participants had already faced it. In general, participants consider it difficult in reconciling with family and personal needs, or work (if executive) (it is a space exclusively made of work), but also as an opportunity for full immersion in research, without 'distractions' from other academic commitments; participants highlight the difficulty in identifying a precise focus and a connection to one's research (what to do when I am abroad?), as well as the awareness of a series of timing for settling into the context/need for contact and previous planning.

The coordinators' group monitoring, on a quarterly basis, is experienced as an important institutional moment of a research community that meet, allow listening and discussion with the doctoral students of subsequent years and involves Ph students both for an emotional and content part (listening to the narratives of the research allowed me to better identify the possibilities). The participants also hope for greater number and length, but also the usefulness of self-organization among peers of such moments.

The presentations of the state of the art of research, held at the end of the academic year, in view of the annual evaluation, are described as a 'ritual of passage', which gives rhythm to the experience with a deadline, and which highlights belonging to the community of research in a tangible way, remaining connected to the monitoring moments previously described.

It is described as a complete experience, in the proposal of presenting an abstract, giving a report, preparing a presentation followed by a discussion, combined with a public communication performance as professionals in a protected context, which gives satisfaction of the return of one's work and useful feedback for continuation.

At an emotional level, it is generally accompanied by sensations of well-being, happiness, mutual exchange, positive energy and a climate of cohesion. In fact, it is also an opportunity for exchange between peers of different cycles, generates admiration and interest towards others, allows formal and informal communications.

3. PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE OF BEING IN THE PRESENT RESEARCH PROCESS

They report that research methodology approach allowed them to delve deeper into the difficulties encountered also with respect to the 'unsaid' and the latencies ("I waited to make an appointment with my tutor [...] then I realized it was late"). In particular the moment of the individual interview was experienced by the doctoral students as a useful non-judgmental listening space.

Interview experience appears to the researcher to have a 'diagnostic' value of the efforts and processes, as well as accompanying the development of the training process. It can be a transformative and reflective interaction on the individual and personal process, listen to what they said: they felt to be at ease; the evidenced that interview allowed them to 'put together' and re-read their experience; they underlined the importance to be asked about (someone asks you questions about what you are doing and also helps you to process and focus everything); for them appeared useful for rethinking your path because if there isn't someone asking you, as in this case you, you don't do it independently, maybe you think about it in broad terms but you don't dedicate an hour and a half to reflect on your path. I felt free to mention. It developed self-reflection, even with strong emotional connotations; students felt listened to; they also were interested in how to do an interview / understand from the inside to be a participant.

4. RESULTS, LIMITS AND PERSPECTIVES

Even if the approach of research gives not generalizable data, the research seems to be able to constitute a perspective of analysis and reflection for PhD Board and professors, supervisors and coordinators, to understand situated experiences and processes.

Interview can be seen as a starting point for comparison and reflection, dipping the need for a 'guide' relating to generalizable skills as well as the conduct of the research.

It seemed important to create in the formation diversified opportunities to develop different skills and competencies.

The need emerges to listen and discuss with someone outside the teaching area, who allows, from a consultancy and active listening perspective, a rereading of one's process and path on an overall level, to address difficulties, limits, dimensions that are difficult to identify and name but which risk blocking the processes of building professionalism and research.

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REFORMING AND (TEACHING?) THROUGH METAPHORS: FROM THE GOOD TO THE NEW UNIVERSITY

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze the relationship between communication, rhetoric and research in the field of university reformism. Such reformism requires simplification and understanding not only for academic actors, but also for students and stakeholders. In this view, the critical reflection on three recent books, *City of Intellect: The Uses and Abuses of the University* (2023) by Nicholas Dirks, *The New University* (2021) by James Coe and *The Good University* by Raewyn Connell (2019), investigates the convergence of academic discourse and reformist innovation through the cognitive efficiency of metaphors simplifying the understanding of academic innovation through the symbolic and semantic reduction of an ever-changing scenario. Their books have the merit of delving into the contingent and programmatic factors fueling academic reliability in terms of democratization and inclusion through teaching activities, in line with the functional tenets of the civic university (Dobson and Ferrari, 2023).

university; reformism; communication; metaphors; innovation

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, foreign literature on university reformism has increasingly exploited the communicative impact of metaphors expressing a significant cognitive perspective, given that university systems as a whole may be interpreted as complex and self-referential environments. The analysis of some metaphors used by academic scholars to simplify the complexity of reformist processes within worldwide university systems may help us better understand the programmatic path taken by universities to cope with the challenges of transparency, efficiency and accountability.

More specifically, some recent works on university reformism exalt the attempt to build a critical academic discourse through the rhetoric and communication lens of reformism, also with the purpose of developing an academic meta-discourse in reference to the technological and dynamic evolution of the communicative process within and beyond university environments (Dirks, 2023; Coe, 2021; Bearman et al., 2020; Connell, 2019). Platformization, democratization, merit, quality teaching and networking are only some of the keywords inspiring the academic debate on the future of higher education in our hyperconnected societies, in which old and

new functional risks sometimes overlap to undermine the credibility of university authority (Rivas, 2023; Furedi, 2017).

1. TOWARDS A CONTROLLED AUTONOMY: THE THREE PHASES OF ITALIAN UNIVERSITY REFORMISM

In the last few years, the critical discourse on the Italian University system has made its laborious way along a troubled pathway, characterized by three different phases. The first (1999-2006) featured the start of the Bologna Process, the introduction of the double level of degree courses and the appearance of online universities. This phase produced some relevant drawbacks which had to be dealt with during the second one (2006-2013), featuring the institution of the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) (2006), the start-up of the "Pacchetto serietà" (the "Earnestness Packet") (2007), the approval of the "Gelmini Law" (2010) and the introduction of the credit and evaluation system of the various university campuses and their degree courses (2013). These innovations underwent a process of monitoring and evaluation that reduced the local margins for manoeuvre and therefore limited academic autonomy to comply with credit requirements that have grown more and more rigid for degree and PhD courses (Lombardinilo, 2019).

This process was strengthened during the third phase (2014-2023), in which the production chain concerning quality assurance was in fact coordinated by the Independent evaluation units (Nuclei di Valutazione) and the Units responsible for the internal QA system (Presidio di Qualità). This challenge required the basic monitoring of the applicative process regarding the many ministerial decrees redefining the requirements for the degree courses, their constant maintenance, and the increasing bureaucratization of academic life, all subject to repeated checks on site by ANVUR's Evaluation Committees of experts. These distinct phases featured the transition from the initial normative hypertrophy to the progressive, binding maintenance of the accreditation system. They also featured an equal number of stages in the public discourse on the Italian university system passing through a political reflection on the future of the system followed by a somnolent pause in argumentation. Except for the ROARS Association (www.roars.it), and a few other academic initiatives, this appears to stem from a passive acceptance of the ongoing process of shoring up the normative process in the name of merit and transparency (Borrelli, 2015).

Certain metaphors express this long process of transformation of the university system from an *ivory tower* to an open and inclusive system. Significant works such as Weber's *Science as a Profession (*1919), Habermas's *University in Democracy (*1968), Graubard and Ballotti's *Embattled University (*1970), Derrida's *University without Condition* (2001) and Coe's *The New University* (2019), emphasize this cognitive approach to university reformism from different yet complementary temporal and epistemological perspectives. The theoretical reflection in Connell's *The Good University* (2019) is one of the possible arrival points of a meta-theory of academic

reformism in times of globalization and knowledge networks, in which the university rankings on the internet and in the press trigger increasingly aggressive, planned strategies of academic marketing (De Martin, 2017).

In any case, the approval of law no. 240/2010 was followed by mass protests, rallies of researchers in front of Parliament and other (political and non-political) points on a number of innovations introduced by the law, including depletion of permanent researchers and the introduction of the tenure track. Opposition to evaluation ideology and normative hypertrophy turned into passive application and adaptation which has *de facto* anaesthetised the debate on universities and their missions. From a more current functional perspective, institutionalization and homogenization are two possible interpretative keys of the ongoing process of anaesthetisation of reflection on the future of our universities, suspended between contingent metaphorizations and normative inflexibility, thus colliding with construction of those smart universities (Ulskor et al. 2018).

2. UNIVERSITY DISCOURSE, FROM THE BOLOGNA PROCESS TO *THE NEW UNIVERSITY*

Seeing that the Ministry of University and Research is starting the new five-year period of research evaluation (VQR 2020-2024), the new session for the attainment for the National Scientific license (ASN) and the renewed procedures of accreditation of teaching courses (AVA3 cycle), the Italian University is taking a further step towards consolidating the systems of self-assessment, assessment and accreditation introduced in 2013, in line with the law 240/2010. This pathway started with the institution of the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research System in 2006 (ANVUR) in line with the political policy to invest a third-party independent agency with the procedures of evaluation of research and of university life devolved for a certain time to, respectively, to the Committee for Research Specialization (CIVR) and to the National Council for the Evaluation of the University System (CNVSU), bodies incorporated within ANVUR, the institution of which had seen the end of the era of monitoring and evaluation carried out by the Ministry.

The first important issues emerged with the application and upkeep of the double level (introduced by Ministerial Decree 509/1999) – such as the fragmentation of exams, the pulverization of teaching, the uncontrolled activation of on-line universities, the abnormal quantity of credits assigned for professional experience – all this goes to show the many collateral effects connected to the application and upkeep of the Bologna Process, which required the member countries of the Union to adapt their respective higher education systems to the parameters of transparency, efficiency, harmonisation and accountability (Capano, Regini and Turri, 2016). There can be no doubt about the fact that complying with the Bologna Process has generated not only deep changes in our university system, but also an extremely stimulating theoretical reflection on the functional and contextual analysis of higher training (Biggs and Tangs, 2011).

In Italy, this reformist stage required urgent corrective measures to limit the collateral effects of a reformist season that politics had not been able (or did not wish) to monitor as regards the practical and bureaucratic fallout, in line with the vision of a permanent functional transition (Turri, 2011). Public discourse on the university is often kept alive by this polarisation between good conduct and non-conformist behaviour, a polarisation that in effect mediatically overwhelms whatever good is produced by universities, as pointed out by James Coe in *The New University*, in which he profiles the role of universities today in the face of an ever more competitive market, thus colliding with the apocalyptic visions (Readings, 1996; Virilio, 2007).

It is no coincidence that the principles of efficiency, transparency and control are behind the current phase of consolidation of the credit system introduced by AN-VUR, but they have indicated a sort of functional vademecum for the new reformist pathway set down in the XV Legislature (2006-2008), when the definition of the new degree years and the issue of the so-called "Earnestness Packet" triggered a new course for the university, even at the journalistic level, to deal with the critical issues and the applicative deviations of Ministerial Decree 270/2004. Since then, the new university reformist path has acquired a corrective, centralised tendency progressively limiting university autonomy in order to counteract the applicative deviations and collateral effects of a strongly-expansive period for the Italian university system, but also a time of worrying administrative concessions to be improved and corrected.

The metaphor in "Earnestness Packet" points to the semantic sphere of ethical, deontological and legislative conformity. Opposition to the fragmentation of teaching courses and the stop to the accreditation of new on-line universities and decentralised campuses, the institution of ANVUR, all were a communicative boost with an on-going informative effect, as confirmed by certain passages of Law 240/2010. The tenure track for researchers and, above all, the introduction of the National Scientific Licence, have effectively divested universities of control over the rules, conferring that role on the Agency.

Hence the constant centralisation of university life, unfolding in the track of a reinforced reformistic layout as defined by Law 240/2010 and by the proliferation of applicative decrees regarding tuition and research in particular. The many decrees setting the requirements necessary to activate study and doctorate research courses, not to mention those to set the threshold values needed to achieve the Licence, go to prove the undeniable reduction of autonomy introduced by Law 168/1989 and the centrality of an assessment classification based on rankings, including international rankings. As regards the careers of lecturers, class A journals have become high priority (and highly sought after); their central position binds the principle of placement with a publisher to the quantitative parameters and the necessary authorisations that the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (COARA) intends to contest and replace with evaluation procedures that set aside the impact factor and the publishing placement of the products.

After the street protests triggered during the passage through parliament of Law

240/2010, the university system seems to have interiorised the evaluation mission imposed by ANVUR which rewards many aspects of university life but not the tuition aspect, which is not included among the many requirements necessary to achieve the Licence. Debate on the "university in the future" over the last five years has wavered between expectations of quality incentivisation and criticism of the distortions and limits of the innovation process set in motion by the Bologna Process, which in Italy has required a high dosage of normative corrections and operative limitations. The outcome has been an effective anaesthetisation of any critical discourse on the university, apart from certain exceptions. This stance has relapsed into a sort of docile compliance with ANVUR's taxonomic and quantitative guidelines, for the sake also of the expected internationalisation of research activity and the enhancement of teacher and student mobility, as shown by the COARA protocol issued for the qualitative assessment of products and research and the promotion of the Erasmus Plus programmes. On the horizon are opposition to the "tyranny of merit" denounced by Michael Sandel and the construction of the Good University outlined by Raewyn Conell thanks to metacritical thinking on the future of the university and its prospects of institutional, social and cultural growth, in increasingly globalised, uncertain times (Sandell, 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

In the very last years, the academic debate on the future of universities has progressively been "anaesthetized" in Italy, in the direction of a misleading weakening of the critical debate on the drawbacks of such a reformist pathway. The reformist process of Italian universities has been founded on the accreditation of degree courses and the evaluation of research products that represent two cornerstones of the wider process of innovation in higher education institutions, in tune with the improvement of the double degree courses introduced by the Bologna Process (1999).

Because of the separation of scientific sectors imposed on aspiring professors, the most recent normative actions have indirectly limited interdisciplinary research and do not include the assessment of teaching quality for professors' careers. The proposal in this paper deals with the normative and institutional emphasis on the tenets of accreditation, evaluation and rationalization inspiring Italian university reformism, in line with the normative pathway that strengthened the functional complexity of the entire system. The hypertrophied bureaucratic grasp on academic life complies with the quantitative parameters that have indirectly reduced scientific and didactic autonomy through the introduction of rationalization and effectiveness of academic services.

Hence follows the opportunity to investigate the most significant normative steps that built this reformist mindset featuring the normative anxiety and complexity of application, in tune with the anaesthetization of public debate on the future of Italian universities overwhelmed by the process of harmonization of higher education institutions. Furedi argues that Universities must re-educate themselves; furthermore, in *A University Education* (2019), Willets highlights that it is necessary to

develop a cognitive reflection upon the social role played by higher education institutions in the era of hyperconnected relationships and in a globalized environment, in which our uses of the university (Kerr, 1963) and abuses (Dirks, 2023) risk to be mischievously ephemeral and contingent.

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QUALITY OF TEACHING: DEVELOPING TEACHERS' SKILLS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' LEARNING AND PARTICIPATION

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This contribution presents two intersecting and complementary lines of research carried out by the T&LC of the University of Florence. The first concerns a survey aimed at investigating the opinions of academic staff with respect to perceived areas of and the design of teaching courses, teaching methodologies and the assessment of learning outcomes. The second is at a preliminary stage, and aims to investigate the role of students as agents of change, investing in their active, responsible and conscious participation in academic processes.

Faculty development; Quantitative research; Teaching methodologies; Competencies of academic staff; Student Voice.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of the principles of the Bologna Process (EHEA, 1999) represented a milestone in transforming higher education in Europe, promoting a series of reforms to improve the quality and coherence of national education systems. These reforms, documented in various publications in Europe, emphasized the importance of placing the student at the center of the educational process, stressing key aspects such as the importance of active citizenship, professionalization, and career skills development (ESG, 2015). The paradigm introduced by Faculty Development concerns the shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning (Sursock & Smidt, 2010; Warming & Frydensberg, 2017; Gover Loukkola, 2018). This important change places the student at the center of the teaching process, learning through the transmission of knowledge and direct experience. It recognizes students as the main actors in the education system, brings out the need to detect and respond to their personal and professional training needs, and recognizes students as active players in their learning process. The concept of Student Voice (Grion, Cook-Sather, 2013) represents a crucial challenge for educational innovation in higher education, promoting a cultural change that places students at the center of the educational process as active, listening stakeholders. This approach challenges teachers to refresh their teaching practices, adopting methods that are

more interactive, inclusive, and oriented towards personalized learning. Listening to students' opinions, needs, and experiences allows them to identify strengths and areas for improvement in their teaching, creating learning paths that not only improve the quality of learning but also respond to the needs of an ever-changing professional world. Teachers are called upon to transform their role, from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of knowledge, capable of co-designing educational experiences that stimulate critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability. This renewal, guided by active listening and collaboration with students, helps future professionals to acquire transversal skills and a sense of shared responsibility, essential for facing up to the complexities of global challenges.

1. RESEARCH BY THE TEACHING AND LEARNING CENTER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORENCE

The Teaching and Learning Centre at the University (T&LC) is an institution established to promote, recognize, and improve the skills of academic staff. In addition to supporting the members of a higher education institution with the acquisition and development of multiple skills to make the institution more dynamic and vital, faculty development actions are closely linked to the concept of didactic innovation. This concept emerges, on the one hand, from growing pedagogical knowledge and, on the other, from the idea of raising the quality and effectiveness of university education in response to the multiple and varied transformations taking place (Lotti & Lampugnani, 2020).

Starting out from the national and international guidelines supporting teacher training, given the T&LC's aim of offering support to teachers in their professional practice by fostering innovative teaching processes, two lines of research will be presented in this contribution. The first concerns a survey aimed at sounding out the opinions of academic staff concerning the design of teaching courses, teaching methodologies, and the assessment of learning outcomes. The second line of research is at a preliminary stage, and aims to investigate the role of students as agents of change, investing in their active, responsible, and conscious participation in academic processes. Acting through teacher training on the areas investigated can have a dual impact on i) the quality of teaching and ii) student learning, and can stimulate the activation of students as change agents. Students and teachers thus develop a sense of equal responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning in the broader university and training environment.

1.1 The survey

The survey promoted by the T&LC was carried out in collaboration with the Planning Support, Quality Assurance, and Evaluation Unit of the University of Florence, to analyze the quality of teaching in today's classrooms and construct reasoned pathways to develop the concepts of knowledge, learning, and teaching. The questionnaire was administered in 2023. The distribution of the sample of 882 respondents reflects that of the reference population in terms of Age, Gender, Role, Area, and

Seniority in teaching activity. The research sample consisted of full and associate professors, as well as researchers active when the questionnaire was administered. The questionnaire was voluntary.

Tab. 1. The sample questionnaire. Source: (T&LC, going to press)

	Response	%	Submitted	%	Response rate
Role					
Full professor	203	23.0%	394	21.0%	51.5%
Associate professor	435	49.3%	860	45.9%	50.6%
Permanent re-searcher	56	6.4%	123	6.6%	45.5%
Researcher (RTD-B)	77	8.7%	187	10.0%	41.2%
Researcher (RTD-A)	111	12.6%	308	16.5%	36.0%
Age					
< 30	1	0.1%	6	0.3%	16.7%
30 – 40	124	14.1%	337	18.0%	36.8%
41 – 50	210	23.8%	472	25.2%	44.5%
51 – 60	318	36.0%	605	32.3%	52.6%
61 – 70	229	26.0%	452	24.1%	50.7%
Gender					
Female	389	44.1%	775	41.4%	50.2 %
Masculine	468	53.1%	1,097	58.6%	42.7 %
Neutral	25	2.8%			
Area					
Biomedical	170	19.3%	460	24.6%	37%
Scientific	249	28.2%	447	23.9%	55.7%
Social Science	141	16.0%	275	14.7%	51.3%
Technology	197	22.3%	448	23.9%	44%
Humanities and Ed-ucation	125	14.2%	242	12.9%	51.7%

The questionnaire was structured in five sections, and consisted of 40 closed-ended questions and 1 open-ended question (Table 1). The closed-ended answers are on an ordinal scale with two positive and two negative modes. The structure of the questionnaire was divided into sections, as follows:

- section 0 – profile: the purpose of section 0 is to collect information on the sample (no. questions – 7).
- section 1 – opinions on use of teaching practices: survey of teachers' opinions on the relevance of certain teaching practices indicative of a learning process-oriented approach to teaching and on the level of their application (no. questions – 9).
- section 2 – opinions of teachers (sub-sections: teaching methodologies;

assessment methodologies; focus on teaching; focus on students' needs): survey of teachers' opinions on some relevant aspects of the teaching-learning process (no. questions – 16).

- section 4 – support and training needs (sub-sections: reflection and improvement): survey to detect support needs and sound out the willingness of teachers to undertake improvement actions (no. questions – 6).
- section 5 – knowledge of educational services offered by the university: the final section looked into the level of knowledge of support services offered by the university and participation in proposed training activities (no. questions – 3).

In particular, we will analyze some aspects highlighted by the survey that are considered relevant to teachers' teaching practices.

The results of section 2 'opinion of teachers', focus on the fourth sub-category, students' needs (Tab. 2.) and lecturers' views about this topic. More than half of the respondents agree (60%=definitely yes) on the importance of taking into consideration "students' opinions (course evaluation) to improve teaching"; 52.5% (definitely yes) agree on the "need to adapt didactic proposals to students' needs concerning their post-course profile"; 51.6% (definitely yes) consider it "appropriate to adapt didactics for students to specific learning needs". Finally, a lower 33.1% of the sample gave a "definitely yes" score about the statement "it is useful to make more use of assessment tools to acquire more information on the quality of student learning".

Tab. 2. The opinions of lecturers on issues related to students' needs. Source: (T&LC, going to press)
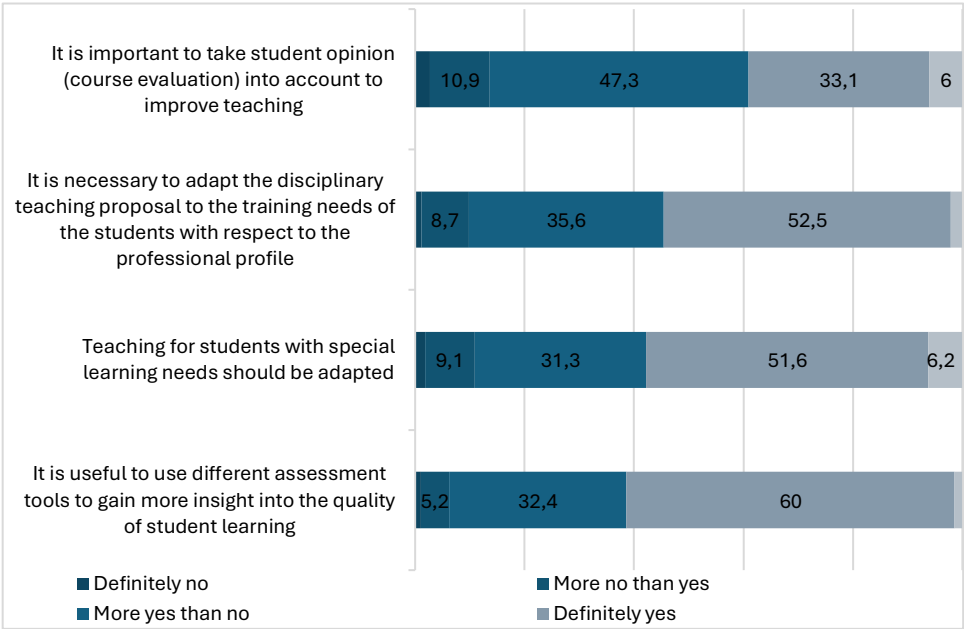
Area number 5 concerns teachers' opinions about their training needs. This area, called *support and training needs*, is key to identifying areas where teachers feel they need additional support or training. This section of the questionnaire helps to

create a targeted professional development plan, and provides the support needed to address specific challenges that teachers may encounter in their professional practice. Increasingly high percentage values are found in the intermediate answers 'more no than yes' and 'more yes than no', revealing a substantial area of uncertainty concerning teachers' training needs:

- Sometimes polarized in a positive sense (more yes than no and definitely yes), as regards methodological support to meet the needs of students with specific learning needs (62.2%);
- interest in participating in meetings with colleagues, also from other disciplines, to share ideas on effective teaching methods (61.4%)
- interest in participating in in-depth seminars on teaching topics (in this case a minimal difference emerges (50.5%).

Other times polarized in a negative sense (more no than yes, and definitely no), as regards

- the need to have didactic experts at one's disposal for the design of teaching courses (68.1%)
- methodological support for didactics oriented towards the development of work-oriented transversal skills (62.1%)
- methodological support for learning assessment tools (62%).

In light of survey results, further profiling was investigated according to the disciplinary area of respondents. There were statistically significant differences (Chi-Square test) (p <.05) between the subgroups of survey participants, specifically with regard to the variable "disciplinary area". As we can see from the data, analyzing single answers and breaking down by subject area, differences can be found that highlight the need to construct targeted training actions for the different profiles of teaching staff. The tables below show the frequency distribution with respect to the subject area, for the items "*I would be interested in participating in in-depth seminars on educational topics*" and "*I feel the need for methodological support to prepare appropriate tools for learning assessment*".

Tab. 3. I would be interested in participating in in-depth seminars on educational topics'.[1] Source: (T&LC, going to press).

	Definitely no	More no than yes	More yes than no	Definitely yes
Biomedical	12,2	37,1	42,9	8,8
Scientific	23,3	32,9	37,3	6,4
Social Science	10,6	29,8	47,5	12,1
Technological	14,7	27,9	42,6	14,7
Humanities and Education	26,4	32,8	33,6	7,2
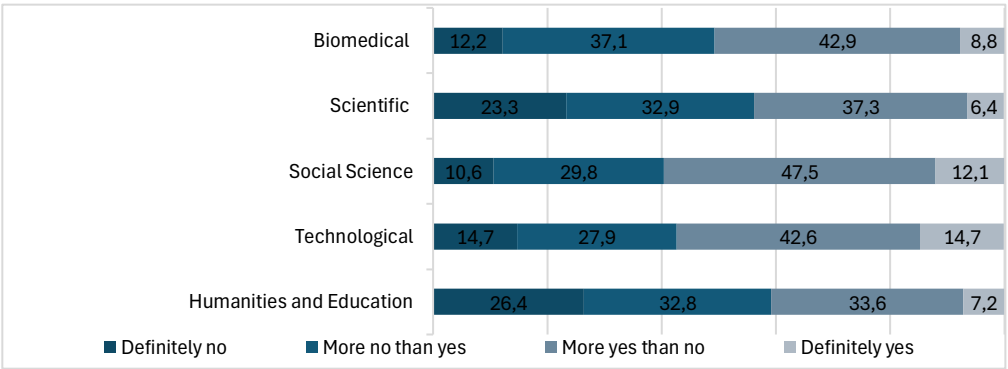
[1] Single item processing. Chi-square test p <,001. The table presents the frequency distribution by Area. Circled in red are the answers with an adjusted standardized residual value >2, thus having a greater impact on overall results.

Tab. 4. I feel the need for methodological support to prepare appropriate tools for learning assessment.[2] Source: (T&LC, 2023).

	Definitely no	More no than yes	More yes than no	Definitely yes
Biomedial	7,6	32,4	47,1	12,9
Scientific	12	30,5	41,8	15,7
Social Science	7,1	24,1	45,4	23,4
Technological	8,1	27,9	45,2	18,8
Humanities and Education	16	20	45,6	18,4
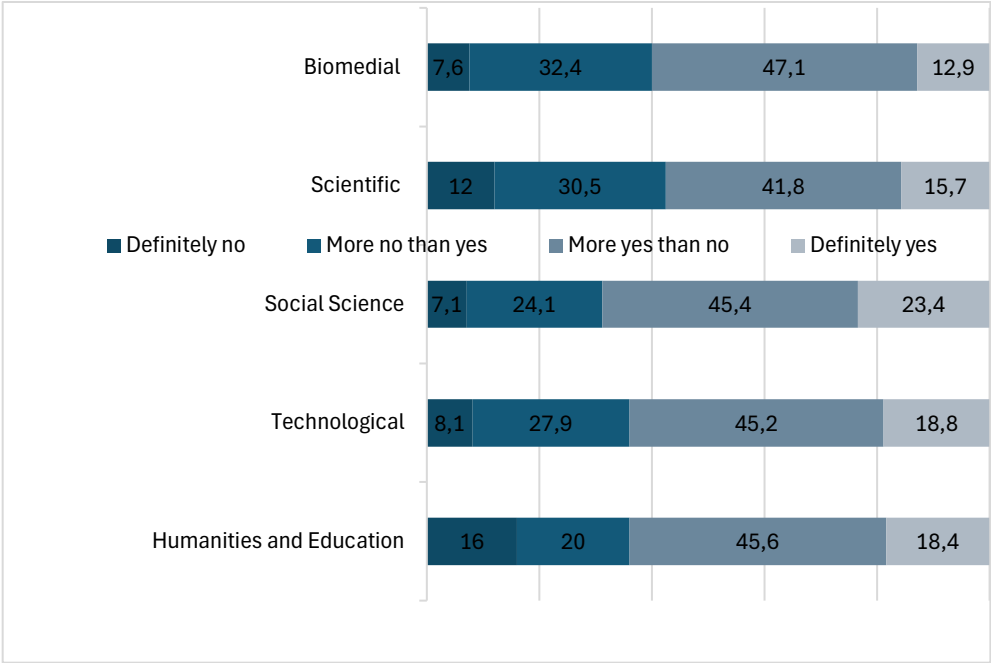
The results highlight a significant willingness to address students' needs, coupled with a clear demand for greater support and professional development for educators. Innovative pedagogical approaches must be adopted to foster active and engaged learning. Diverse teaching techniques can transform the learning process, making it more interactive and dynamic. Moreover, fostering collaborative environments – where students engage in teamwork on projects and problem-solving activities – effectively prepares them for real-world challenges. This practice underscores the importance of lifelong learning, for students and academic staff alike, highlighting the need for continuous professional growth. Educational institutions must embrace flexible and adaptive strategies to personalize learning pathways, catering to the diverse needs of their stakeholders. Such an approach not only supports personal and professional development but also enhances the overall quality of the university ecosystem. By promoting active citizenship and aligning with universities' Third Mission, these efforts prepare students to become professionals that can make a meaningful contribution to their communities and to society at large.

STUDENT VOICE AND INVOLVEMENT

The second line of our research focuses on recognizing the critical importance of student perspectives as a foundational goal in improving the quality of teaching. Aligned with the principles of student-faculty partnership (Cook-Sather, Boville,

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[2] Single item processing. Chi-square test p <,011. The tab presents the frequency distribution by Area. Circled in red are the answers with an adjusted standardized residual value >2, thus having a greater impact on overall results.

Felten, 2014), the T&LC program at the University of Florence emphasizes the creation of an environment where students act as creators, collaborators, agents of change, and even trainers. This initiative establishes a collaborative framework in which students work alongside faculty members, co-constructing and designing learning spaces while addressing critical topics, such as their representative role, institutional functions, active citizenship, and the broader university context (Cook-Sather, Alison, 2014). The program includes a participatory research approach that facilitates this partnership through workshops, mentoring sessions, and collaborative activities. Participants of a workgroup led by T&LC analyze and develop targeted educational strategies, fostering a culture of shared responsibility. Focus groups within the student working group identified specific educational needs, including:

- Establishing spaces for listening to students' needs.
- Enhancing connections and communication with the faculty.
- Providing clear information about students' rights and responsibilities.
- Developing effective communication methods, particularly with lecturers.
- Building foundational literacy on active citizenship, the university structure, and navigating the academic environment.

The notion of student-faculty partnership (Cook-Sather, Boville, Felten, 2014), as in all participatory co-design processes, is inherently complex and transformative. It requires continuous commitment and a willingness to change on the part of all involved, laying the foundations for a more inclusive and participatory higher education (Cook-Sather, Boville, Felten, 2014). The idea of setting up a working group with students arose from the need to train students in the sphere of organizational culture and provide them with the tools they need to best experience the university context, reinforcing the principle of the educational community and promoting agency.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The two proposed research lines emphasize the importance of continuous monitoring between faculty opinions on teaching practices and the views of students, the true protagonists of the university setting. The T&LC serves as a space for reflection on implemented practices and the development of training pathways based on the analysis of needs of both faculty and students. Supporting their perspectives also means ensuring that "individuals are not only capable of understanding the complex dynamic relationships characterizing the environment through their experiences, but also able to perceive themselves as a structurally connected element in a continuous process of action and transformation: not just as a component of the environment, but dynamically related to it" (Del Gobbo, 2022, p. 115).

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METAPHORS OF COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY IN FLIPPED LEARNING. MIXED-METHOD EXPLORATION TO UNVEIL STUDENT PERSPECTIVES AND NAVIGATE INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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The contribution returns some outcomes of a university teaching experimentation inspired by the methodological approach of the flipped learning, declined in the form of mastery learning conceived by Bloom (1973). The research on this project has adopted the epistemological paradigm of the Community of Inquiry (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001), in this mix-method study integrated with the powerful of metaphors of education conceived by the students. The analysis of the metaphors, based on a classification process, contributes to explain the results obtained in previous studies (Coco, Strongoli & Pillera, 2022; Strongoli & Pillera, 2022) and to unveil the complexity of students' views on the university teaching innovation.

university teaching; community of inquiry; mixed method; metaphors of education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the exponential growth in the production and dissemination of digital media has led to a significant shift in their use, moving from serving simply as tools for educational activities at all levels to functioning as immersive virtual environments (Rivoltella, 2019; De Simone & Annarumma, 2018). This has fostered a growing attention by the pedagogical scientific community to the equally burgeoning diffusion of medial teaching practices, among which the so-called flipped classroom plays an increasingly significant role. This educational practice, with a twenty-year history behind it (Talbert, 2017), aims to subvert the logic and functioning of the traditional teaching organization: the pair composed of the frontal lecture, conducted by the teacher, and the subsequent individual study by the students.

The flipped model reshapes both components of the pair: traditional lectures are replaced by videos, multimedia and interactive content, while independent in-depth study evolves into a collaborative session between students and the teacher.

During these sessions, students engage in reflection, elaboration and application of the contents, guided by the teacher. The teacher casts off the role of the bestower of knowledge and becomes the director of the knowledge path, according to a constructivist-inspired perspective. Against the backdrop of this complex phase of technological and digital change, this contribution outlines the latest findings from a five-year university teaching experimentation, grounded in the methodological frameworks of flipped learning (Bevilacqua, 2018) and flipped classroom (Bergman & Sams, 2012) and designed within the perspective of mastery learning elaborated by Benjamin Bloom (1973).

2. RESEARCH CONTEST AND DESIGN

The research was developed as part of the international ERASMUS+ Task-21 project *EdTech & AI: Creating pedagogical material for the 21st century*, which started in 2019 and ended in 2024 at the Department of Education Sciences, University of Catania. The project involved six European partners, including four universities, Pôle Universitaire Léonard de Vinci in Paris (France), Universida de Lusófona (Portugal), Oslo Metropolitan University (Norway), University of Catania, and two technology partners, the NetPort Science Park (Sweden) and Claned (Finland).

The main objectives of the project were:

- development of a pilot university course inspired by the flipped learning model;
- creation of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC);
- study of the possible development of transversal skills in students participating in the teaching experimentation.

The Italian research unit contributed by conceiving, designing and implementing an undergraduate course on educational design, that was designed during the first year of experimentation according to flipped classroom criteria in the form of mastery learning (Fioretti, 2013). The course was supported by the Claned e-learning platform (www.claned.com) and involved students attending the teaching of Methods and Techniques of Educational Design, Organization and Research, offered in the second year of the Master's Degree in Pedagogical Sciences and Educational Design (LM-85) at the University of Catania.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

By interweaving quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed methods design (fig. 1), this study seeks to holistically understand students' views on university teaching innovation based on the flipped learning model. Specifically, we investigate the following three research questions.

1. How much did students feel part of a research community?
2. How did they represent this belonging through the use of metaphors?
3. What relationships can be drawn between quantitative results and the analysis of metaphors?

The sample analysed in this essay refers to two years of experimentation and consists of 74 female and 1 male student: including 46 students attending during the academic year 2021/2022 and 29 during the academic year 2022/2023. The majority of them (49 students) were between 23 and 26 years old, but the average age was 27 years, because a substantial group (14) were between 29 and 41 or more years old.

Fig. 1. The used mix-method design.
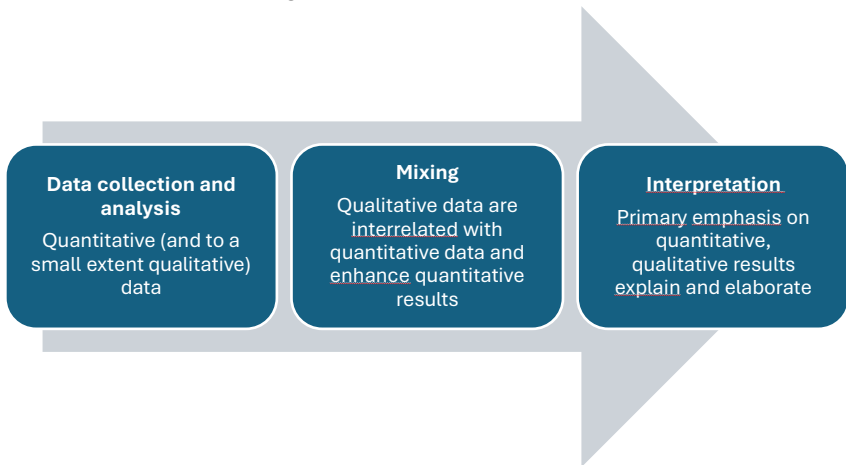
The research methodology involved the administration via GoogleForm of the COI-s (Community of Inquiry survey by Arbaugh et al., 2007), that operationalizes the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001) in order to support the creation of effective online learning environments. The Italian translation of the COI-s was based on a Spanish validated one (Ballesteros Velázquez, Gil-Jaurena & Morentin Encina, 2019) carefully compared with the English original. The 34 items of the COI-s, answered on a 5-steps Likert scale, are divided into three dimensions: teacher presence (TP), social presence (SP) and cognitive presence (CP), each composed of 3-4 indicators specified in tab. 1.

The COI-s results are examined alongside students' responses to three open-ended questions, each linked to one of the COI-s dimensions. These questions aim to elicit metaphorical representations of how students perceived the flipped classroom experience in relation to the teacher's role, peer relationships and the learning process itself. The classification process, aimed at synthesizing and extracting representative elements from the complex images created by students, was based on a previous study (Strongoli, 2017). It employed three categories – organic, mechanical (or technical) and movement metaphors – which are among the most commonly used semantic domains in scientific literature to represent the teacher-student relationship and the teaching-learning dynamic. Furthermore, each metaphor was traced back and combined with one of the COI-s indicators of the dimension corresponding to the question asked.

Finally, Pearson's chi-square test was conducted to analyse the contingency between the distributions of COI-s results and metaphors in these categories.

4. RESULTS

On the basis of what we synthetized in tab. 1 and fig. 2, we can try to answer to the three research questions. On the first one, the students involved in the flipped classroom experimentation, on average, feel part quite enough of an inquiry community, but their sense of belonging seems a little stronger in terms of CP and especially of TP, than in terms of SP (tab. 1). Nevertheless, the evidence from a quasi-experimental study (with a sample partially overlapping that of this study) did not allow us to identify an advantage of the flipped model over CP, while offered partial evidence in favour of traditional teaching on some factors of TP and in favour of flipped learning on some aspects of SP (Coco, Pillera & Strongoli, 2022).

Regarding the second research question, the sample offered a vivid and kaleidoscopic depictions of the flipped experience, with some particularly suggestive examples reported in tab. 1. In most cases, students chose movement metaphors to symbolize the guiding role of the teacher and, to a lesser extent, the progression of the learning process (fig. 2). However, they consistently portrayed themselves as protagonists of this challenging journey, likening it to a climb, a labyrinth, or a roller coaster. This appears interesting because the learning process itself – out of metaphor – is somewhat a change of position, in which the teacher is represented as variously involved, as its generator, medium or viaticum, guide and regulator (movement metaphors) but also as its designer, stimulator, support and correction agent (mechanical metaphors) or, more classically, as its curator and protector (organic metaphors). The peer relationships have been described with metaphors that can be attributed more or less equally to all three categories used, although a little more to the organic one (fig. 2), with images mainly attributable to the animal world, such as a spider web or a hive of bees (tab. 1). However, it is interesting, suggestive and very explicative also the use of way to describe sociality as mechanical devices, likening it to a catalyst (a funnel), an interdependent game (a jigsaw puzzle), or as a movement that is sometimes harmonious (a merry-go-round), sometimes contrastive (a tug of war).

About the third question, no significant contingency relationship emerged from the Pearson's chi-square test between the distribution of the COI-S results and the distribution of metaphors in the three categories. Maybe, using a different – parallel or second level – coding system, e.g. more addressed to some specific research questions, could lead to find significant associations. Nonetheless, the process of matching the metaphors provided in response to the three open questions associated with the three dimensions of the COI-S allows us to capture a wealth of nuances of meaning around the indicators used in the quantitative instrument and thus enhance the point of view of the students in a way that is impossible with the sole use of rating scales.

Tab. 1. COI-S dimensions, indicators and average results, with examples of the metaphors (generally one for each category) considered explanatory of each indicator.

TP Design and organization: 4.62	Organic: A gardener who creates the environmental conditions that favour the flowering of his creatures. Mechanical: An architect who plans and takes care of the experience down to the smallest details. Movement: The treasure hunt cards, they guide you but it's you who manages to solve.
TP Facilitation: 4.56	Organic: A pot for a plant: it gives support, contains the roots to allow the plant to grow independently. Mechanical: A talented miner. The table legs. A stick, because it supported us in the most complex and uncertain moments. Movement: A bridge between the contents and the students.
TP Direct instruction: 4.54	Organic: A big sister who guides and accompanies by pointing out the error without judging but offering wisdom dictated by experience and competence. Mechanical: A pen that evaluates and corrects any errors. The steering inside a car, in fact it gives a direction and acts as a guide for the students. Movement: The teacher orients us as the North Star of our project.
SP Affective expression: 4.13	Organic: A spider that weaves an increasingly dense web of relationships with every meeting. Mechanical: Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, slowly each one finds its missing piece resulting in a wonderful landscape. Movement: A merry-go-round where you all have to hold hands.
SP Open communication: 3.95	Organic: A rainbow in which each element contributed its own fundamental colour. Mechanical: A circle, in which each person donates and provides part of his or her knowledge to build something greater. Movement: A wall that collapses, expanding imagination and thought.
SP Group cohesion: 3.97	Organic: A hive of bees producing together. If the ants get together they can move an elephant. Mechanical: A funnel full of different ideas. Everyone contributes their own ideas to work on a single final project. Movement: A tug of war.
CP Activation: 4.32	Organic: My learning process, consisting of persistence and gradual attention, can be represented with the metaphor of a sprouting seedling. Mechanical: The driver and the vehicle: if the driver does not decide and commit to driving himself to a place, the vehicle remains stationary. Movement: A fascinating labyrinth in which you have the map that indicates the direction but, unlike the traditional

	labyrinth, there is the freedom to explore spaces, follow interests and deepen knowledge.
CP Exploration: 4.09	Organic: A sponge in an ocean. Mechanical: A car engine requires numerous components for its operation; the flipped classroom is the instruction manual: it allows the assembly of the components and their correct functioning. Movement: Reaching a summit after a gradual climb.
CP Integration: 4.22	Organic: My learning process is a chameleon, slowly adapting to the surface on which it rests. Mechanical: A chain, in which the missing link is inserted each time. Movement: A roller coaster, moments of steep uphill and moments of easy descent.
CP Application: 4.16	Organic: A bare tree that gradually fills with new fruit. Mechanical: Lego bricks, I started assembling the pieces slowly until I came up with a final design that was not described anywhere. Movement: Red hot air balloons raising obstacles in a labyrinth.

Fig. 2. Occurrences of coded metaphors used by students to represent the three COI dimensions.
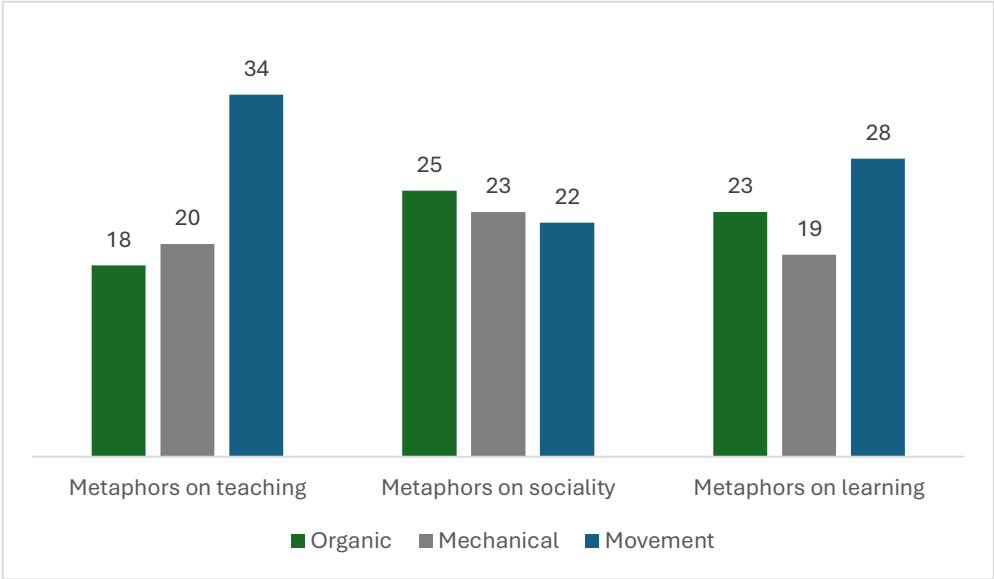
5. CONCLUSIONS

In the framework of a multi-year experimentation on flipped learning at university, this study was useful to complete and enrich previous research outcomes. Specifically, the reading of the metaphors in the light of COI-S indicators helped us to clarify, contextualize and enhance their results and to make the dimensions of the

Community of Inquiry framework vivid and three-dimensional.

Even if it is not always possible to attribute the complex and holistic meaning of a symbols to the analytical indicators of a quantitative tool in a unambiguously way (and therefore we were unable to trace contingencies between the results on the COI-S indicators and the categories with which we divided the metaphors), nonetheless, the collection of metaphors with respect to the dimensions of a quantitative tools proved to represent not only an alternative information source useful to triangulate the quantitative data, but also a powerful key to mine and to expand the understanding of quantitative results, and an integrative way to describe, narrate and discuss them.

Although it is not always possible to unambiguously attribute the complex and holistic meaning of a symbol to the analytical indicators of a quantitative tool (and perhaps for this reason, we were unable to identify contingencies between the results of the COI-S indicators and the categories used to classify the metaphors), the collection of metaphors related to the dimensions of a quantitative tool, their analysis, and their matching with the tool's indicators proved to be research processes capable not only of providing an opportunity to triangulate quantitative data but also of revealing a powerful key to extracting and expanding the understanding of quantitative results. Additionally, these processes offered an integrative and stimulating way to describe, narrate and discuss them.

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STRENGTHENING UNIVERSITY TEACHING THROUGH FACULTY DEVELOPMENT: STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE GAP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND TEACHING IN ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES

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In the Italian university system, the gap between research and teaching is significant (Felisatti, 2011). Research activity is intrinsically recognized as a primary requirement in the academic context, playing an indispensable role in both access to the profession and career development. In this context, research skills are provided through specific, long-term training courses that are supported by scientific communities and institutions. Research is systematically conducted in collaboration with others, and the results of this research are presented, compared, and widely discussed in national and international circles. On the other hand, the reality is different concerning the teaching aspect. In this regard, this contribution aims to outline the historical evolution and multidisciplinary areas of Faculty Development, examining the activities aimed at mitigating the existing gap between research and teaching, through an enhancement of the teaching skills of university lecturers. The intention is, therefore, to reflect on the current state of universities, on new models and perspectives in an attempt to reinforce and promote attitudes and beliefs relating to various aspects of the role of the university lecturer. In particular, it is intended to raise awareness of Faculty development activities; and to establish an ongoing reflection and reconsideration of teaching strategies, to give greater centrality to student learning.

university career; faculty development; teaching; research

INTRODUCTION

The intention of this contribution is to initiate a reflection on the determination of the causes that have led teaching to take on a marginal role in the Italian university; the causes, from an initial analysis of the main Italian university reforms, in particular those from 1990 to 2010, seem to be to be found precisely in the institutional regulatory choices of this twenty-year period. The decision to consider the aforementioned period, in fact, stems from the realisation that until the 1990s the Italian university system maintained a stable structure, in which there were few significant

changes and the academy walked on long-established assumptions, dating back as far as the birth of the system in 1859 (Vaira, 2011). Organisational staticity began to change only at the end of the century in the 1990s with the reforms introduced by the Ministers of Education and Research: Ruberti (1990), Berlinguer (1998), and subsequently Moratti (2005) and Gelmini (2010), making this twenty-year period crucial for understanding the progressive decline in the importance attributed to teaching skills in university academic roles. This is confirmed by the very way in which competition procedures for university lecturers are carried out, which have always placed the centrality of research and the secondary position of teaching skills in the evaluation of lecturers in university roles. In the face of this institutional static nature, which has been further reinforced by the Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale (National Scientific Appointment), the need has emerged over the last decade to promote in the universities themselves, much less in the academic communities, processes for training and updating the teaching skills of university lecturers, which has emerged in recent years from the introduction within Italian universities of Teaching and Learning Centres, centres devoted to Faculty Development.

1. TEACHING IN UNIVERSITY FACULTY RECRUITMENT PROCESSES

An analysis of the recruitment processes for university faculty through public competition unequivocally reveals the secondary role of teaching competencies compared to research aptitude. This investigation has been guided by several key questions: What weight is given to teaching in the selection of university faculty through public competitions? What criteria are used to assess candidates' teaching skills? Does Italy have a structured system for evaluating teaching competencies as a prerequisite for entering the teaching profession?

This article seeks to provide an overview of these questions, highlighting that, in most cases, there is no structured system for the evaluation of teaching competencies. This lack raises an important consideration: access to an academic career does not necessarily require specific training in teaching. Mastery of one's subject matter alone may not suffice to ensure high-quality teaching. Without professionals who are genuinely "capable of teaching", it will be impossible to achieve effective quality in education (Felisatti, 2020).

Faculty recruitment is closely tied to the regulations and reforms enacted at the ministerial level. The composition of university faculty reflects not only the type of training provided by universities but also the methods used to select faculty members (Calvano, 2021).

1.1 The relevance of teaching in career progression

The issue of the relevance of teaching in academic career advancement in Italy is situated within a complex historical and regulatory framework, characterized by the progressive evolution of university recruitment systems. Despite various legislative reforms, teaching has consistently played, and continues to play, a secondary role compared to scientific research, undermining the full recognition of university

professors' pedagogical competencies. The Ruberti Reform (Law 341/1990) introduced the first elements of autonomy for universities to announce recruitment calls. However, this autonomy remained subordinate to national regulations defining criteria and procedures for staff selection. The selection process primarily focused on candidates' scientific publications and credentials. For associate and full professorships, the evaluation considered academic qualifications, publications, and included an oral exam, and sometimes a written exam, which could involve a simulated lecture. However, there were no explicit and standardized criteria to measure the quality of teaching. Competitions remained predominantly centered on scientific production and credentials, with teaching relegated to a secondary and unstructured role in recruitment calls. The Berlinguer Reform (Law 210/1998) introduced comparative evaluations for faculty recruitment, which included the assessment of academic and scientific credentials, as well as, explicitly, teaching competencies. Article 2 of Law 210 states: "For associate professor positions, a teaching test and a discussion of scientific qualifications are also conducted; teaching activities and services provided at universities are also evaluated [...]" (Official Gazette, 1998). The same applied to full professorships not obtained through associate professor ranks. The law required that evaluation criteria be defined and publicly disclosed before the procedure began. At the end of the process, the commission ranked candidates and declared a certain number "eligible"; however, eligibility did not guarantee immediate hiring, leaving the final decision to individual universities. Although this reform marked progress in recognizing the importance of teaching, research remained the dominant factor in candidate evaluation. The Moratti Reform (Law 230/2005) introduced new mechanisms for accessing academic positions, combining national eligibility assessments with local recruitment procedures (Official Gazette, November 4, 2005). This reform required candidates for faculty positions to first obtain national eligibility, granted through comparative evaluations conducted by national commissions using criteria based on scientific production, teaching tests, and prior teaching experiences. A teaching test was included to assess candidates' teaching abilities, and prior teaching contributions were considered in the evaluation. Once eligibility was granted, universities could initiate local recruitment processes to fill available positions. Although the reform emphasized teaching as a more significant factor for entering the academic profession, it never fully came into effect due to the lack of implementing decrees required by the law itself. With the Gelmini Reform (Law 240/2010, December 30), a profound restructuring of the Italian university system was initiated. Article 16 of Law 240/2010 introduced the National Scientific Qualification (*Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale*, ASN), which serves as the first stage for faculty appointments. An analysis of the criteria, parameters, and indicators for ASN described in the National University Council (CUN) document (2011) reveals a clear lack of attention to teaching and pedagogical aspects. A textual search of the document shows that the term "teaching" (*didattica*) appears only eight times in 39 pages, while "pedagogy" (*pedagogia*) is mentioned only three times; even more strikingly, there are no explicit references to "teaching skills" (*abilità didattiche*). Among the indicators

considered in the evaluation, teaching competencies are portrayed as an obstacle to scientific production. In the ASN framework, there is a marked imbalance between the emphasis on research and the attention given to teaching. While bibliometric criteria and scientific production receive detailed evaluation, teaching competencies are often overlooked. This asymmetry may negatively impact the quality of university teaching, risking the perception that teaching is a marginal aspect of the academic role.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF PEDAGOGICAL TRAINING FOR UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

Since 1998, with the Sorbonne Declaration and the subsequent Bologna Process (1999) leading to the Yerevan Communiqué (EHEA, 2015), improving teaching has been identified as a strategic priority for Higher Education by international organizations.

This orientation has also been supported by OECD recommendations (Hénard, 2012), the work of the *High-Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education* (McAleese, 2013), and the *ANVUR* working group (ANVUR, 2023). These efforts have emphasized the need for pedagogical innovation, continuous faculty training, and the use of technology to support teaching. The OECD report, *Fostering Quality Teaching in Higher Education: Policies and Practices* (2012), highlights the centrality of quality teaching, advocating for policies that recognize and incentivize teaching competencies alongside academic research. The report explicitly calls for raising awareness within academia about the importance of teaching and for adopting mechanisms to recognize faculty who excel in teaching, thereby encouraging innovation and effectiveness in the educational process. These documents provide a normative and strategic framework that drives an evolution in the role of university faculty, where teaching is afforded equal status alongside research.

3. FUTURE PERSPECTIVES FOR STRENGTHENING TEACHING IN THE ITALIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Faced with this different relevance attributed to the functions of the university lecturer, Italian universities now have a responsibility to bridge this gap; and they are doing so by adopting Faculty Development programmes to offer training courses to improve lecturers' teaching skills. This is one of the reasons why the Teaching and Learning Centres (CTLs), also in the form of networks between universities, have sprung up to promote the training of university lecturers in university teaching. Underlying these pathways is the now obvious need to introduce 'teaching to teach' (Lampugnani, 2020) into the university as well, since the decade of the introduction of teaching quality assurance processes through the Anvur has highlighted the need to promote such training in order to allow teaching as the transmission of one's own disciplinary knowledge derived from research to be surpassed. These programmes, over time, must be transformed into institutionally approved initiatives, as has long been the case in other contexts (Steinert, 2010), introducing even in universities, in

fact, everything that educational research has introduced in schools: online learning, peer training, observational learning, learning by doing, communities of practice, etc. (Lampugnani, 2020).

The hope is that teaching competence can once again be integrated among the functions of university lecturers and progressively included among the requirements for recruitment and also among the indicators for career progression and salary increases.

In essence, the Italian university system must take charge of reducing the gap between research and teaching, embarking on a path of change that recognises both as essential and complementary components of the university lecturer's profession. While waiting for the reforms to give greater weight to teaching as a strategic element for the training of the new generations, enhancing it in the criteria for recruitment and career progression, the university system, once again, must take charge of it, strengthening the process of training and refresher courses within it, transforming Faculty Development into a strategic action, so that it becomes systematic from a voluntary action, as a continuous training action for university lecturers, making it an integral part of the professional preparation of lecturers. To date, this seems the only way to promote an academic culture that values teaching not as an ancillary obligation, but as a central dimension of the lecturer's role.

A big step forward has been taken by the pedagogical academic community by initiating a structured research pathway through the creation of a specific Faculty Development curriculum within the national doctorate Teaching and Learning Sciences starting from the XXXIX cycle.

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WORKING AT SCHOOL. CAREER PATH-WAYS, PROFESSIONAL DEONTOLOGY, PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITIES IN THE FACE OF SOCIAL JUS-TICE

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INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to elaborate further and refine the theoretical framework that inspired the panel Working at School: Career Pathways, Professional Deontology, Professional Relationships, and Identities in the Face of Social Justice, clarifying the goals pursued during the debates held in Cagliari. First, the panel aimed to promote a multidisciplinary dialogue among the various fields studying work in schools—sociology, anthropology, pedagogy, and psychology—by involving researchers from different professional backgrounds. Secondly, it sought to strengthen the dialogue within sociology itself, particularly between the sociology of education and the sociology of labour and professions. Furthermore, it is essential to adopt a comparative and international perspective to situate the transformations of the teaching profession, highlighting the specificities and commonalities of different national contexts, such as Italy and France. Finally, the panel aimed to broaden the analysis to include all the actors involved in schools, going beyond the study of teaching to emphasize how teachers work alongside other professionals—such as educators, pedagogists, psychologists, and auxiliary staff—and to explore the specificities of their work.

1. THE TEACHING PROFESSION: TRANSFORMATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Classical sociological studies on the teaching profession have provided a theoretical framework that is still useful today. These studies underscore the importance of considering the historical, cultural, and educational contexts that shape a profession characterized by cognitive, emotional, and relational labour. For instance, Willard Waller (1932), a pioneer in the sociology of education, argued that schools should be understood as social systems deeply influenced by their relationships with local communities, particularly in the United States. As a social system, each school develops its own rules, dynamics, and rituals—in essence, its culture. Waller also highlighted a crucial aspect of teaching: the ambivalence between an "authoritative" institutional role marked by a power asymmetry—further accentuated by the generational differences between teachers and students—and the relational

dimension of teaching, which requires emotional and affective resources alongside cognitive ones. This theme, further developed by interactionist literature on professions, remains central to contemporary discussions.

In the 1970s, Dan C. Lortie advanced these themes in Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study (1975). Drawing on theories from the sociology of work and professions, Lortie delineated the specificities of teaching through a historical analysis of its evolution. His work examined recruitment, motivations, professional recognition, career paths, classroom management, and daily tasks, illustrating how teaching is less autonomous and prestigious than professions like medicine or law—professions extensively analysed in sociological studies of professional groups. Despite its fundamental social mission, teaching operates within a bureaucratic framework that regulates working conditions, career progression, and remuneration—typically lower than those in more prestigious fields. Consequently, teachers' careers often lack upward mobility and are marked by strategies aimed at horizontal mobility, such as moving to less demanding or more prestigious schools (Becker, 1952). While teaching does allow for creativity in lesson planning and instructional delivery, it offers limited professional autonomy. Both Waller and Lortie emphasized the institutional constraints shaping teachers' professional experiences, contributions that remain highly relevant.

The sociology of teaching has developed into a distinct field that reflects the profound transformations in educational, social, and cultural contexts (Abbiati, 2014). Teachers occupy a central position in school systems, acting as agents of cultural transmission, mediators of knowledge, and key figures in shaping the skills and values of younger generations. However, their role has never been static, undergoing continuous redefinition in response to structural societal changes. This dynamic is evident in the tensions between normative expectations and professional practices, as well as between the idealization of education and the often-frustrating realities of daily work.

To fully understand the complexity of teaching, as Waller and Lortie suggested, it is crucial to examine its historical, institutional, and cultural dimensions. Historically, the institutionalization of compulsory education positioned teachers at the core of a social project aimed at shaping modern citizens. From the 19th century onward, as national education systems expanded, teachers were tasked with not only transmitting knowledge but also instilling norms, values, and behaviours deemed essential for social integration. However, in recent decades, their role has been restructured amid growing concerns about professional training (Busemeyer, Trampusch, 2012; Pinna, Pitzalis, 2024) and a decline in social recognition and pay as education became a universal right and thus a less exclusive practice.

Educational sociology, particularly since the 1960s and 1970s, has challenged the notion of teachers as neutral and apolitical figures, highlighting their role in social reproduction. Scholars such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1964, 1970) demonstrated how schools perpetuate social inequalities by privileging the cultural capital of dominant classes. The teaching profession faces increasing demands and growing

complexity as schools evolve into spaces not only for education but also for inclusion and professional training. Teachers are increasingly called upon to engage in diverse projects and build meaningful relationships with students, colleagues, and families—an essential competence for professional success (Durler, Losego, 2019). Concurrently, education policies emphasizing standardization and accountability have intensified the focus on teaching effectiveness (Argentin, 2018), reshaping the profession and raising new questions about balancing institutional requirements with professional autonomy.

Contemporary studies revisit and expand upon the classical themes of the sociology of teachers' work (Barrère, 2003), focusing on relational dynamics within classrooms, teacher motivation, the sociodemographic characteristics of the profession, and its progressive feminization (Cavalli, Argentin, 2010). These studies also address issues such as teacher malaise and the declining prestige of the institution and the profession in a context marked by numerous organizational and structural reforms aimed at transforming pedagogy, improving school inclusivity, and, most notably, bridging the gap between education and the labour market.

Among the topics warranting closer attention, teacher malaise has recently been enriched by discussions about the declining attractiveness of the profession (Barrère, 2017). This trend is evident internationally in countries such as the United States, Great Britain, and, more recently, France, with an increasing focus on the factors driving teacher resignations (Burrow et al., 2020; Garcia, 2023). Additionally, a strand of the literature has concentrated on the precarization of the teaching profession (Bertron et al., 2024), particularly pronounced in contexts like Italy, where structural issues related to turnover management and permanent appointments persist. Many teachers are compelled to endure prolonged periods of precarious employment. These studies have deeply analysed the evolution of the teacher labour market, which is increasingly characterized by segmentation and dualization.

Moreover, expanding sociological inquiry to other school professionals—such as psychologists, educators, and speech therapists—highlights the collaborative nature of contemporary educational work (Bois, Jacquot, 2022; Durler, Losego, 2019). These reflections highlight the enduring relevance of the observations made by classical scholars such as Wallard and Lortie. Their insights underscore the necessity of continuing research on the work conducted within schools, grounded in a detailed reconstruction of the historical and social contexts in which such work is embedded.

2. THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF TEACHING: FROM MASS SCHOOLING TO NEOLIBERAL EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

The ethical dimension of teaching gives broader and higher goals to professional competencies and practices, encouraging the pursuit of values – such as social justice, equity, and social inclusion – in an independent spirit. Teachers act within an institution that professes equal opportunities, and intellectual and moral

emancipation of citizens. These progressive ideas that, in public representation, are associated with the vocation to teach appear fragile today in relation to certain transformations of the educational system.

Educational sciences have long since highlighted the "paradoxes of mass schooling" (Dubet, Duru-Bellat, 2020). The founding principle of mass schooling is that education is a collective good that everyone can access. However, it has been seen how the diversity of students' starting conditions easily turns into an inequality of educational success opportunities. Faced with the heterogeneity of the school population, the appeal to the meritocracy device has reinforced mechanisms of social segregation in the democratic mass school (van Zanten, 2021). The mass school system, by postulating the formal equality of all and recognising differences in terms of 'individual merit' (and not as a consequence of social and cultural asymmetries of origin), exposes itself to the risk of reproducing inequalities. Since the 1950s, in the wake of a critique of the functionalist perspective of meritocratic resource allocation, sociological research has focused on the relationship between social origin and educational success (Besozzi, 2017). This relationship has not only been analysed as a conditioning of the social and cultural context of families on their children's educational success. In this respect, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron (1970) shifted the investigation to the ideology of the 'école libératrice' and its dramatic failure. The two authors focus on the arbitrariness of teachers' pedagogical action and the "false neutrality of the school" concerning the mechanisms of reproduction of the social order (Bonichi, 2010). In other words, the official mission of imparting knowledge in an equitable manner, which the teaching profession ascribes to itself, appears hard to achieve in complete autonomy from the processes of social selection. On the other hand, mass education has produced "a politicisation of the debate on education", thanks also to cultural initiatives by groups of teachers, who have questioned the social reproduction function of school knowledge (Bonichi, 2010, 247). In Italy, for example, we can cite movements, such as the Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa inspired by Célestin Freinet's popular education, which although not structurally widespread, have at least proposed alternative and critical visions of the pedagogical relationship. In recent decades, the only progressive turn recognised for the mass school seems to be the one driven by an emphasis - started from the socio-constructivism paradigm - on learning. In this contemporary educational discourse, which focuses on the needs, interests, abilities, and learning styles of students, the teacher's role is often diminished to that of an enabler of learning (Biesta, 2005, 2022).

International research has shown that this new approach does not overturn the traditional asymmetries in the construction of knowledge. Instead, the doxa of learnification seems to be supported by educational policies focused on lifelong and adaptable learning in relation to the needs of the global neoliberal economy. As a result, the student is shaped as one who chooses whether or not to actualize their desires and knowledge, independently of the conditions of possibility—a "dis-embedded" subject, as Agnes van Zanten (2009) puts it—upon whom the full

responsibility for success or failure rests (Kelly, 2001). The teacher, on the other hand, is reduced to a mere "facilitating" factor for achieving measurable learning outcomes (Biesta, 2022).

Neoliberal educational policies, in particular, have had a significant impact not only on the purpose of educational action as a public good but also on the working conditions of teachers (as well as other school professionals) and their recruitment and career paths. Educational actors are increasingly "mobilized" within political agendas that value education in relation to the labor market or as an investment to monetize resources useful for individual success (Ball 2010; Pitzalis, 2016; De Feo, Pitzalis 2019). At the same time, the gradual introduction of market logic into education has changed the criteria for organizing teachers' work. While the values of equality and social justice still play an important role in the rhetorical defense of public education (van Zanten, 2021, 47), the theme of economic efficiency is becoming just as central to school realities. The decentralization policies of education, dominated by the self-managing school and new public management (Ball 1990, 2010; Newman & Clarke 1994), required teachers to take on middle management functions. Teachers are thus mobilized in the accountability processes of their schools, which have a significant impact on the orientations and goals of their work (Barrère 2017).

This brief overview of some of the current critical issues in the teaching profession should not make us forget that teaching as a profession is a plural and differentiated universe, due to the heterogeneity of professional training, institutional contexts, and discipline-specific fields. For this reason, with this panel, we wanted to open a space for discussion that highlights the various facets of the teaching profession in an international framework, as will emerge in the interesting contributions that follow in this section.

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"WE LOST THE FRAGILE SUBJECTS, THE BROKEN ONES". PRINCIPALS AND TECHNOLOGIES, BETWEEN OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS: LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE PANDEMIC

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This study explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school leadership, drawing on qualitative data from interviews with 14 principals and focus groups with teachers in comprehensive schools across four Italian regions. The research investigates how principals faced the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic; disparities in technology access, the shift to distance learning, and the heightened vulnerability of certain students. Findings reveal that principals adopted a flexible and responsive "good enough" leadership approach, adapting to the evolving circumstances and prioritizing the needs of their school communities. The pandemic was a stark reminder of schools' crucial role in fostering social interaction and providing a safe and supportive learning environment. Furthermore, it underscored the need for a thoughtful and balanced approach to technology integration, ensuring that digital tools enhance, rather than replace, in-person learning experiences. All the practices experimented during this challenging period offer valuable insights for principals to face the complexities of education in a rapidly changing world.

principals; schools, leadership style; followership style; digital teaching

INTRODUCTION

The research question underpinning this study focused on the role of the school principal, specifically examining how relationships between the principal and other members of the "professional bureaucracy" (Mintzberg, 1996; Ballarino, Panichella, 2021) in the school system were structured. The hypothesis suggested that the relational dynamics between the principal and collaborators were significantly different during the pandemic, affecting the organization of school activities and educational outcomes. This variability could explain why, despite adherence to the same regulatory frameworks and protocols during the pandemic, schools responded differently, some managing to adopt virtuous and pedagogically effective

practices.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, school principals faced unprecedented challenges, such as the technological disparities highlighted by the shift to remote learning and the increased vulnerability of certain student groups. These circumstances called traditional leadership models into question, prompting principals to reassess priorities, strategies, and intervention approaches.

The research findings highlight four main challenges that principals had to address. The first was reorganizing the school system by adapting it to innovative methods that balanced traditional and virtual teaching, while also guiding teachers through this transformation. The second challenge involved addressing technological inequalities, with the aim of ensuring equitable access to technology and connectivity for all students.

Another significant challenge was implementing specific protocols to protect vulnerable students, safeguarding their health and emotional well-being. Lastly, priority was given to student safety and well-being, often considered more critical than academic learning alone. Principals initiated innovative projects to promote mental health and emotional stability, many of which now stand out as valuable best practices that can benefit schools even beyond emergency contexts.

1. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The research design envisaged first of all the planning of a qualitative investigation in two phases: the first one consisted in the realization of 14 discursive interviews (Cardano, Ortalda, 2021) carried out with school principals of comprehensive institutes and secondary schools located in the regions of North-Eastern Italy (Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Trentino Alto Adige, and Friuli Venezia Giulia), the second one consisted in the participation to focus groups involving a total of 40 educators (from kindergartens) and teachers from the same schools reached during the interviews with the principals. The participation in focus groups phase was not mandatory and only 6 schools reached by interviews joined in.

Both the interviews and the focus groups focused on the relational styles considered successful from the pandemic experience, on the use of technologies for distance learning and on the 'good practices' that were effective in responding to the educational emergency that the school feels it must face.

2. RESEARCH FINDINGS: THREE MAIN TOPICS

The analysis shed light not only on the initial research questions but above all on several and sometimes unexpected issues, which resulted in three important insights.

2.1. Maintaining the sense of going to school

School always represented a place of formal education, essential for acquiring knowledge and skills necessary for everyday life and professional careers (Ajello, 2005). However, school also represents an important agent of secondary

socialization, essential for the formation of individual identity, particularly during childhood and adolescence. Beyond the accumulation of knowledge, school contributes to the overall growth of the individual. The pandemic emphasized how certain aspects, such as physical contact, visual connection, and shared space, for effective learning (DIRETTIVO AIE 2021-2023, 2021). Social research (Montanari, 2021; Save the Children 2021; Istat, 2022) confirmed that these elements, absent in distance learning, are essential for an optimal growth process in the school environment. In many interviews, principals reinforced the perception that during pandemics the risk for school was to miss important aspects of education that play a crucial role in shaping our learning experiences. "Social distancing has drastically reduced the emotion of contact creating an alienating self-perception and conditioning the evolution of identity self" (Montanari, 2021, p. 101).

> We lost the fragile subjects, the last ones, the broken ones – the ones that even in the classroom you have a hard time keeping them on track. But at least they're there -- they're there. They listen to something. Especially the foreigners in our case but also all the problem families. As long as you have them in the classroom you know that for five or six hours they are safe. Maybe they understand half of what is explained to them – but the half at least... And then something remains if they listen to it... When they are at home (during digital education), what happens? (P.Pd1)

Interviews and focus groups with principals highlight the critical importance of in-person school attendance, even in the digital age. While Distance Learning (DL) offers potential, it cannot substitute the central role of physical and face-to-face interaction in education. Data show that DL negatively impacts relationships among students, regardless of their educational level.

Physical presence in the classroom enables authentic interactions between students and teachers, essential for effective learning (Andreatta et al., 2022). In-person schooling, as a physical space for meeting and sharing, is particularly vital for the most vulnerable students. As Laneve (2020, p. 414) notes, "the school, even in its physicality, is a place to be inhabited, a space of relationship and identity construction, history, and memory, an anthropological place in the sense of Marc Augé (1996)".

Authentic relationships, which involve individuals fully engaging with the consequences of their interactions, cannot be replicated in digital environments mediated by technology (Riva, Morganti, 2006). School should be envisioned as a "Vitruvian" space, integrating physical, psychological, cognitive, emotional, and socio-relational dimensions, shaping students' life perspectives (Laneve, 2020). Physical interactions foster authentic learning experiences, creating a shared "educating time" ("tempo educante", Massa, 1986) that supports inclusivity and growth through cultural and personal diversity. For many, school represents the only true space of belonging, a sanctuary for building identity (Ammaniti, 2020; Save the Children, 2021). Reflecting on the purpose of school, beyond mere knowledge transmission, underscores its essential relational and physical dimensions for authentic human development.

2.2 Technology as an opportunity to rethink educational planning

Our second key finding focused on how digital became an opportunity to reflect on didactics. Throughout our research, interviews and particularly focus groups revealed that the emergency exposed disparities in teachers' access to technology and their digital skills. Many teachers simply replicated traditional teaching models in a digital environment, while others recognized the need for a complete educational redesign.

The pandemic accelerated and sometimes forced the adoption of digital tools, prompting teachers to rethink their teaching styles and instructional design. Ultimately, as in any other context, digital tools in education do not have intrinsic moral value; their ethical implications arise from the intentions of those who adopt and utilize them (Rossi, 2021). Notably, social media were employed in schools as "working tools" for the first time, allowing teachers and principals to move beyond the negative perception of them as the "epitome of evil" and to grasp their potential benefits.

> Social media has always been a reason to fight with my daughters... actually then also having joined some social channels of Facebook especially [...] I found resources from other principals who were posting interpretations, documents... for me now (social media) has become a reason not exactly for training but certainly to update. (P.Vi1)

2.3. The "Good Enough" Principal Model: A New Approach to School Leadership

The Italian school system is increasingly complex due to social, generational, and technological shifts, exacerbated by the pandemic. This demands a new role played by the school principal: a leader who can navigate this complexity and guide schools into the "new digital era" (Rivoltella & Rossi, 2024; Rivoltella, 2020; Mulè, 2020; Rossi, P.G., 2016). The principal must assume a multifaceted role, bringing together managerial, pedagogical, and educational competencies to make the school an authentic "educational learning space" rather than simply a place for formal and bureaucratic processes. Principals must know how to optimize staff resources, ensure justice and equity, and direct educational action towards current challenges while keeping an eye on the future (Minello, 2011).

This context necessitates a dialogic and flexible leadership style. Principals must avoid the misconception that they solely bear the school's burden (Kets de Vries, 2019), instead adapting to diverse collaborators and fostering trust. While respecting role asymmetries, principals are called to share goals and responsibilities with their collaborators, moving beyond a tendency for excessive control and mere routine management (Maviglia & Bertocchi, 2022). By sharing goals and responsibilities, and moving beyond excessive control, principals can create stimulating and inclusive environments. Distributed and participative leadership is crucial for effectively leading schools in this complex landscape.

This principal's model, paraphrasing Winnicott, can be defined as "good enough"

(Andreatta, Cianfriglia, & Rossi, 2024): not perfect, but attentive and receptive. This model manifests through concrete actions, such as implementing a lean organizational system that avoids excessive bureaucracy and rigid rules (Banna & Brambilla, 2021). This openness involves seeking diverse and sustainable solutions for daily school operations, focusing on student and staff well-being and learning, while adhering to regulations and effectively balancing formal and normative requirements with human aspects like personal recognition and the expression of individual uniqueness. Three key dimensions enable this "good enough" principal to practice dialogic leadership. Firstly, they demonstrate a willingness for open exchange with colleagues, valuing equality despite role differences.

> "Our job is to empower others, to give them the chance to engage in something that allows for creativity, genuine interest, and passion. This makes the difference— when teachers come to me with, 'What if we could do this…?' and if it's feasible without excessive cost, then, well, why not? We try, and sometimes something wonderful comes of it" (P.Tv1).

Secondly is the capacity to maintain a clear vision of ongoing motivations, dynamics, aims, and objectives, and the readiness to share this vision with collaborators. This fosters a shared understanding of "where we want to go" and supports coordinated, systemic efforts that avoid losing sight of the big picture in fragmented initiatives. Finally, dialogic leadership relies on the ability to promptly recognize and address problematic situations and to acknowledge and support the personal vulnerabilities of staff to enable effective management and growth.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A DIALOGIC LEADERSHIP

This study highlights the vital role of schools in both knowledge acquisition and holistic individual development. The pandemic underscored the importance of social and relational learning, exposing the limitations of distance education compared to traditional settings. Findings reveal that many principals adopted a flexible "good enough" leadership approach, adapting to circumstances and prioritizing community needs. Focus groups emphasized the importance of open communication and collaboration in addressing challenges and supporting student well-being.

To address the complexities of contemporary education, this research suggests three trajectories emerged from the qualitative analysis. Firstly the need to actively overcome resistance to change, typical of those who take refuge in the phrase "It has always been done this way" (P.Tn2), and encourage experimentation with new teaching and organizational practices to strive towards networking with local leaders. Secondly to adopt a dialogic leadership: to foster collaboration between principals and staff, valuing individual expertise. Open the school to the community and share best practices. As one principal noted, "be afraid to experiment, don't be a bureaucrat manager but use the legislation to exploit all the tools available". (P.Tn1). Finally to promote a 'Vitruvian school' that can be attentive to all dimensions of the person, integrating technology critically while maintaining the relational dimension and the "sense of going to school".

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WHY WORK AT SCHOOL? THE TEACHING PROFESSION THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE PUPIL EXPERIENCE

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At school, teachers and pupils work for each other, but also with, or sometimes against each other. The question of work, viewed from the same perspective on both sides of the educational relationship, provides a new way of understanding certain tensions experienced by teachers in their profession and the ways in which they deal with them. Faced with the lack of meaning and recognition, experienced by some pupils in their relationship with school work, teachers are led to become involved in a different way in the relationship, but also in a range of devices that influence the school form. In a broader sense, this situation raises questions about the critical sociology of inequalities.

School; Work; pupils; teachers; pedagogical relationship

INTRODUCTION

In this contribution, based on earlier and more recent empirical work on French secondary education (Barrère 2002, 2017, Barrère et Montoya, 2019), we will look at certain changes in the teaching profession, based on an analysis of the current social challenges of school work for pupils. The obligation to manage the academic pressure generated by these issues leads teachers to differentiate their strategies, in order to continue to teach all pupils, including those with poor academic results or who no longer find meaning in school. This analysis of work at school, seen from the perspective of the two main groups of players, will be linked to developments in the school system and its fight against inequalities.

1. THE MEANING OF SCHOOL WORK FOR FRENCH SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS AND PUPILS: EVALUATION AND RECOGNITION

In France, in 2023, almost every age group will attend *lycée*, whether general, technical or vocational, with these different destinations being ranked in order of importance. Although the final *baccalauréat* exam marks the end of secondary education, it does not mean the end of studies for the great majority of students who go on to university (94% in general baccalauréat, 80% with technical, 56% with professionnal in 2021). Even though, in principle, this diploma is the first higher education qualification, future students apply for admission to the various universities via a

national allocation system, known as Parcourssup since 2018. It's not enough to pass the baccalauréat, you have to pass it in sufficiently good conditions to hope to continue along the desired path, assuming it is defined, which is far from being the case for all young people. The results obtained at secondary school largely determine subsequent studies.

However, secondary school teachers do not necessarily place the issue of assessment at the heart of their profession. They are more concerned with the transmission of knowledge in a subject that they generally take an interest in, if not a passion for, as well as the relationship with groups of teenagers, who are variously motivated by their subject. The fact that they are recruited at baccalaureate plus 5 level and that their training is largely centred on the subject, with little emphasis on pedagogy and educational science, largely explains this state of affairs, despite a certain diversification in teachers' careers (Farges, 2018).

Thus, it is possible to consider the work of pupils, although not salaried, (but rewarded with marks at any moment) and that of teachers to be of equal dignity despite the differences in status, as American interactionist sociology did when it compared caretakers and doctors to better understand work as a whole (Hughes, 1958).

This brings to light certain structural tensions in the way they meet in the classroom. For pupils, however weak or strong their interest in each subject, school is socially useful, and they need to work hard enough to continue their studies in the best possible conditions, which also means organising their lives outside school around a variable amount of working time. Grades and assessment play a decisive role in students' progress, and they naturally feel individually responsible for this, even if they often seek to protect themselves from this responsibility by other considerations (about their health, their living conditions, or the questioning of the teachers themselves). For teachers, the most important is to motivate students sufficiently to work in a good classroom climate. It is this classroom climate that teachers feel most responsible for, or even empowered to take responsibility for, in a context where the synthetic index of professional incompetence is disorder or rowdiness. While assessment is, of course, part of their job, in the course of their homework they often deny the importance of these marks for the pupils, and the weight of the stakes involved in their assessments (Barrère, 2002).

Yet despite these different points of view, students and teachers agree on one fundamental point: school assessment, although central, cannot be the ultimate meaning of school work. Both sides criticise each other for attributing too much importance to it. But no sooner had this consensus been reached than the points of view diverged again. The teacher critics see the lack of attention or mobilisation on the knowledge itself, as if, in a process termed hysteresis by Bourdieu, they were retaining something of the old 'gratuity' of elitist secondary education. Pupils, on the other hand, criticise the pedagogical relationship as such for being too conditioned by marks, with teachers taking a different interest in pupils whose average grade is up and those whose average is down.

In this way, the themes of sense and recognition at work, which are central today, especially since the pandemic (Coutrot, Perez, 2022) burst into the school, admittedly in a clandestine manner insofar as it does not involve salaried work. But it is nonetheless recognition that pupils are seeking, recognition of their efforts through results, especially when they experience a disjunction between the two, and more generally recognition of their participation in the courses.

'Interesting pupil' is the nicest annotation you can get from a teacher on a report card, as one pupil told me during a survey. Assessment at school, as elsewhere, is a token of recognition, but it is also full of unfulfilled promises, shifting and widening the stakes.

Faced with this situation, strategies naturally diverge, sometimes continuing to widen the gap from the initial consensus. In the context of this contribution, which focuses solely on teachers, we will confine ourselves to naming the strategies adopted by pupils, who either persevere in their efforts or increase them, or on the contrary stop working in order to maintain a good self-image, or even try to win recognition by behaving in an atypical or even deviant way, when the stakes have changed, or finally 'drop out', remaining minimally present without cognitive mobilisation, or moving away from the school (Zaffran, Vollet, 2018).

Teachers, for their part, have a choice of posture: they can accentuate the role of assessment in regulating the class and the relationship, with the risk of increasing relational problems and widening recognition deficits. Focused on the marks, on the stakes involved in moving up to the next class and in career guidance, they increase academic pressure. Some teachers, on the other hand, seek to dissociate the pupil from the result of the work, in order to counter the deleterious effects of poor assessment on the meaning of school work. They seek to contain academic pressure. Of course, these two positions can alternate for the same teacher and are not mutually exclusive. They also depend on the context, leading some teachers to develop more advanced pedagogical approaches, particularly in the second case.

2. IN SEARCH OF ALTERNATIVES TO PRESERVE THE MEANING OF SCHOOL WORK: NEW CONFIGURATIONS OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN DIFFICULT SCHOOLS

2.1 Relational teacher, device teacher

Faced with this situation, and to prevent schoolwork from losing too much meaning, teachers use a variety of options.

First of all, within the classroom alone, they can adapt assessment to avoid demotivating pupils, at the risk of creating an opacity that pupils are not necessarily fooled by: 'a 15 ZEP (priority education zone) is not a real 15', says one pupil. At the same time, they can focus on relationships and socialisation in a 'contextualised ethic' (van Zanten, 2001) where judgement of academic skills is balanced by considerations of effort. We can speak of a relational teacher, attentive to ensuring that difficulties at school do not degrade exchanges, considering that these are essential to effort and success at school.

In the classroom, but also more widely in the school, they may also become in-volved in 'educational devices', of which there are now many in France, focusing on targeted groups (school difficulties, disabilities, new migrant arrivals, school drop-outs) or on 'education for' health, the environment, the media and information in the arts.... At the cost of more or less extensive organisational work, sometimes in partnership, the device teacher diversifies the transmission of school knowledge, by considering it in relation to action and behaviour. Heir to the project-based teaching approach adopted by the French priority education system from the 1990s onwards, and sometimes very difficult to distinguish from this figure, this type of teacher is, however, unlike the latter, involved in commitments that go beyond classroom activities, and the vast majority of which are not assessed by marks. But educational devices depend less on the affinities between teachers than projects, and are supported by more institutional partnerships and demands (Barrère, 2013). In this way, they differ from relational teachers in that they bypass traditional as-sessment and believe that this bypass can offer ways of reconciling or reconciling with regular school work.

2.2 An artistic and cultural education device

In the 2010s, we studied an artistic and cultural education device in a department of Ile de France. Supported by the regional council, this device enabled artists to spend 50 hours a year working with secondary school classes on an artistic project (Barrère, Montoya, 2019). The overall support expressed by the teachers questioned in the survey differed greatly from the justifications given by cultural decision-makers, who reasoned either in terms of promoting contemporary art or in terms of combating cultural inequalities. Although the teachers were able to take up the latter argument, the benefits observed were mainly in terms of breaking the monotony, improving relationships and the school climate, in a classroom that had become a 'workshop' where discipline is born of the need to work together. But it is also in terms of opening up opportunities for success other than academic success itself that teachers appreciate this device. In this context, exercises and/or performances are meaningful in the present, apart from their numerical results: shows, exhibitions, collective performances, and they bring expectations in terms of 'softskills': expression, self-assertion that brings meaning beyond the school itself. What teachers appreciate is being able to recognise pupils in a different and different way, including or even especially those who are struggling at school.

CONCLUSION: BROADENING THE SOCIOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

The relational teacher and the device teacher can undoubtedly be seen, as the teachers of the 1960s were by the sociologists of reproduction, at the forefront of the ongoing construction of educational inequalities in the school itself. The risks of increased inequalities in learning and of dualisation or fragmentation of the school system (Netter, 2019) can be highlighted, if some were to remain focused on academic success as embodied in traditional assessments, and others in terms of educational success that is as broad as it is vague, but which would not prevent

their exclusion from the most promising educational pathways in terms of qualifications for the future.

However, it seems increasingly impossible to stick to this vision, which dismisses the issues of mutual recognition of pupils and teachers in their day-to-day work, in favour of findings solely in terms of school performance, even when used to denounce inequalities.

Today, the rise of the theme of well-being, the psychologisation of school failure, and the reports of the damage done to certain pupils by 'school pressure', give strength to a strong critique focused on the 'decent' treatment of childhood and adolescence by the educational institution (Margalit, 1999). Together with a focus on performance and competition in schools, including internationally, they create a dualistic, even schizophrenic, landscape between a school of academic efficiency and a school which, in view of 'what it does to the defeated' (Dubet, 2006) is transforming itself into a school of performance and a school of inclusion, in a 'dual individualism' (Taylor, 1998).

Relational teachers and device teachers are confronting this dualism by seeking to maintain inclusion for all, despite the poor academic performance of some, and by diversifying and enriching their work, in order to maintain a positive feeling about their job on a daily basis. In their own way, they are questioning the issues at stake in a comprehensive school that welcomes all pupils, but which can no longer be legitimised solely by the social allocation of places.

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INCLUSIVE SCHOOL AND THE TREATMENT OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN FRENCH PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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In contradiction with the traditional meritocratic system of the French school, the inclusive school asserts the principle of "equitable equality of opportunity" for all students. Our survey shows that the implementation of this new principle of justice, puts primary school teachers in a difficult professional position. While "inclusive schooling", the new slogan of French education policy, claims to deconstruct the social stigmas that contribute to inequalities in education, it actually contributes to the work-related suffering of the staff who are supposed to apply it, by incriminating their traditional professionalism.

inclusive school, teachers working condition, professional recognition

INTRODUCTION

Stemming from ideas in transnational circulation and inscribed in a managerial conception of education (Woollven, 2021), the "inclusive school" is today considered a guarantor of justice by international bodies (UNESCO, 2009). To ensure the "effectiveness" of the school system, in terms of equality, it is no longer up to the student to adapt to the demands of the school. The school must respond to the "special educational needs" (SEN) of each student. These SENs, initially conceived in relation to physiological disabilities, have been extended to any source of gap from school normality (social, cultural, linguistic, etc.). This "inclusive" model for managing pupils with handicap in schools is now gaining ground in France, as opposed to a previous model that was considered segregative and unfair (Ebersold, 2020).

In the field, the institutional imposition of this inclusive model appears as one of the major sources of the professional difficulties encountered by the teachers we interviewed (Charles and al., 2023). In this chapter, we propose to show that it calls into question their "mandate" and "license", in particular by severely restricting their authority "to indicate to society what [...] is good and right" in educational matters (Hughes, 1996, 100). We will begin by outlining the context of dealing with educational differences in the French school system, and then present our results on the impact of inclusive school on teachers' working conditions.

DATA COLLECTION

This chapter is based on a collective research project conducted in 2017-2018 for the French minister of education, on the profession of primary school teacher, based on two quantitative surveys on a representative sample of 629 trainee teachers and of 3263 teachers in function, and a series of 43 in-depth interviews (Charles and al., 2023).

1. FROM EXCLUSION TO INCLUSION: RELEVANT IMPACTS ON TEACHERS' WORKING FRAMEWORK

Figure 1: Laws and Regulations on Treatment of Diversity in French Schools, 1900-2024
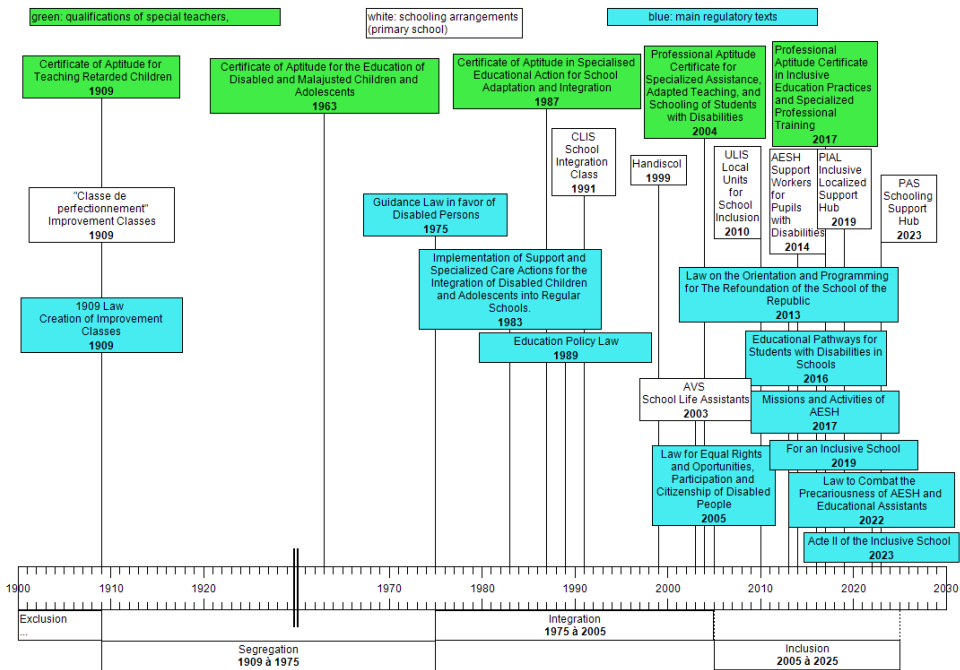
From a socio-historical perspective on the treatment of diversity in French primary schools, four time periods can be identified: exclusion, segregation integration and inclusion (Figure 1).

Segregation

The "classes de perfectionnement" system was created in 1909 for "retarded" children. This first schooling arrangement initiated the institutionalization of special education within the public school system. Before then, these children did not attend school. The Minister of Public Instruction of the time saw this as a step forward in fulfilling the Republic's social duty (Ville and al., 2020). The "classes de perfectionnement" are no longer based on a logic of exclusion, but on a logic of segregation within the school. Over the years, these classes have not only catered for disabled pupils, but also for pupils with disadvantaged backgrounds, with academic difficulties or migrant pupils. That allows physical integration of so-called "backward"

pupils (a class within a mainstream school), but not much more (no shared activities, for example).

Integration

It was not until 1975 that a law reaffirmed the educational rights of all children and adolescents and made their "integration" into a mainstream environment a priority. In the 1980s, a "school adaptation and integration sector" was created. In 1990, "Classe d'Intégration Scolaire" (CLIS) replace "classes de perfectionnement" to enroll children with disorders. These children, whatever their differences, are more welcome in mainstream schools, but it's still up to them to adapt to school.

Inclusion

As a result of the 2005 law, it is now up to the school to adapt the situation to the children's needs, in terms of physical, pedagogical, human or material compensation. Moreover, this new definition significantly broadens the scope of disability. This reform has concrete and immediate consequences for teachers' work, especially by increasing the number of pupils with special educational needs in the general classroom (figure 2).

Figure 2: Figures for pupils with disabilities. 2006-2024

	2006	2010	2015	2017	2020	2024	Evolution between 2006-2024
(in thousands)							
Pupil numbers in 1st degree (public)	5699,2	5770,8	5885,3	5842,7	5691,7	5564,1	-2%
Pupils with disabilities attending state primary	111,08	126,29	160,04	181,16	200,42	222,547	100%
Individual schooling (in a mainstream class)	71,4	83,31	111,68	130,51	147,37	168,096	135%
Group schooling (in a special unit)	39,68	42,99	48,36	50,65	53,06	54,451	37%
Numbers of classes	244,47	245,283	248,635	251,395	256,491	255,662	5%
Chance of a class including a disabled pupil	29%	34%	45%	52%	57%	65%	

Source : Depp, Repères et références statistiques 2024. Public education, mainland France + DROM, including Mayotte from 2011.

With regard to the increase in the number of pupils with administrative recognition of disability, the data in Figure 2 shows that the number of pupils with recognized disabilities has risen by 100% over the past fifteen years. This increase is particularly marked in ordinary classes, where the proportion has more than doubled (+135%). As a result, the statistical "chance" of having a pupil with recognized disability per class has been rising steadily since 2006. This probability rises from 29% in 2006 to 65% in 2024. That means that more than two teachers in three are likely to be faced with these pupils. All the more so as pupils with SEN who are not administratively recognized are not included here. Therefore this is a low estimate, the reality of the presence of all the SEN pupils is much broader. That impacts directly on teachers' perceptions of work.

Primary school teachers have a rather pessimistic view of their profession. A very small majority of them were satisfied with their job at the time of the survey (52.4%). They regret low salaries, limited career prospects, low social statute and poor working conditions. These complaints are expressed at a time of regulatory inflation.

Figure 3 shows a timeline of the main curriculum reforms and school laws affecting primary education in recent decades. It illustrates a very significant acceleration in the framework that regulates teachers' work.

Figure 3: Chronology of Primary Education Reforms between 1980 and 2024

This regulatory inflation has an impact on teachers' working conditions. When asked about the impact of 4 major primary school reforms over the last 20 years, teachers responded that the latest reforms are synonymous with an increase in their workload, often without compensation. Among them the "Loi Monchamp" (inclusive act) emerges as the most significant. This means that a law that claims to bring more justice has had negative effects on teachers' work.

2. SERIOUS EFFECTS ON WORKING CONDITIONS

A shake-up of the school order

The injunction to take into account "handicap situations" and, more broadly, the SEN of each pupil is regularly mentioned by teachers as a major source of work overload in our research. During interviews, teachers often complain about pupils who are the source of classroom disruptions: unexpected gestures or movements, verbal exuberance, shouting, and so on.

> When you've got a kid in your class all the time who's making noise, who's screaming, especially... it's just horrible... from hearing that noise, you suffer... If you have it all the time! The parents of disabled children really want them to have normal schooling... It's not possible. (Interview 38, female, 17 years' seniority)

These complaints seem to focus on the most visible signs of abnormality in the school/classroom, but they are recurrent and therefore express a disruption in the

working environment.

"Individualizing" without sufficient resources: a contradictory injunction

For the respondents, the required individualized teaching should mean smaller class sizes. But the number of pupils remains the same.

> We feel that thanks to all the teaching aids put in place (…) we've met the… specific needs of the children. In fact, that's what it comes down to… a 'child's specific needs'. But no, I'm not there to respond to "children's specific needs". Well, sometimes I am, but I've got 27 pupils in the class and I can't respond to the specific needs of each child. (Interview 32, female, 9 years' seniority)

In fact, some resources are allocated. There are assistants responsible for supporting pupils with disabilities. But getting them on board is always a lengthy administrative process. On another level, it's the same for requests for assistance from specialized teachers with pupils in difficulty. There's a lack of resources and personnel. And that's why the procedures are not always successful.

Teachers are faced with a double bind. They are expected to provide personalized, even individualized, care for problem cases. At the same time, they lack the resources to do it, including the resources which are sometimes officially said to exist but are not provided.

The need for innovation and ambition as a denial of skill

As ministerial directives say, teachers must find their own "appropriate response" to the most problematic cases. They are also urged to implement "innovative practices" and "ambitious projects". This kind of injunction is formulated not only for pupils with "disabilities", but also for all pupils with special needs. This takes the form of a very abstract motto. Especially as some inspectors hide behind this motto to ignore the lack of resources made available to teachers. The institution's denial of a shortfall in allocated resources logically leads to a denial of the competence of its agents, who in reality face sometimes insurmountable obstacles.

> This class of 23 pupils (…) That makes nine of them [with SEN]. If I look objectively. And what have I done this year? I looked after the four who wanted to change levels. And the others, *for me, it's a failure*. (Interview 37, female, 17 years' seniority)

Forcing teachers to be "innovative", "ambitious", "creative" or "adaptable" in the face of highly critical situations, sooner or later condemns them to isolation, failure and even malpractice.

As the many open-ended statements left in the questionnaire attest, this gap between rhetoric and allocated resources (financial, human, technical, training, etc.) is a frequent cause for indignation and denunciation of the hypocrisy of ministerial authority.

> School has been turned into a catch-all for solving all social problems. I signed up to be a teacher, not a social worker, psychologist or educator… Faced with these unrealistic advertisements, not only do I feel helpless, but I often feel like I'm taking part in a scam. (Verbatim of questionnaire, 2626)

"Tinkering" with non-professionals: the dilution of teaching qualifications

To deal with these critical injunctions to pedagogical innovation, many of the teachers, are quick to glean new knowledge – particularly medical-psychological knowledge – for which they have no training. But this kind of investment appears as tinkering and band-aid solution.

In fact, teachers are asked to cross-skill, which goes beyond traditional disciplinary versatility. It continually confronts them with their inadequacy, and further undermines the legitimacy of their own professional qualification. That's why on the contrary they define their profession in terms of delimited skills. Skills which cannot be replaced by those of the medical specialists, social workers or specialist colleagues with whom they often collaborate.

> Well, the problem with AESHs is that they're not trained, it's not a profession. (…) In fact, we only work with them on unspoken things. (…) At no point do we act as professionals and say to ourselves: "What do you understand about the child? What do I understand about the child?" (…) I don't think we're professionals at this. They're not professionals and neither are we, we don't know how to do it … what we expect on the whole is … well, I'm going to be a bit blunt, but what we expect on the whole is that they manage it and that we don't have any problems with it, that's all. (…) I don't think we're doing a very good job of it. (Interview 37, female, 17 years' seniority)

Revealingly, teachers often repeat that they would like the precarious staff (AESH) who assist them with disabled pupils to have real qualifications and professional status. In fact, it's a plea for their own profession to be taken seriously. The lack of professionalism on the part of these employees forces the teachers into a form of haphazard improvisation — which very often leads to the feeling that they are doing a "bad job". Therefore, assistance from an AESH just appears as a palliative to lighten the burden of caring for a disabled child — when not seen as the inconvenient presence of an adult in the classroom.

An inflation of administrative work

What's more, the mobilization of these resources relies on a whole series of administrative measures, which uncertainly delimit the populations concerned and are cumbersome to implement. Above all, these measures lead to a multiplication of control tools. The teachers are constantly being called to account for the way they work, their pedagogical objectives, and the deadlines and methods of evaluation. This bureaucratic inflation of systems can also be explained by the fact that teachers are increasingly required to work with other "partners" and above all "partners" outside the school[1]. For teachers, this imposed collaboration with "educational partners" is tantamount to a dispossession of their autonomy, which is in reality

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[1] Agents in the classroom (AESH) and colleagues outside the classroom (principal), but also professionals from health or social services (even though PEs are partly incompetent when it comes to medically or psychologically monitored students, since they have no access to medical diagnoses), multidisciplinary evaluation teams (commissions for the Rights and Autonomy of Disabled Persons), parents and so on.

largely localized within the walls of the classroom. We're dealing here with parameters that have a major impact on the loss of meaning in their work: loss of control, discrediting their profession and overloading them with work.

CONCLUSION

Our survey (Charles and al., 2023) shows that the implementation of the inclusive school as principle of justice, far from being a global approach involving all professionals, relies on the close accountability of individual teachers isolated in their classrooms to "tinker" with the difficulties posed. Faced with an exponential growth in the number of SEN pupils enrolled in ordinary classes, teachers do not benefit from any significant increase in the resources allocated to their care (Katz and al., 2021). Torn between pedagogical differentiation and recurring problems of maintaining school order, they report a workload that is difficult to sustain. They also appear to receive little recognition, and are even made to feel guilty by their superiors: the expansion of control and evaluation (Bezes and al., 2011; Mons & Durpiez, 2010; Connan and al. 2024), and the injunction to innovate in teaching, are experienced as an unfair indictment of their skills (Garcia, 2023).

In short, "inclusive schooling", the new slogan of French education policy, claims to deconstruct the social stigmas that contribute to inequalities in education. In reality, it contributes more surely to the work-related suffering of the staff who are supposed to apply it: by causing work overload and above all incriminating their traditional professionalism and diverting new vocations for the profession (Charles and al., 2020).

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THE DIFFICULT OF TEACHING BETWEEN BURNOUT, PROFESSIONAL ETHICS, AND COMMUNITY

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It is generally accepted that teaching is among helping professions which are strongly related to the risk of burnout. This paper aims to start new avenues of reflection on the risks of burnout within the school context, focusing on the individual and social well-being of the teacher and the repercussions on the student's teaching-learning process, and on the consequent need to initiate prevention paths based on adult education. In this regard, the paper intends to highlight the results of a qualitative research conducted in 2023 and involving secondary school teachers in the province of Palermo, subdivided by gender and type of institution in which they serve. The main objective of the research, which fits within the framework of fundamental pedagogy of hermeneutic-phenomenological style, was to survey the subjective perception of the burnout phenomenon and teachers' job satisfaction. The first aim of the study becomes access to the teacher's lived experience, with specific reference to the risk and protection factors that contribute to the definition of professional identity and ethics. The broader aim is to promote more fruitful educational practices, insofar as they are communitarian, from the point of view of those involved.

school; teachers; burnout; professional ethics; community

1. TEACHING: A HELPING PROFESSION AT RISK?

The interest in well-being at school seems today, more than in the past, to be at the centre of contemporary public as well as scientific debate. Alongside a continuing interest in the student, the need for a specific focus on the figure of the teacher emerges. The main reason for this is to be found in a widespread "formative suffering" (Mariani, 2017b, p. 119) that affects both young people and adult educators. Indeed, school life is more complex today than in the past. Educational reforms, the growth of bureaucratic processes, the advent of new communication technologies, changes in teaching and assessment programmes, the heterogeneity of students' educational and personal needs, attention to the demands of the school context and the territory, present the teacher with ever new challenges, for which adequate pedagogical support is not always provided. In addition, the centrality of the relationship, which is the most important aspect for the effectiveness of the educational action in the school, requires constant attention, specific emotional and relational skills and a certain predisposition and investment of energy (Bobbo, Ius,

2021).

It is precisely because of this complexity of the school system that teachers experience feelings of frustration and inadequacy, which manifest themselves in their relationships with pupils and throughout the educational system (Favretto, Tajoli, 1988).

As is well known, teaching is one of the helping and caring professions most exposed to the risk of stress and burnout (Botticelli, Burla, Lozupone, Pellegrino, 2012), especially because of the emotional and relational overload to which it is subjected, especially today. Although the first studies on burnout were limited to the medical and health professions, this construct was later extended to all helping professions, including those professions in which the focus is specifically on interpersonal relationships that unfold within complex and articulated emotional terrains. Specifically, teaching is a helping profession influenced by multiple elements, mainly related to the school and social environment, the nature of the work, the characteristics of the different people involved in the educational relationship, and the investment of emotional energy in the relationship itself.

In this regard, data from the 2022 survey of the Observatory on Teacher Wellbeing of the University of Milan-Bicocca show that 49% of Italian teachers are at a critical level in at least one of the three dimensions of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, reduced personal fulfilment) and 4.6% are at high risk of burnout, as all three dimensions appear to be compromised. The risk is higher for secondary school teachers, correlated with years of teaching and type of institution.

At school, the main cause of the risk of burnout is the mismatch between the demands of the school context (bureaucratic, didactic and relational) and the resources available to the teacher to meet these demands (Boyle, Borg, Falzon and Baglioni, 1995). The result is a change and/or loss of the values that guide professional and personal choices, a loss of personal motivation and the emergence of feelings of mistrust and anxiety that manifest themselves in professional practice.

Indeed, the teacher's identity unravels through multiple levels of complexity, often combined with an overlap of unclear and ambiguous roles and boundaries (Maslach, Leiter, 1999).

Burnout becomes a response to a situation of emotional overload, in which the care relationship is permeated by a high level of emotional tension experienced by the teacher and which he or she is unable to cope with.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL UNDERSTANDING.

The psychological literature identifies several factors that can be attributed to the onset of teacher burnout, which can be divided into three main categories: societal and cultural factors, individual factors and psychosocial factors. The former refers to the changes in the teacher's role, the increase in responsibilities in response to the new demands of the various training bodies, the increase in the contradictions implicit in the teacher's role, the devaluation of teaching by the general public, the

uncertainty of the educational objectives of the school and the inadequate quality of teacher training. As far as the individual factors are concerned, they are closely related to the different theoretical interpretations of the construct of burnout, which is why it is not possible to define a precise and unambiguous configuration of the profile of the person most at risk of burnout.

However, the various contributions, particularly those of a psychological nature, share the centrality of motivational factors, locus of control, consistency between the ideal self and the real self, and socio-anagrammatic variables as possible risk factors. Psychosocial factors, or more generally those related to the reference environment, have become more prominent and taken into account thanks to the contribution of ecological and systemic-relational theories. According to these theories, the onset of burnout is based on the relationships that the teacher establishes with the various figures in the school context (students, families, colleagues, management, territory), the quality of these relationships and the variables related to the organisational climate and dynamics (Maslach, Leiter, 1997, tr. it. 2000).

Attention to the relevance of the living environment and the interdependence between the person and the context opens up new possibilities for identifying the possible factors that cause malaise in the school context and for outlining possible formative interventions to reduce the risk of teacher burnout, understood as an educational care professional.

In this perspective, pedagogical research was developed in the fundamental pedagogics framework (Bellingreri 2017), that is a hermeneutical-phenomenological one. This research aimed non only at understanding and prevent teacher burnout but also at developing new teacher education pathways (Coppola, in press).

The use of the phenomenological approach made it possible to move from the explanation to the understanding of the phenomenon of burnout. Understanding is a particular way of being in the world. Hence the effort to describe educational phenomena from the perspective of the people involved, with a focus on words and their structures of meaning.

On the basis of these considerations, phenomenology takes shape as a fruitful pedagogical paradigm because it offers: a humanistic view of human experience; a sensitivity to lived experience and situationality; an ability to challenge prevailing and taken-for-granted attitudes; and thus an attempt to have a deeper understanding of human experience, including but also bracketing *empiriological explanation* (such us the psychological ones). Actually, the fundamental pedagogics implies enhancing and foregrounding *eidetic accounts* of experience, understood as the relationship between the subject and the world.

On the basis of what has been said so far, and with the aim of understanding the representations of the phenomenon of burnout in schools and identifying the dimensions related to the educational and training needs of teachers, within the research above sketched, a field inquiry was carried out in 2023 on a total of 53 secondary school teachers in the province of Palermo.

Also recalling the pandemic experience, the most recurring categories of meaning

were fatigue, insecurity, anxiety, feeling disorientated, more stressful activities, reduced relationships and emotional annihilation.

However, from the experiences expressed by the participants, it is possible to identify positive personal as well as communitarian attitudes in order to prevent burnout and promote professional well-being.

The individual attitude coincides with the willingness to achieve goals, the educational success of the students and the feeling of satisfaction with their work.

The communal attitude is manifested in the need for recognition and cooperation, as well as perceived support.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The historical, social and cultural changes that have affected and continue to affect the Italian school have given rise to new educational emergencies that require pedagogical knowledge to pay greater attention, both in terms of possible reflections on meaning and possible methodological directions for education in our time.

There is no professional ethics without care for professional and personal well-being. In particular, the professional ethics of the teacher calls into question their relational skills, the training of which is often entrusted to chance and not to structured formative paths. The research conducted has shown that the two attitudes that emerged as crucial in burnout prevention seem to be linked to the rediscovery of one's professional vocation (personal disposition) and the promotion of fruitful community processes (communitarian disposition). Therefore, teacher education should be a virtuous practice for promoting the two aptitudes and, consequently, for promoting the two dimensions of professional ethics.

In particular, with regard to the individual dimension, it is important to promote teacher training courses aimed at rediscovering the motivations behind professional choices (Tempesta, 2018) and tracing the link between the personal and professional self.

Regarding the community dimension, teacher training courses should promote processes based on relationships and the creation of a generative environment (Vinciguerra, 2022), understood as a place where shared meanings can be constructed. Therefore, training courses that involve the whole community seem to be virtuous for preventing the risk of teacher burnout at school.

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BECOMING SENIOR EDUCATIONAL ADVISORS: HOW KNOWLEDGE DEFINES PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DURING THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

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There is a very special kind of educational profession in France called Senior Educational Advisors (*Conseillers Principaux d'Education*). They remain fairly invisible and have been little studied. In this paper, we present a sociological study of the competitive recruitment examination which allows candidates to become Senior Educational Advisors, and therefore constitutes a barrier to entry. More precisely, we focus on the prescribed knowledge, both explicit and implicit, that candidates are expected to demonstrate during the competitive exam, in order to better understand the social definition of the profession and the way it differs from other professions. We demonstrate that members of the profession define themselves as educators and specialize in understanding and addressing students' issues, but that their autonomy is restricted by both cognitive and managerial factors. The constraints on their professional territory highlight the broader structural dynamics within which they operate, shaping their unique yet subordinate role in the French school system.

education; recruitment; non-teaching staff; knowledge

INTRODUCTION

In France, the organisation of secondary schools is structured by a division between on the one hand pedagogical work, which is carried out mainly by teachers, and, on the other hand, educational work, which is carried out by non-teaching staff (Bois & Jacquot, 2022). Among these are Senior Educational Advisors (*Conseillers Principaux d'Éducation*, or *CPE*), who are responsible, according to official guidelines, for "placing adolescents in the best possible conditions for individual and collective life, academic success, and personal fulfilment" (Circular n° 2015-139, French Ministry of Education). This broad mandate translates into a series of tasks, such as implementing the school's educational policies, monitoring pupils (which includes maintaining connections with their families), organizing aspects of "school life" (essentially all non-classroom time, such as breaks and lunch periods) and coordinating the work of educational assistants (*Assistants d'Éducation*) who help oversee students. The professional identity of Senior Educational Advisors is complex

and somewhat opaque, both to the public and to the various people with which they interact within schools (Douat et Michoux, 2021). They play, however, a central part in the work carried out within schools, given that their duties span a broad spectrum, from ensuring the security and well-being of pupils to managing their everyday experiences at school. Their professional rhetoric emphasizes their role as educators, and they see themselves primarily in this light, often downplaying the disciplinary responsibilities that they also actually perform. Since the profession was created in 1970, Senior Education Advisors' professional territory has evolved, expanding to encompass more aspects of educational policy (including school counselling, gender equality, etc.).

The purpose of this paper is to examine, in a sociological perspective, the professional definition of this rarely studied and relatively invisible profession. Sociologists of professions such as Everett Hughes (1971) and Andrew Abbott (1988) consider that knowledge plays a central part, among other things, in defining professions. In the case of Senior Educational Advisers, the specialised professional knowledge cannot be easily studied through observation. It nevertheless becomes most evident when candidates attempt to enter the profession, that is during the recruitment process. Those seeking to enter this profession do not need a specialized university degree, only an educational level equivalent to a master's degree. If they aim to pursue a long-term career (i.e. as civil servants), the primary entry path is through a competitive examination.

Drawing on the works of Edmond Goblot (2010), we study the examination both as a barrier and as a level. As a barrier, the examination selects candidates on the basis of the knowledge they master. This means some pass, while others fail. As a level, the examination defines knowledge that is common to members of the profession. This paper focuses on the prescribed knowledge that candidates are expected to demonstrate during the competitive exam. We study both explicit expectations, and more implicit knowledge that emerge through the recruitment process.

Our research methodology involves an extensive collection of data: statutory texts regulating the profession and the competitive exam, jury reports from 2014 to 2021, observations made during the oral portion of the exam, and interviews with ten members of the examination board (the jury). This variety of sources allows us to develop a nuanced understanding of the types of knowledge that the exam aims to assess and how these types of knowledge contribute to shaping Senior Educational Adviser's professional identity.

The competitive exam involves firstly two written. Candidates who pass the written component are then invited to participate in the oral exam. Unlike the exams for secondary school teachers in France, there is no specific syllabus for Senior Educational Advisor candidates. Instead, there is a general bibliography that "draws attention to the essential questions raised by education in the contemporary world [but] (...) is by no means exhaustive" (Jury Report 2014, p.46). This ambiguity in the content coverage underscores the inherent challenge for candidates in preparing for the examination, as expected knowledge is not entirely clear.

1. TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE

Our analysis of jury reports between 2014 and 2021 leads us to identify four types of knowledge that are expected from the candidates, to varying degrees, at each stage of the competitive exam. The first type, *school knowledge*, requires candidates to demonstrate proficiency in written and oral language, including grammar and spelling:

> Candidates are expected to: [...] be able to express their thoughts clearly, both orally and in writing, and express themselves well (spelling, syntax, vocabulary, language register) (Jury report, 2018, p. 4).

The second type, *academic knowledge*, calls for familiarity with disciplines such as history, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and education science. Mastery of this academic knowledge is assessed in particular in a written essay, whose subject often includes the following formula:

> [...] drawing on your historical, sociological, philosophical and regulatory knowledge, but also on the debates and reforms in our society and the French education system, you will explain [...] (Jury report, 2015, p.9).

The third type, institutional knowledge, encompasses statutory texts governing the Senior Educational Advisors profession and secondary education regulations (*e.g.*, laws on sanctions, procedures). For example, for one of the two oral examinations, candidates are expected to have:

> a considered knowledge of the institutional context, its various dimensions (classroom, school life, educational team, school, educational institution, society) and the values that underpin it, including those of the Republic (Order of 19 April 2013 laying down the procedures for organising competitions for the certificate of aptitude for teaching in secondary education, French Ministry of Education).

The final type, *practice-related knowledge*, is assessed through the candidates' discourse, as there is no practical demonstration component in the exam. Candidates must demonstrate their ability to define the professional practice of the Senior Educational Advisors in a given situation, and to embody the expected professional posture. In the reports as well as in jury members' informal comments, these expectations are often referred to as "reflexivity" and "critical distance". It is therefore knowledge of professional practice that is expected.

Notably, these three types of knowledge are not evaluated independently in separate tests; rather, candidates are expected to integrate them appropriately in each exam component so as to demonstrate their readiness for the role. Additionally, the competitive exam assesses candidates' loyalty to the institution and their alignment with the school's values, as they will be members of and represent the French civil service.

2. SPECIALISED KNOWLEDGE

The combination of school, academic, institutional, and practice-related knowledge defines the specialized knowledge expected of Senior Educational Advisors. This knowledge is both exclusive and distinctive, given that it requires candidates to exhibit specific skills and understanding that set them apart from other professions. Candidates must demonstrate that they know and can do a range of things that are specific their profession.

In particular, we identify a recurring phrase, in the words of jury reports and interviews with jury members, which can help us understand the characteristics of this specialised knowledge and thereby grasp the professional ethos expected of candidates: it is the phrase "common sense" (*le bon sens*). It implies a down-to-earth, pragmatic approach to problem-solving. One member of the examination board described it as follows:

> What we're looking for, once we've seen that they know the legislation, is common sense (Informal discussion with a board member – Competitive exam 2017).

One of the board chairs during the period we studied puts in more detail:

> At the end of a school day, a pupil comes to you as a Senior Educational Advisor and says "I'm a victim of sexual abuse in my family". Do I send him home and say "come back, we'll talk about it tomorrow"? What do I do? So there's the law: every adult has to report it. And then, for me, common sense means saying: (...) I trust the pupil's word, so what do I do? It's a bit along those lines. In the same way, if there's an emergency situation, do I warn everyone, do I first write the report that will cover me or do I call an ambulance when a student is injured? Little things like that(Chair of the examination board A).

Consequently, a Senior Educational Advisor should be able to respond to sensitive situations, such as a student confiding about abuse, with the right blend of legal knowledge and empathetic action.

This type of "common sense" involves an expertise in adjusting to real-life situations, aligning with Bourdieu's (1980) notion of practical sense, within the limits of the professional jurisdiction defined by the statutory texts. It is a learned activity, at a distance from practice (in the context of the examination). This knowledge is specific to Senior Educational Advisors and it is compulsory to master the specialised knowledge in order to enter the profession.

3. THE LIMITS OF PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY

The study of specialised knowledge in the context of the recruitment process also sheds light on the place of the profession in the social and moral division of labour within French secondary schools.

3.1. Senior educational advisors as educators

The specialised knowledge of Senior Educational Advisors relates to educational tasks, which have been central to the rhetoric of the professional group since its

inception. In schools, Senior Educational Advisors construct and defend a professional territory in an interface position, reacting not only to the work of teachers but also borrowing from other logics, such as popular education. What Senior Educational Advisors consider to be their 'real work' consists of understanding and attempting to deal with pupils' "problems" and being identified as "resource persons" by other staff (Michoux, 2022). These educational tasks are valued during the competitive exam. For example, "pupils' issues" form an important part of the subjects proposed for both oral and written tests.

This attention to pupils' issues aligns with the board's emphasis on values like identity and partnership, considered as compulsory to ensure the inclusion, success and "well-being" of all pupils. Indeed, oral exam questions frequently reinforce this identity by prefacing them with "as a Senior Educational Advisor." For instance, a test question on Special Educational Needs is phrased as such: "Who do you work with?" (Candidate 15, 2017, ED).

3.2. Senior educational advisors as subordinates

Despite this educational focus, Senior Educational Advisors' autonomy remains limited in several respects. Firstly, despite the fact that Academic knowledge is a key element in the recruitment process as well as in professional identity, specialized knowledge does not align with any specific academic discipline. The specialization is therefore only partial.

Secondly, Senior Educational Advisors define themselves as educators, and are actually specialists of pupils' problems. In French schools, a clear hierarchy exists between teaching and educating. Teaching, typically performed by teachers, is traditionally valued more highly. Historically, Senior Educational Advisors have been assigned tasks like pupil supervision and discipline, often deemed less prestigious and considered as "dirty work" (Hughes, 1971).

Thirdly, hierarchy plays a significant role throughout the recruitment process, limiting the profession's self-definition and autonomy. The exam board itself is chaired by a General Inspector of National Education, and its members include over 200 individuals, only one-third to half of whom are Senior Educational Advisors. Another third is part of senior school management (principals and headteachers) while the remainder consists of regional Inspectors. The presence of Inspectors is not surprising given that they also take part in secondary teachers' recruitment exams. The presence of school management staff is more unusual and the composition of the exam board suggests a hierarchical structure where the oversight of school management personnel is integral, reflecting the importance of the day-to-day school hierarchy in shaping the boundaries of Senior Educational Advisors autonomy, rather than the peer-defined autonomy seen in other professions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, studying the knowledge expectations within the recruitment process offers valuable insights into the professional identity of Senior Educational

Advisors. They define themselves as educators and specialize in understanding and addressing students' issues, but their autonomy is restricted by both cognitive and managerial factors. The constraints on their professional territory highlight the broader structural dynamics within which they operate, shaping their unique yet subordinate role in the French school system.

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ORGANIZATIONAL WORK CONTEXT AND INCLUSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES: A SURVEY OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

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Organizational context plays a pivotal role in shaping teachers' behaviors, interactions, and professional development within schools. This study aimed to expand the *Perceptions of School Context scale*, by introducing five new dimensions to evaluate inclusive aspects of the organizational work environment. A total of 177 teachers from Italian schools participated, providing insights into their perceptions of inclusion processes, relationships, and organizational support. Results demonstrated significant correlations among the dimensions, highlighting the interconnected nature of organizational factors. ANOVA analyses revealed differences in perceptions based on role, employment status, and years of experience, emphasizing the influence of individual and contextual elements on organizational inclusivity. These findings underscore the importance of fostering collaboration, managing teacher workloads, and offering targeted training to enhance inclusivity and professional relationships in schools.

perceptions of context; inclusion; teachers; school organization

INTRODUCTION

Organizational context refers to the situational opportunities and constraints that affect behaviors and shape the meaning of interactions within an organization (Johns, 2006). Recent studies in occupational psychology emphasize the dynamic interaction between environmental and individual influences, stressing the significance of situational elements in organizational research (Johns, 2018). This highlights the need for further exploration of its impact on behaviors and outcomes. In an educational setting, the term pertains to the school environment and the interactions that occur within it. Crucial here is the quality of the recursive teaching-learning process that governs not only the environmental dynamics within the classroom but also outside it. In fact, the organizational school context is crucial for teachers' well-being and professional development. The quality of teaching depends not only on individual abilities, pedagogical and relational skills, and teaching methodologies but also on the conditions, structures, and dynamics of the working environment, which have a significant impact on performance and well-being (Botta & Stanzione, 2022). A positive and well-structured work environment

enables teachers to manage their tasks better and interact more productively with students, thereby improving the overall quality of teaching and learning (OECD, 2019). The teaching profession can thus be seen as composed of dynamic competencies that can be acquired and perfected through actions taken at both the individual and contextual levels; these contribute to determining that professional expertise (Calvani, 2012) capable of developing an epistemological attitude capable of deconstructing unfavourable situational contexts and of realizing learning and working environments that are inclusive (UNESCO, 2016; 2020) and healthy for teachers and learners. For this reason, in recent years, there has been an increasing focus on identifying both individual and contextual factors that influence teachers' perceptions of their organizational context, which is closely tied to their professional development (Granziera et al., 2021). Understanding teachers' perceptions of their work context can be instrumental in enhancing several aspects of teacher professionalism, such as improving teacher well-being by identifying areas of stress, increasing teaching effectiveness by fostering a positive work environment, and highlighting areas that require additional training or support (Botta & Stanzione, 2022). All these reasons align with the strategic priorities set by The National Evaluation System for school autonomy and enhancement through self-evaluation, such as the Self-Evaluation Report (RAV), which integrates management and organizational practices by correlating individual professionalism with contextual factors.

1. HOW TO EVALUATE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL WORK CONTEXT

One of the models used to understand work contexts is *The Management Standard Model*, which focuses on identifying and managing work-related stress factors within organizations. Based on this model, a specific tool was developed: the *Management Standard Indicator Tool* (MS-IT). Developed in England by the Health and Safety Executive, the MS-IT is designed to measure *Management Standards*, helping employers assess and manage work-related stress risks. Within this model, areas of work content and work context correspond to conditions or ideal states to be achieved in organizations (MacKay et al., 2004).

In Italy, the MS-IT has been widely adopted in workplaces by the National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work as part of efforts to support organizational well-being and improve workplace conditions (INAIL, 2017).

In 2021, Stanzione developed an adaptation of the MS-IT for the educational context, known as the Perceptions of School Context scale. This adaptation was designed to align the instrument with the dynamics of the school and the teaching profession, addressing the specific challenges posed by the educational environment by considering a multidimensional approach in which contextual factors are considered in terms of facilitators or barriers (WHO, 2001). The adapted tool allows schools to assess teachers' perceptions of their work context, offering valuable insights for organizational improvement. The adaptation involved reformulating

several items to better reflect the characteristics of school settings. It was tested on a convenience sample of 225 teachers (Stanzione, 2021), which validated its relevance and utility in this new context and was subsequently used in various studies on teachers' professionalism development (Botta & Stanzione, 2022; Stanzione & Botta, 2023). Although the original MS-IT focuses on work-related stress, its adaptation for schools serves a broader purpose. It enables schools to explore organizational dynamics (e.g., flow of communication, articulation, and division of tasks), identify potential areas of discomfort (e.g., demands, perceived support), and investigate factors influencing well-being. As such, it can function as a formative and exploratory tool, guiding schools in addressing key organizational challenges without requiring a formal evaluation of stress-related risks, which would necessitate a different methodological framework. The tool can thus be used for educational reflection from a needs analysis perspective, starting from teachers' perceptions. This flexibility makes the adapted MS-IT a practical and valuable resource for creating healthier and more supportive educational environments (Stanzione, 2021). Stanzione's (2021) adaptation therefore led to the development of a specific model for the school context. This model (Table 1) allows for the analysis and understanding of teachers' perceptions of their work environment without delving into the specific dimensions of work-related stress risk.

Tab. 1. Dimensions of the *Perceptions of School Context Scale* (Stanzione, 2021).

Organizational Dimension	Standard	Examples of Ideal Conditions
Demand	Teachers should meet job demands with local systems to address individual issues	Achievable demands within work hours
Control	Teachers should have decision-making power over their work with local systems to address individual issues	Encouragement to develop new skills
Support from School Principal	Teachers should receive adequate information and support from supervisors with local systems to address individual issues	Timely and constructive feedback from supervisors
Support from Colleagues	Teachers should receive adequate information and support from colleagues	Procedures and policies that ensure adequate peer support
Relationships	Teachers should not experience unacceptable behaviors (e.g., bullying) with local systems for individual issues	Promotion of positive behaviors by the organization
Role	Teachers should understand their role and responsibilities with local systems for individual issues	Adequate information to understand roles and responsibilities
Change	Teachers should be involved in organizational changes with local systems for individual issues	Adequate support during the change process

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

The present cross-sectional study is part of a broader project aimed at exploring teachers' professionalism in relation to their perceptions of the work context. The general aim is to identify individual, contextual, and didactic factors that either hinder or facilitate the implementation of inclusive teaching practices. Furthermore, the study seeks to support teachers, both individually and collectively, in reflecting

on their teaching experiences while equipping schools with practical tools to design context-specific actions and intervention strategies tailored to their unique needs. The specific aim of this study is to further adapt the scale to the school context. This adaptation involved the addition of five new dimensions (Well-being in Relationship with Students, Managing Relationships with Students, Inclusion Processes, Relationship with Families, Relationship Among Teachers) to evaluate teachers' perceptions of more specific areas within the school environment. Additionally, these organizational dimensions were analyzed in relation to individual factors, such as teachers' experience and roles, as well as contextual factors, such as the type of school (e.g., primary or secondary level).

2.1. Participants and Procedures

A total of 177 teachers from various Italian schools, ranging from pre-primary to high school, participated in the study by completing a questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed via *Google Forms* and shared using a snowball sampling method, initiated through the first and second authors' contacts with various Italian schools. The first section, in addition to including socio-demographic questions such as biological sex, also includes questions related to factors that may influence teachers' perceptions of their work context. These factors include the school level they teach in, years of teaching experience (both overall and at the current school), role (e.g., regular classroom teacher or special education teacher), and employment status (e.g., tenured, temporary, or substitute). The second section focuses on the *Perceptions of School Context scale*. Specifically, of interest in this study are the five newly developed dimensions, which will be presented in the next paragraph. The characteristics of the sample are reported in Table 2.

Tab. 2. Socio-demographic Characteristics and Job Information

		% of Total
Gender	Female	90,4
	Male	9,6
Age (Years)	Under 35	13,6
	35 to 44	21,5
	45 to 54	36,2
	Over 55	28,8
School Level they teach in	Pre-Primary	11,3
	Primary school	52,5
	Middle School	17,5
	High School	18,6
Years of Experience as a teacher	Less than 5 years	24,3
	Between 6 and 15 years	29,9
	Between 16 and 25 years	20,9
	More than 25 years	24,9
Years of teaching experience at the current school	Less than 1 year	24,9
	From 1 to 4 years	28,8
	5 years or more	46,3
Role	Regular Classroom Teacher	61,6
	Special Education Teacher	38,4
Employment status	Tenured	72,3
	Temporary or Substitute	27,7

2.2. What Do the New Dimensions Evaluate?

As mentioned, the five new dimensions were added to the *Perceptions of School Context scale* to assess teachers' perceptions of how inclusive aspects are reflected and implemented within their organizational work environment. These dimensions aim to explore the organizational factors that influence inclusivity, focusing on both structural and contextual elements that facilitate or hinder inclusive practices in schools (see Table 3). They are designed to capture critical aspects of the organizational school context, including how teachers experience, interpret, and engage with inclusivity in their daily work. This expansion seeks to provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the school as an organizational environment, highlighting how inclusivity is perceived and operationalized within its structures and dynamics. These dimensions are composed of a total of 25 items, which are evaluated using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). Both the dimensions and the items were initially formulated collaboratively by researchers within the research group (see the Acknowledgements). The process drew inspiration from existing validated tools on inclusion, such as selected indicators from the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth & Ainscow, 2000). Following their initial development, the items were refined and adapted to ensure their relevance and clarity for the specific context of schools and the teaching profession.

Tab. 3. New Organizational Dimensions

Organizational Dimension	Standard	Examples of Ideal Conditions	Examples of items
Well-being in Relationship with Students	Teachers should maintain emotional well-being in interactions with students	Training on emotional intelligence	When I enter my classroom, I feel pleasant emotions
Managing Relationships with Students	Teachers should effectively manage relationships with students	Professional development in relationship management	I easily manage the difficulties that students share with me
Inclusion Processes	Teachers should be actively involved in and support inclusive practices	Promotion of conflict resolution strategies and inclusive teaching practices	In my school, different viewpoints are respected and valued
Relationship with Families	Teachers should maintain high-quality interactions with the parents of their students	Clear communication channels; Regular parent-teacher meetings	The parents of my students trust my competence
Relationship Among Teachers	Teachers should foster collaboration, mutual respect, and support among colleagues	Collaborative work culture; Professional development on teamwork	Teachers treat each other with respect, regardless of their role and years of experience

2.3. Type of Analysis

The initial analyses were descriptive, focusing on the sample and the dimensions of the *Perceptions of School Context scale*, for which Cronbach's alpha values will also be reported. Following this, correlations were conducted among the dimensions. Notably, *Inclusion Processes* and *Relationships Among Teachers* showed the strongest correlation, prompting a more detailed focus on these two dimensions. A series of ANOVAs was performed to assess the influence of various individual and contextual factors on these dimensions. The analyses were conducted using the statistical software *Jamovi* 2.4, with the significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

3. RESULTS

The descriptive statistics, correlations, and ANOVA results are reported in Table 4. Significant positive correlations ($p < 0,001$) are observed among all dimensions, with the strongest correlation between "Inclusion Processes", and "Relationship Among Teachers" ($r = 0,802$) and a notable correlation between "Well-being in Relationship with Students" and "Managing Relationships with Students" ($r = 0,642$). The ANOVAs did not yield all statistically significant results. Only the significant ones are reported in Table 4, with F values ranging between 3,15 and 10,58.

For *Inclusion Processes*, significant differences emerged based on role, employment position, and experience in the current school. Special Education Teacher rated inclusion processes more positively compared to Regular Classroom Teacher. Similarly, annual or temporary substitute teachers provided higher ratings than tenured teachers. Teachers with less than one year of experience in their current school reported more positive perceptions compared to those with 1–4 years or five or more years of experience.

For *Relationships Among Teachers*, significant differences were found based on role and experience. Special Education Teacher gave more positive ratings compared to Regular Classroom Teacher. Teachers with less than one year of experience provided the most positive ratings, while those with 1–4 years of experience gave the lowest ratings. Teachers with five or more years of experience rated these relationships more positively than those with 1–4 years of experience.

Tab. 4. descriptive statistics, correlations, and ANOVA results. *p <.005; **p<0.01; *** p <.001

	Mean	SD	α	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1.Well-being in Relationship with Students	4,39	0,54	0,81	—				
2.Managing Relationships with Students	4,09	0,59	0,67	0,642***	—			
3.Inclusion Processes	3,77	0,85	0,87	0,352***	0,325***	—		
4.Relationship with Families	4,10	0,64	0,66	0,551***	0,644***	0,326***	—	
5.Relationship Among Teachers	3,77	0,88	0,79	0,300***	0,262***	0,802***	0,306***	—

Inclusion Processes (Significant ANOVA Results)		
		Mean
Role *	Regular Classroom Teacher	3,67
	Special Education Teacher	3,93
Employment status**	Tenured	3,66
	Temporary or Substitute	4,04
Experience in the current school*	Less than 1 years	4,04
	From 1 to 4 years	3,54
	5 years or more	3,76

Relationship among teachers (Significant ANOVA Results)		
		Mean
Role *	Regular Classroom Teacher	3,67
	Special Education Teacher	3,94
Experience in the current school***	Less than 1 years	4,03
	From 1 to 4 years	3,35
	5 years or more	3,89

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of this study was to expand the organizational dimensions of a widely used tool designed to capture teachers' perceptions of their work context (the *Perceptions of School Context scale*; Stanzione, 2021). As previously discussed, this tool allows for a comprehensive understanding of how teachers perceive their organizational work environment. These new dimensions were developed to capture the inclusive aspects of the organizational school context. Results demonstrated correlations between the dimensions, emphasizing the interrelated nature of these aspects within the organizational context, highlighting the holistic nature of the school environment, where different factors influence and reinforce each other.

By expanding the Management Standard Indicator Tool, this study contributes to a better definition and establishment of standards for inclusive schools and teaching practices. To translate the findings of this study into actionable steps, it is essential to consider several practical implications that could positively impact both teachers and the overall school environment. For instance, schools should focus on role-specific teacher support, providing training to enhance inclusive practices and strengthen professional relationships. Additionally, workload management is crucial, especially for experienced teachers, to improve their perceptions of inclusion and collaboration. Promoting a collaborative culture can further enhance relationships among teachers and support inclusive practices. Lastly, integrating this self-evaluation tool into the Self-Evaluation Report (RAV) allows schools to systematically assess their performance and implement targeted improvements, driving both immediate and long-term development. However, the study is based on a relatively small sample, which may not be representative of the broader teacher population. Additionally, the sample is not equally distributed across different school grades, potentially limiting the applicability of the results to all educational contexts. Data collection is still ongoing, and further research with a larger and more evenly distributed sample is needed to validate these findings and explore additional factors influencing teachers' perceptions. This will help refine our understanding and improve strategies to support teachers across diverse educational contexts.

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Stream F

CIVICNESS, CITIZENSHIP, AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

DEMOCRACY THROUGH MERITOCRACY. A REFLECTION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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According to the perspective proposed in this paper, truly meritocratic policies are believed to be intrinsically democratic. When certain institutional policies – mostly concerning education and welfare – cooperate in order to protect, enhance and make personal and subjective merits emerge, the opportunities of social mobility and inclusion are widened, with positive impacts on disadvantaged people. Promoting democracy in a complex and competitive society means allowing each one to find its own role, according to his\her specific personal talents, and this is why the issue is strongly related to Higher Education. In this respect, it seems urgent to contrast the idea that only certain qualifications will award people the highest positions in society: while these positions are not available for all, the implied "wasteful "competition opens the way to a consumerist rather than educational approach by higher education institutions, and causes a loss of efforts that could have been better invested in other activities, and many may end up professionally and socially excluded. Both the meritocratic and the democratic instances are so disregarded. A diverse but widespread inclusion is the objective to be pursued, and a proper educational guidance within higher education institutions may represent an initial step towards this objective.

disadvantage, effort, motivation, social inclusion, consumerism, wasteful competition, educational university guidance

INTRODUCTION: DEMOCRACY AND MERITOCRACY AS CO-FUNCTIONAL TERMS

The main purpose of this contribution is to claim that any attempt to find balance between meritocracy and democracy should draw on the understanding of these terms not as alternative concepts, but as complementary and co-functional concepts, both objectives of contemporary societies cooperating in order to realize a *diverse* social inclusion. This assumption is valuable for education as a social sub-system as well as for the social system itself: hence, when merit is valued, democracy comes along. Of course, the notion of merit needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed in order to justify and offer arguments in favour of this statement,

as much as democracy needs to be understood getting back to its literal and original meaning.

As far as the latter is concerned, and according to the etymology of the word, two terms and concepts have to be taken into account: people's (*demos*) power (*cratos*). Power is, of course, not only a political notion, but must be understood as social power, too. Social power arises from the possession of more resources in terms of wealth, authoritativeness, role, access to knowledge, culture, and, eventually, origins. As far as education is concerned, a double meaning is implied in the periphrasis "people's power": in order to be actually democratic, education is supposed to em-*power* diverse *people* (with different backgrounds), and empowering people precisely means guaranteeing access to knowledge, in order to allow them – and here comes the second meaning – to choose and responsibly pursue one's own educational path, according to specific and different personal aptitudes, with the main goal of professional and social inclusion.

As far as meritocracy is concerned, this is, as well, the ideal of a society governed by the "best among people", an élite that does not derive its power from anything but the ability to propose and realize the best options for a community, based on meticulously built competence and expertise. As much as the word "aristocracy" progressively lost its original meaning of "government of the best", to became the government of few based on inherited privilege, meritocracy seems to have lost its original meaning, given the obstacles and limits the ideal has faced through the decades, and the lack of trust that such ideal could actually work in real society. The real history of meritocracy has somehow materialized that risk that Michael Young (1961) had warned against: the risk that meritocracy would introduce and perpetrate a system made to maintain privileges, *i.e.* the risk that the meritocratic élite self-preserves and controls society. Apart from this risk, the idea of a social selection based on "merit" has actually "drawn all the stake-holders in education towards a consensus because in socially mobile post-industrial societies it opens the way to educational and occupational success based on individual responsibility and achievement rather than inherited privilege" (Lauder et al., 2006, p. 9). Merit, in this perspective, is assumable as the achievement resulting from the effort which needs to be added to one's intelligence, as stated in Young formula, in order to reach an (educational) objective.

1. SOCIAL FACTORS IMPACTING ON EFFORT AND MOTIVATION: WHY AND HOW MERITOCRATIC POLICIES CAN BE DEMOCRATIC

Still, detractors of meritocracy could effectively and rightly argue that effort itself, for sure, and intelligence, too, are conditioned and even determined by previously constructed inequalities.

Here is what Robert K. Merton addressed as the "Matthew Effect" (Merton, 1968)[1],

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[1] As the Gospel according to Matthew says to everyone who has, it will be given and he will have abundance; but for those who do not have, what they have will also be taken away.

indicating how certain positions of social advantage bring along further advantages, i.e. those who occupy advantaged positions in society, who have more social power in terms of wealth, authority, role, knowledge, etc., are more likely to reach for higher and higher social positions, while disadvantaged people are destined to fail and carry with them the legacy and the consequences of their starting social position. Theories of knowledge gaps (Tichenor, 1970) and digital divide (Van Dijk, 2003; 2014) also originate from this assumption, arguing that technologies can only widen the gap already existing between people in terms of access to knowledge, as this is dependent on cultural and social backgrounds, i.e. socialization conditions, social relations, economical power.

Now, one has to decide whether a collectivistic or rather individualistic approach is to be preferred. Subjectivist sociologists would argue that individuals are influenced by social environments and practices, but that they do possess the inner creativity to generate cultural and social innovations, and to contrast the coercive power of social structures, therefore the limits of their specific social conditions, too. Nevertheless, while I do agree with individualistic general assumptions, the empirical evidence of how previously constructed inequalities affect the positive development of "merit" intended as both intelligence, effort and motivation, cannot be disregarded.

Intelligence as *cognitive capacity* is to be assumed as a genetic factor to be fully developed within the social environment. Effort is to be intended as the result of both attitude (deriving from personality traits to learning style) and perseverance (coming from intrinsic achievement motivation), *i.e. operational and emotional competences*. Effort thus depends on both intrinsic motivation to succeed while one is involved in a social competition, and personal skills developed through previous formal and informal socialization.

Intelligence and effort are, thus, *internal* factors of learning clearly conditioned by the *external* ones, related to the above mentioned cultural background and social environment that produce inequalities: as already said, each individual has different starting conditions related to (family's) social power in terms of wealth, authoritativeness, role, culture, origins, that impact on the equality of opportunities, and make these opportunities differ and affect the individual development, one's possibility and ability to achieve results and goals that society would define meritorious.

Nevertheless, external factors also include welfare and educational policies that can impact on family's social power variables or gaps, and can counterbalance the gaps related to different backgrounds. In fact, if welfare and educational policies are truly meritocratic, they end up reducing these gaps: Scadinavian model offers an empirical, existing, evidence of such a correlation, since their policies are incredibly – compared to European Mediterranean countries ones – supportive measures for both educational institutions, women and families, and social

mobility in Scandinavian countries seems to be higher, even higher than those registered in Anglosaxon, pragmatic, countries (Abravanel, 2008). The provision of a large number of very high-quality nursery schools is, for instance, proof of both the tendencies, and happens to reduce the "family gap" for disadvantaged kids, born in social environments less likely to stimulate them.

And here it is, the other crucial external variable which – theoretically and technically – can be institutionally "controlled" and can effectively reduce inequalities: the *quality of education*. The belief and hypothesis advanced is that educational institutions can and must precisely enhance this element, in order to work as moderators of other external factors. Of course, the "quality of teaching" itself is a composite and complex variable depending upon a wide variety of factors, from recruitment policies to teacher's training, from availability of resources to organizational culture (students' centred environment, cooperative environments…).

2. DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: DEMOCRATIC GOALS FOR A MERITOCRATIC HIGHER EDUCATION

Given the unavoidable existence of differences within the informal socialization processes, and the assumption that the only controllable external learning factor is the one assessed as "the quality of teaching". It is on formal processes that attention must be paid and efforts directed in order to alleviate any previously constructed inequality, is to say, on formal education and the quality of teaching\learning environments, depending on all the factors just mentioned, which must be objects of attention and revision, too.

For now, the "quality of teaching" is considered *coeteris paribus*, i.e. without considering the policies that could better implement it in terms of recruitment, teacher's training, and resources. A specific measure, the one addressed as "educational university guidance" is explored, as a starting point in order to enhance organizational cultures.

2.1. The balance between democracy and meritocracy and the rise of consumerism in HE

As widening access to tertiary education was a top priority in western societies during the whole last century, meritocracy itself was actually *implied* by such democratic turn: in fact, alongside the arrival of mass higher education, a neo-liberal culture emphasising individual responsibility became dominant and "a meritocratic ideology is central to this culture, bringing with it the message that your privileges are all your own achievement" (Altbach, 2006).

Together with meritocracy, neo-liberal culture brought about some contradictions. Over the last decades it proved it difficult for higher education to resist the "cons" of such a democratic turn: marketization of education led to both a consumerist attitude of institutions and the wide perception that university degrees – more than academic education itself – are fundamental in order to achieve more remunerative jobs.

This led most of people to compete for positions that are not available for all, and caused: (i) a wasteful competition: a loss of resources and efforts that could have been better invested in other educational paths and\or professional activities; (ii) an oversupply of graduates: this element is not to be understood in absolute terms, as data in relation to it could be said to be unsatisfying in certain countries, like Italy itself; nevertheless, the supply of graduates is not consistent with what the market requires and is able to absorb: the oversupply is relative to certain fields and positions, for which it involves the phenomenon of credential inflation, pushing competition between both higher education institutions and students further and further, while institutions might lose focus over the promotion of competences to be spent on the labour market.

Eventually, the over-qualification does not correspond to an actual over-skilling but, instead, discloses a skills-mismatch that produces inequalities, since many end up professionally and socially unsatisfied or excluded: both the meritocratic and the democratic instances, thus, are eventually disregarded.

2.2. The proposed strategy: valuing diverse merits through guidance

A partial answer to this paradox could be found in the above stated attention to formal processes of socialization and education: Higher Education as a system should precisely – instead of *just* widening access – enhance the quality of teaching, in order to at least *try to* alleviate inequalities, and make merit emerge.

As anticipated, and in accordance to a previous study (Sideri and Campanella 2018), the element I want to focus on, among those related to quality, is *university or academic guidance*, conceived as a compulsory, curricular, innovative, proper learning and educational activity, that could enhance the quality of learning environments and teaching practice itself.

The previous analysis was focused on the Italian case and drawn on the assumption that guidance should be re-interpreted and managed in opposition to the traditional models – still prevalent in Italy – that represent an incomplete and ineffective tool, due to the insufficient attention they pay to the educational value that guiding action can have.

The idea and initial proposal advanced here is the following: if educational guidance was a proper didactic activity (Sideri, 2013) aimed at promoting *in itinere* self-selection and re-orientation of individuals, it would help mitigating the phenomena of wasteful competition and professional and social exclusion.

Self-selection is intended as the individual's capacity to assess his own learning activity, and it is the goal that guidance is supposed to accomplish at first. Whilst external pre-selection tools could turn out to be discriminatory, educational guidance should provide students with: (i) training on text analysis, study methods, envisioning practices, project-based learning (Blumenfeld et al., 1991) and other learning activities aimed at stimulating both *meaning-oriented* and *application-oriented* learning patterns (Vermunt and Vermetten, 2004, 2007); (ii) a self-aware attitude and an intrinsic achievement motivation built on self-assessment routines.

Re-orientation is the necessity that may result from subjective self-evaluation: this phase should be guided, as well, by coaches and professors in charge of guidance classes.

Such a guidance could be a teaching tool for both moderating previously constructed inequalities and re-orienting students who are not "succeeding", and who could end up wasting their efforts in a wishful competition, hence a strategy to accomplish the goal of a *diverse social inclusion*.

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FORCED MERITOCRACY AS A WAY OF DEMOCRATIZATION: HOW TO (RE)BUILD THE HIGHER EDUCATION IN RUSSIA?

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Since the 2000s, Russian higher education has increasingly fallen under state control, reducing academic freedom. This shift is marked by a rise in state funding, centralized oversight, limited self-governance, and politicization of academia. Additionally, Russia's academic science sector has faced challenges like an aging scientific workforce, declining numbers of scientists, and increased bureaucracy in degree attainment. The situation worsened after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, leading to international isolation, exclusion from the Bologna Process, and mass emigration of Russian scholars. These developments have intensified the crisis in Russian higher education. This essay analyzes these institutional issues and proposes potential reform scenarios for post-liberalization reforms, focusing on the application of meritocratic principles to improve academic and educational systems. The essay's structure includes an examination of current trends, a discussion on meritocracy in education, and three possible reform paths for rebuilding Russia's higher education system.

Higher education; Science; Russia; Reform; Democratization

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2000s, Russian higher education has increasingly become dependent on the state, accompanied by a reduction in academic freedom. This trend has manifested in several ways, including a rise in the proportion of state subsidies within university funding structures (Forrat 2020), heightened centralization and ministerial oversight (Dubrovsky 2024), stricter control over the activities of academic councils and the election of rectors, and diminished opportunities for institutional self-governance (Golunov 2013; Forrat 2020). Alongside greater state control, there has been a growing demand for the politicization and ideologization of higher education, driven by shifts and radicalization in Russia's political direction. Concurrently, Russian academic science has undergone significant institutional and demographic transformations, notably a steady decline in the number of scholars, an increasing proportion of academics beyond retirement age, and the growing complexity and bureaucratization of the process of obtaining academic degrees (Smirnov 2021). Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the severing of ties between Western and Russian universities, Russia's exclusion from the

Bologna Process, and international isolation, the aforementioned trends and their associated risks have intensified. Additionally, under mounting political pressure and the threat of criminal prosecution, a significant number of Russian scholars — ranging from hundreds to several thousand, representing up to 2,5% of Russian academics —were compelled to emigrate, further impacting the state and prospects of Russian science and education.

Under these conditions, a key question arises how to reorganize and rebuild Russian higher education and reintegrate it into the European higher education system following the democratization and liberalization of the political regime in the future.

One possible approach to reforming higher education and science in Russia is the implementation of meritocratic principles in the organization of education and academia. Meritocratic principles in higher education admissions and faculty recruitment emphasize selecting candidates based on academic accomplishments, ensuring that only the most qualified individuals are chosen. This approach enables institutions to attract high-caliber faculty, fostering an environment of academic excellence and innovation (Boliver 2016; MacLeod 2019). Merit-based hiring practices are designed to ensure that universities recruit faculty members who demonstrate high levels of research productivity and teaching effectiveness. These systems are essential for promoting faculty excellence and stimulating academic breakthroughs (Alon and Tienda 2007; Macfarlane 2007; Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

This essay provides an analysis of the institutional landscape of Russian higher education and academia and explores three potential reform scenarios, ranging from moderate changes to the comprehensive application of meritocratic principles: (1) Liberalization Reforms, (2) Institutional Reforms, (3) "Forced Meritocracy". It aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on Russian higher education, as well as to the broader discourse on meritocracy, examining its potential as a mechanism for democratization and enhancing the effectiveness of higher education and academia.

1. INSTITUTIONAL STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENCE IN MODERN RUSSIA

The institutional state of Russian higher education and science, though closely related and interdependent, require separate detailed analysis.

1.1. State of Russian Higher Education

Higher education in Russia has undergone substantial transformations in funding, the number of institutions, and student enrollment between 1995 and 2023. Funding peaked in 2006 when the share of GDP allocated to higher education rose to 1.4%. A temporary surge in funding was also observed in 2020–2021, likely driven by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, though overall funding has generally remained stable at around 1% of GDP.

The number of higher education and research institutions expanded until 2008, reaching a total of 1,134. However, following this peak, a decline set in due to both a demographic drop in high school graduates and economic challenges. As a result,

the number of institutions fell to 722 by 2022, with 500 of these being state-owned.

Student enrollment has also fluctuated with demographic trends. The highest enrollment was recorded in 2008, followed by a decline that continued until 2016. In recent years, however, enrollment has stabilized, with a modest increase in 2022–2023. This recent growth is likely due to limited opportunities for studying abroad and the ongoing effects of demographic changes.

An additional noteworthy trend concerns the workload of academic staff. Professors and associate professors have seen their teaching responsibilities increase steadily, currently averaging 900 academic hours per year or approximately 12 lectures or seminars per week.

1.2. Russian Academic Science

Science funding in Russia reached its peak in 2013, although the share of science spending as a percentage of GDP has fluctuated between 0.5% and 1%, hitting 1% in 2023. Since 1999, there has been a clear trend toward an increase in state funding for science, while the contribution of foreign sources has declined significantly, from 17% in 1999 to just 1.8% in 2022.

The number of scientific organizations has remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 3,500 and 4,000, with a peak of 4,195 in 2020. However, substantial structural changes have taken place. Since 1995, the number of research organizations has dropped by 30%, construction organizations by 55%, and research-project organizations by 94%. In contrast, the number of educational organizations (mainly universities) has more than doubled, increasing 2.5 times, while industrial organizations with research divisions have grown by 1.5 times.

Negative trends are particularly visible in Russian postgraduate education (equivalent to PhD) and doctoral education (equivalent to habilitation). The number of postgraduate graduates earning a Candidate of Sciences degree has sharply declined, from 9,611 individuals (28% of all postgraduates) in 2010 to just 1,791 (13%) in 2022. This reflects the dysfunction of postgraduate studies and a serious reduction in the young academic staff reserve. The situation is equally concerning for doctoral studies, where the number of recipients of the Doctor of Sciences degree dropped from 336 in 2010 to only 78 in 2022. Over the entire period from 2010 to 2022, a total of just 2,455 individuals received the Doctor of Sciences degree.

Since 1995, the number of researchers in Russia has declined from 519,000 to 340,000 in 2023. In 1995, 116,470 researchers held academic degrees, either Candidate or Doctor of Sciences, while by 2022, this number had dropped to 95,000.

The aging of academics is a major issue. Among Doctors of Sciences, 40.7% are aged over 70; a dramatic rise from 10.2% in 1998. The share of Doctors aged 50–59 is only 15.9%. Similar trends are seen among Candidates of Sciences, although there has been a modest increase in the share of those aged 30–39, from 17.1% to 26.4%. Overall, 70% of Doctors of Sciences and 30% of Candidates of Sciences are over the age of 60. The average age of professors is 64, while the average age of Candidates of Sciences is 51. In contrast, the average age of postgraduate students

remains 30, highlighting a significant generational gap in the scientific community, with most professors being over 70 and very few young scientists entering the field.

Another important indicator of the state of Russian science is the number of peer-reviewed scientific journals. Currently, Russia has 5,172 such journals, despite having fewer than 100,000 individuals with an academic degree. Of these, only 148 journals (less than 3%) are indexed in international databases such as Web of Science and Scopus, underscoring the country's limited visibility in the global scientific community.

1.3. Changes following the Invasion of Ukraine in 2022

Following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian science and higher education have entered a period of profound change and instability. According to various estimates, up to 2,500 scientists, representing about 2.5% of those with academic degrees, either left Russia or were compelled to resign. This exodus of talent reflects the broader challenges facing the academic community. Moreover, Russia's exclusion from the Bologna Process—an international framework that facilitates compatibility and mobility in European higher education—is expected to have severe long-term consequences for the country's educational system, cutting off integration with European academic standards.

In parallel, there has been a significant increase in ideological and political control over teaching and research within Russia. The risk of criminal prosecution and repression against scholars has escalated, as the government seeks to suppress dissent and impose tighter controls on academic freedom. This politicization of science and education has been compounded by the mass endorsement of the invasion by university rectors in March 2022. Following their open letter of support for the invasion, many Western universities severed ties with Russian institutions, leading to Russia's deepening academic isolation.

This raises urgent questions about how to reform the system to restore its effectiveness and competitiveness, and how Russian higher education and science can reintegrate into the European academic community once the political landscape changes. One potential solution lies in the implementation of meritocratic principles in the organization of science and higher education.

2. MERITOCRACY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Meritocracy in higher education admissions and faculty recruitment aims to select the most qualified individuals based on academic achievements, fostering innovation and excellence (Bourdieu, 1973; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; MacLeod, 2019). In faculty hiring, meritocratic practices emphasize research output and teaching effectiveness, driving academic progress. However, merit-based systems can deepen socioeconomic inequality, as students from affluent backgrounds often have more resources to excel in such frameworks (Armstrong, 2015). Similarly, in faculty hiring, meritocracy may favour candidates from elite institutions, marginalizing scholars from underrepresented backgrounds (Clauset et al., 2015).

Additionally, metrics like standardized tests and publication records can be subjective and fail to address systemic barriers (Lamont, 2009; Zwick, 2017).

In Russia, meritocracy poses different challenges. With fewer than 100,000 scholars across over 700 universities, averaging less than 135 academics per institution, and a significant portion nearing retirement, the typical risks of meritocracy are less pronounced. Education and science receive less than 3% of GDP, highlighting the need for personnel and financial optimization. Furthermore, reliance on publication output as a primary success criterion requires reevaluation, given the need to reassess thousands of peer-reviewed journals.

3. SCENARIO OF RESTORATION OF RUSSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Reform plans for introducing meritocratic principles in higher education and science will vary in terms of implementation speed and the scope of proposed changes. The most ambitious and transformative approach, which envisions comprehensive institutional reforms aimed at liberalizing the higher education and scientific sectors, can be termed "forced meritocracy".

3.1. Scenario 1. Liberalization Reforms

The first scenario, "Liberalization Reforms", envisions moderate reforms targeting personnel policies and science funding. First, it calls for a financing reform that allows open access to foreign capital, with the aim of gradually reducing reliance on state subsidies. Second, a comprehensive reform of postgraduate and doctoral programs is necessary to streamline and facilitate the process of obtaining academic degrees, which would encourage the development of a new generation of young scientists. Third, a certification process for scientists should be implemented, evaluating their professional qualifications and proficiency in foreign languages. Fourth, at least 30% of peer-reviewed scientific journals that operate as "predatory publishers" should be phased out to improve the overall quality of academic publishing.

3.2. Scenario 2. Institutional Reforms

The second scenario envisions more comprehensive institutional reforms. While it includes some of the same measures as the previous scenario—such as reforming science and higher education funding to increase university autonomy, overhauling postgraduate and doctoral programs, and certifying scientists based on their qualifications and foreign language proficiency—it also introduces more radical changes. First, it proposes the closure of "predatory universities", which are deemed ineffective, allowing for the redistribution of funding and the consolidation of a greater number of scientists within more productive scientific institutions. Second, this scenario advocates for the closure of up to 50% of "predatory" academic journals, with the aim of ensuring that publication activity serves as a genuine measure of scientific effectiveness and quality. These more aggressive reforms aim to enhance the overall efficiency and credibility of Russia's academic and scientific sectors.

3.3. Scenario 3. Forced Meritocracy

The "Forced Meritocracy" scenario envisions the most extensive reforms in higher education and academic science. Like other scenarios, it includes funding reforms, allowing foreign capital, and revamping postgraduate and doctoral programs. However, this approach introduces more radical changes to restructure the system.

Key actions include closing ineffective and "predatory" universities and eliminating up to 70% of scientific journals to address low-quality publishing. The most notable reforms target personnel policy. All university rectors who supported the March 2022 pro-war letter will be dismissed, signaling a break from politically influenced leadership. Stricter hiring standards will be enforced, including mandatory foreign language proficiency. Additionally, a generational shift is planned, requiring the retirement of all scientists over 70 and half of those over 60, promoting younger researchers and rejuvenating the academic landscape. These changes aim to improve the quality and merit-based nature of the system.

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PARADOX AND RHETORIC OF MERITOCRACY IN THE AGE OF THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

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The aim of the proposal is to address the issue of meritocracy in the age of the crisis of democracy. More specifically we focus the degeneration of this concept that, in this scenario, leans to become very abused and misunderstood in a way that outlines the pattern of a very clear paradox and rhetoric of meritocracy. In order to clarify that ambivalent scenario we analyze the Italian debate about the democratic education with Tullio De Mauro, Paola Mastrocola, Luciano Ricolfi and Gianfranco Viesti reflections and we reconsider the circle of the reproduction of Bourdieu integrated with Mannheim's perspective on the crisis of democracy and regression..

 meritocracy; crisis of democracy; circle of reproduction;

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the proposal is to address the issue of meritocracy in the age of the crisis of democracy. Specifically we focus the degeneration of this concept that, in this scenario, leans to become very abused and misunderstood in a way that outlines the pattern of a very clear paradox and rhetoric of meritocracy. We attempt to understand this problem in three steps: firstly trough a survey of the recent Italian debate about the degeneration of meritocracy and the paradoxes of the progressist and hyperdemocratic school focusing on one hand the book of the Italian famous linguist Tullio De Mario "Ten thesis" for a democratic school, developed since 1963 and published in the 1975, and many his contributions collected in the volume "L'educazione linguistica democratica" (2018) and on the other hand the book of Paola Mastrocola and Luca Ricolfi about the bad aspects of the progressive model of education summed up in the formula and in the title of "The scholastic damage"; secondly linking this debate to the contemporary revival and discussion of Bourdieu's theory of the *reproduction* and *symbolic violence;* eventually we insert this suggestion in the very productive Mannheim's framework of the crisis of democracy and the notion of regression recently re-examined and updated by Casavecchia (2022).

In this contribution we argue in favor of the existence of a paradox and a rhetoric of meritocracy that affects the politics of education in many countries. It emerges a degeneration of that field that increases nowadays cause of the activation of many

political variables such as the spread of the populism and cause of the ambiguity of many progressive politics that are very linked with the consideration of Bourdieu's theory of reproduction.

As we know Bourdieu's theory suggests that the progressive ideal generates the paradox that we have not a pervasive diffusion of the knowledge and the awarding of and invest in the merit by the educational agencies and the socio-political institutions, but instead at the same time the paradox of the rhetorical exhibition of the ideal of meritocracy in presence of a *de-facto* a-democratic lowering of standards and the continuity of the logic of the reproduction that favorites the dominant position agencies and his exploitation of the symbolic violence in different ways that are more and more link with the economical power emptied by the milieu of the social and moral value and norms of the bourgeoisie and middle classes that are into an epochal crisis.

The contemporary scenario is complicated by the presence of a tendence of regression and the emergence of the phenomenon of populism. Cause of that we need to combine the Bourdieu's account with the theory about democracy and regression of Mannheim. The issue of the paradox of the rhetorical exhibition shows its ambivalence in the interplay of the effect of degeneration of progressive politics and view of education and the effects of the populistic challenges against an articulated system and practice of democracy.

1. THE ITALIAN DEBATE ON DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

The Italian debate about democratic education is very significant in order to discuss the paradox of the rhetorical exhibition of the ideal of meritocracy. It is also very important to better clarify the symptoms and effect of the crisis of the democracy in the ideal and practices of the politics of education.

In the past Italian debate was prevailed the ideas of famous linguist Tullio De Mauro (2018) about the possibility of a popular and democratic linguistic education in the direction to cancel the differences among the population. Tullio De Mario developed his own "Ten thesis for a democratic school" since 1963 and published in the 1975. He shared this process with the organization of Giscel (*Gruppo di intervento e studio nel campo dell'educazione linguistica*) underlining among them: the centrality of the verbal language; the linguistic rights of people; the plurality and complexity of linguistic domains; the inefficacy of the traditional pedagogy. Many of De Mauro' contributions have been collected in the volume *L'educazione linguistica democratica* (2018).

The topic of this theory is that the mass accessibility of the language, knowledge and competences raise up the mass towards more exclusive level of education. Mass system of education is in function of the raising of the mass, not of the levelling down. The line of the democratic education is toward the top not involving a lowering of the standards. In our opinion this is a very crucial feature that has been often relegated in the background whereas it is the main principle on which all the view of the democratic education relies on. In fact the democratic utopia is

grounded not in the tendency of lower the standards of the education and of the cultural development of people, but on the contrary pushes to a spreading of the higher level of education. The underrating and the mis-recognition of this aspect is the main cause of the failure of the progressive democratic ideal of education. It is very interesting evaluate how

Cause of that and on the other hand the book of Paola Mastrocola and Luca Ricolfi have recently focused the paradox of the democratic view and the scholastic damage of progressive model of education. On the contrary of the previous ideal of democratic thesis, in the contemporary society, progressive model entails a levelling down of the aspirations. Mastrocola and Ricolfi (2021) highlighted the overturn of this perspective in the degeneration of progressive ideals of education and the evidence that the education agency failed the goal of awarding the merit. They outline the situation of the "scholastic damage" namely a school and a university which, in a contradictory democratic urge ends up decreasing quality and increasing gap between upper class and lower class. The outcome of this system is the leveling of the excellencies and the conservation of a sort of Bourdieu's circle of reproduction with new variables and patterns.

2. THE MODERNITY OF THE CIRCLE OF REPRODUCTION

The outcome of the paradox of democratic ideal of education is the leveling of the excellencies and the conservation of a sort of Bourdieu's circle of reproduction with new variables and patterns outlined in the famous *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction (*1970). The main question now is if we face a conservation or deconstruction. And we argue that we need a reconsideration of the circle of reproduction in order to bring up to date and actualize the Bourdieu's doctrine.

Bourdieu's theory suggests that the progressive ideal generates the paradox that we have not a pervasive diffusion of the knowledge and the awarding of and invest in the merit by the educational agencies and the socio-political institutions, but instead at the same time the paradox of the rethorical exhibition of the ideal of meritocracy in presence of an de-facto a-democratic lowering of standards and the continuity of the logic of the reproduction that favorites the dominant position agencies and his exploitation of the symbolic violence in different ways that are more and more link with the economical power emptied by the milieu of the social and moral value and norms of the bourgeoisie and middle classes that are into an epocal crisis.

In order to better clarify our claim we have to consider the ambivalence of the reproduction and distinguishing good and bad aspect of reproduction and socialisation. Among good aspects we can find that cultural reproduction is the mechanism that helps to build and maintain existing cultural forms, values and practices allowing to provides agencies and contexts to share understandings and transmit an heritage of knowledge from generation to generation thereby scaffolding the continuity of cultural memory and enterprise across time. This is a warranty for the passing of a memory from society to society. Another important aspect is that cultural

reproduction is a very useful mechanism for improve and enhance intergeneration-ality and transgenerationality link. In that perspective we have to don't forget the importance of reproduction for the improvement and the accomplishment of the *socialisation* cause the transfer of accepted cultural norms, values, and information promotes interaction between individuals within a social context.

The conservative feature of the reproduction is important in its ambivalence. Nonetheless we know that that circle takes place in way that promotes and favors the reproduction of existing social structure in a monolithic way. Then social classes preserve their advantages and privileges through reproduction. Likewise processes of schooling is affected by that paradox becoming the most important tool and proof of bad aspects of reproduction not working only in the restricted and narrow context of the what is taught in courses of formal instruction, but in many ways cultural and education are working in the social perceiving and in the creation of frames and stereotypes. As we know very crucial for these aspect is the famous notion of hidden curriculum namely the aspects of the education that are not shown in the curriculum of the formal instruction, but related to the personality of the adolescent that the system build as subject that needs to acquire "appropriate attitudes and values" needed to further improvement and redefinitions within the more narrow confines of education. All the mechanism of the socialization, linked to the cultural reproduction affects, provides to the generation of that hidden curriculum. And that is the main feature of that system more than what is directly explained by the material and a subject taught.

Then bad aspects are many as reproduction is source of disadvantages and inequalities According to Bourdieu, inequalities are recycled through the education system and other social institutions. This system affects the economical development through the enhancement of the powerful classes in a prosperous and affluent societies that become a cultural capital that leads the progress and the working assets of the West society as the high social class and the bourgeois cultural with his own educational credentials continue to determine one's life chances and the chances of an entire society and of entire parts of the worlds. As Bourdieu claimed in *The Inheritors* (1964) it was biased towards those of higher social class and aided in conserving social hierarchies. Therefore system concealed and neglected individual talent and academic meritocracy in order to maintain the higher class position. According to Alice Sullivan (2001), the theory of cultural reproduction entails three fundamental propositions: "parental cultural capital is inherited by children; children's cultural capital is converted into educational credentials; educational credentials are a major mechanism of social reproduction in advanced capitalist societies". But we argue that this synthesis does not show the complex ambivalence of the mechanism.

After having stressed good and bad aspects of the reproduction we can address the issue of a deconstruction of the Bourdieu's theory asking what happens in a scenario in which we face the crisis of democracy and the social status and economical power of the middle class and the bourgeoisie. And what happens if the progressive

system of education represents the same ambiguity of the bourgeoisie and middle classes system as Mastrocola and Ricolfi explained.

Linking Bourdieu's account to Mannheim's account we can reflect better on the reproduction mechanism as affected by crisis of democracy and regression in which richest part of society attempts to overpass the crisis restricting more the environment of the circulation of money and raise the barriers to the true high profile academic context.

We can use again the Italian context to deepen the issue. Gianfranco Viesti analyzed that paradox investigating how the creation of restricted group of excellence Universities in Lombardia, Veneto ed Emilia Romagna, while peripherical North, Centre, South, Inslands languish in a growing loss of resources. The rhetoric of excellence is supported by a thick curtain of indicators and algorithms that doesn't help to single out actual structural problems. Paradoxically this rhetoric is used to justify disinvestment under the slogan of meritocracy and virtues of the system and a technocracy represented by the big judge, the *deus ex machina* of university politics: ANVUR. Then we have the combination of:

1. Restriction of the environment of the high profile education + rhetoric of the merit;
2. Technocracy + loss of status at the same time of the inheritors and scholars

Investment cut, political deresponsibilization, delegating evaluation of Universities performance to a restrict group of technocrats are factors that there is a structural change.

Embrace this politics of disinvestment consist in forgetting and cleaning off the political function of university as motor of social progress in the name of a logic of business through an instrumental analysis of benefit and costs that is ideologically biased.

This shows that the mechanism of the cultural reproduction is fallen in a big crisis and unmasked. It shows itself as the construction of a restriction of privileges that are only economically based with the paradox that is also in crisis the estate of cultural and political democracy and the crisis of capitalism and the status of the leadership system of entrepreneurs.

This scenario is at the same time cause and effect of the crisis of the democracy and shows a perfect shorting out understandable within Mannheim's framework of the crisis of democracy and regression. Therefore a future attempt will be to better show the interplay between Mannheim's and Bourdieu's account.

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TEACHER EDUCATORS' ATTENTIVENESS TO DEMOCRACY. AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY AT A SWISS UNIVERSITY OF TEACHER EDUCATION

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This paper investigates the teaching and training practices related to democracy education at a Swiss University of Teacher Education, with a particular focus on teacher educators' attentiveness to fostering democratic skills among pre-service teachers. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research identifies a substantial overlap between democratic and transversal skills and uncovers the presence of a "hidden curriculum" through which democratic competencies are imparted implicitly. The findings underscore the importance of explicitly integrating democratic competencies into teacher education curricula to better align with international educational objectives.

Democracy Education; Pre-Service Teacher's Education, Transversal skills

INTRODUCTION

International organizations emphasize the pivotal role of education in preparing citizens and provide recommendations for policymakers. The Council of Europe (2010) urges member states to implement education for democratic citizenship, while UNESCO (2017; 2021) highlights the need to cultivate critical, informed citizens equipped to address glocal challenges. Similarly, the United Nations (1990) advocates for children's participatory rights in matters affecting their lives. Consequently, democratic learning has increasingly been integrated into primary school curricula, starting as early as first grade (Abendschön, 2015).

Effective teacher training is essential to ensure educators are prepared, aware, and attentive to education for democratic citizenship. However, several studies highlight significant challenges. Some teachers feel insecure about integrating democracy and citizenship into their classrooms due to insufficient preparation (Peterson et al., 2015), while others lack awareness of democracy education topics (Gollob et al., 2007). Additionally, the absence of a shared understanding of democracy among educators hinders the development of a cohesive approach (Biseth & Lyden,

2018; Weinberg & Flinders, 2018). Given these challenges, there is a need for targeted teacher training in democracy and citizenship education.

1. TEACHERS' EDUCATOR ATTENTIVENESS TO DEMOCRACY

The concept of citizenship has historically been tied to the emergence of nation-states and the political rights associated with nationality (Papadiamantaki, 2014). This legal framework has often linked citizenship education to nationalistic narratives that emphasize patriotic values (Grever & Van Der Vlies, 2017). However, in an increasingly interconnected and diverse society, such a perspective is outdated, as contemporary challenges transcend national boundaries. Consequently, the discourse around global citizenship has gained prominence in recent years (Andreotti, 2021; Estelles & Fischman, 2020).

Integrated citizenship education, encompassing the ability to address multiple dimensions, represents a key challenge in complex societies. Here, knowledge and being are deeply interconnected, extending beyond the purely intellectual domain to incorporate values, behaviors, responsibility, and active participation (Santerini, 2010).

Research indicates that when in-service teachers acquire democratic competences, they become more motivated and capable of engaging with the world democratically, thereby empowering their students to do the same (Scott et al., 2022). Consequently, the development of a shared framework for citizenship education that fosters a more critical and engaged society remains an active area of debate (Andreotti, 2021).

Research across various national contexts has explored teachers' conceptions of democracy and citizenship education, including studies in Spain (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2022), Norway (Biseth & Lyde, 2018), the UK (Weinberg & Flinders, 2018) and Canada (Scott et al., 2022). These studies highlight that democracy education remains a central focus of academic and pedagogical discourse.

2. RESEARCH GOALS AND METHODOLOGY

The study aimed to: a) examine teacher educators' attitudes toward democracy, as well as their practices and activities in democracy education; and b) identify strategies to promote democracy education among students and educators. Conducted between September 2023 and April 2024 at a Swiss University of Teacher Education, the research included the entire academic staff, comprising professors, lecturers, and researchers.

A mixed-methods design was employed for data collection. An online questionnaire was first distributed to the entire academic staff (n=134), followed by semi-structured interviews to explore themes emerging from the questionnaire responses. A total of 67 participants (50%) completed the questionnaire. The sample is broadly representative of the target population in terms of teaching sector (Bachelor, Master, etc.), primary activity (Teaching, Research), and disciplinary field (Educational

Sciences, Social Sciences, Psychology, Literature and Linguistics, Natural Sciences and Maths, and Other).

Nine volunteers were selected for interviews, ensuring a diverse range of academic profiles. The interviews addressed three main themes: a) activities related to democratic and citizenship education; b) awareness of engaging in such activities; and c) strategies for training students and educators in democratic and citizenship competencies. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, was fully transcribed, and analyzed using a structured grid. Researcher triangulation was employed to enhance validity and reliability.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Explicit vs. implicit democracy teaching: the "lack of awareness problem"

Our initial assumption, based on Gollob et al. (2007), was that many educators engage in democracy education activities unconsciously. To test this, the questionnaire asked respondents whether they conduct training or research activities in the field of democracy education. Among the 67 respondents, 23 answered "yes", 38 "no", and 6 stated they "did not know" (Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Topics, skills and teaching methods used by "conscious" teachers
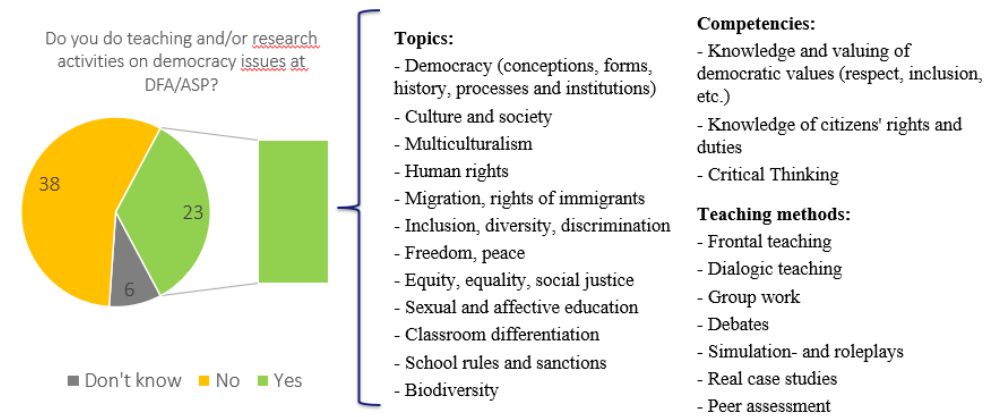
For those who answered "yes", we further inquired about the topics, skills, and teaching methods they employ. The topics vary widely, encompassing themes such as civic education, biodiversity, inclusion, peace, and social justice. The skills include knowledge of citizens' rights and duties, democratic values, and competencies for coexistence. Critical thinking skills were also frequently mentioned. Teaching methods include debates, simulations, and role-playing activities, among others.

We then invited colleagues who initially stated they were not engaged in democracy education to review the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) published by the Council of Europe (2018) and reconsider their response. After examining the framework, nearly all of them acknowledged that they promote the learning of democratic skills in their classrooms (Figure 2).

Fig. 2: Topics, skills and teaching methods used by "unconscious" teachers

Looking at the RFCDC Framework, do you do teaching and/or research activities on democracy issues at DFA/ASP?

[Pie chart: No = 3, Yes = 34]

Topics:
- Solidarity, humanity
- Justice and peace
- Information literacy, computational thinking, digital literacy
- Sustainability
- Geopolitics, Geoeconomics
- Democratic values in literature books
- Psychological capital
- Autonomous learning skills and self-reflexion
- Respect and inclusion
- Cooperation and collaboration at school

Competencies:
- Valuing cultural diversity
- Knowledge and critical understanding of the educational system
- Tolerance of ambiguity
- Autonomous learning skills
- Responsability
- Autoefficacy
- Collaboration and cooperation
- Listening and observing skills
- Empathy
- Communicative skills
- Critical thinking

Some topics and skills overlap with those mentioned earlier, particularly transversal skills. Unsurprisingly, many reflect the skills and attitudes outlined in the RFCDC Framework. Notably, new themes emerged, such as information and digital literacy and psychological capital, which were absent in the responses of those who initially identified themselves as engaged in democracy education.

This finding illustrates the "lack of awareness problem" (Gollob et al., 2007), where teachers unknowingly address democratic issues or competencies without explicitly recognizing them. This aligns with our analysis of all formal University curricula (n=7), which revealed that terms like "democracy" (n=7) and "democratic" (n=4) are rarely mentioned in the descriptions of learning modules.

3.2 Teachers educators' conceptualization of "democracy": the "lack of a shared understanding of democracy problem"

In a follow-up question, we asked respondents to define "democracy". The responses align with Gandin and Apple's (2002) concepts of *thin* and *thick* democracy. *Thin* definitions focus primarily on electoral and institutional processes, essentially reflecting a civic education perspective. *Thick* definitions, by contrast, extend beyond institutional mechanisms to emphasize the idea of a "social citizen", an individual actively engaged in relationships with others and capable of reflective agency.

3.3 Strategies for pre-service teachers

The initial findings reveal two key insights: first, conceptions of democracy vary significantly, leading to differing views on the school system's role in promoting democratic competencies; second, despite this variation, nearly all respondents address aspects of democracy, either explicitly or implicitly. But how can this situation be improved? To explore this question, we conducted interviews. From the analysis, four main categories of strategies for training pre-service teachers in democratic skills emerged.

The first suggestion is to enhance dedicated moments for democracy education within the curriculum, aiming to promote foundational knowledge and raise

awareness of its significance.

The second suggestion is to encourage student participation both in the classroom and in institutional governance by creating democratic spaces that empower students through authentic participatory experiences. As noted by some respondents: "The institution should have a student committee that plays a role" (R5); "We could have parts of courses co-designed with students (...) or common eating spaces that are self-managed" (R1). This perspective aligns with Dewey's (1916) view that democratic learning is best achieved through experience. One interviewee elaborates:

> These issues of democracy, like justice or self-responsibility... you can talk about them endlessly. But the real point is, 'What kind of experience do you have of it?' If we create a context with a certain level of participation and active responsibility, I think this becomes more formative than anything else. (R1)

Another suggestion involves offering students opportunities to engage in international exchanges, fostering dialogue with diverse contexts and perspectives.

Finally, as one respondent noted, "since the school's mandate is essentially to prepare citizens (...) the creation of public spaces to address political issues" (R2) is proposed as a potential strategy.

3.4 Strategies for Teachers Educators

What can a University of Teacher Education do to better prepare educators for democracy and raise their awareness? The interviews highlighted the importance of emphasizing the link between democratic and transversal skills. The first step is raising trainers' awareness that fostering democratic competencies inherently involves developing transversal skills. As one respondent noted: "We probably need to (...) insist more on transversal skills; citizenship implies participation, collaboration, respect, human rights, and so on" (R3). In this regard, the RFCDC Framework is considered particularly useful, as it clearly illustrates this connection.

The second step is integrating the topic across all disciplines. As highlighted earlier in this paper, few courses explicitly address education for democracy or citizenship. However, as several interviewees emphasized, it is essential for all subjects to contribute to education for democracy.

> History can make a contribution (...) but we are talking about the heritage of everyone, of the whole school. An italian teacher, a maths teacher, a music education teacher cannot say, 'This doesn't concern me'. (R3)

The third step is to make this learning explicit to students.

> Teachers know that (...) this issue is very important for their students. These are values that are essentially non-negotiable: involving them, giving them a voice, the importance of dialogue. If they understand that this is what democracy education means, then (...) this approach is clearly accepted as such. (R4)

Of course, these elements alone are insufficient and must be complemented by continuous training on the subject, as highlighted by many interviewees. Organizing ongoing professional development, offering discipline-specific materials that connect subjects to democratic skills, and creating spaces for discussion could enhance sensitivity and awareness of the issue.

Another strategy to reinvigorate trainers, boost motivation, and inspire action could be "inviting influential figures from the local area or other contexts who have contributed to advancing democratic values or fought for the respect of democratic principles" (R2) or establishing forums for debating political issues.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated teacher educators' attitudes, practices, and strategies in democracy education at a University of Teacher Education. The findings reveal a lack of awareness, with many educators unknowingly imparting democratic competencies implicitly. However, upon introduction to the RFCDC Framework, most recognized their contributions, highlighting the potential of structured tools to make implicit practices explicit. The study also uncovered diverse conceptions of democracy, spanning from institutional (thin) to relational and reflective (thick), which influence educators' approaches to their roles.

In conclusion, advancing democracy education requires a multifaceted approach that combines explicit curriculum integration, a transversal commitment across disciplines, and an emphasis on participatory learning. Educators play a central role in making democratic learning visible, fostering a culture of participation, dialogue, and shared responsibility. Continuous professional development, supported by targeted resources and opportunities for reflection, is essential to sustain progress. Moreover, providing students with authentic experiences of democratic practices, both in classroom activities and institutional governance, reinforces the development of a more informed, reflective, and participatory democratic ethos within educational contexts.

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CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONAL PUPIL MOBILITY AS TOOLS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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As previously discussed in the International Scientific Conferences of the Review Scuola Democratica, the relationship between education and democracy is crucial and pivotal in addressing contemporary challenges of late-modern societies (Dewey, 1916, 1938). Presently, the recent crises, wars, and increasing tensions undeniably affect the educational processes and question their role in dealing with these challenges. Thus, there is a pressing need to strengthen democratic culture and intercultural competences, as already pointed out by the Council of Europe (CoE, 2018). Within this framework, our contribution aims to elucidate the potentialities of individual international pupil mobility experiences in imparting citizenship education and fostering awareness of social justice. Drawing from a section of the "Civic education and international pupil mobility" research conducted in Italy by Fondazione Intercultura and Associazione per Scuola Democratica in 2022, our study delves into the didactic-organizational modalities facilitating the development of citizenship competence through such experiences. The methodology entailed interviews and focus groups with teachers, principals, and experts and allowed shedding light on the challenges and possibilities of integrating international mobility experiences into civic education pathways. Specifically, the findings emphasize the importance of promoting these activities to enhance educational, intercultural, and critical competencies. Furthermore, the dialogue and comparison stemming from different environments and experiences are pivotal for a more inclusive and equal society. This research not only contributes to the ongoing discourse on education and democracy but also provides actionable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to leverage international mobility experiences and citizenship education as tools for social justice.

citizenship education; pupil mobility; upper secondary education; democratic competence; Italy

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies are challenged by several important issues that the "pandemic acceleration" (Cone et al. 2021; Grek, Landri, 2021) and the tightening of global interconnections have contributed to make it more pressing. These include the crisis of democracy, often framed as a transition to a post-democratic era; the structural and cross-cutting role of cultural diversity in European societies; and the rise of new forms of nationalism (Crouch, 2004).

Education systems are at the forefront of these tensions, as the foundational principles of justice, freedom, and democracy confront new obstacles. This necessitates innovative cultural visions and actionable practices from both scholars and practitioners, aimed at addressing and mitigating democratic and educational crises (Dewey, 1916, 1938).

Hence, education has been widely recognized as a powerful tool to counteract post-democracy, intolerance, and racism, yet this raises a critical question: what kind of education can effectively mitigate and challenge them? Drawing upon the Council of Europe's Framework for Competence for Democratic Culture (2018), the answer to this question resides in an education that fosters democratic and intercultural citizenship, alongside awareness of social justice.

Within this perspective, we emphasize the pivotal role of intercultural competence in shaping democratic citizenship. Citizenship is viewed here not merely as a static status but as a dynamic, performative practice involving active participation (Osler, Starkey, 2005; ten Dan et al., 2011). In this context, pupil mobility emerges as a particularly relevant mechanism, offering a means to engage the entire school community while fostering the development of intercultural competence—a crucial component of democratic culture (CoE, 2018). Specifically, we hypothesize that individual international pupil mobility can serve as a resource for innovating the teaching of civic education.

This research explores the potential of international pupil mobility experiences to enrich civic and citizenship education, aiming to develop a holistic approach that integrates democratic and intercultural competences into school curricula. The ultimate objective is to position the internationalization of schools as a cornerstone of democratic citizenship education, weaving together the national and international dimensions of citizenship (UNESCO, 2015; CoE, 2018). The focus of this study is on long-term learning mobility, as it represents a key element for intercultural competence (Barrett, 2018) and an immersive and experiential form of education that is distinct from the more traditional methods employed in Italian schools. Further, experiencing cultural, civic, and political differences in a foreign context allows students to critically reflect on and question assumptions about their home environment, fostering deeper insights into the dynamics of citizenship and democracy (Sclavi, 2005).

1. CONTEXT

In Italy, civic and citizenship education has always been considered a "Cinderella" subject in the Italian educational system (Dei, 2002). Several reforms about this curricular area have been carried out but with uncertain results (Palmerio et al., 2021). With Law 92/2019, civic education was reintroduced in the Italian school curricula as an independent subject, with a specific time allocation and mark, to be delivered across the curriculum by selected teachers of the other subjects in every class. While the reintroduction of civic education marks a significant step forward, the current framework still lacks a robust emphasis on the international dimensions of citizenship education.

Simultaneously, the Italian school system legally recognizes individual international pupil mobility for one year, usually during the fourth year of upper secondary school. These experiences of long-term learning mobility represent an essential element for fostering intercultural competence (Barrett, 2018) and allowing in-depth immersion and experiential learning of different cultural, civic, and political contexts. Nevertheless, schools have yet to fully integrate such mobility experiences into structured educational pathways that connect them with civic education.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research involved conducting interviews and focus groups with principals and teachers from high schools known for their robust international mobility programs or strong commitment to civic education. These focused on the modalities through which the mobility experiences can represent an opportunity for developing citizenship competences. Schools were selected by *Fondazione Intercultura ONLUS* and the National Association of School Principals (ANP), representing regions across Northern, Central, and Southern Italy. In the study, six institutes in Northern Italy (specifically, in Piedmonts, Lombardy, and Emilia), four Sicilian institutes for the South and one in the province of Rome have joined the research. Totally, eleven principals from upper secondary schools participated in interviews conducted between June and October 2021, while four focus groups with teachers were held between November and December 2021. Both the interviews and focus groups were conducted online via Google Meet, and the questions were pre-approved by a scientific research committee.

The interviews and focus groups focused on four key objectives. The first was to understand how civic education is implemented in schools. Participants reported several challenges in organizing the curriculum and collaborating effectively, challenges that were further compounded by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. While schools engaged in various extracurricular activities related to civic education, the integration of these activities into a cohesive curriculum remained inconsistent.

The second objective was to examine the integration of international dimensions into civic education. Most schools acknowledged that topics related to Global Citizenship Education (GCED) and international civic education are addressed

implicitly across curricula. Many schools incorporate discussions on Agenda 2030, as mandated by Law No. 92/2019, but connections between GCED, intercultural education, and civic education were generally weak. This reflects a broader lack of coherence in how international and intercultural dimensions are embedded in civic education.

The third objective explored how mobility experiences are organized and managed. Participants described three primary types of mobility: short-term exchanges involving entire classes; individual mobility of foreign students hosted by an Italian school; and long-term individual mobility of Italian students abroad through agencies and associations. Long-term mobility was identified as particularly valuable for fostering intercultural competence. However, it is important to underline some aspects. To begin with, there are differences between the mobility experiences coordinated by the agencies and the ones arranged by associations, in terms of organization, costs, and choice of locations. Secondly, according to the interviewees, the relevance of students' socio-economic background is a strong factor that triggers students' choices to leave. Thirdly, the long-term individual mobility experiences are predominantly experienced by students from *liceo*, a type of Upper Secondary School usually attended by students from wealthier families in Italy.

The fourth objective addressed the valorization of students' experiences upon returning from mobility programs. Schools largely focused on assessing whether returning students had acquired sufficient knowledge and competences to advance to their final year. However, approaches to assessment and recognition varied significantly between schools, and there was limited emphasis on using students' experiences as collective learning opportunities for their peers. In many cases, the mobility experience was treated as a private endeavor rather than a shared educational resource.

3. FINDINGS AND PROPOSAL

The findings of this study highlight a weak connection between individual international pupil mobility and civic education in the schools studied. Mobility is often perceived as a personal experience, primarily benefiting the individual student, with minimal involvement from their classmates or broader school community. Consequently, opportunities to foster collective democratic and intercultural competences through shared reflections and discussions are largely missed.

Within this perspective, in this paper, we want to highlight the possible didactic-organizational modalities facilitating the development of citizenship competence through such experiences. Specifically, drawing upon these considerations, we propose and design structured pathways that integrate individual mobility experiences into broader classroom activities. This approach seeks to maximize the potential of mobility experiences by connecting them to educational objectives in civic and citizenship education.

The pilot will follow a comprehensive framework encompassing the three stages of mobility—before, during, and after—to ensure that the experience benefits not only

individual students but also their peers and the school as a whole.

Specifically, this tripartite approach entails the first moment before departure. Here, the focus is on preparing students to meaningfully engage with cultural differences in their host environments. This preparation includes equipping them with tools to navigate familial, social, and school contexts abroad. Crucially, this phase is not limited to the students who are traveling; the entire class participates in activities that foster intercultural and citizenship competencies. By doing so, the school lays a strong foundation for embedding mobility experiences within the broader curriculum of civic education, addressing a common gap in current curricula.

Secondly, during the experience, students are encouraged to observe and reflect on the differences between their home and host environments. These comparisons might span family dynamics, social interactions, or educational systems. Guided by tools and frameworks introduced before their departure, students can delve deeper into these contrasts, gaining insights that are both personal and educational.

Lastly, upon return, the emphasis shifts toward collective reflection. Here, the aim is to connect the individual's experience with the broader civic education framework, turning it into a shared learning opportunity for the entire class. This phase encourages critical thinking, allowing the returning student to analyze their own environment considering what they learned abroad. At the same time, it fosters a dialogue within the class, enriching everyone's understanding of citizenship and cultural diversity through the lens of real-world experiences.

Additionally, the project relies on three other aspects: teacher training, the implementation of innovative teaching methods, and the improvement of the final assessment. Teacher training is a cornerstone of the project. Teachers play a critical role in connecting mobility experiences with civic education, and training programs focus on building skills in intercultural competence, global citizenship, and democratic education. Resources such as the Council of Europe's Competences for a Culture of Democracy provide valuable guidance for ensuring that this training is aligned with best practices. Secondly, innovative teaching methods make learning more engaging and impactful. Approaches like cooperative learning and project-based learning activities encourage collaboration and active participation. Service-learning initiatives, which involve students in community-based projects, help bridge the gap between classroom education and real-world application. Teachers are also encouraged to facilitate open discussions on controversial topics, adopting neutral but engaged stances to create a respectful environment for diverse perspectives. Finally, evaluation is integral to the project's success. Assessments go beyond cognitive achievements to include relational skills, attitudes, and students' ability to reflect on their experiences. This holistic approach ensures a deeper understanding of the outcomes of mobility programs. Additionally, the evaluation framework values both abroad and at-home experiences equally, recognizing their complementary contributions to civic and intercultural education.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the potential of international pupil mobility experiences to enrich civic and citizenship education, aiming to develop a holistic approach that integrates democratic and intercultural competences into school curricula. By treating mobility as a comprehensive journey with clear educational objectives at every stage, schools can maximize their impact. This structured approach not only benefits the individuals who travel but also creates opportunities to cultivate intercultural awareness and critical citizenship skills across the entire learning community. Thus, by developing educational practices that link international mobility to critical reflections on citizenship, rights, social justice, and inequality, schools can transform mobility into a powerful tool for democratic citizenship education. However, as the findings of this study underscore, the potential of international pupil mobility cannot be fully unfolded without intentional pedagogical strategies that integrate it into structured civic education frameworks.

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EDUCATING FOR RESPONSIBLE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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In the digital age, freedom is often reduced to online interactions, leading to a depersonalized society shaped by digital media. This transformation profoundly affects our behaviour, perception, and social interactions. Education is crucial in helping us understand this shift, preventing a digital panopticon (Byung-Chul, 2015) and promoting active societal participation and critical thinking. Integrating digital technologies in education presents opportunities and challenges, requiring awareness and pedagogical sensitivity from all stakeholders. Effective digital education involves promoting the conscious, critical, and creative use of technology, resisting reductionist views of knowledge, and addressing the risks of social exclusion and online harassment. The panel was organized to address these challenges and possibilities from various angles and disciplines. The discussions that derived from the presentations thus highlighted the importance of ethical, critical, and inclusive approaches to digital education, aiming to foster responsible digital transformation and active citizenship. Insights from these discussions are here structured around three overall perspectives, namely, *ethical perspectives*, *critical mindsets*, and *inclusion*.

responsible digital transformation; critical thinking; active citizenship; social justice; education.

INTRODUCTION

In the information regime, being free does not mean acting, but clicking, liking, and posting (Byung-Chul, 2022). In this critical vision, humanity lives in an environment transformed by digital media without understanding them, and so becomes a swarm of individuals crushed in a collective and depersonalizing dimension.

There is no doubt that the ubiquity of digital technology is profoundly changing our behaviour, perception, sensitivity, thinking, and living together: technology interacts with the world, with our world, to transform it. Education has the responsibility to help us understand this paradigm shift to ensure that the scenario of a digital panopticon (Byung-Chul, 2015) does not become a reality and that digital technologies can, on the contrary, encourage active participation in society and the development of critical thinking. From this perspective, every activity aimed at understanding digital media is an activity in the search for freedom.

Digitization in education and schools comes with opportunities and challenges and

calls for awareness from teachers, school leaders/principals, students, and parents. Digital technologies must be used for training with pedagogical sensitivity and awareness of how knowledge construction processes occur. Promoting the conscious, critical, and creative use of digital technologies means resisting the idea of knowledge consisting solely of data devoid of theoretical foundations. It means knowing how to filter information with critical awareness and distancing oneself from easy and superficial interpretations of reality. It means resisting reductionism with its simplifications and realizing the authoritarian danger that hides therein.

Children and young people's everyday lives include many forms of digital activity – regardless of age. Many of these activities are entertainment-oriented and occur in the home sphere, such as games, films, and social media. Students may take these media habits with them to school. This can be a good starting point for teachers since they can use the students' home-based media experiences. Many young people are, for example, very good at making short film recordings, which can be used as a resource in multimodal media productions under the auspices of the school/teacher. Furthermore, some studies suggest that students who are gamers in their spare time may demonstrate good collaboration skills and some proficiency in English. Nonetheless, children's and young people's media habits may also impact everyday school life less advantageously. Social exclusion, harassment, and bullying take on different forms online, and often the activities can be kept hidden from teachers and parents for a long time and, in the worst case, develop into very destructive actions. How can teachers deal with this? As noted, several challenges and possibilities come with digitalization, and some of these were further explored and addressed in the panel, which included two sessions and ten contributions from scholars across Europe. Together the contributions collectively emphasized the importance of integrating ethical, critical, and inclusive approaches to digital education, aiming to foster responsible digital transformation and active citizenship. In the remaining parts, we will elaborate on the insights provided by the participants. These are structured around three overall perspectives: *ethical perspectives*, *critical mindset*, and *inclusion*.

ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

A major concern regarding digital transformation in education relates to ethical perspectives. As this topic may be vast, it must be narrowed down to distinct situations or sub-areas relevant to education. Here are three examples of areas that were addressed in the panel. First, participants in the panel discussed the need for education that integrates ethical considerations with technical and critical skills to foster responsible digital citizenship. This was highlighted by several of the presenters. For example, Klykken introduced us to analogue games and how they may help expand our understanding of data literacy. Poletti highlighted the importance of understanding the ethical implications of algorithmic decisions and AI. Moreover, ethical concerns also touch upon issues on AI and inclusive education. For example, Bendetta and Bertelli, along with Zanazzi and Tømte stressed the importance of

implementing AI in education with a deliberate focus on ethics to avoid perpetuating biases and discrimination. Pursuing ongoing evaluation and proper training is important to ensure that AI supports inclusivity. Another ethical dimension was suggested by Marci, who relates it to hate speech in the digital era. In her presentation, Marci proposed educational activities that promote critical thinking and social change to counter online hate speech, emphasizing the ethical responsibility of higher education to foster a respectful digital environment.

CRITICAL MINDSET

In diverse ways, the panellists highlighted the need for cultivating a critical mindset toward digitalization. The discussion highlighted the need for critical awareness of digital media's impact and the role of digital literacy in fostering active citizenship and combating misinformation. This may be conducted in coherence with students' profiles (e.g. their age, previous experiences with digital media, maturity, and the like). Teachers need to be trained to be capable of fostering this development. In the panel, concepts such as digital literacy and digital citizenship were discussed and further elaborated. For example, Gui and colleagues presented findings from a longitudinal study that explored the impact of early digital media use on learning outcomes, particularly among socio-economically deprived families. By using longitudinal data, they analysed the effects of early access to smartphones and other digital devices on students' academic performance. They argue that we need robust empirical evidence to understand digital inequality and its long-term effects, advocating for policies addressing these disparities and supporting responsible digital engagement from a young age.

In his presentation, Trebisacce looked to Dewey's philosophy of education as a process of socialization and discussed the skills needed for digital citizenship, suggesting critical thinking, ethical use of technology, and active participation in digital society. It was emphasized that a reflective and critical attitude towards digital technologies should be fostered, promoting ethical and responsible use to support active citizenship and social inclusion. This also relates to the educational potential of interactive digital narratives to enhance critical digital literacies, preparing students for responsible engagement with digital media, as outlined by Schlauch in his presentation.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Digital technologies, including AI, have the potential to both hinder and promote inclusivity in education. Responsible and ethical implementation, along with proper training for educators, is crucial. This was a key message from Zanazzi and Tømte in their presentation. They also provided several examples of how AI may be adopted in developing assistive technologies and personalized learning experiences for students with disabilities. Another perspective on inclusiveness relates to how the use of non-digital games to promote digital competencies may also foster social connections simply by promoting an inclusive approach to technology use in

education, as suggested by Klykken. The panel also suggested an overall need to integrate socio-technical and socio-economic knowledge to navigate digital transformations responsibly. In other words, educators and students were encouraged to understand the political economy and the overall technological affordances of digital technology.

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DIGITAL LITERACY: LINGUISTIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE FOR EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Digital literacy, which includes technological, linguistic, and critical thinking skills, is vital in modern society. It goes beyond basic reading and writing to include media literacy, analysis, and ethical technology use. As digital platforms evolve, literacy now involves using information across text, images, and sound to tackle social and economic challenges. The concept of Multiliteracies emphasizes active learning and the growing need for digital and multimedia skills in a globalized world. Digital literacy fosters justice by helping individuals critically engage, with information and exercise, their rights, supporting societal cohesion and sustainable development.

digital literacy; multiliteracies; social justice; inclusive education

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly digitized world, digital literacy has emerged as a critical skill set, essential for navigating the complexities of the modern age. Digital literacy encompasses both linguistic and technological knowledge, empowering individuals to engage meaningfully in education, society, and the pursuit of justice.

Humanity now lives in a world reshaped by digital media, yet many fail to understand their impact, leading to depersonalization. The challenge is to develop critical awareness of how digital media influence our lives and society, while fostering meaningful connections beyond superficial online interactions. Promoting digital literacy and ethical technology, indeed, can help counteract depersonalizing effects.

1. TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF *DIGITAL LITERACY*

The concept of literacy, as opposed to alphabetization, includes identification, understanding, creation, and communication in a digital, information-driven world. According to the 2024 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization definition, literacy is a

> continuum of learning [...] and is part of a larger set of skills, which include digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship as well as job-specific skills. Literacy skills themselves are expanding and

evolving as people engage more and more with information and learning through digital technology.

It is evident that this type of definition of literacy inherently incorporates the concept of functional literacy, as though the very essence of literacy intrinsically includes or embodies the practice and application of these skills and competencies. Thus, the concept of functional literacy is so pivotal that it becomes intertwined with the broader notion of literacy itself, suggesting that true literacy cannot exist without applying foundational skills like reading, writing, and numeracy in practical, real-world contexts.

In digital era, the concept of literacy has evolved beyond its traditional association with reading and writing to embrace what Lanham refers as "the ability to understand information however presented" (Lanham 1995:198). In this context, the presentation of information has shifted from static black text on white paper to dynamic multimedia combinations of text, sound, and images. Emphasizing the multimedia dimension of digital information, Lanham explains that being deeply literate in the digital world involves developing skills to interpret complex images and sounds alongside understanding the nuanced syntax of language. When discussing skills and competencies, Gilster also defines digital literacy as "the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats [...] via computers" and, particularly, through the medium of the Internet (Gilster, in Pool 1997:6), highlighting, as observed by Knobel and Lankshear (2006), that it entails adapting existing skills to a dynamic new medium. Mastering digital literacy, as Gilster (1997) states, involves acquiring the skills to navigate, interpret, and utilize information in a digital world. These skills are not just technical; digital literacy is about "mastering ideas, not keystrokes" (Gilster, in Pool 1997:6). It focuses on cognitive abilities to interpret, engage with, and create meaningful content, requiring understanding of complex digital environments, analysis of diverse information, and critical thinking across multimodal platforms. Indeed, as Buckingham writes: "the use of the term 'literacy' implies a broader form of education about media, that is not restricted to mechanical skills or narrow forms of functional competence. It suggests a more rounded, humanistic conception that is close to the German notion of 'Bildung'" (Buckingham, 2006:265).

Like a *Bildungsroman*, where the protagonist's journey leads to growth and self-awareness, digital literacy can be seen as a formative process. This journey transcends the mere acquisition of technical skills, encompassing critical thinking, the capacity for judgment, ethical reasoning, and a commitment to broader democratic and humanistic ideals. Such an approach positions digital literacy as a multidimensional pathway, fostering both competence and deeper engagement with the ethical and societal dimensions of the digital age. Although the concept of *Bildung* is multifaceted and deeply nuanced, drawing a connection between it and digital literacy does not trivialize the former; rather, it elevates the latter as a subject worthy of greater scholarly and societal focus. Just as *Bildungsroman* characters face challenges and confront dangers that lead to their transformation, so individuals in the

digital age encounter risks, such as fraud, data breaches, and exploitation, lurking within the World Wide Web. To navigate these complexities, a profound form of knowledge must emerge, one that cultivates critical thinking and personal freedom, aligning with the humanistic values of *Bildung* (Gadamer, 2021).

Critical thinking has become increasingly fundamental, especially considering the paradoxical nature of the digital age in which the mass of information produces no truth. The more information is set free, the more difficult it proves to survey the world. Hyperinformation and hypercommunication bring no light into darkness (Han, 2015:41).

2. BEYOND TRADITIONAL *LITERACY*: *MULTILITERACIES* APPROACH

The concept and understanding of literacy have undergone significant transformations with the advancement of technology, particularly through the emergence of the internet and computers. This evolution has given rise to terms like *New Literacy* and *Multiliteracies*, reflecting how the integration of digital tools into education and the rapid pace of technological innovation have reshaped traditional notions of literacy, including those centered on foundational concepts such as alphabetization. Since the 1980s, as Buckingham (2007) observes, there have been many attempts to extend the notion of literacy beyond its original application to the medium of writing. The expanding use of the term literacy across various domains appears to stretch the concept so far beyond its original association with written language that any meaningful connection to its traditional definition is obscured. As a result, literacy risks being reduced to little more than a nebulous substitute for terms like "competence" or "skill". The New Literacy Studies have further developed the concept of *Multiliteracies*, which accounts for the social diversity of modern literacy practices and the transformative impact of new media on communication (Buckingham, 2007).

To describe the new concept of *Multiliteracies*, Cope and Kalantzis (2000) propose a pedagogical approach that extends the traditional notion of literacy to address the challenges of globalized, technologically advanced, and culturally diverse societies. It recognizes the multiplicity of languages, cultures, and social contexts, aiming to integrate diverse perspectives into educational design. Literacy is no longer confined to traditional written text but now encompasses a range of semiotic modes, including images, sounds, and multimedia. The concept of *Design* frames learning as an active process where students and teachers co-construct meaning using linguistic, visual, and digital resources. Language is understood as a system for creating meaning that extends through new media, and linguistic literacy consists of an active process of constructing and transforming meanings, adaptable to multimodal contexts. If the concept of grammar can indeed be applied to various semiotic systems, then, as stated, "teachers and students need a language to describe the forms of meaning [...] they need a metalanguage – a language for talking about language, images, texts and meaning-making interactions" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000:24). The Multiliteracies approach expands literacy pedagogy to

reflect multicultural realities and adapt to new media and technological text forms. Scholars like Gurak (2001) and Fabos (2004) emphasize the need to understand the political, economic, and ideological contexts shaping digital media, including commercial interests. Media education thus provides a broader framework for critical understanding beyond technical media usage (Buckingham, 2007). This approach aims to create equitable learning environments, empowering individuals to become "hyperreaders" and fully participate in social, economic, and community life (Burbules & Callister, 2000).

This evolution of literacy, from fundamental reading and writing skills to more advanced digital competencies, mirrors the way literacy was regarded in earlier centuries. If we consider the character Renzo from *I promessi sposi*, it becomes evident that in the nineteenth century, Alessandro Manzoni regarded primary literacy as a fundamental prerequisite for participation in social life and for the realization of justice. Now, this type of preparation is insufficient for the challenges and changes that have occurred in our society. Fast forward to the digital, the current form of illiteracy, as it once was for Renzo, is digital illiteracy. The advent of the internet and digital technologies has revolutionized information access and communication, while also widening the gap between the digitally literate and the digitally excluded, thus creating new forms of vulnerability and gaps, including digital divide.

Not at the same speed as the digital world is changing, but the linguistic realm is also undergoing many changes, and an increasingly specialized language has developed. When certain alphabets, such as the computer one, become so relevant as to determine the fundamental access key for any kind of bureaucratic, administrative, or healthcare activity, it becomes evident how functional literacy cannot simply be understood as the ability to access a set of languages that are prominent in social life. Digital literacy today increasingly reveals, in its counterintuitive sophistications, its exclusive and undemocratic side (Fiormonte, 2003; Gheno, 2009; Tavosanis, 2021). The world of digital media is not, after all, characterized by a new universal language of multimedia, but by a plurality of styles and expressive forms corresponding to different situations and needs, where the specific mixtures of different codes give rise to structures based on distinct and balances of roles and priorities, and where writing retains an extremely important position in many situations. It is not surprising, that even in the realm of digital and networked media, it is possible to recognize and profitably investigate different textual forms, characterized by different registers and linguistic uses.

Recalling the title of a posthumous book by a renowned Italian linguist, Tullio De Mauro, *linguistic education* is *democratic (*De Mauro, 2018). Linguistic education now extends into the digital domain, making digital linguistic education an extension of democratic education that promotes equal participation.

3. DIGITAL LITERACY AS A PILLAR OF *JUSTICE*, *EDUCATION*, AND *SOCIETAL PARTICIPATION*

Furthermore, digital literacy, which includes critical thinking, media literacy, and ethical use of technology, is essential for navigating not only educational but also social and economic spheres. In an information-saturated world, the ability to distinguish fact from fiction and navigate digital spaces responsibly is crucial.

Just as literacy empowered individuals in Manzoni's time, digital literacy is now a prerequisite for full participation in modern society. Education bears the responsibility of aiding our comprehension of this paradigm shift, ensuring that the prospect of a digital "panopticon" doesn't materialize (Han, 2015). From this standpoint, every endeavor directed towards grasping digital media constitutes a pursuit of freedom. Citizens need critical digital skills, such as evaluating and using information to transform it into knowledge. This involves questioning sources, producers' interests, representations of the world, and understanding technological developments in relation to social, political, and economic forces.

While governmental and educational projects promote basic skills and online safety, they tend to prioritize efficiency over critical analysis. To cite some European programs, SELFIE and the Digital Education Action Plan stand out. The latter, adopted in 2020, promotes inclusive, high-quality digital education, supporting Member States in adapting education systems to the digital era and addressing challenges from COVID-19. The goal, aligned with the European framework for the digital competence of educators (2017), is to bridge the digital divide between schools by improving access to high-speed internet, online resources, collaborative platforms, and tools for inquiry-based teaching. Addressing the digital divide requires concerted efforts to ensure equitable access to digital tools and resources, preventing digital divide.

In line with the 17th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) – Partnership for the Goals – Governments, educational institutions, and civil society must collaborate to bridge this gap and empower individuals with the skills needed to thrive in the digital age. By investing in digital literacy programs and infrastructure, it is possible to create a more inclusive society: digital literacy, thus, is also a fundamental condition to achieve SDG 4 (Quality Education).

It is further alleged that literacy provides a foundation for skills development and lifelong learning and can help all citizens participate in the nation's economic prosperity and improve their quality of life. Literacy is seen as being inextricably linked to cultural, political and power structures and as media relationships are shaped by social contexts, it is crucial to move beyond skills-based literacy and view it as a sociocultural phenomenon (Perry, 2012; Buckingham, 2003).

In both Manzoni's narrative and the digital age, education and justice are inseparable. Just as Renzo's journey highlights the crucial role of literacy in achieving justice, digital literacy is now vital for promoting equitable participation and empowering citizens in today's interconnected world.

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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH NON-DIGITAL GAME-BASED LEARNING

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Data literacy is key in a society increasingly saturated by digital technologies. This paper investigates the potential of analogue game-based learning to support the development of data literacy in upper secondary education. The paper presents findings from an exploratory case study conducted in two upper secondary school classrooms. The students participated in lessons integrating analogue learning games to support the understanding and awareness of how everyday actions generate digital data. Qualitative questionnaires were distributed to gather students' perceptions and experiences after the lesson. The findings suggest that high levels of social engagement coupled with contextualising and complementing activities contributed to the potential of the analogue game-based approach in promoting data literacy.

data literacy, game-based learning, digital citizenship, social inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies continuously and significantly reconfigure society (Vial, 2019, p. 133), and the transformative effects can be seen in an increase of data-driven technologies in education and more system-wide (Martin et al., 2024; Tømte et al., 2023). For individuals, the availability of digital devices facilitates online connection 'anywhere, anytime' (Erstad & Silseth, 2023, p. 560), with many adolescents living a large portion of their social lives online (Sjolie et al., 2024). Educational institutions are vital in promoting digital inclusion and active citizenship among young people. The Norwegian general K-12 curriculum defines digital skills as foundational and necessary for education, work, and societal participation (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). Despite the increasing use of digital technology, children's digital competency levels have not improved (Fraillon, 2024). This paper explores the potential of non-digital game-based learning to support data literacy in upper-secondary education. Through an exploratory case study in a Norwegian school, the following research question is explored: *How can non-digital learning games support upper-secondary students' data literacy?* Data literacy refers to the fundamental skills and knowledge needed to competently and responsibly navigate the increasingly digitised and datafied society (Castañeda, Arnab, et al., 2024).

1. NON-DIGITAL GAMES FOR DATA LITERACY

Game-based approaches facilitate learning experiences through the use of games or game mechanics (Plass et al., 2015). The potential of games as educational tools has been connected to intrinsic motivation and enabling learners to playfully explore topics in a context where mistake-making is viewed as accepted and safe (Whitton, 2018). Games designed to reach defined learning objectives can be found in digital and analogue forms (Breien, 2024). Analogue learning games have been shown to be effective in fostering soft skills, such as communication and collaboration (Sousa et al., 2023, p. 9) and creativity (Ness et al., 2024).

The games used in the present study were initially created in the Data Literacy for Citizenship Erasmus+ project (DALI, 2023), addressing basic data literacy for adult learners through the co-creation of a playful learning toolkit (Castañeda, Arnab, et al., 2024). The DALI project advanced 'networked game-based learning strategies' for flexible contexts and learning environments to foster collaboration and dialogue about data (Castañeda, Villar-Onrubia, et al., 2024, p. 2). The current study is based on the further development and playtesting of two DALI games for the Norwegian secondary education context (SLATE, 2024).

Game of Phones is a card-based game designed to make players aware of the availability and use of online data by requesting them to access and communicate digital materials retrieved from online sources (DALI, 2023). Players search for specific requested items online within a set time limit (30-60 seconds) using digital devices (e.g., their smartphone). After searching, for instance after 'Find a photo of your favourite breakfast food', all players share their findings, and the judge selects the round winner.

Data Iceberg is a card game that teaches players about digital data types through everyday scenarios (SLATE, 2024). Following a memory game mechanic, players try to match cards which then create a sentence describing a data-generating activity. (For instance, 'I like a friend's photo...' and '...I see data about the time I liked the photo'). The players then categorise the pair to one of the data types on their individual player boards. The game intends to help players understand how everyday activities generate visible and invisible types of data (DALI, 2023).

2. THE CASE STUDY

The paper is based on an exploratory case study of a game-based intervention in a Norwegian upper secondary school context (Yin, 2018), asking the following research question: *How can non-digital learning games support upper-secondary students' data literacy?* Two second-year classes (16-18 years old) participated in the study, and the students (N=37) played the games as part of their ordinary school lessons. After the sessions, qualitative online questionnaires were given to participants to report their experiences (Braun et al., 2021). Additionally, the teacher made reflection notes after each session. The students were informed about the study and that participation was voluntary and anonymous (Klykken, 2022).

The case study was embedded in an iterative design process of adapting two DALI

games for upper secondary education settings as part of the EduTrust AI project (SLATE, 2024). The two implementations, therefore, involved different classes and activities. Class A had 18 students participating in a 45-minute session that used one game followed by a reflection activity. Class B had 19 students in a 60-minute lesson incorporating two games with both a reflection activity and a mini-lecture in between.

Tab. 1. Lesson structures and approximate time usage.

Class A (45 min)	Class B (60 min)
Introduction (5 min)	Introduction (5 min)
Play *Game of Phones* (30 min)	Play *Game of Phones* (20 min)
Post-play reflection in groups (10 min)	Post-play reflection in groups (10 min)
	Mini-lecture on data types (5 min)
	Play *Data Iceberg* (20 min)

The two classes' responses helped shape the games' further development and the additional teaching resources for a data literacy game package for schools (SLATE, 2024). For instance, in Class A, the teacher observed high engagement during gameplay but a decline during the reflection phase. In the questionnaire, two students stated an unclear connection between the game and the learning goal. Based on this feedback, the second implementation was adjusted to include Data Iceberg as a second game and a mini-lecture to provide more concrete concepts about data. In the implementation with Class B, the students remained highly engaged throughout, but the teacher suggested that additional time could have facilitated deeper discussion and more learning.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A thematic analysis was conducted by inductive coding of the qualitative dataset and looking for patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and recurring themes are presented in the following sections.

3.1 Social curiosity

The post-play qualitative questionnaire revealed that 92% of all the students found the game-based session fun and engaging. In the students' descriptions, enjoyment was frequently connected to social aspects. For example, one student from Class A referred to the sharing of online items in the Game of Phones and wrote: 'It was fun to see how similar and differently we answered'. This can be interpreted as the social enjoyment of connecting with other players and learning something new about them. Social curiosity was also recurrent in Class B, with one student writing: 'Fun! I feel like I got to know my peers better, and about data'.

Game-based learning depends on a playful and immersive experience, facilitated by the entertaining and engagement aspects of the game made possible by elements such as visuals, interactivity and rules (Arnab, 2020, p. 74). A game can promote many types of player engagement, such as cognitive, affective and social

engagement (Plass et al., 2015). The above excerpts illustrate a recurring theme of *social curiosity* in the students' responses. The finding resonates with research indicating that analogue games increase social interaction (Giles et al., 2019), and promote a culture of friendly, informal interactions, such as joking and teasing, even among strangers (Rapport, 1999). This finding also aligns with Lazzaro's (2009) argument that games create a range of emotions, with 'social fun' defined as one key type of engagement (pp. 163-165).

3.2 Data trails and data types

The students' responses in the post-play questionnaires suggest that the analogue game-based activities fostered learning about data, albeit with some differences between the two lessons. In Class A, where students played one game with de-brief reflection activities afterwards, 60% reported that the lesson made them think of something new and/or reaffirmed earlier learning. Of the students in Class B, who played two games with reflection activities and a pre-play mini-lecture on data types, 79% reported learning something new and/or reaffirming prior knowledge— the higher proportion of reported learning in Class B aligned with the teacher's reflections.

In their responses, the students detail increased awareness of data, also with some differences between the two groups. Students in Class A reflected on becoming more conscious of *data trails* and how data can influence search activity. For instance, one student wrote: 'I became more aware of how the results you get can vary from different search engines and persons'. Students in Class B also expressed increased awareness. For instance, one student wrote: 'Maybe not something I had never thought about before, but definitely made me think more about my data tracks'. Additionally, several students in Class B described learning the names of *data types* and data categorisation, by stating, for instance: 'I had not thought about different types of data before, or their names'.

3.3 Diversifying data awareness through added context

As shown, the students in Class B reported increased awareness about data footprints and, additionally, a broader vocabulary about data types. One interpretation of this variation from Class A could be that introducing additional *contextualising activities*, such as the mini-lecture on data types contributed to their learning. This aligns with Arnab's (2020) argument that games are not 'all comprehensive' teaching tools but require context (pp. 180-182). When facilitating learning experiences, games should be regarded as part of a network of learning resources, supported by pre-play contextualisation, post-play debriefing and reflection activities (Kim & Pavlov, 2019).

Another interpretation of the variation in the students' expressed learning could be the potential to create a more engaging and diverse learning experience through *combining multiple games*. For instance, the first game, Game of Phones, engaged students, created social connections and provided shared online search experiences and reflections, thus scaffolding and preparing learners for the second game,

Data Iceberg, which introduced more concrete learning content of data concepts. Hence, the games can be understood as complementing each other, functioning as pre-play and de-briefing activities in the learning design.

4. CONCLUSION

In this case study, the analogue game-based activities fostered social engagement and curiosity and emerged as beneficial in supporting the students' awareness of data footprints and data types. The study supports previous research on games' capacity to foster rich learning experiences when contextualised by pre-play and de-brief activities (Arnab, 2020; Plass et al., 2015; Sousa et al., 2023). Active participation in a data-saturated society requires an intricately connected set of social, technical and abstract skills (Castañeda, Arnab, et al., 2024). Therefore, a socially embedded, multi-layered game-based learning approach appears to be a promising area for future research on fostering data literacies.

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COUNTERING HATE SPEECH IN THE DIGITAL ERA THROUGH A PEDAGOGICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH IN TEACHING PRACTICE

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Hate speaks through what are defined as Hate Speech, which aim to foment or encourage denigration and defamation towards individuals or groups, subjecting them to verbal and non-verbal violence based on ethnic, physical, cultural, sexual, or religious diversity. Specifically, the introduction of Social Media in our digital era has contributed to the spread of this phenomenon, through their online version, called Online Hate Speech. Supporting the pedagogical position according to everyone, by nature, is educable, and that one of the promoting factors of HS is a miseducation in critical thinking, to counter this fact are necessary a re-education towards assuming a critical and deep stance facing reality, to the discernment of one's own truth, and to the relationship with others. Therefore, schools and universities should be a fertile ground for educating future citizens to think critically about the world we live in, maybe supported by educational and learning activities which can promote this need through the acquisition of soft skills useful for the purpose, experimenting active and participative teaching strategies for fostering active learning. Relating to this, an important aspect to further reflect on corresponds to *Faculty Development* programs.

HS; critical thinking; education, Social Media, teaching practice

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HATE?

Respectively, Treccani and the Devoto-Oli Dictionary define 'hate' as a feeling of strong and persistent aversion, by which one desires harm and ruin of others for others. So, a feeling of deep hostility and antipathy. Namely, a resolute hostility that usually implies a negative judgment associated with rejection, repugnance towards someone, or the intense desire to harm someone. Someway, we can say that hate is a feeling that has accompanied human life since ancient times, leading to a lack of authentic thinking, and hindering the promotion and development of ones own and others humanity. This feeling leads individuals to perceive diversity as something to distance, denigrate, and in extreme cases, desire to annihilate. Even if is not always simple to actually know the specific reason why one human being hates another one – because of the different nature of this condition, that it could be due to cultural, social, value-based, personal issues, and also because of the

fact that each one is different from every other who has got a life and an educational story at the same time different from everyone else – it is important to be aware of the psychological mechanisms that lie beneath (Amnesty International, 2019). The first is the social cognition, by which we mean a cognitive process that, by classifying reality incentives into categories, aims to simplify human daily life, influencing the way humans think and act in it: when we talk about social category, the related process of categorization leads to identifying individual subjects as members of a specific social group because they share certain characteristics of that one, enabling them to predict the behavior of others and act accordingly (Crisp & Turner, 2017). However, social categorization is the process behind stereotyping and prejudice, which can lead to discriminatory actions, attitudes, and behaviors (Amnesty International 2019, 11; Crisp & Turner, 2017). The second mechanism corresponds to ones own worldview, which stems from the totality of ones emotional structure, the perception of our personal and social identity, the influence of the experiences and events of our existence, and our beliefs and convictions: the moment one encounters a worldview that differs from ones own, one may feel a feeling of discomfort – cognitive dissonance – and the need to eliminate it, changing its meaning, realigning it consistently with ones own (Amnesty International, 2019, 7-10).

1. HOW DOES HATE SPEAK?

It is possible to say that hate speaks through its language, composed by hate words that together form Hate Speech (Ferrini & Paris, 2019). HS are commonly defined as expressions of intolerance – predominantly verbal (written or oral), accompanied by or related to visual (pictures, photographs and similar) dimensions, but with non-verbal consequences and possibilities – primarily directed against minorities, that are aimed at expressing and spreading hatred or inciting prejudice and fear toward an individual or a group of people who share a different ethnicity, sexual or religious orientation, disability, or social and cultural affiliation (Ferrini & Paris, 2019; Amnesty International, 2019; Anjum & Katarya, 2024; Arcila-Calderòn, et al., 2022; Shilpashree & Ashoka, 2024; Wachs et al., 2022). In this case, it is important to refer to the General Policy Recommendations n° 15 by the European Commission (2015) that officially says that

> HS is defined as fomenting, promoting, or encouraging, in any form whatsoever, the denigration, hatred, or defamation of a person or group, as well as subjecting a person or group to abuse, insults, negative stereotyping, stigmatization, or threats, and the justification of all such forms or expressions of hatred as mentioned above on the basis of race, color, ancestry, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other characteristics or personal status[1].

The feelings of hate that every human being can feel are partly subjective and partly generated and/or fueled by the reference society or community: the foreigner

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[1] Translated from Italian by the author.

(Ferrini & Paris, 2019). Every historical period has got a specific collective actor (They), protagonist and target of their own HS. In daily HS, this role may appear to be played by a single actor: e.g. the immigrant or criminal (Arcila-Calderòn et al., 2022). Actually, in this way, he represents a collective narrative role, producing one of the most typical and dangerous dynamics of HS: generalization (Ferrini & Paris, 2019). To try to investigate HS formal structure, it is interesting to mention the linguistic and semiotic study approach by Ferrini & Paris (2019). From this perspective, HS are investigated by analyzing and meticulously dissecting it syntactically, lexically, grammatically in the broadest sense, semantically, and symbolically. From the linguistic perspective, it is methodologically important to first separate the parts of speech (nouns, adjectives, and verbs), followed by an analytical process of observing each grammatical category taken individually and placed in relation to their target subjects. From a semiotic perspective, it is necessary to do an interpretation, recognizing where – in a speech – the terms We and They are used for derogatory purposes: they place themselves in linguistic reference – in relation – but in complete contrast, rejection, and conflict from a semantic and symbolic point of view. HS, therefore, builds the identity of the other as the object of hate:

> The object of hate is thus "someone" (noun), who is in some way (adjective) and who performs certain actions (verb). This person (the other) is hated by someone else (noun) in a certain place and in a certain way. HS does not always manifest itself through overtly aggressive language: the various ways in which HS is realized depend, first and foremost, on the channel through which the message is conveyed[2] (Ferrini & Paris, 2019).

HS can be recognized in a variety of physical places – schools and universities, stadiums and entertainment places, at home, in public places or social spaces, in newspapers and books, on public transportations, at work, on the street, everywhere around us.

2. ONLINE HATE SPEECH

The increase of technologies, the progressive and persistent digitization of communications and relationships have contributed to the creation of new places and ways of conveying HS, which, in this way, are called Online Hate Speech (Ferrini & Paris, 2019; Anjum & Katarya, 2024). Especially with the emergence and rise of Social Media – such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, X, etc. – it is possible to identify them and see their almost uncontrolled proliferation in the form of posts, comments, reactions, videos, images (Amnesty International, 2019). Therefore, virtual world, has increasingly allowed hate to spread in an ever more unstoppable and difficult-to-contain manner over time. Despite hate, through its speech – as seen – being a discriminatory, denigrating, and marginalizing act and tool, it is interesting to note how in the digital reality one might say it does not discriminate: everyone hates everyone, no one excluded. OHS have several peculiars, such as the

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[2] Translated from Italian by the author.

permanence over time – when a disparaging or offensive comment is posted on SM, it is difficult to be sure that it can actually be removed, because it can be shared several times and it is difficult to know by whom; they are itinerant and recurring; one is hidden behind a monitor and this entails having fewer inhibitions, to feel all 'equal' – for example, hate comments can be aimed at political figures or celebrities without worrying about different social positions (Amnesty International, 2019; Ferrini & Paris, 2019; Anjum & Katarya, 2024; Arcila-Calderòn, et al., 2022). It is worth mentioning that the Covid-19 Pandemic has contributed to the increase of Online HS (Anjum & Katarya, 2024), as shown by Amnesty International Hate Barometer[3]: the Organization, in that time that Adriano Prosperi (2021) calls plague time, has constructed this digital tool and platform through which is possible to realize the increase of this kind of HS, destinated towards increasingly specific diversities, featured in comments or posts on various SM.

3. PEDAGOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

The use of SM today predominantly affects the younger generation and it is interesting to consider that increasingly precocious young people are making use of it, bringing with them a state of hyperconnectedness to everything that conveys the digital world and a disconnection from the real world, with recurring episodes in which they themselves first contribute to the proliferation of HS towards peers, but not only. Some of the adolescents possible motivations about it, have been studied by Wachs et al. (2022). The uncontrolled use of SM can cause alienation and isolation in a parallel world; self-enclosure; lack of reflexivity, promoting a superficial view of reality and crisis of intelligence (Morin, 2020); favoring performance and appearance, in order to please others even if this means denigrating and hurting someone; the inability to discern reality, due to the proliferation, for example, of fake news and the progressive inability to discern the truth, giving up the will to find it (Modugno, 2023); the denial of relationship, the denial of face-to-face dialogue and confrontation with the other as a richness; the risk of promoting conflict and competition, even to the point of producing behaviors of dehumanization and deformative consequences (Sola, 2024). Finally, all this leads to a progressive habit of hatred and a diseducation in critical thinking, underscoring the urgency of educational interventions that know how to aim at re-education in relationship with oneself, with reality and with other human beings. Drawing inspiration from Hate Studies, which consist in the collaboration among different sciences and disciplines working together to find solutions to counter HS (Ferrini & Paris, 2019), I think that a pedagogical-philosophical approach to counter this fact could be one key: supporting the pedagogical position according to every man and every woman, by nature, is educable (Kaiser, 2013), if one of the promoting factors of HS could be a mis-education in critical thinking, a re-education towards assuming a critical and deep stance towards reality and the discernment of ones own truth (Modugno,

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[3] It is possible to explore it on this link: https://www.amnesty.it/barometro-dellodio-intolleranza-pandemica/.

2023) and relationship with others is not only possible but necessary. In a pedagogical perspective, a lack of education implies the necessity to either assume for the first time or re-educate oneself to recognize some essential pedagogical principles related to the recognition of human values (Kaiser, 2013; Gennari, 2006; Sola, 2024) in everybody, so to identify diversity as richness and as something that is within each of us; on the other hand, identifying Philosophy as critically thinking means assuming a critical stance towards oneself and the world we live in, acquiring the ability to question, inquire the why of things and go deeply into there: thinking critically is philosophizing, experiencing Philosophy in first person (Modugno, 2023), which allow for opening oneself to ourselves and to others; questioning and engaging with reality; promoting the reflexivity and the authenticity; fostering the research of truth; learning to take a personal position about an issue, problem or question (Modugno, 2023).

4. CONCLUSIONS: TEACHING AND LEARNING FIELDS

Although the possibility of educating in critical thinking is ageless, fertile places to do it can be schools and universities (Chomsky, 2004). A possible strategy for educating the younger generations to become aware citizens, critical thinkers, and promoters of pedagogical principles capable of countering all forms of hate could be the use and experimentation of active and participatory teaching innovation methodologies also integrated with techniques of a more properly philosophical nature (Modugno, 2023), capable of promoting the acquisition and development of soft and life skills (Sancassani et al., 2019) such as: relational competence, team building and teamwork, critical thinking, decision making, problem solving, etc. For example, Cooperative Learning and Mutual Teaching allow students to develop interpersonal and teamwork skills (Bonaiuti, 2014) that enable them to value the importance of everyone's contribution in achieving a common goal. Since it is very important to educate on the conscious and correct use of SM, they can be integrated into these kinds of strategies: e.g. proposing the development of a small-group project aimed at countering OHS, creating an Instagram social page to make reels and multimedia content that promotes values of peace, equality, etc. Another useful strategy could be the Case Study: one could build a case focused on HS, have students recognize them, and have them propose possible solutions and interventions to counter them. Another optimal technique to stimulate critical thinking and educate students to take a position, identify valid arguments to support and confront others, is Debate. Finally, it might be useful to formulate reflective questions that can challenge students on social and value issues related to HS: either individually or in pairs or small groups. Still to enhance critical thinking skills is the philosophical analysis of texts, videos, movies, songs, containing hate words or HS (Modugno, 2023). In conclusion, an important aspect to further reflect on corresponds to Faculty Development, that can be an extremely relevant resource for ensuring that teachers are consciously trained in methodologies that can make their teaching a path of critical development for the life of each of their students. For example, through workshops, seminars, individual consultations centered on how to use

these methodologies and promote soft skills in students to address more transversal themes (Silva, 2022) – such as Hate Speech – starting from their own discipline of reference.

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ALGORITHMIC CRITICAL INTELLIGENCE AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: EDUCATING IN AND TO DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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Algorithmic critical intelligence is essential in the digital age, were algorithms and automation shape everyday life. It implies the human ability to critically evaluate information, discern reliability and make informed decisions, integrating processes of reflection, analysis and synthesis. In parallel, artificial intelligence mimics human abilities such as reasoning, problem-solving, and learning. These two types of intelligence, if well integrated, can promote ethical and sustainable technologies, addressing the challenges and opportunities of the digital world. Education plays a crucial role, guiding towards a conscious digital citizenship that combines technological literacy, critical thinking, ethics and social inclusion. It is necessary to train educators and students with technical and reflective skills, preparing them to actively participate in digital transformation. This approach must consider the possibility of a "technological singularity", in which exponential progress could revolutionize society in unpredictable ways. As George Westerman says: "When digital transformation is done right, it's like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly; when it is badly done, it remains a caterpillar". The challenge is to educate intelligently to transform technological potential into human and social development.

critical intelligence; algorithmic intelligence, artificial intelligence, digital transition, digital citizenship

INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has radically transformed the way we live, work and learn. In a world where algorithms influence a wide range of everyday activities – from online information selection to automated decision-making – it becomes increasingly urgent to develop "algorithmic critical intelligence". This ability involves being able to recognize and consciously evaluate the functioning and effects of algorithms, distinguishing between what is ethically and socially acceptable and what could perpetuate discrimination, manipulation or inequality. In parallel, digital citizenship education aims to prepare individuals to become responsible and aware users of digital technologies. However, this educational challenge is complex and multilevel: it is not only about acquiring technical skills, but also about developing critical thinking, sound digital ethics and social awareness. As highlighted by Noble

(2023), the risk of algorithmic bias and discrimination inherent in technological systems makes an educational approach that includes critical reflection and an in-depth understanding of the underlying dynamics essential. In this context, artificial intelligence and digital technologies must not only be tools to be used, but objects of critical analysis. The increasing integration of AI into education, for example, offers unprecedented opportunities to personalize learning and improve academic outcomes, but it also raises significant ethical and pedagogical questions. How can we ensure that the use of these technologies respects diversity, equity and inclusion? And how can we educate students not only to use these technologies, but also to understand and question their implications? Digital citizenship education is therefore at the crossroads between technology and ethics, aiming to train citizens capable of navigating the digital society with awareness. Integrating algorithmic critical intelligence into this educational framework is critical to helping individuals develop a holistic and informed view of the technological world in which they live. Through theoretical and practical reflection, strategies are proposed to integrate these skills into training courses, promoting education that is ethical, inclusive and sustainable.

1. ALGORITHMIC INTELLIGENCE AND THE EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION

Algorithmic intelligence is a relatively new concept, but one of paramount importance in the digital age, as it concerns the ability to understand, analyse and critique the algorithms that influence many of our daily decisions. In a world where algorithms regulate access to information, define online interactions, and even influence public policy, the need to develop algorithmic intelligence has become crucial. This form of intelligence, although closely linked to the technical understanding of algorithmic systems, also has a critical and ethical dimension that concerns the ability to evaluate and judge the effects of these algorithms on society.

Algorithmic intelligence can be defined as the ability to understand the principles that guide algorithms, interpret the results, and apply critical judgment about their implications. An algorithm is essentially a sequence of instructions that allows a machine to perform certain tasks, whether they are simple, such as sorting a list, or complex, such as making decisions about who to get a loan or who to be selected for a job opportunity. Algorithmic intelligence, therefore, goes beyond the simple use of technologies; It involves the ability to recognize the assumptions on which automated decisions are based and their potential social and ethical implications. A common example of algorithms that affect our daily lives is the one that regulates search engines like Google. Each time we enter a query, an algorithm selects, among millions of results, the ones it considers most relevant. But how do these algorithms determine "*relevance*?" What criteria do they use to select content? These mechanisms, although apparently neutral, are strongly influenced by factors such as the popularity of content, the behaviour of other users, geographical location and, in some cases, specific commercial choices. Understanding these mechanisms – which is at the heart of algorithmic intelligence – allows users to become

aware of the biases that could affect their online experiences.

A crucial aspect of algorithmic intelligence is awareness of the biases inherent in algorithms. Algorithmic biases occur when an algorithm produces results that discriminate against certain groups or individuals based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, social class, or political orientation. These biases can result from various factors: from incorrect or partial training data, from choices made by developers during algorithm design, or from models that reflect unconscious human biases.

For example, a study by Noble (2023) highlighted how search engines can perpetuate negative stereotypes about women and ethnic minorities, suggesting that search results are dominated by content that reinforces traditional and unequal ideas. Here emerges the need for an algorithmic intelligence that not only understands the functioning of algorithms, but is also able to question them from an ethical and social point of view.

Algorithmic intelligence is not only a matter of technical skills, but also has a strong educational and training component. In school and education in general, training in algorithmic mechanisms is essential to allow students to develop a critical understanding of the technologies they use on a daily basis. To do this, it is necessary for educational curricula to not only teach how algorithms work, but also how they affect society, how they can be used ethically, and how they can be improved to reduce or eliminate bias.

A fundamental step is the integration of skills related to algorithmic intelligence in all disciplinary areas.

Machine learning, for example, allows AI models to identify patterns in data and make decisions autonomously. But how are the data on which these models are trained selected? And how can we be sure that these models do not reproduce human biases or amplify pre-existing inequalities? These questions are central to the debate on algorithmic intelligence, as they raise concerns about justice, transparency, and accountability in the use of AI. Floridi (2020) argues that AI ethics must be integrated directly into development and design processes, to ensure that systems are not only efficient, but also fair and equitable. The increasing pervasiveness of algorithms in our daily lives, combined with the evolution of artificial intelligence, makes it necessary to educate digital citizens not only to use technology, but to understand and criticize it in an informed way. Algorithmic intelligence, in fact, becomes one of the fundamental tools for exercising conscious digital citizenship, which implies the right to understand how technologies influence social, economic and political life. As the European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 argues, digital citizenship education must integrate an understanding of algorithmic mechanisms, promoting critical thinking and ethical awareness, as well as the ability to actively participate in the governance of technologies. An education that stimulates algorithmic intelligence not only helps individuals navigate the digital world with greater autonomy, but also prepares them to challenge unfair or discriminatory practices, promote digital inclusion, and participate in building a fairer and more transparent society.

2. ALGORITHMIC CRITICAL INTELLIGENCE AND EDUCATION IN DIGITAL TRANS-FORMATION

2.1 Algorithmic critical intelligence and digital education

Algorithmic Critical Intelligence refers to the ability to understand, analyse and evaluate algorithms and their effects, not only from a technical point of view, but also from an ethical and social one. It is developed through a process that involves the acquisition of technical and cognitive skills, necessary to interpret the results generated by the algorithms, identify biases and potential risks, and understand the implications of automated decisions on individuals, groups and society as a whole. In other words, algorithmic intelligence is not only a knowledge of technology, but also a critical awareness of its impacts. This critical dimension is particularly important in an age where AI and algorithms are increasingly being used to make decisions that directly and meaningfully affect people's lives: from the selection of information on social media, to recommendation systems, to decisions on loans, hiring, access to justice and so on. Algorithms are not neutral; They are designed, developed, and implemented by humans who may, knowingly or unknowingly, introduce biases into systems. Algorithmic critical intelligence thus becomes a core skill for digital citizens, who must be able to recognize, challenge and, when necessary, correct such biases. Education plays a vital role in the development of algorithmic critical intelligence. It is not just a matter of training technology experts, but of preparing aware and responsible citizens in an increasingly digital social and cultural context. Educating to algorithmic intelligence implies not only teaching how algorithms work, but also how these algorithms impact social, economic and political life, an interdisciplinary education. According to Jasanoff (2020), it is crucial that education encourages critical reflection on the use of algorithms, which should not be seen as a neutral and technical process, but as an act that can have profound impacts on society. For example, digital ethics training helps students understand how technologies can impact core values such as justice, privacy, and equity. The educational approach must be integrated and not limited only to theory. It is necessary for students to be involved in practical projects that push them to think critically about the technologies they use, highlighting the ethical challenges and social dilemmas related to the use of digital tools. In this context, schools, universities and training centres need to develop curricula that integrate digital literacy with digital civic education, stimulating the acquisition of practical skills, and the development of a critical awareness of the algorithmic dynamics that shape society.

2.2 Digital citizenship and algorithmic critical intelligence: a holistic approach

Digital citizenship education is a concept that has evolved in response to the increasing influence of digital technologies in our daily lives. It implies not only the acquisition of technical skills, but also the emergence of a critical awareness regarding the rights and responsibilities that each individual has in the digital world. Digital citizenship, therefore, is not only about the safe use of technologies, but also about informed and conscious participation in the public debate on issues related to digital governance, privacy, online safety and social justice. In this context,

algorithmic critical intelligence becomes one of the essential components of digital citizenship education. Understanding how and why an algorithm can favour some groups at the expense of others allows students to actively participate in the digital society, questioning technologies and helping to create more just and equitable ones. This approach to digital citizenship not only prepares students to consciously navigate cyberspace, but also makes them active participants in shaping the future of technologies. According to Selwyn (2022), digital citizenship education must be seen as a process of empowerment, allowing students to understand and intervene in the algorithms that govern their digital lives. This means not only knowing how to use digital tools, but also how these tools can be used to promote social justice, inclusion and collective well-being. Finally, a crucial aspect of the relationship between Algorithmic Critical Intelligence and education concerns the acquisition of critical thinking that allows students to examine and analyse the moral and social implications of technologies. Algorithms, as tools that organize and structure information, are never neutral. Design choices, development priorities and data collection are influenced by cultural, economic and political factors. This necessitates an educational approach that not only explores how algorithms work, but also how they can be designed to meet ethical and socially responsible criteria. This is the approach to education proposed by Floridi (2019), who suggests integrating ethical principles into digital literacy courses and AI ethics, so as to provide students with the tools to judge and improve algorithmic systems based on values of fairness, transparency, and justice.

CONCLUSIONS

Algorithmic critical intelligence, combined with informed digital citizenship, represents a necessary response to the challenges of digital transformation. Training critical, ethical and responsible citizens is an educational goal that requires an integrated and holistic approach.

Future-oriented education cannot be limited to the transmission of technical skills, but must promote a culture of reflection, dialogue and participation. Only in this way will it be possible to build a society capable of exploiting the potential of digital technologies in a fair and sustainable way, putting human dignity and well-being at the centre.

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NAVIGATING EMERGENT MEDIA IN EDUCATION: THE CASE OF INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NARRATIVES

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This article explores the question of what distinctive characteristics and implications of emerging media for education are. It introduces interactive digital narratives, their theoretical foundations and a selection of practical applications for classroom use. Key concepts such as remediation and multimodality are examined along with essential expressive affordances, highlighting their role in promoting agency and transformation in media education. An initial taxonomy of interactive storytelling tools for classroom use is developed, reviewing tangible story generation, touch-based story editing, storyboard-based tools and narrative coding. By integrating interactive digital narratives into educational practices, teachers can support critical engagement while addressing the challenges posed by emerging digital media.

emerging media; media education; interactive narratives

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Jenkins et al. (2009) first formulated the challenges in fostering a participatory culture in online spaces through media education efforts, there has been an increasing call for educational institutions to adapt to the continually evolving media landscape. However, before educators can design effective educational interventions in schools, it is crucial to establish clarity regarding the theoretical concepts applied to various digital media. Frequently, the use of broad categories such as "entertainment media", "video games", "film", or "social media" falls short of describing the diverse range of experiences young people encounter.

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have engaged in discussions about interactive digital narratives (IDNs). A growing variety of interactive experiences, such as interactive fiction, extended reality experiences, interactive books, or serious games no longer fit within the constraints of older media definitions. Arguably, there is significant educational potential in IDNs. As conventional narrative and "traditional storytelling techniques fall short of conveying the multiple perspectives necessary to understand the systemic nature of modern society" (Barbara et al., 2023), IDNs afford multi-perspectivity and narrative complexity, which are essential pillars of any future literacy effort. This article outlines related theoretical concepts and literacy dimensions that are essential for the digital transformation of schools' media environments.

2. MEDIA EDUCATION AS MEDIENBILDUNG

The concept of structural media education, or "Medienbildung", as articulated by Benjamin Jörissen (Jörissen, 2011), provides a compelling framework for understanding and engaging with emergent media in contemporary educational contexts. In particular, this approach emphasizes the need for a fundamental shift in how media is perceived and utilized within the learning process. Those who advocate for structural media education argue that educational processes should aim to create new frameworks for orientation. This involves a reflexive transformation of individuals' self-perceptions and worldviews, thereby fostering an ongoing evolution in understanding and engagement with media (Jörissen, 2011, p. 223). In structural media education, open-ended transformational processes lead to structural changes in knowledge. The transformative approach is not merely additive; it fundamentally restructures existing knowledge frameworks. By challenging and replacing outdated patterns of perception, learners develop more complex and nuanced understandings. In this context, a critical aspect is "mediality"—the inherent qualities of media that shape experiences and interactions. Rather than viewing media as passive instruments for delivering content, the concept encourages us to explore how media actively construct meanings and influence perceptions.

3. WHAT DISTINGUISHES EMERGENT MEDIA?

Emergent media present significant challenges in educational contexts, particularly in distinguishing novel affordances from those of "old" or legacy media. Traditional framings often fail to capture the nuances of new media formats, using terms like e-book or video conference. An important question in this context is how the "new" media can be distinguished from the old, without using circular arguments. As proposed by Bolter and Grusin (1998), remediation provides a framework for understanding how new media evolve from older forms while simultaneously retaining certain characteristics. It describes the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms, retaining some features while discarding others. The ongoing cycle of remediation emphasizes that each new media form is both a response to and a transformation of its predecessors. For example, the podcasts of the 2000s exemplify remediation by retaining the essence of radio while innovating upon its format to cater to contemporary audiences' preferences for personalization. A decade later, however, proprietary streaming platforms such as Spotify or Deezer remediate the foundational elements of podcasting while adding digital rights management, on-demand access and personalized recommendations based on data-driven algorithms into the listening experience. In the visual realm photography remediates painting by preserving its aesthetic foundations while introducing new capabilities for capturing reality, enhancing accessibility. But by being easily duplicated they also challenge the concepts of originality and authenticity (Benjamin, 1972). A similar relation persists between the introduction of digital photography and analogue photography, adding the characteristic that digital images can be easily copied and shared across various platforms without loss of quality. Today,

generative AI tools like Stable Diffusion leverage vast datasets of existing images to create new content based on user prompts, representing a novel form of remediation. While each of those remediations afford new ways of engaging with media, some of them simultaneously challenge existing paradigms, introducing restrictions on user freedom, or exacerbating concerns about copyright protection and the use and ownership of data. Moreover, remediation is not a deterministic process that unravels as soon as technological novelties emerge. Murray (2011) argues that cultural shifts and the development of new genres often require significant time to align with technological possibilities. In other words, cultural developments necessary for new media genres take much more time than the mere technological possibility for them to emerge. These dynamics prompt critical questions about the fundamental characteristics of what is commonly referred to as emerging media regarding education.

4. APPROACHES TO NEW MEDIA IN EDUCATIONAL

4.1. Multimodality

Interactive media are closely aligned with Kress's theory of multimodality (Kress, 2003, p. 35), which emphasizes that meaning is distributed across various modes, such as speech, writing, gesture, and other forms of communication. Although textbooks remain a significant component of children's media environments, they now engage with print text alongside a diverse range of digital content. This shift poses both conceptual and educational challenges, particularly in addressing the multimodality inherent in these texts. In light of the plethora of modes that digital media can facilitate, the educational sector must navigate a shift from an alphabetic writing culture towards "multimodal meaning making" (Bezemer & Kress, 2015) in the age of new media. As Kress (2003, p. 35) argues, literacy or language can no longer be regarded as the primary or sole means of representation. Instead, it is necessary to explore the principles that govern this multimodal spreading of meaning.

4.2. Transmedia Narratives

Jenkins et al. (2009) introduced the concept of transmedia storytelling, which describes the way individuals engage with narratives that span multiple platforms, fostering the emergence of new participatory cultures. In this context, consumers are likened to "hunters and gatherers", actively pulling together information from diverse sources to create new syntheses, while storytellers capitalize on the opportunities provided by this transmedia environment (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 46). The fluid integration of various media and modes across different sign systems further enriches this characteristic, offering new dimensions to narrative experiences. A decade ago, it was a novelty for stories to become 'transmedial' by spreading across multiple media and involving the active participation of young people in their social interaction (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 86). Transmediation and the fluid use of different media as well as different modes add to this characteristic.

4.3. An Additional Lense: Interactive Digital Narratives

In recent years, the academic field of interactive digital storytelling has emerged, focusing on the theory and design of interactive digital narratives (Koenitz & Eladhari, 2019). In short, interactive narratives can be defined "as a narrative expression in various forms, implemented as a computational system [...] containing potential narratives, which is experienced through a participatory process" (Koenitz, 2023, p. 75). Murray (2016) identifies four key affordances of digital media that distinguish it from traditional forms such as books or video: procedural, participatory, encyclopaedic, and spatial. Procedural affordance refers to the rule-based behaviour of digital systems, allowing users to engage actively with narratives. Participatory affordance enables users to influence and shape the unfolding narrative. Encyclopaedic affordance highlights the vast capacity of digital systems to include extensive detail and coverage, unbounded by physical constraints like page limits. Finally, spatial affordance emphasizes the potential for coherent navigation through digitally organized contexts.

Together, these affordances enhance the expressive power of digital media, promoting key aesthetic dimensions, such as agency and transformation. Regarding their pedagogical implications. Agency signifies that children or students gain a sense of control and the ability to feel that their decisions have consequences. Transformation implies that while engaging with interactive narratives children can experience different perspectives and identities, which leads to a transformation in their understanding. Thus, students engage with interactive digital narrative in a reciprocal manner; on the one side they affect the narrative outcome, while in exchange their personal narrative path also affects their perspective-taking and critical thinking.

5. APPLICATIONS OF INTERACTIVE DIGITAL NARRATIVE

Building on the pedagogical potential of interactive digital narratives, there are several notable examples that highlight the diverse applications and innovations within this field. One prominent example is *Façade* by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern (Mateas & Stern, 2003), which exemplifies the power of interactive storytelling to engage users in a dynamic and participatory narrative experience. Long before the advent of advanced AI models like ChatGPT, in this interactive drama players engage with the story by freely inserting text, allowing them to influence the narrative in real-time and evoking emotional reactions while dialoguing with virtual characters. Regarding education-focused interactive storytelling and without the intention to be exhaustive, the following taxonomy is proposed to categorize interactive tools for digital storytelling in schools encompassing a variety of innovative approaches.

Tangible story generation

This approach utilizes physical objects to facilitate storytelling. As achieved in projects such as PageCraft (Budd et al., 2007) or Mobeybou (Sylla et al., 2019), tangible story generation encourages students to manipulate real-world items, which can

represent characters or plot elements, thereby changing the narrative that gets displayed on a screen or represented through audio and visuals. This hands-on method allows learners to visualize their narratives and fosters creativity through physical interaction.

Touch-based story editing

Designed for primary school use, the TellTable supports collaborative storytelling by enabling users to edit and refine their narratives through touch interactions (Cao et al., 2010). This intuitive approach helps young learners engage with their stories actively, allowing them to make changes easily and collaboratively, thus enhancing their understanding of narrative structure and flow.

Storyboard-based tools

Storyboard-based tools like the telling board (Powell et al., 2018) provide a visual framework for organizing stories into panels or sequences, making it easier for students to plan and visualize their narratives (Schlauch, 2023). By breaking down stories into manageable parts, storyboard-based tools help learners focus on pacing, transitions, and the overall arc of their narratives, promoting a clearer understanding of storytelling mechanics.

Narrative coding

Block-based narrative programming (Smith et al., 2021) integrates coding concepts with storytelling, allowing students to create interactive narratives through programming, leveraging graphical programming environments such as Scratch. By combining narrative construction with coding skills, learners can develop stories that respond to user inputs or choices, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving abilities while enhancing computational thinking.

As the field of interactive storytelling continues to evolve, these tools represent just a starting point for the ongoing integration of interactive digital narratives into educational curricula, demonstrating the significant role of emerging media in promoting agency and transformation in pedagogical practices.

3. CONCLUSION

Interactive digital narratives represent a significant development in the intersection of media and education, offering structured opportunities for procedural, participatory, encyclopaedic, and spatial engagement. In this article, we have explored the mediality of emerging media through key concepts such as remediation, transmedia, multimodality and interactive digital narratives. Various practical examples and use-cases illustrate how these types of media can be applied in educational contexts. Future research may examine the adaptability of interactive digital narratives to diverse educational settings and integration into existing curricula, facilitating reflexive engagement with media and contributing to a responsible digital transformation in education.

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION. A CRITICAL LOOK FROM A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Experts, researchers, and advocates in the field have expressed concerns about artificial intelligence (AI) potentially making education less inclusive. In this perspective, AI systems can inadvertently perpetuate or exacerbate discrimination and biases in the data on which they are trained. On the other hand, many sources emphasize that AI has the potential to play a positive role in promoting diversity and inclusivity in education when implemented with a deliberate focus. Here we ask: How do national educational authorities guide schools, teachers, and students on the possibilities and challenges that are caused by AI in inclusive education? What are the main issues addressed? Our contribution is informed by analysing research papers, international and selected countries' public guidelines, strategies, and overall AI and inclusive education recommendations.

artificial intelligence (AI); inclusive education; AI international guidelines; Italy; Norway.

INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed the educational landscape in many ways, offering new opportunities for adapting educational experiences and catering to diverse learner profiles, from adaptive learning platforms tailoring content to individual student needs to intelligent tutoring systems providing real-time feedback (Holmes et al. 2022; Lim et al., 2023; Niemi et al., 2023). Moreover, the potential of AI extends beyond the classroom, permeating administrative functions such as student enrolment, assessment grading, and educational resource allocation, thereby optimizing institutional efficiency and resource utilization (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022). Furthermore, when the generative AI was introduced in fall 2022 by the Open AI and ChatGPT, education faced even more unforeseen challenges, and its impact on teaching and learning remains unknown.

The integration of AI in education necessitates a paradigm shift in pedagogical approaches and teacher training, raising questions pertaining to professional autonomy, accountability, and the redefinition of educator roles within technologically mediated learning environments. While these types of multifaceted challenges

related to pedagogical issues emerge, also various ethical and juridical considerations caused by various forms of AI are observed, and they call for careful policy deliberation. For example, concerns regarding data privacy, algorithmic bias, and digital inequality underscore the imperative for robust regulatory frameworks and ethical guidelines to govern the development, deployment, and usage of AI in educational settings.

1. THE INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

AI constitutes a key area of interest and contention within policymaking, both national and across the nations. Its development has been pursued and debated, and guidelines have been outlined by international policymaking bodies such as the OECD, UNESCO and the EU. Nations, on their side, have adjusted these guidelines in coherence with local laws and regulations, and most likely with their existing policies, laws and regulations on digitalisation. However, as countries around the world hold different profiles and approaches towards digitalisation, this impacts the implementation and regulation of AI in education. While research suggests that digital technologies and AI may support inclusive education (Selwyn, 2022), less is known on how national educational authorities approach these possibilities in their overall strategies, guidelines and regulations. Thus, in our paper we will take a closer look at this perspective.

1.1 The European Union initiative

The *Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027)* is the EU policy initiative to support the sustainable and effective adaptation of the education and training systems for the digital age (EU, 2020). It presents opportunities for improved quality and quantity of teaching concerning digital technologies, support for the digitalisation of teaching methods and pedagogies and the provision of infrastructure required for inclusive and resilient remote learning. The Plan has two strategic priorities: to foster high-performing digital education ecosystems and to enhance digital skills and competences for the digital age. In line with these priorities, in 2022 the EU published an important document entitled *Ethical Guidelines on the use of AI and data in teaching and learning for educators* "to help educators understand the potential that the applications of AI and data usage can have in education and to raise awareness of the possible risks so that they are able to engage positively, critically and ethically with AI systems and exploit their full potential". By way of introduction, the document underlines that "evidence-based research on the impact of AI in education is still limited so it is important to maintain a critical and supervised attitude". It then begins by analysing some prejudices about AI and assigning the responsibility to people and to teachers/educators, to enhance the potential and control the risks. Several examples of virtuous use of AI in the educational field are proposed, to support teaching, learning and assessment practices. The text outlines the key considerations and requirements for trustworthy AI: human agency and oversight, transparency, diversity, non-discrimination and fairness, societal and environmental wellbeing, privacy and data governance, technical robustness and safety,

accountability. Finally, there are guiding questions for teachers based on the key requirements for trustworthy AI systems. Some of them are focused more on practical implementation issues and others on ethical considerations. Based on the focus of this paper, it is interesting to report some of the key questions relating to the requirement of diversity, non-discrimination, and fairness:

> Is the system accessible by everyone in the same way without any barriers? Does the system provide appropriate interaction modes for learners with disabilities or special education needs? [...] Are there procedures in place to ensure that AI use will not lead to discrimination or unfair behaviour for all users? [...] Are procedures in place to detect and deal with bias or perceived inequalities that may arise? (EU, 2022).

On March 13, 2024, the European Parliament formally adopted the EU AI Act, the world's first law governing AI, providing rules on data quality, transparency, human oversight and accountability. The Act establishes obligations for providers and users depending on the level of risk. Unacceptable risk AI systems are a threat to people and will be banned. They include cognitive behavioural manipulation of people or specific vulnerable groups, social scoring, biometric identification and categorisation of people, real-time and remote biometric identification systems, such as facial recognition. AI systems that negatively affect safety or fundamental rights will be considered high risk and will be assessed before being put on the market and throughout their lifecycle. People will have the right to file complaints about AI systems to designated national authorities.

2. ITALY

The Italian government has been taking initiatives to increase digital skills, to address e-inclusion, to reduce the digital divide amongst the population and ensure that most have at least basic digital skills.

In 2020 the Italian National AI Strategy was launched by the Ministry of Economic Development, taking a comprehensive approach, including on aspects related to ethics, trust and education policies. Its objective is to outline a coherent plan to allow Italy to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs resulting from "the most important technology paradigm shift of our times".

The strategy is based on the principles of anthropocentrism, reliability and sustainability. AI must be at the service of people, guaranteeing human supervision, preventing the risks of worsening of the social and territorial imbalances potentially resulting from its unconscious or inappropriate use. AI must be designed and built in a reliable and transparent way. AI must generate opportunities of growth and well-being for all individuals, in line with the principles contained in article 3 of the Italian Constitution and the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. It must be itself a sustainable technology and provide a tool for environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Section 3 of the Strategy deals with citizen awareness, provides for information and

awareness-raising actions and states that "there will be particular attention to the possible uses of AI in promoting access for disabled people and the most vulnerable subjects to digital services" and to the development of enabling technologies to improve the ability of these categories to use AI based digital technologies.

On April 23th, 2024, Italy's cabinet approved the Bill 1066 aimed at laying down ground rules for the use of AI, to ensure that it is applied "with respect for the autonomy and decision-making power" of human beings (Senato della Repubblica Italiana, 2024). The bill aims to promote "a correct, transparent and responsible use, in an anthropocentric dimension, of artificial intelligence, aimed at seizing its opportunities" (art. 1). The anthropocentric approach to artificial intelligence emerges from the art. 3 which provides that the use of this new technology takes place in compliance with the fundamental rights provided by the Constitution and European law and with the principles of transparency and proportionality of the processes, reliability and correctness of the data used for the development of artificial intelligence systems.

The development of AI systems is entrusted to a strategy prepared by Invitalia, a specific structure of the Government, in agreement with the national authorities responsible for technological innovation. The choice denotes the government's intention to play a crucial role in the process of developing AI systems.

There aren't specific references to schools and inclusive education in the National Strategy. This appears to be a shortcoming in the Italian emerging regulatory framework. However, the principles stated and reiterated in the cited sources denote attention devoted to vulnerable persons, equity matters and, more generally, to the ethical aspects in the use of AI in all fields.

3. NORWAY

In Norway, the government launched a national strategy on AI in 2021, including areas relevant for the public and private sector. While most schools and higher education institutions including teacher education are public and free to all in Norway, the national strategy on AI did not address issues that targeted the education field directly. However, a few years later, in late Spring 2023, a national strategy for digital competence and digital infrastructure in primary and secondary education was launched (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023). The strategy was a joint effort among the Ministry of Education and Research and The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS), involving various stakeholders such as researchers. Moreover, there was a delay on its release, mainly caused by the introduction of Generative AI during Fall 2022. The strategy had thus to find ways to incorporate updated guidelines on how to approach AI, and especially generative AI in education. Consequently, various issues on AI were addressed, such as ethical and juridical concerns regarding the use of AI in education, along with developing AI literacy for students, as referred to in the national curricula. A national agency for education, the Directorate for Education and Training has developed some guidelines on how schools and school owners may pursue the guidelines outlined in the national

strategy, and on their website, these guidelines are updated on a regular basis. Furthermore, in 2017, the Directorate for Education and Training initiated a framework for professional digital competence for teachers (Kelentric et al., 2017), which guides teachers and teacher trainers in digital competence. In Spring 2024, the framework was updated including perspectives on AI, including AI literacy (Directorate for Education and Training, 2024).

Norway has sent its position on the regulation to the European Commission. The position was prepared following a process in which the ministry obtained input from several stakeholders. Here, Norway supports the risk-based approach proposed by the Commission, in which most current AI applications are considered to fall into categories that do not place undue demands on business. Furthermore, the Norwegian government outlines some remarks regarding the proposition's formula on prohibited AI practices. The Article 5 – 1 suggests prohibiting AI systems for evaluation or classification of the worthiness of natural persons where such use of AI-systems may lead to unjustified or disproportionate treatment of individuals. Furthermore, it should be carefully considered whether the terms "unjustified or disproportionate" will provide sufficient safeguards against unwanted use of this type of AI systems. The Norwegian government is concerned that this may allow for exclusion of individuals from the use of certain fundamental services that should be available to all, for instance health and care services (Norwegian Government, 2024, p. 2).

CONCLUSIONS

The development of AI constitutes a key area of interest and contention within policymaking, both in and across the nations. In this paper, by doing a document analysis of public documents such as international recommendations and national strategies, we elaborated on how two countries, Italy and Norway, have approached AI and inclusive education. The two countries were chosen due to their different profiles as regards approaches towards digitalisation, education and affiliation to the European Union. For example, Norway was ranked as number 14, and Italy as number 24 in the World Digital Competitiveness Ranking 2023 (IMD, 2023).

Although they started from vastly different positions, both countries have adopted similar approaches to the challenges posed by AI in education. They've aligned themselves with the cautious, risk-aware stance of European regulations, while still promoting technological and commercial advancements. Both nations prioritize ethics and responsibility in this delicate phase of digital transformation, where the societal and educational impacts of new technologies are often unpredictable. In both contexts, discussions surrounding AI, especially in education, emphasize inclusivity and address the unique needs of vulnerable populations

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INTERCULTURAL NATIVES: HOW TO PROMOTE THE CITIZENSHIP STARTING FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

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1. THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AS A HUMAN RIGHT

Currently the early childhood education is a central issue in the scientific debate and beyond. In the international context, European Commission as well as UNESCO have fostered a growing interest in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in terms of rights, accessibility, achieving greater social equity, and preventing the risks of marginality. These are central issues in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015), of which the Goal 4 calls for the commitment of states to quality, and equitable and inclusive education. Compared to the past, the focus on the early years of development has allowed for an increasing interest in studies that seek to understand how best to fight exclusion and disadvantage starting from early childhood education. In general, early childhood education is even more urgent if we consider the growing conditions of widespread poverty in the world and the continuing risks for so many children to grow up in contexts of deprivation, war and environmental emergencies. Although there are many international guidelines, declarations, conventions and documents which claim the importance of making quality education accessible to all children right from the start, there is still a lack of access to adequate education and training (Moss, 2013; Stringher, 2016). In Italy, for example, the rate of educational poverty affecting children is increasing, as well as the difficulty of access to early childhood facilities, with strong differences between the north and south of the country. Therefore, is interesting to remember the law article dedicated to early childhood, which outlines the aims of the Integrated System: girls and boys, from birth to six years of age, in order to develop their potential for relationships, autonomy, creativity and learning, in an appropriate affective, playful and cognitive context, are guaranteed equal opportunities in education and training, care, relationships and play, overcoming territorial, economic, ethnic and cultural inequalities and barriers (D.L., 2017). The Integrated System is, therefore, a means of supporting the democratic development of our society, aiming to ensure quality education for all, regardless of any disadvantages. Accessibility and continuity of an early childhood pathway are the first and indispensable factors to ensure positive development paths and to contrast social inequalities in a systemic and comprehensive way. All of this is even more

important for children who start with greater difficulties. Indeed, having meaningful educative experiences in the 0-6 age range primarily represents a factor of protection from social exclusion, especially for those who are defined in documents as children with a migrant background, disadvantaged, or in educational poverty. Eventually, a good educative experience also supports the growth of each individual in complex societies (European Commission, 2019). The widespread multicultural condition of social contexts worldwide, indeed, questions us on the ability to promote forms of citizenship capable of understanding and experiencing diversity as a value and richness. In this regard, it seems necessary to recall the fundamental importance of an integrated education and training system for children aged zero to six, and at the same time the centrality of adopting an intercultural approach in schools, starting from early childhood education and care.

2. INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN A PLURAL SOCIETY

Today society is very complex: there is great heterogeneity of groups and interactions in everyday life contexts. In such a plurality of possible relationships, acquiring intercultural competences becomes fundamental, not only for living together, but also in order to create positive interactions in every field of an individual's life. In this sense, intercultural education represents a crucial response to today's challenges, especially starting from early childhood onwards. The intercultural perspective in education is an important approach to promote spaces for encounters between people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Fiorucci, 2020). Moreover, it is also an educational and political perspective, committed to building greater social equity and full accessibility to educational pathways, in a decolonial understanding of knowledge and practices. This is even more important in those places, such as early childhood services, which especially for people with a migrant background often represent the first places of reception. For many people, those services could be the only chance to build real forms of inclusion and active participation, in a plural society characterized by conflicts between different groups. The risk is to create pathways emptied of meaning and full of empty rhetoric, whereas it is essential to emphasize how an authentic intercultural practice begins with – indeed cannot exist without – the deconstruction of power, privilege, oppression, and the consciousness, or lack of consciousness, that these conditions engender in the oppressor and the oppressed (Gorsky, 2009, p. 89). Intercultural education, in fact, through the exercise of a real cognitive, emotional and relational decentralisation and the ability to develop a critical ethnocentrism, tries to rethink the relationships between subjects and groups and build plural knowledge. From an educational perspective, this means rethinking curricula, teaching methodologies and strategies so that it is really possible to build welcoming and inclusive educational pathways rooted within the paradigm of heterogeneity as a value and richness.

3. INTERCULTURAL TOOLS AND STRATEGIES IN THE CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The intercultural education approach in early childhood promotes a global process of rethinking, starting from the reception and integration of children and their families, who encounter educational contexts structured to take charge of the entire family unit for the first time. This aspect is all the more valid if we think in particular of families with a migratory background. The reception must therefore be carefully structured, favouring effective intercultural communication and dialogue, through the educational team's mediation skills and socio-relational competences, which are indispensable for building a relationship of trust between two subjects. It will be fundamental to equip oneself with tools and skills useful for conflict resolution and mutual understanding, as well as working to deconstruct stereotypes and prejudices, in the name of an education to differences. In this regard, storytelling can be a valid educational tool to promote plural and decentralised imagery, as well as playful and cooperative activities, in which to build relational and collaborative skills. Another fundamental element is related to the promotion of plurilingualism and cultural plurality in classrooms and families, as indicated in the intercultural guidelines promoted by the Miur (2022) and declared in international documents. In fact, the promotion of the plurality of languages, including artistic ones, implies the recognition of equal dignity in expressive possibilities and promotes an education that is fully inclusive and open to differences. Practising an intercultural perspective already in early childhood contexts and regardless of the presence of children with different cultural or linguistic backgrounds makes it possible, in fact, to work on the recognition of the other (Pescarmona, 2021). All of this will help to build a more inclusive society, promoting coexistence and mutual respect.

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IN-SERVICE TRAINING TO SUPPORT AN INTEGRATED EDUCATION IN CONTEXTS OF SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION

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ECEC plays an essential role in preventing educational poverty and social injustice, thereby reducing the risk of marginalisation. The integrated approach to education adopted by 0-6 services can mitigate the impact of disadvantage, facilitating genuine opportunities for development for all. The present contribution outlines a training programme implemented with teachers employed in nursery schools situated in the south-west area of Brescia. These schools are characterised by a multitude of challenges, including high rates of multiculturalism, the emergence of new forms of poverty, discrimination and marginalisation, among others. In light of the aforementioned circumstances, our objective was to investigate the underlying reasons behind an integrated vision of educational action, while simultaneously creating the necessary conditions to encourage educators to engage in systemic working practices. The training path, conducted with the MAG method (*méthode d'analyse en groupe*, i.e. the method of analysis in a group), has facilitated reflection and discussion on challenges, critical issues, and the delicate process of interconnection with families, social services, and diverse educational contexts. The objective of this training experience was to provide an opportunity for the 0-6 services to be made open to the community in its broadest and most inclusive sense.

children with migrant background; educational poverty; in-service training; integrated system 0-6

1. THE SUPPORTING ROLE OF HIGH QUALITY ECEC AND TEACHERS IN CONTEXTS OF SOCIAL MARGINALISATION

As is widely acknowledged, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015), in Goal #4, which is to *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*, calls for States to commit to the provision of quality, equitable and inclusive education. From this standpoint, the Scientific Community as well as National and International Governments have demonstrated a growing interest in High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as a framework that guarantees:

- the respect for children's rights;
- the accessibility and quality of education provision;
- the achievement of greater social justice;
- the prevention of risks of social marginalisation.

In particular, it has been demonstrated that having meaningful educational experiences in the 0-6 age range is a primary protective factor against social exclusion, particularly for those identified in documents and studies as "children with a migrant background", "disadvantaged", or "in educational poverty" (Save the Children, 2015). In other words, it also supports the growth of each individual in "complex societies" (Council of Europe, 2019). Indeed, the increasingly multicultural nature of social contexts necessitates the promotion of forms of citizenship that are capable of understanding and experiencing diversity as a value and a richness. It also leads to enhance the importance of supporting the activities of teachers, that are among the strongest witnesses and players in adopting an intercultural approach, promoting spaces for encounters between people from a plurality of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and building greater inclusiveness (Fiorucci, 2020).

It is for this reason that we will present an in-service training from an intercultural perspective.

2. CONTEXT

We describe a training programme carried out with teachers working in the nursery schools of the south-west and inner-city areas of Brescia: an area marked by many challenges, including new forms of poverty, discrimination, and marginalisation, to name just a few.

Brescia is actually one of the most multicultural cities of Italy. In 2023 (Assirelli, 2024), the percentage of non-Italian citizens in the total population was 18.6%, compared with a national average of 8.7%. In particular, the south-west and city centre area of Brescia have the highest concentration of migrants in the city, as evidenced by the following demographic data. The neighbourhoods in which the schools are located (Don Bosco, Porta Milano and Chiesanuova) (Figure 1) had incidence rates of between 25 and 29% in 2023 (the year the project was launched) (Municipality of Brescia)[1]. In the 0-14 age group, the percentage in these areas reaches 41%. Furthermore, studies on poverty in the city in general have demonstrated that 65% of resident foreign families live below the relative poverty line.

These neighbourhoods display social dynamics that may be characterised as follows:
- considerable social problems, including poverty, drug abuse and low-level criminality;
- a lack of integration and social cohesion;
- and, at the same time, a population growth, particularly in the school-age group.

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[1] Data provided directly by the Civil Registry of the Municipality of Brescia.

Fig. 1. The neighbourhoods in which the schools interested by the training project are located (Don Bosco, Porta Milano and Chiesanuova)
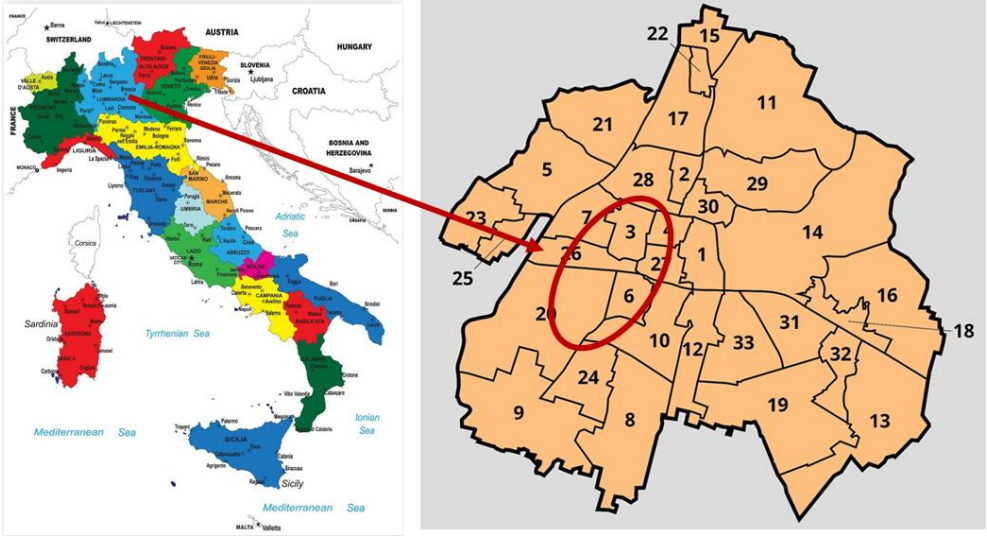
The context thus presents traits of high socio-cultural complexity (Zoletto, 2023). In order to better understand these dynamics, it is necessary to consider the intersection between several conditions that produce marginalisation.

A principal factor in understanding the intricacies of this context is not the migratory background of a significant proportion of the population, but rather the conjunction between the migratory condition and other elements, including socio-economic factors. Contextual elements also contribute to this condition of deprivation. Indeed, during the initial phase of the project, a mapping of educational, social and community services in the area was conducted, which revealed that some of the districts of interest lack these kinds of services. Schools appear to be the primary educational institution capable of addressing the needs of children and families and of interacting with social services. These are highly multicultural schools, with classes in which the proportion of children with a migrant background is close to 90% and in which significant instances of social marginalisation are observed. In these schools, teachers engage with the issue of educational poverty on a daily basis, considering not only the lack of opportunities, hardship and quality of life, but also social deprivation.

The measures required to address these issues are inherently systemic. Indeed, the project in question forms part of a wider initiative that seeks to tackle the underlying causes of such deprivation through a multifaceted and integrated approach. The 'SUS strategy' (Sustainable Urban Development strategy) is being promoted by the Municipality of Brescia in collaboration with a number of local entities and communities, as well as with universities, third-sector organisations and schools. It encompasses a variety of actions across multiple domains. The strategy aims to facilitate sustainable urban development in the south-west area of the city through interventions, such as: urban and architectural initiatives to promote sustainable mobility, as well as educational initiatives for children and teachers. Additionally, the

strategy entails the creation of a community hub that fosters social interaction and cohesion.

One of the actions focuses on the training pathways implemented in schools, in particular on the role of educators and teachers. A complex approach guided the training activities. The intention was, in fact, twofold: firstly, to examine the rationale behind an integrated vision of educational action and, secondly, to establish the conditions under which educators are motivated to engage in a systemic approach to their work. It is not possible to address the multifaceted dimensions of educational poverty without considering its existential implications and the impact it has on the professional identity and emotional experiences of teachers.

3. RESEARCH-TRAINING PATH

The training path is informed by the following questions:

- What pedagogical perspectives on the role of ECEC should be reflected in training practices?
- What methods might be employed to promote an intercultural perspective in professional practices and attitudes?
- What is the most effective approach to supporting these professionals, beginning with the acknowledgement of their requirements and capabilities, and continuing with a reflective process?

3.1 La méthode d'analyse en groupe (MAG)

Thus, it was resolved to propose a research approach that could also serve as an educational methodology, capable of fostering diverse perspectives, facilitating the exchange of ideas and projects, and consolidating resources and actions. Furthermore, it was crucial to commence the process from the perspective of community life experiences, employing narrative techniques and facilitating reflection. The method chosen was hence the MAG, that is the method of "analysis in the group" (Van Campenhoudt et al., 2005). This method is based on the hermeneutic approach of Paul Ricoeur (1969), namely the conflict of interpretations.

The MAG has the distinctive feature of engaging with a heterogeneous group of individuals who share an identical subject of investigation or training, yet present different representations and divergent interests. Despite this, they are situated on the same level, regardless of age, gender, or status. As trainers, we decided to adopt the MAG approach, specifically because this method of intervention is designed to engage with groups including individuals who are directly impacted by the issues under consideration (Amadini, 2019).

In the context of implementation, educators engaged in the nursery schools participating in the SUS project have collectively examined the experiences and circumstances occurring within their respective communities. It was crucial to ensure the involvement and active participation of individuals throughout the entire process, as the enhancement of each participant was a central element of the device. The events have been narrated by those who were directly involved in them, in

accordance with a rigorous methodological procedure: the MAG, indeed, follows a clearly-defined sequence of multiple collective analyses of the shared narratives. Its original structure is divided into four phases: narration, interpretations, analysis, and practical perspectives and evaluation. These phases are conducted in a relatively short time frame to maintain proximity and cohesion.

We therefore decided to divide the four phases into three meetings spread over a maximum of one month: the first two were dedicated to narration, interpretation and analysis; the concluding session saw the integration of new insights, the identification of shared learnings, an evaluation of the process, and a consideration of the potential for future repetitions. This organisational choice responds to the need to guarantee spaces for reflexivity that are not extraneous to everyday educational practice. Indeed, the meetings were held in the contexts themselves, ensuring a fully situated approach. This allows for the enhancement of knowledge derived from experience, or the fact of living within contexts and experiencing social situations (De Certeau, 1984). Therefore, it provides a methodology capable of enhancing reflective competencies among professionals. These skills can then be applied independently in everyday practice, in a process of learning that can engender transformations in individuals and perspectives, both at the personal and at the collective level (Mezirow, 1991/2003).

The distinguishing feature of MAG is that it is not confined to a group dynamic; rather, the central focus is on a process of analysis conducted within a group, with the objective of integrating disparate perspectives. Ultimately, this training tool facilitates "shared reflection", whereby participants engage in learning not as isolated individuals but rather through the interconnectivity of interpersonal exchanges. In essence, the resources of reflexivity are distributed and disseminated among all participants. The outcome of the process is achieved not only through the individual's narration of their personal experiences, but also through the examination of the experiences of others (Demazière & Dubar, 1997).

Indeed, as Mercier and De Muelenaere point out, on the basis of these confrontations of interpretations, we try to identify a consensual understanding, i.e. an understanding from which convergences emerge, without neglecting the divergences of interpretation (2007, p. 141).

Thus, in addition to the advancement of experiential knowledge, MAG also facilitates the integration of this knowledge with scientific knowledge, as represented by the researcher. Consequently, a virtuous circle of interdependencies is established between practical and theoretical knowledge. This is one of the most distinctive features of MAG, setting it apart from other methods (such as the focus group) where the final analysis and understanding of social phenomena remains a matter managed by the researcher.

4. OUTCOMES

The complexity of educational poverty and marginality cannot be adequately comprehended or resolved through the exclusive implementation of didactic methods.

In order to address these challenges, it is crucial to develop new in-service training processes that are more integrated and capable of improving complex strategies to face the intricate and changing phenomena of social injustice in accordance with the principles of the 0-6 integrated system. The use of a reflexive methodological approach has facilitated a transformative learning process, as defined by Mezirow (2000). It moves from experience and, through critical reflection, draws from the experiences themselves learnings capable of changing the people and the practices. Therefore, transformative learning is a process of self-understanding and self-reflection: the value of MAG lies in its capacity to facilitate the implementation of such dynamics at the collective or group level.

This approach has also led us to work on teachers' fatigues from a formative perspective. As a result of this process, teachers have enhanced their competencies, not only in terms of intercultural skills, which are essential in the neighbourhoods and schools where they teach, but also in regard to the capacity to engage in reflexive thinking in the face of complexity. Indeed, this methodology allows for the identification of the intricate dynamics inherent to such socio-cultural and educational contexts, as well as the dichotomies that are often encountered in everyday life education.

Moreover, this intercultural and reflective approach can be employed with children in order to support them in managing their own fatigue. The way teachers accompany their pupils through the complexity and challenges that children face (which can be highly impactful) offers them a valuable example and demonstrates effective strategies from an educational perspective.

In addition, this posture encourages the implementation of educational approaches, both within the school environment and in connections with external factors. In this way, a dialogue is fostered with the territory and the various subjects that inhabit it, including families, other services and local communities. In fact, through this training experience, we create an opportunity to make the 0-6 services accessible to the community, in its most inclusive sense. The complexity of educational poverty requires, indeed, multidisciplinary measures and the engagement of a number of actors, in order to improve educational standards and social justice, and thereby to enhance the community.

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ETHICAL AWARENESS: A CROSS-CUTTING ELEMENT IN THE INTERCULTURAL SKILLS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

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Ethically responsible behaviour has been identified as a key element in the context of global citizenship education (UNESCO, 2015; Tarozzi, 2024). By integrating the findings of a qualitative empirical study on the relationship between education and ethics with an investigation into the intercultural competences of early childhood educators, this article introduces the construct of *ethical awareness* as a transversal element between these domains. After exploring the intercultural competences of early childhood educators, using the competence models proposed by Fiorucci and Deardorff as a point of reference, the article explores the research design and the concept of ethical awareness in formal educational settings for children aged 0-6 years. Finally, it examines ethical awareness as a transversal element in the field of intercultural competence.

ethical awareness; intercultural skills; early childhood education; early childhood educators; Constructivist Grounded Theory

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the relationship between early childhood educators' *intercultural competencies* and *ethical awareness*, with reference to findings from the qualitative research project *Promoting Ethical Awareness: a Grounded Theory on the Socio-Ethical Education Curriculum in Preschool*.

The article begins with an analysis of the intercultural competencies of '0-6 educators'.

The following section presents the research design and provides a detailed account of ethical awareness in early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts.

The final section will address the relationship between the promotion of ethical awareness, the intercultural competence of '0-6 educators' and the concept of meaningful education.

1. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES OF THE 0-6 EDUCATOR

In a globalised, multicultural society, the engagement with diversity and the fostering of relationships with plurality are central to the educational process (Reggio &

Dodi, 2017) also with the aim to realize *social justice* (Tarozzi, 2011). This is particularly pertinent in early childhood services, where educators' roles and trust-based relationships with children and families necessitate robust *intercultural competencies* (Fiorucci, 2020). Furthermore, the development of these competencies represents a pivotal objective in the pursuit of effective education (Council of Europe, 2019; UNESCO, 2020).

Deardorff's (2009) and Fiorucci's (2020) models of intercultural competence are particularly relevant in the context of early childhood education. Fiorucci (2020, pp. 104-107) outlines three core areas: decentralising perspectives, shifting from ethnocentrism to *critical ethnorelativism*, and engaging in intercultural mediation. Deardorff (2009) highlights the educator's role as a behavioural role model, fostering openness, cultural self-awareness, and attentiveness to others' values and norms.

The achievement of ethnorelativism necessitates the overcoming of inherent ethnocentrism through the development of self-awareness, openness, and active engagement with difference (Bennett, 1993). *Mediation*, a key competency, involves the utilisation of constructive dialogue to create a 'third way' that transcends cultural differences (Deardorff, 2009, p. 33). *Conflict*, approached with inquiry and reflective communication, becomes an opportunity for mutual understanding.

In early childhood services, these competencies manifest as practices that embrace diversity, challenge stereotypes, and promote active listening and reflection (Fiorucci, 2019, 2020, pp. 95-96).

2. ETHICAL AWARENESS: AN EMERGING CATEGORY IN A CGT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

2.1. Research design

This study employs *Constructivist Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2014) as its methodological framework. This approach was selected for its *ethical stance* (Bianchi, 2019) and alignment with the epistemology of reference: socio-constructivism, complexity theories, and critical pedagogy. In contrast to an approach based on hypotheses and research questions, it focuses on the *co-construction of meanings* through a process of engaging with the scientific literature, the opinion of privileged witnesses and the researcher's own perspective.

The context identified is that of Italian preschools, which are regarded as spaces for early democratic coexistence and *loci of ethical practice* (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Therefore, more than thirty *intensive interviews* (Bianchi, 2019) were conducted mostly with pre-school teachers.

The data coding and analysis (Charmaz, 2004) identified four categories[1]: Promoting ethical awareness; Making the ethical framework of educational action

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[1] In order to enhance the procedural dimension that characterised it and constituted its unavoidable backbone, in accordance with the tradition of *Constructivist Grounded Theory,* the gerund form was used in the name of the categories.

intentional and explicit; Positioning ourselves ethically in the educational relation-ship; Becoming literate in emerging ethics.

2.2. Ethical awareness

Ethical awareness is a multidimensional construct that can be defined as the ca-pacity to reflect on the motivations behind actions, their consequences, and their consistency with reference values (Iori, 2023; 2024a; 2024b). This entails question-ing one's choices, considering alternative paths, and ensuring alignment with per-sonal values.

It is therefore closely associated with the concepts of *personal intelligence* (Gard-ner, 2010, pp. 343-344), *agency* (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and *emotional intelli-gence* (Goleman, 2011). This encompasses the analysis and expression of one's own states of mind, observing and understanding them, as well as the motivations and emotions of others, without neglecting the ability to act autonomously, choos-ing between different possible alternatives, also in function of social change (Iori, 2024a, 2024b). This approach could prove effective in preventing ethical illiteracy (Iori, 2024c).

In educational contexts, ethical awareness is manifested in the promotion of be-haviours that facilitate *reflective thinking* (Michelini, 2016), *democratic dialogue* (Baldacci, 2020), and *active listening* (Sclavi, 2003).

Teachers occupy a pivotal position as ethical role models, facilitating discourse on morally salient issues and cultivating an environment of respect and dialogue. This encompasses the creation of an environment that enables children to freely ex-press themselves and develop their critical thinking abilities, with the gradual inte-gration of these practices into their lives.

In preschools, tools such as *assemblies* (Martini et al., 2020) provide opportunities for self-expression, listening, and collective reflection, thereby fostering the devel-opment of a *community of thought (*Michelini, 2016).

These practices contribute to the development of an *ethical atmosphere*, which is of the utmost importance for an educational process that is emancipatory. Eman-cipatory education (Freire, 1970; Biesta, 2012; Catarci, 2023) fosters the free ex-pression of individuals, enabling them to engage with their reality in a critical man-ner and strive for transformative change.

Therefore, it is imperative that intentional educational settings prioritise reflection on the ethical atmospheres that shape the relational dynamics, values, and respon-sibilities embedded in educational practices (Massa, 1987; Riva, 2004).

3. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES AND MEANINGFUL EDUCATION: WHAT ROLE DOES ETHICAL AWARENESS PLAY?

It is inevitable that the cultural plurality of society will be reflected in early childhood services (Fiorucci, Pinto Minerva & Portera, 2017). Therefore, it is important to cul-tivate and support the intercultural competences of early childhood educators in

order to increase their effectiveness (Portera, 2016).

In fact, every relational context involves an encounter with a variety of cultures, as everyone is the custodian of his or her own cultural traditions (Fiorucci, 2020).

This dynamic, particularly in 0-6 institutions, necessitates the implementation of a targeted intercultural training programme (Pescarmona, 2021). Professional development in this regard comprises the provision of the requisite tools for staff to effectively address the diverse situations they may encounter.

In this sense, the concept of *meaningful education* is put forth as an alternative horizon of meaning to that of *quality education*, associated with neoliberal logic (Dahlberg, 2016).

With regard to the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems, one well-established perspective, particularly within the field of economics, views the qualification of early childhood institutions as a means of reducing public expenditure by preventing future costs in essential or emergency services linked to poor quality of life (Heckman, 2020).

Nevertheless, some scholars contest this neoliberal interpretation of quality (Dahlberg, 2016). They argue for a relational and transformative perspective, whereby the quality of education is determined by the creation of a framework in which children can express themselves, construct meaning through deep observation and listening (Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 1999; Clark & Moss, 2014).

This perspective challenges the limitations of traditional views of quality, which are often limited to measurable learning outcomes.

In contrast, the approach emphasises the significance of establishing material and symbolic conditions that facilitate children's engagement in meaningful experiences and collectively reworking these expressions (Massa, 2000).

It is of the utmost importance for those working in the field of education to develop and maintain the ability to interact effectively with individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds. This enables educators to engage with a diverse range of realities, plan and act in a reflective manner, and relate to those who are different from them using appropriate frameworks (Deardorff, 2009). This is particularly crucial in the context of early childhood education, where stereotypes and prejudices tend to emerge, influencing attitudes towards diversity (Tabet, 1996).

Interviews with preschool teachers indicate that *ethical awareness* is a fundamental aspect of *intercultural competencies*.

Ethical awareness, as defined by intentionality, responsibility, and reflective capacity, is associated with values such as attentiveness, respect, and dialogue (Fiorucci, 2019). It allows teachers to model reflective behaviours and create spaces for listening and engaging with diverse perspectives (Iori, 2024d).

Educators demonstrating *intercultural sensitivity* (Bennett, 1993) are aware of the necessity to deconstruct their own stereotypes and demonstrate flexibility in managing inner resistance and conflicts when engaging with otherness. They utilise innovative strategies to facilitate communication and navigate the complexities of

dynamic balances. An inclination towards comprehending the other is a fundamental attribute that facilitates the acquisition of these competencies. This process, however, is continuous and iterative, as exposure to otherness evolves over time.

This necessitates the development of analytical skills that extend beyond cognitive or cultural frameworks, incorporating reflective and metacognitive abilities aligned with ethical-political directions (Fiorucci, 2020, pp. 66-67). Secondly, effective intercultural engagement requires self-awareness, which encompasses the recognition of one's limitations, vulnerabilities, and the influence of lived experiences, including the educational processes shaped by one's cultural context, on one's worldview. Such self-awareness must be coupled with efforts to approach the other's perspective through interaction, mutual understanding, or *cultural shocks* (Cohen-Emerique & Rothberg, 2016), which may be defined as emotional and intellectual experiences arising from encounters with unfamiliarity. A fundamental aspect of this undertaking is the educator's ability to regulate emotions, tolerate individual peculiarities, refrain from hasty judgments, and adopt a self-critical perspective while creating an environment conducive to the other's cultural creativity. To genuinely comprehend the other, it is essential to first gain an understanding of oneself (*Ibid.*).

Therefore, *ethical awareness* also serves as a foundation for essential intercultural competencies, including the ability to shift perspectives and mediate differences (Bennett, 2015). To cultivate these competencies, initial and in-service training must facilitate cognitive decentring and mitigate ethnocentric biases (wa Thiong'o, 2000). Educators must be equipped to reflect on their biases and serve as role models for critical engagement with otherness and *intercultural citizenship* (Tarozzi, 2005, 2024; UNESCO, 2015).

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GROWING INTERCULTURALLY. EXPERIENCES AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES FOR THE 0-6 EDUCATIONAL SERVICES OF ROMA CAPITALE

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Intercultural education has long been a perspective that is strongly present in the Italian educational context, although with a great fragmentation of experiences, practices and reflections, which need to be further enriched within the integrated 0-6 system. In this regard, the aim of this paper is to examine in depth some intercultural practices through the presentation of three case studies in early childhood services, that are considered particularly significant in the specific context of Rome, which presents itself as an interesting and complex research laboratory. The objective, in addition to the valorization of the peculiar elements of the proposed initiatives, is to grasp the still unexplored spaces on which it appears to be fundamental to activate research paths that know how to combine qualitative and quantitative in-depth studies

integrated 0-6 system; interculture; best practices; Rome; childhood.

INTRODUCTION

The presence of families of foreign origin in Italy is now an increasingly stable reality, which has structurally transformed educational institutions in a multicultural sense, inducing scholars, politicians and educational professionals to make a deep reflection on the categories of identity, culture and coexistence, experimenting with innovative educational practices in contexts in which people from different cultural universes coexist, but they do not necessarily meet.

 In this regard, intercultural education represents the best approach to promote dialogue and foster the development of an open mindset (Pescarmona, 2021), capable of "opening borders to cross borders", operating "within our mental boundaries, in the fences of our gaze" (Agostinetto, 2022, p. 30). It is an intentional and transversal approach to educational and didactic activity, aimed at everyone, which provides for a continuous reconstruction of educational practices, exploiting alternative methodologies and tools to the traditional ones, with the main aim of building a scenario that enhances both differences and similarities, supporting the

development of a thought capable of decentralization, by preparing suitable places to foster a plural identity (Susi, 1999; Portera A., Grant C.A.; Fiorucci, 2011, 2020), through a path that sees the meeting as the main objective and is therefore able to promote dialogue and listening.

This approach is particularly important in the integrated perspective of the 0-6 system, identified as a pedagogical model to be supported within the Italian education system (Miur, 2021;Bondioli, Savio, 2018), placing the decentralization of dominant thought at the service of reflection, methodology and educational practice.

1. GOOD PRACTICES OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN SOME CHILDCARE SERVICES OF ROMA CAPITALE

This paragraph reports the results of a research conducted during 2022 on three Roman educational facilities in which good practices of integration, promotion of dialogue and citizenship are adopted. These realities are diversified from each other, both in terms of structure and territorial location, but they are united by the implementation of "good practices" of intercultural education, which can be adopted as valid models. The choice to investigate and disseminate good practices is due to two types of motivations: on the one hand, contexts such as the nursery school are currently difficult to explore with quantitative and standardized approaches, on the other hand, qualitative research can be the first useful tool to co-construct good professional practices focused on respect, dialogue and the acceptance/enhancement of all diversity.

The facilities we have taken into consideration are:

- The "Loris Malaguzzi" nursery, located in the Trullo-Montecucco district (XI municipality).
- The "Nido d'ape" day center, located in the Pineta Sacchetti area (XIII municipality).
- The "Celio Azzurro" kindergarten, located in the Celio park (I municipality).

The tools used are those of qualitative research. Specifically, for each context, after studying any available documentary sources (internal documents, websites, publications), semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out (Gianturco, 2004) with educational staff (educators, teachers, coordinators). The topics addressed are related to the working group, daily and routine activities, proposed activities, also from an intercultural perspective, and the relationship with families.

2. AT THE SCHOOL OF INTERCULTURE. COMPARING EXPERIENCES: THE "NIDO D'APE" DAY CENTER, THE "LORIS MALAGUZZI" NURSERY AND THE "CELIO AZZURRO" INTERCULTURAL CENTER

The "Nido D'Ape" day center

The reality of the Nido D'Ape managed, for more than twenty years, by the "L'accoglienza" Cooperative, offers services dedicated to families in fragile conditions. Over the years, the Nido D'Ape has welcomed boys and girls of the most diverse

nationalities, so the activities that are carried out try to offer the opportunity to live the first experiences of socialization and schooling in an environment attentive to recognizing and appreciating cultural and social differences. From the interviews carried out it is possible to recognize some aspects that, more than others, appear significant within this educational experience: the educational continuity of the nursery and the family and the many ways of being in childhood

The first aspect is undoubtedly a central and transversal pedagogical element in all educational and school contexts, placing as a central focus the attention to the school-family relationship and the positive learning of children connected to this alliance (Epstein, 2011; Educational co-responsibility between the different educational agencies is a particularly significant perspective in early childhood services, often taking the form of a method of prevention and intervention on educational poverty and as a support for parenting (Sirignano, 2019). In this regard, central elements come into play that invest the commitment in the relationship that is necessary to establish between all those who are interested in the care of the child, beyond the different origins or cultures of belonging (Dusi, Pati, 2011), through effective and positive communication methods, but also an important empathic competence and a deep ability to understand otherness. The experience of the Nido D'Ape, strongly focused on a broader mission of support and support for the social fragility of the territory with a look and accompaniment that recovers a dimension of proximity and family closeness, that is, able to reproduce a form of full solidarity. This translates into this context in a particular way through work with boys and girls, with attention to the diversity of each one and in education to the recognition of the other, to full respect for the many ways of being of the human and of the world, in contrast to forms of oppression, supremacy and power, seeking, therefore, "to welcome and respect the diversity of each one, but putting them on the same level" (Int. 3).

The "Loris Malaguzzi" nursery school

Another valuable example of an intercultural educational approach that is nourished by good practices is offered by the municipal nursery school "Loris Malaguzzi", located in the popular district of Trullo-Montecucco.

The Loris Malaguzzi nursery school was inaugurated in 2003 with the experimental project "Part-time nursery and time in the Municipality", with the main objectives of focusing on the needs and rights of boys and girls and ensuring that parents who work on afternoon shifts can find a context in which their children can live a meaningful educational experience, reconcilable with one's work commitments, this is because welcoming boys and girls always means welcoming their families as well (Favaro et al, 2006). The attention to the family by the Loris Malaguzzi nursery is also recognizable in some services offered, such as the "Spazio Insieme", active once a week and designed to give parents and children, who for various reasons do not attend the nursery, quality time to live "together"; in addition, the nursery organizes themed meetings with specialists from the Family Counseling Center, on topics of interest to the family.

Intercultural education is the background to the educational project itself which, in the wake of the path traced by the great pedagogist who gives its name to this nursery – Loris Malaguzzi – aims to recognize and enhance differences, giving space to different forms of intelligence (Gardner, 1987) and to every possible form of language, thus breaking the barriers of communication. Intercultural education is done at every moment of everyday life: "There are no activities designed specifically for interculture, all activities are conducted in such a way that all children feel naturally included. In this period we are collecting songs and music from the parents' countries of origin, not only from other nations, but also from other Italian regions, precisely to convey the idea that we can all be immigrants" (Int. 4). Another theme that emerged from the interviews is the importance of cooperation, especially within the working group, which can also be traced in the words of a nursery educator Loris Malaguzzi: "I wish everyone to find themselves working in a team like ours, there is always a serene and close-knit atmosphere. In the previous contexts in which I have worked, I have rarely found such harmonious situations. Working in a good group also reflects positively in practice and in what is done with children" (Int. 5). After all, sharing is the basis of Malaguzzian pedagogy, ever since the teacher Loris Malaguzzi brought the Robinson school to the city: once a week a truck hosted children and teachers and took them to the squares and public gardens, with the intention of involving the whole community in educational activities (Edwards et al, 1995).

Sharing and interconnection, therefore, are the basis of the pedagogical approach used by the Loris Malaguzzi nursery, interconnection between every form of language practiced within the spaces of the nursery, real centres of interest, structured to promote the autonomy of children and the search for the space most suited to their interests, an interconnection that is achieved between all the actors who participate in the life of the educational service.

The intercultural center "Celio Azzurro"

Celio Azzurro is not just a kindergarten but it is an intercultural educational center, which aims to facilitate and enhance the encounter and relationship between people with different cultures. The structure is located within the Celio park and is a place of welcome for foreign children and Italian children. The school hosts about sixty children of different nationalities, aged between 3 and 6 years. It is characterized by a "fluid organization" of the environments, there are no sections but working groups divided by age groups where each student is offered the opportunity to operate according to his or her own ways of thinking in full respect of the individuality of each one. In this interlocking of belongings, the child learns to esteem himself without belittling the other, he learns that difference is an "added value" to be respected and appreciated: "diversity is never a critical issue, on the contrary, it is always an added value" (Int. 6). This teaching is not only theoretical but is applied daily in the life of the center which represents a "successful attempt" of coexistence in the name of respect, exchange and equal dignity between people with different cultures. From this point of view, the school becomes a place "where children and parents can also find support, practical and affective help to face the

difficulties of a daily life that is sometimes problematic, often difficult" (Int. 7). The help offered by the school is evident in the flexibility of hours (the school is open from 8 am to 5.30 pm, from September to July), it is free for families who cannot afford to pay the tuition and it is a space open to the territory during extracurricular hours (dance activities, parties, projects, seminars, parenting support, etc.). Parents are considered an integral part of the center, they are involved in many activities and can count, in case of difficulty, on the support of teachers, other families and specialized figures (social workers, psychologists, speech therapists). The school is perceived as "a community in which all members support and support each other even outside school hours" (Int. 8). The mosaic tiles can come in different shapes, colors, and sizes, but they are all essential to complete the work. Accepting diversity does not only mean welcoming those who are different from us, but it means, above all, "perceiving" them as an opportunity for growth and not as a threat. Seeing him as a bearer of ideas, experiences and values that we do not know and that can help us better understand the world around us. From this point of view, it is necessary to focus "on similarities, on what unites all subjects in order to then be able to value differences as a stimulus and not as concerns" (Int. 7). Intercultural education, therefore, is not aimed exclusively at foreigners but at all children, it is a dress that we must learn to wear to interpret the changes in our society, it is a daily exercise in sensitivity and above all in the desire to know the other. A place where curiosity about the other is stimulated by valuing similarities rather than differences" (Int. 7).

CONCLUSIONS

The experiences described above are examples of "good practices of interculture" (Nanni and Curci, 2005): three educational services that are characterized by the ability to generate a qualitative action that can become a reference model to be socialized and possibly transferred, with the appropriate adaptations, also to other educational contexts of the city. These realities, despite the different user groups to which they are addressed, the different geographical location and the different type of management, are united by some "denominators" that distinguish them. First of all, they are schools that have built a strong alliance with families and the territory. The active and constructive collaboration of this triad allows the "school" to become a point of reference in the neighborhoods, thus creating a virtuous dialogue with local associations and, in general, with citizens who can experience daily practices of dialogue and interculturality (Zinant, 2022). They are places where comparison, curiosity towards the other, the exchange of "memories" are valued, where a plural and often alternative narrative to the dominant one finds space. Here diversity does not represent a limit but a richness, a resource to be valued, respected and shared.

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INHABITING THE LIMINAL, DISRUPTING THE CONVENTIONS: MUSIC AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM AS TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES FOR MUSLIM IMMIGRANTS' DESCENDANTS

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The current research aims to discover and discuss the possible causes and consequences of inhabiting the Liminal/Third Space since it is a useful instrument to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences as they shape personality, […] agency, and […] bind thought to experience (Thomassen, 2015, 46). Following an interdisciplinary analysis through post-colonial, cultural studies, and anthropological approaches, emerges the socio-economic, cultural, and political discomfort experienced by Muslim immigrants' descendants living in Western countries. Specifically, it has been taken as case studies some musical videos, lyrics, and speeches produced by these youth living in Italy, France, and Spain. Besides, following several inputs provided by these productions, emerged heartfelt support for Palestinians which leads the current study to consider a participant observation during the demonstrations in support of Palestinian People in Milan and Bologna (Italy) in 2024. The heterogeneous participation led to sustaining the wider interpretation of the *Liminal* and *Third Space* as a cross-label area of resistance against dominant hegemonic social, cultural, and political setups – in which it can flourish an international culture.

Muslim immigrants' descendants; Third Space; Liminality; hybrid identity; social and political activism; resistance; international culture

INTRODUCTION

Following the 9/11 attacks on the United States, Islamophobia toward the World spread quickly– especially in Western countries (Ciftci, 2012; Green, 2019). Muslim diasporas who live in these countries are those who mainly suffer such hostile sentiments and discrimination (Allen, 2010; Boland, 2020; Lindemann & Stolz, 2021). Indeed, various sources argue the difficulties in identity formation by people with a migratory background – especially by Muslims and post-colonial diasporas (Turner, 1969; Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1994; Said, 1994; Barnard & Spencer 2010; Cassim, Stolte & Hodgetts 2020).

Among post-colonial and cultural studies scholars, it is widely discussed that the complexity of immigrants' identity formation flows into a hybrid identity that matches both, the culture of the origin country and the culture of the host one (Hall, 1994; Burdsey, 2006; Sirin & Fine, 2007; Fletcher, 2011; Nayar, 2015; Boland, 2020). Such a hybrid identity gives way to feelings of belonging and non-belonging

to a specific (fixed) culture, leading them to live in a *Liminal* or *Third Space* in between two dominant cultures' identities[1] (Turner, 1969; Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1994; Cassim, Stolte & Hodgetts, 2020).

Through the observation and analysis of music videos, lyrics, and speeches by Muslim immigrants' descendants and artists, widespread and heartfelt solidarity with the Palestinian Cause has been observed among several singers (including trappers and rappers) with Arab, Muslim, or Amazigh backgrounds. This solidarity has become more pronounced following the recent escalation of brutal injustice against the Palestinian people[2]. This was also evident during participant observation at demonstrations in support of the Palestinian people, where there was significant involvement from young Muslim (and non-Muslim) males and females.

This evidence suggests some interesting links and starting points toward the interweave of *Liminality/Third Space*, Palestinian Cause, and young Muslims with an immigrant background (in Europe) – leading to the discovery of a wider "international culture" (Bhabha, 1994, 56).

This article will offer preliminary insights into the causes and consequences of Muslim immigrants' descendants inhabiting the *Liminal/Third Space*, serving as a starting point for further in-depth research on the theme.

1. METHODOLOGY

For this purpose, it has been adopted an interdisciplinary literature review concerning theories on *Liminality* and Bhabha's (1994) term *Third Space* – focusing mainly on post-colonial, anthropological, and international relations approaches.

Furthermore, trying to explore a first pathway for the case studies, it has been conducted participant observation during the demonstration in support of the Palestinian Cause (in Bologna and Milano, Italy, in 2024). Such a methodology provides the possibility to "transform interactions, words, and gestures, thoughts, ideas, and daydreams into material forms that can be recorded and are […] available for analysis" (Nightingale, 2008, 121).

Besides, has been used textual analysis to explore cultural productions like musical lyrics, visual images, and discourses made by some European (t)rappers with a Muslim immigratory background – living respectively in Spain, France, and Italy. This method aims to "highlight the common codes, terms, ideologies, discourses, and individuals that come to dominate cultural outputs" (Pink, 2008, 56) – since these are often expressions of social conditions and political positions.

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[1] According to several anthropologists and historians, cultural and identity labels were created to divide people and communities, enabling hegemonic policies through the strategy of divide et impera. See Abu-Lughod (2021); Remotti (2012); Cavatorta (2007).

[2] https://www.aljazeera.com/where/palestine/

2. HYBRID IDENTITY: LIMINALITY AND THIRD SPACE

Many post-colonial, cultural studies and anthropological scholars examine the challenges of identity formation faced by immigrants and their descendants. These struggles stem from navigating dual social, cultural, and political contexts over long periods (Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1994; Burdsey, 2006; Fletcher, 2011; Cassim, Stolte & Hodgetts 2020). Nayar (2015, 99) speaks about a "not fully formed" identity and Edward Said (1994, 48) highlights the condition of half-involvements and half-detachments, which returns to the anthropologist Turner's (1969, 95) definition, saying that [l]iminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. These interpretations highlight the influence of social, cultural, political, and historical contexts on identity formation – especially how they are situated in an unconventional and transitional space with fluid boundaries, where cultural interaction and exchange occur (Nayar, 2015).

Accordingly, Homi Bhabha (1994, 56) defines the *Third Space* as an 'inter' [place] [...] of translation and negotiation. Indeed, recent studies found the difficulty and complexity for young Muslim immigrants' descendants to negotiate their identities across different cultural terrains [since it] became decidedly more challenging after the attacks of September 11, 2001 in United States (Cainkar, 2004, 17).

Furthermore, Bhabha (1994, 56) spoke also about the potentiality of Third Space given that it [O]pens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchythrough which we may elude the politics of polarity. Speaking about "politics and polarity", emerges colonial binary rhetoric that several post-colonial scholars like Edward Said (1978, 1989) studied and analysed.

3. THE CONTINUITY OF COLONIAL RHETORIC

3.1. The Othering

The statements above align with Edward Said's works *Orientalism* (1978) and *Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors* (1989), where he discusses the dualistic colonial rhetoric – specifically Western "Othering" – used during colonialism to justify the occupation and subjugation of native lands. This political discourse establishes a binary opposition between "Us" (Western and colonial powers) and "Others" (the "Oriental" and colonized nations) (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1984). Indeed, this communication strategy – rooted in differentiation and discrimination – is made up of web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, and dehumanizing ideology, reinforced by media and public discourses. These representations consistently link terrorism with Islam, portraying it as an esoteric religion or culture (Said, 1989, 218). He spoke about colonialism, but, nowadays, it is possible to find a shape of continuity with this discriminatory rhetoric of *Othering* toward Muslims – intensified after 9/11.

In contemporary history, it is possible to take into consideration a significative and emblematic conflict in which such discourse is still used for imperialistic reasons.

That is the war and occupation of Palestine by Israel.

3.2. The link with Palestinians

The *Othering* rhetoric is used also by Israeli politicians – and its supporters – to justify the war against the Palestinians and the occupation of their lands (Mason, 2021). Following the broader definition of liminality provided by Thomassen (2015, 49) which includes borderlands or, arguably, whole countries situated in consequential in-between positions between larger civilizations, it has been found that Palestinian people live in a *Liminal space/Third Space* as well. This conclusion is reinforced by King-Irani's (2006, 924) analysis of the Palestinian Cause, which demonstrates that Palestinians "occupy a liminal and interstitial space in the international legal and political order". She goes on to state that such an order is founded upon and grounded in the interests of sovereign nation-states, highlighting the statement of Bhabha (1994, 56) that "the productive capacity of this Third Space [has] a colonial or postcolonial provenance". Indeed, Mason (2021, 126) also speaks about "the injustice and inequality experienced by Palestinians, […] enabled and justified *as a result of* discourses of Othering and exclusion".

This evidence shows that one of the causes that leads to inhabiting the *Liminal/Third Space* is provoked by discrimination and stigmatization, regardless it refers to individuals, groups, or entire societies – showing a link between the conditions of Muslim immigrants' descendants and Palestinians.

What about the consequences? Following Bhabha's (1994, 5) interpretation of the potentiality of a hybrid culture "that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy", it is possible to find the feature of resistance and struggle that occurs in a zone in which identities assume the shape of "a contested and negotiable territory of intersection, fantasy, selective affiliation, and disjunction" (Eileraas 2003, 833).

3.3. The Resistance: Music and Political Activism

Throughout the analysis of some lyrics and video clips produced by some emerging Muslim singers (trappers) with an immigratory background in Europe – Italy, France, and Spain (e.g. Ghali, Mister You, PNL, Morad)[3] – it has been possible to discover the social, economic conditions, as well as political positions of these youth. From their productions emerges the condition of stigmatization and discrimination[4] experienced by the majority of them, independently of their hosting country. Alongside, they also express their support to Palestinian people in the name of justice and implementation of human rights.

Following this discussion, we can support the thesis that music and political activism may be unconventional, transformative, cross-border, and cross-cultural

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[3] Available on YouTube: Morad – El Barrio; Mister You – Maghrebins; PNL – Gaza; Ghali's speech in Festival of Sanremo 2024: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xq-pgNSXVSU

[4] For more in-depth studies on the subject, see the works of Sarti & Bertoni (2024) and Salone & Panzuto (2023).

answers to the *Liminal* condition. As discussed above, inhabiting the *Liminal/Third Space* means living in the margin with "uncertainty, instability, and disorder" (Nayar, 2015, 99) into which, at the same time, is possible to resist political binarisms and create a dynamic area of interaction. Indeed, Bhabha (1994, 56) also states that *Third Space* "may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture based [...] on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity".

As a matter of fact, following the ethnographic observations during the demonstrations in support of the Palestinian people in Bologna and Milan (Italy) in 2024, a "cultural" heterogeneity among participants was observed. This highlights "significant solidarities and alliances between Palestinians and other anti-colonial movements; offer[ing] new strategies and pathways for transformative emancipatory action" (Mason, 2021, 124). Moreover, has been also observed a huge participation of Muslim immigrants' descendants – with a notable presence of Muslim girls and women[5]. These groups are united by a shared socio-political position, calling for justice, fulfillment of global human rights, as well as a ceasefire and halt of Israeli's discriminatory settlements in Palestinians' territories.

To sum up, by studying *Liminality* and *Third Space*, an important connection has been identified between the descendants of Muslim immigrants, the Palestinian people – extending beyond their shared religion and language – and anti-imperialist groups. Living in the *Liminal/Third Space* involves being in a complex situation connected to political, social, and economic issues. The experience of stigmatization and discrimination, often driven by colonial and Islamophobic rhetoric, prompts young Muslim immigrants' descendants to engage in active musical and political resistance. Music becomes a powerful tool to express their discomfort and anger, bringing together social groups marginalized by the dominant socio-economic, cultural, and political system. Bhabha's (1994) concept of *international culture* is evident in demonstrations in support of Palestinians, revealing a broader state of *Liminality* that includes all those – such as the LGBTQ+ community – who face stigmatization and discrimination from rulers pursuing their imperialistic agendas.

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[5] See pictures of Lapini Michele and the study of Bernacchi & Chiappelli (2024).

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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF CIVIC EDUCATION BASED ON COMMON EU VALUES: THE EXPERIENCE OF A BOARD GAME

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This paper explores civic education's role in fostering EU values, emphasizing the innovative board game *The House of Common Values*. The game enhances understanding of democracy, equality, and the rule of law through experiential learning and dialogue. Applied in teacher education, it revealed gaps in students' prior knowledge but improved their engagement and awareness of EU principles. The findings underscore the need for inclusive and interactive tools to promote active citizenship in diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: civic education: common values; global citizenship; board game

INTRODUCTION

In a democracy, citizens have the right to participate in political decisions within a framework valuing equality, freedom, and participation. These principles foster social development and reinforce democracy's influence on society. For democracy to thrive, democratic thinking must be culturally embedded and transmitted as a way of life (Beutel et al., 2022). Democracy isn't self-sustaining; it requires active learning and practice. In this regard, schools are key spaces for cultivating democratic processes and values. Learning democracy involves not only theoretical knowledge but also direct experiences and participation in decision-making across life contexts (Von Hentig, 2009).

Philosopher John Dewey (1915) emphasized student participation in schools, where democracy can truly be learned through active engagement among students, teachers, and parents. Dewey warned against reducing civic education to rote memorization of principles, advocating for participatory democracy. Similarly, Franco Frabboni (1989) promoted a "curriculum school" advocating experiential learning that extends beyond classrooms into a "decentralized educational classroom", fostering holistic, practical education. Frabboni viewed education as a political and cultural tool for democratic development, countering the focus on skills and the lack of dialogue between economy, society, and pedagogy (Baldacci, 2019).

Schools, as privileged spaces for civic education, support "culturally aware and active formation" (Cambi, 2021), preparing youth to critically participate in public life. Civic education must foster cross-cultural dialogue, moving society from coexistence to interaction and promoting personal and social growth. Since Italy became a destination for immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s, civic education has taken two forms: as an integral part of school instruction and as specific courses for migrants.

Rademacher (2021) links civic education to sociology, political science, and economics, emphasizing its importance in addressing global issues like resource use, climate change, and conflict resolution. In the Anthropocene era, investing in active, inclusive citizens who defend human dignity is vital. Civic education must extend beyond schools, engaging broader social contexts to enhance participation, foster civic engagement, and create community spaces for interaction.

1. CIVIC EDUCATION AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Citizenship today requires multidimensional participation, recognizing multiple identities and adapting to diverse social contexts (Tarozzi, 2005).

In this context, civic education, is aligned with global citizenship education, which moves beyond nationalistic perspectives, encouraging individuals to see themselves as global citizens. This approach requires a cross-curricular strategy within various school subjects to ensure shared goals and reinforce learning. As Cantini and Chellini (2024) highlight, citizenship relies on civilization, requiring active engagement, values, and critical thinking, not merely cultural knowledge. Without civil coexistence citizenship risks becoming legalistic, detached from ensuring rights and duties (Corradini, 2021).

Cultivating active global citizens in democratic communities implies evolving policies. For instance, Italy's civic education, removed in 1990, was reinstated by Law 92/2019, mandating at least 33 hours annually. Its objective is to form responsible citizens for full participation in civic, cultural, and social life, focusing on the Constitution, digital citizenship, and sustainability. From 2024/25, new guidelines redefine national goals, adding content like responsibility, solidarity, economic growth, and environmental respect. However, whether these updates foster true civic responsibility remains under scrutiny. In addition, a global connotation within civic education is still missing.

Beyond schools, civic training for migrants, mandated by D.P.R. 179 (2011), fosters integration through sessions covering rights, duties, and democratic values.

Amid this, the board game presented in this contribution, "The House of Common Values", finds its original place. Focusing on the issues of EU common values, it addresses the challenges surrounding civic education, in particular in regards to "new citizens". Immigration and asylum policies, as Ambrosini (2021) notes, locate civic education as a "battleground" where security measures clash with integration goals. While the EU recognizes civic education's role in creating responsible citizens, nonformal education – via extracurriculars, volunteer work, and adult learning – remains vital. Challenges include embracing diversity and inclusivity while

avoiding cultural homogenization that erases minority characteristics.

Critics argue rigid civic education programs may stifle participation, reinforce cultural biases, and idealize social narratives, creating "double standards" between ideals and practice (Rietbergen-McCracken, 2018). Assimilation demands can generate identity-related tensions, as Remotti (2010) cautions. Each EU country tailors civic education, but global citizenship education links these efforts to a larger framework, exemplified by UNESCO's *Education for Global Citizenship* (2015). This program emphasizes knowledge, skills, and values to tackle global issues and foster positive contributions. Yet, persistent social inequalities highlight the need for ongoing efforts to ensure global citizenship education's transformative impact.

2. THE VALUES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Civic education encompasses, among other topics, the theme of shared values. Within this framework the common values of the European Union and its member states are provided for in Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU): "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the member states in a society characterized by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men". The sharing of certain values is generally considered crucial for social cohesion and a sense of belonging to a given community, although the interpretation of these values may vary over time and space (Medda-Windischer & Carlà, 2024).

As specified by the director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), Michael O'Flaherty (2018): "The 13 values, set out in Article 2 TEU, are translated, in varying proportions, into the 54 articles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, a more detailed and efficient code of human rights". Common values are an integral part of the very essence of the Union and are closely related to the concept of European identity.

It is important to note that the values of the European Union are not generally regarded as "universal" values because, on the one hand, they were not conceived as values necessarily shared by every state outside the European Union, and on the other hand, even among the member states of the Union, there is no absolute uniformity in terms of interpretation and implementation.

The thirteen common values, in their normative dimension, as they guide individual behaviour, have the ambition to shape shared rules and standards, facilitating coexistence among communities and individuals.

Over the past few years, European institutions have promoted programs on education for democratic citizenship, human rights, and civic values as valuable tools to support active participation in democratic life and, in general, to promote democracy, considering them valuable tools to strengthen engagement in public life and, at the same time, countering social isolation and radicalization processes among the younger generation (Mouritsen & Jaeger, 2018).

3. EXPERIENCE WITH THE BOARD GAME "THE HOUSE OF COMMON VALUES"

The board game "The House of Common Values" promotes understanding and application of EU values through concrete experiences, focusing on "togetherness" rather than "sameness" (Medda-Windischer & Carlà, 2021). It emphasizes unity among diverse individuals without requiring uniformity in beliefs or backgrounds (Medda-Windischer et al., 2020). This interactive and collaborative game explores EU values, fostering mutual understanding while respecting diversity. It also reflects on complementary values, like hospitality, that strengthen European common values.

The game uses a metaphor: European societies as an apartment building, where social cohesion among tenants depends on shared values. Participants discuss and share experiences, building awareness of shared norms and principles as foundations for coexistence. Through storytelling, participants connect values to everyday experiences, making them relevant and tangible. Stories inspired by game scenarios are interpreted and linked to specific values, turning abstract principles into relatable concepts.

The University of Bolzano's Faculty of Education integrated the game into its Master program for Primary Education within the Inclusive Pedagogy module, which prepares future teachers to use pedagogical tools in schools. The module includes lectures and workshops emphasizing peer-led learning, reflection on group dynamics and leadership. Students engaged in structured discussions and experiential learning settings during the game, available digitally and in print.

After playing, 75 participants (average age 21) completed a questionnaire. Results revealed limited prior awareness of EU values; only 64% identified foundational values, with many associating the EU more with economic alliances. Familiarity with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights was limited, and some concepts, like the rule of law, were misunderstood. Recognized values included solidarity, equality, and freedom of expression, but others, like peace (not officially an EU value), were inconsistently identified.

Experiential learning through the board game proved effective, with 75% of students reporting deeper comprehension of theoretical concepts, and an increased motivation to further explore the subject matter. Feedback highlighted the game's ability to encourage active participation, with 90% of participants feeling comfortable discussing values. However, many noted gaps in secondary education on EU values and expressed a need for deeper engagement with the topic.

Repeating the exercise in 2023/2024 with 69 students showed an 8% increase in the belief that the EU is based on shared values. Commonly cited values included justice, equality, tolerance, freedom, and solidarity, while others received less attention. Findings suggest "The House of Common Values" fosters critical reflection on policies related to education, social issues, and inequality (Kofler, Medda-Windischer, & Carlà, 2024). Playful pedagogical tools support learning "to", "with", and "through" diversity (Pinto Minerva, 2002), positioning teachers to facilitate dialogue, innovation, and active citizenship in future-oriented schools.

4. REFLECTIONS, RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The board game "The House of Common Values" offers an innovative, play based, approach to citizenship education, emphasizing European and global citizenship and exploring the tensions within civic integration practices (O'Flaherty, 2018). Civic education for residence permit applicants often struggles between regulatory restrictions and limited school methods. Measuring its effectiveness remains challenging, as indicators like voting or volunteerism don't directly reflect civic education outcomes. Citizenship education aims to foster public engagement, political awareness, critical thinking, and legal knowledge, often exceeding schools' typical scope (Santerini, 2010). Schools must adopt an interdisciplinary curriculum promoting group discussion, shared experiences, and critical inquiry, grounded in socio-political awareness and ethical consciousness.

Baldacci (2020) proposes social-ethics education addressing societal conditions, exploring economic, political, and social dimensions while encouraging alternative models. Participatory methods like role-playing foster empathy, critical thinking, and democratic values. Such methods are crucial for inclusive civic education where all voices contribute to understanding and change (Cecchini & Donati, 2020). Civic integration reflects mutual acceptance, empowering minorities to integrate and lead their lives under human rights frameworks (Parricchi & Kofler, 2022).

Understanding contemporary challenges, shaped by globalization, social fluidity, and unpredictability (Bauman, 2012), is key to fostering global citizenship. Despite societal shifts, education institutions committed to democracy should sustain efforts toward responsible, equitable, and democratic actions aligned with global citizenship ideals.

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MANAGING COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN THE PLURALISTIC SCHOOL: TOWARDS A NON-NEUTRAL EDUCATION

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Modernity, as Peter Berger (2014) notes, fosters constant cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) due to exposure to diverse beliefs, values, and norms in increasingly intercultural and interreligious societies. Cognitive dissonance arises when individuals encounter discrepancies with their prior knowledge, triggering unconscious strategies to regain coherence. These strategies can either aid deep learning and societal integration or impede these processes. Schools play a crucial role in helping students develop skills to manage cognitive dissonance effectively.

This presentation critiques the concept of "neutrality in education", which often undermines the complexities of pluralism. One approach overemphasizes cultural diversity without fostering dialogue, while another seeks to neutralize public schools from private affiliations. Instead, we propose "non-neutral" education, where students' cognitive preconceptions, controversial topics, values, and political aspects are acknowledged and engaged. Drawing from Vygotsky (1980), education should treat beliefs and values as cognitive tools for critical reflection. Schools must transcend a transmissive model of education, becoming spaces for re-elaborating social knowledge and integrating diverse perspectives. By positioning schools as second-level experiential fields (Massa, 1998), education fosters meaningful engagement with cognitive and cultural elements, promoting deeper learning and societal cohesion.

pedagogical neutrality; pluralism; cognitive dissonance; rationality

In the public debate on education and the plurality of schools, which juxtaposes conservative and progressive views—constructivist and anti-constructivist, cognitive and holistic, exclusivist and inclusivist perspectives—one idea appears to be universally accepted and shared: the notion that schools should be neutral spaces, impartial and respectful of students' beliefs and values.

However, this concept of neutrality is subject to two distinct interpretations, which can be categorized as a multiculturalist model and an assimilationist model. The multiculturalist approach to managing social plurality seeks to recognize and preserve diversity, assigning to schools the role of safeguarding and valuing culturally and religiously determined traditions and values. In contrast, the assimilationist model emphasizes equality as the foundation of citizenship, advocating the

renunciation of particularistic identities within the public sphere and relegating them to private life. This model envisions a neutral school as one free from conflicting beliefs and values by excluding private demands from public spaces.

Despite these differing interpretations, there seems to be a convergence on the perceived need for a "neutral school". The research questions I aim to address in this presentation are as follows: What critical challenges are inherent in neutralist models within a context of educational plurality? What alternative model could be developed to address these challenges effectively?

1. PLURALISM AND NEUTRALITY OF SCHOOL

According to the American psychologist Leon Festinger (1962), every individual constructs their own "cognitive repertoire" through interactions with their environment. From upbringing within social groups and religious communities, to engaging with others, reading books and articles, browsing online, watching television, observing the world, and acquiring experiences, individuals encounter various cognitive elements—knowledge, opinions, beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes—that collectively form this repertoire.

In pre-modern societies, the fundamental worldviews of each social group—their "taken-for-granted world" (Schutz, 1962)—were transmitted across generations. This process ensured the continuity of core beliefs and the preservation of group cohesion. As a result, every child entered a world already interpreted by those who came before them (Mead, 1943). However, modernity, as Peter Berger (2014) observed, is marked by pronounced pluralism. Within this context, individuals are exposed to diverse belief systems through interactions with members of different groups. Each system conveys distinct, and often conflicting, information, values, and norms. Consequently, the taken-for-granted world loses its self-evident character, as multiple definitions of reality—grounded in cultural, religious, or ideological plausibility structures—compete for legitimacy.

In contemporary schools, children bring with them a variety of cognitive elements that may conflict with those of their peers or teachers. This dynamic raises the issue of neutrality: should schools adopt an assimilationist stance, whereby they ignore students' cognitive elements, or a multiculturalist approach, which fully acknowledges and protects them?

Let us now examine the limitations of neutralist approaches in pluralistic schools. First, both the assimilationist and multiculturalist models fail to fully address the consequences of dissonance and conflict between students' groups of belonging. As Festinger (1962) explains, when two cognitive elements are dissonant, the individual experiences an unpleasant psychological tension, which triggers pressures to reduce or eliminate the dissonance. Unconsciously, a process is initiated to restore coherence. The individual may reject the dissonant element by distorting its perception or delegitimizing the source, modify previously acquired cognitive elements to align with the new ones, or seek explanations for the inconsistency by recognizing the existence of different realms governed by different rules.

Children in pluralistic settings often inhabit multiple, competing worlds and may struggle to reconcile these divisions. Neutral education avoids engaging with this challenge, either by relegating dissonant elements to the private sphere (assimilationism) or by asserting an alleged harmony among culturally or religiously connoted cognitive elements (multiculturalism). However, both approaches are reductionist and fail to resolve the underlying issue. Children remain trapped in a state of discomfort caused by dissonance and are forced to activate involuntary strategies to mitigate this discomfort. These dissonance-reduction processes can have problematic consequences, such as impairing learning, causing relational difficulties with peers and teachers, and generating tensions between school and family. In essence, while education inevitably creates dissonance, neutralist models fail to adequately address its complexities.

Demanding a neutral school is, therefore, a denial of the intricate dynamics and inherent conflicts that characterize any educational context. The polarization between assimilationist and multiculturalist perspectives presents a false dilemma, suggesting an unavoidable choice between these two positions. Yet, I argue that a third path exists—an escape from this false dichotomy—leading toward a genuinely non-neutral model of education.

The perspective I propose is a non-neutral educational model that centers neither on the public interest or superior values, as in assimilationism, nor solely on communities of belonging, as in multiculturalism, but on the learners themselves. This model considers learners' plural and fragmented identities, their cultural and religious cognitive elements, and their shared public belonging as citizens. The goal is to create continuity across the various dimensions individuals traverse, particularly between the specific communities they identify with and the broader national community to which they belong.

The school, therefore, cannot disregard students' cognitive elements, underestimate their prior knowledge, or exclude controversial topics, value-laden dimensions, and political issues from its curriculum. On the contrary, it must embrace the experiences of its students, recognizing and addressing the challenges posed by cultural discontinuity.

2. RATIONALITY OF BELIEFS

Many teachers believe that students hold irrational, naive, or superstitious beliefs that schools should "correct". However, numerous sociologists and psychologists have rejected the notion that people adhere to irrational beliefs or unfounded opinions. Instead, they have demonstrated that individuals adopt beliefs that seem most relevant to their perception of reality. For instance, anthropologists once observed members of traditional societies performing rituals to induce rain and concluded that such behaviors stemmed from a "primitive mentality", a "savage mind", or "magical thinking". In contrast, the same observers typically recognized the rationality of behaviors like rubbing two sticks together to create fire.

Max Weber (1922) challenges this perspective, arguing that the distinction between

the rainmaker and the firemaker exists only in the mind of the observer. Because contemporary Western individuals are informed by modern scientific discoveries, they distinguish between "accurate and inaccurate" causal determinations, labeling the latter as irrational. Weber differentiates between the rationality and the veracity of beliefs: not all beliefs are necessarily true, but they are always rational because they stem from deliberate and contextually understandable decision-making strategies based on an individual's situational and cognitive position. Similarly, Piaget's genetic epistemology demonstrates that a child's cognitive functioning is not chaotic or irrational but is organized from birth through specific structures and processes.

This interpretive framework invites us to reconsider the cognitive elements that children bring with them. Vygotsky (1934) emphasized that rational activity is grounded in the ability to manipulate tools, systems of signs, or concepts—auxiliary instruments for thinking and communicating about the world. These tools, acquired from the environment, are internalized and become mediators of thought. Rational activity, therefore, is fundamentally an activity of mediating knowledge and cognitive elements. While individuals from different cultures, religions, or social groups may encounter distinct cognitive tools, they process these tools through the same universal cognitive mechanisms.

This perspective departs from viewing culture as a system that imposes meanings on individuals. Instead, the rational activity of human beings is characterized as a process of re-signification and re-semanticization of cognitive tools. The act of believing—associating ideas of truth or rightness with a cognitive element—emerges from the interaction between the real world and these tools of thought. Since rationality is a process of mediation, thought cannot be disconnected from the world. Consequently, individuals do not merely collect information, values, norms, and beliefs over their lifetimes and passively activate strategies to reduce cognitive dissonance. Rather, individuals have the potential to act as active agents in organizing and elaborating cognitive elements, consciously managing cognitive dissonance. This perspective allows us to move beyond assimilationism and multiculturalism: even in a pluralistic context, it is possible to activate collective processes of rational elaboration, developed through the ongoing confrontation between reality and cognitive tools, by mastering the management of cognitive dissonance.

Non-neutral education is, therefore, rooted in trust in the rationality of its participants. Students learn and believe in something because they find good reasons to do so; the content they encounter in education becomes a cognitive tool manipulated by thought and incorporated into a continuous process of re-signification. Education must be non-neutral in the sense that it trusts its ability to integrate the oriented opinions of students and foster the production of rational judgments.

3. NON-NEUTRAL EDUCATION

At this point, Riccardo Massa (1998) makes a fundamental contribution by asserting that schools must adopt a model of cognitive and emotional re-elaboration of

the external world. Massa emphasizes that young people today are constantly exposed to an overwhelming flow of information, positioning schools as just one among many formative agencies within a polycentric context. The phenomenon of pluralism leads to the dissolution of an integrated and coherent transmissive model, giving way to a pluralization of learning opportunities. This shift necessitates the continuous activation of processes for negotiating interpretations of reality. The school finds itself in crisis precisely because it fails to transcend its traditional role as the primary and original source of knowledge supply and dissemination in a society undergoing profound transformations.

In response, Massa introduces the concept of the school as World2—a second-level field of experience. This model situates the school in relation to the external social and cultural world as a space for the reflective and critical re-elaboration of knowledge content.

Massa's proposal radically rejects the two forms of neutrality previously discussed. A neutral school, by its nature, reflects an essentialist perspective on cultural content: from the multiculturalist standpoint, cultural elements are crystallized to be preserved, while from the assimilationist perspective, they are standardized to ensure citizen homogeneity. In both cases, the learner is rendered passive in relation to cognitive elements, which are either transmitted or omitted, narrated or banned. Massa, however, envisions a model in which the central focus of the learning process is the "critical re-elaboration of knowledge content".

Using Vygotskian terminology, learning becomes a rational activity insofar as it involves the semantic use of cognitive tools. Paradoxically, one might argue that a neutral school is, in essence, a school that does not require rationality, instead encouraging students to engage non-rationally with the cognitive elements they encounter. In contrast, a non-neutral school is characterized as a field of rational experience, where students actively participate in the reflective and critical organization of knowledge.

As illustrated, school education must be configured as non-neutral to facilitate the critical re-elaboration of knowledge content and prevent cognitive dissonance from leading to conflicts and hindering learning. In this context, the role of the teacher must necessarily evolve. The traditional notion of the teacher as the sole repository of knowledge must be discarded, as this concept faces a profound crisis in a pluralistic society and loses its legitimacy. As Volpi (2012) observes, "The secular teacher no longer has the comfort of an absolute truth by virtue of which to justify his role to young people, to society at large, and to himself" (p. 37). When teachers position themselves as the bearers of definitive answers, they risk generating dissonance among students without the capacity to manage it effectively. This traditional view, rooted in a pre-modern conception of education where schools transmitted parental knowledge and skills, is increasingly inadequate today.

If, as Massa suggests, the educational community is envisioned as a "World 2", a space for re-elaborating knowledge from the pluralistic social environment, then the teacher's role is to mediate relationships between the educational community

and broader society. A non-neutral school, therefore, becomes a field of practices oriented towards a cultural mediation and re-elaboration of first-level experience (Massa, 1998). In this framework, the non-neutral teacher assumes the role of a cultural mediator, tasked with resolving contradictions and guiding them toward rationality (Volpi, 2012).

It may seem contradictory to propose that a non-neutral teacher act as a mediator, a role traditionally understood as neutral. However, in the perspective advanced here, a mediator adopts a non-neutral stance—not in the sense of partisanship, but of active engagement with cognitive content. This entails representing reality through a process of metaphorization, wherein the mediated reality is symbolically reconstructed to make it manipulable. The educator mediates between diverse belief systems and the educational community, filtering and adapting these interactions pedagogically (Volpi, 2012).

This mediation process involves several activities: collecting and selecting cultural content appropriate for the class group; valuing students' backgrounds and interests through transdisciplinary planning; presenting cultural content to ensure inclusion while considering learning styles; fostering interaction between students and knowledge content; and creating a functional learning environment that incorporates physical spaces, technological aids, emotional climate, and relationship dynamics.

The mediating teacher must ensure that non-neutrality fosters transformative dialogue rather than unresolved conflict, steering education toward widespread rationalization. This approach avoids both the uncritical celebration of diversity and the homogenizing tendencies of assimilationist perspectives. Instead, the teacher's role lies in synthesizing and transcending these polarities, creating an inclusive learning environment.

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MIGRATIONS, COEXISTENCE, INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION: THE PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES FOR THE GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

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1. MIGRATIONS

International migration is not a new phenomenon, but its scale and impact have grown significantly in recent decades. In an increasingly interconnected world, migration has become a defining feature of our global landscape.

According to the World Development Report 2024, approximately 281 million people (3.6 percent of the world's population) live outside their country of nationality. The reasons behind migration are multifaceted and complex. Demographic pressures in certain regions, such as high population growth rates and aging populations, create imbalances that drive people to seek better opportunities elsewhere. Economic disparities between countries also play a crucial role, as individuals move in search of improved living standards, employment opportunities, and better access to education and healthcare. Additionally, conflicts, wars, and political instability force people to flee their homes in search of safety and security. Climate change and environmental disasters further exacerbate these movements, as people are displaced by rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and other environmental changes.

Social networks and established migrant communities in destination countries also influence migration patterns, providing support and resources for new migrants. Furthermore, advancements in transportation and communication technologies have made it easier for people to move and stay connected with their home countries, facilitating the migration process.

2. COEXISTENCE

The geographical mobility of human groups in the world is a phenomenon that questions every society. It challenges traditional notions of borders, citizenship, and national identity. As people move and settle in new places, they bring with them their cultures, traditions, and ways of life, contributing to the cultural diversity of their new communities. This diversity can enrich societies, fostering creativity, innovation, and a broader understanding of the world (Recchi and Flipo, 2019). However, it also presents challenges, as societies must find ways to integrate newcomers and manage the potential for social tensions and conflicts.

Talking about intercultural coexistence means referring to the interaction and peaceful coexistence of people from different cultures, ethnic origins, religions, and traditions within a community or, at a broader level, within a society. Intercultural coexistence is not merely a static state but a dynamic process involving mediation, conflict management, and the mutual exchange of ideas, values, and practices. It requires a commitment to dialogue, understanding, and respect for diversity. As Remotti (2019) suggests, cohabitation involves individuals spending significant parts of their lives in shared spaces, leading to a continuous negotiation of cultural and social norms.

Even ethnic belonging, being the fruit of history, tradition, education and habits, before being the result of option, will and conscious choice, is not and must not be fixed and delimitable. This is why it is necessary to promote a more flexible and less exclusive notion of it, capable of fostering the existence of multiple belongings. As Amin Maalouf writes, everyone should be encouraged to assume their diversity, to conceive of their identity as the sum of their different belongings, instead of confusing it with a single one, erected as a supreme belonging and an instrument of exclusion, sometimes an instrument of war (2007, 147). In essence, the challenge posed by multi-ethnic societies to coexistence is played out precisely between spaces of freedom and the experience of community, between self-affirmation and self-realisation and the non-ephemeral experience of the other (Besozzi, 2001, 76).

3. A NEW IDEA OF CITIZENSHIP

In this context, the concept of citizenship undergoes a profound transformation. It shifts from being a marker of identity and belonging to a specific nation to a broader notion of belonging to a common earthly homeland. This evolving concept of citizenship emphasizes growth and socio-cultural development amidst the complexities, heterogeneity, and conflicts inherent in contemporary societies. Citizenship is increasingly seen not just as a legal status but as a process of active participation in the life of the community, contributing to the common good and fostering social cohesion.

This transformative process is reflected in the works of intellectuals such as Alexander Langer, Edgar Morin, Danilo Dolci, Aldo Capitini, and Martha Nussbaum. These thinkers have provided insightful and forward-looking perspectives on intercultural coexistence and global citizenship. Alexander Langer, for example, emphasized the importance of building bridges between different cultures and promoting dialogue and understanding. Edgar Morin highlighted the need for a new way of thinking that embraces complexity and interdependence. Danilo Dolci and Aldo Capitini advocated for nonviolence and social justice, while Martha Nussbaum has written extensively on the capabilities approach, which emphasizes the importance of creating conditions that allow individuals to flourish and participate fully in society.

Additionally, significant international documents underscore the importance of global citizenship and education in fostering intercultural understanding. For

instance, the Council of Europe (2017), the United Nations (2015), and UNESCO (2014) have all highlighted the critical role of education in promoting global citizenship and intercultural dialogue. These documents call for educational systems to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to navigate an increasingly interconnected and diverse world. They emphasize the importance of teaching respect for human rights, cultural diversity, and sustainable development.

4. TOWARDS AN IDEA OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

The movement of people across borders and the resulting intercultural coexistence present both challenges and opportunities for societies worldwide. By embracing a dynamic and inclusive approach to citizenship and fostering intercultural dialogue, societies can navigate the complexities of globalization and build more cohesive and resilient communities. This requires a commitment to policies and practices that promote social inclusion, protect the rights of migrants and refugees, and create opportunities for meaningful participation in the life of the community. It also requires a recognition of the value of diversity and a willingness to engage in dialogue and cooperation across cultural boundaries. Through these efforts, societies can harness the potential of migration to drive social, economic, and cultural development, while also addressing the challenges and tensions that may arise.

Intercultural education, in this context, is viewed as a fundamental component for fostering social change. This educational approach, described as open, well-structured, and multifaceted, emphasizes the importance of being receptive to others, promoting fairness, and enhancing social cohesion (Ouellet, 2007; Portera, 2008). It also takes into account the intricate economic, social, and political interdependencies that shape our world. This viewpoint offers a valuable framework for educators working with learners, aiming to cultivate a global awareness. The goal of such education is to diminish the disparities between different social groups, including the wealthy and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressors, and the marginalized and the privileged. By doing so, it contributes to the creation of a more just and inclusive society.

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"CARTA DI REBBIO": CASE-STUDY ON A SOCIAL NETWORK OF SOLIDARITY FOR MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT

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This contribution follows a case study on Baobab Experience, a voluntary association that helps migrants in transit ('people on the move') (Audino, 2023). The present study analyses the capability of this organization in networking with others subjects operating in the national territory with the same goals. In particular, the study analyses the outcome of the four meetings whose purpose was to find the best way for the participating associations to coordinate and draft a common document. The final document is called "Carta di Rebbio", named after the place where the meeting took place. Sharing good practices and organizational models, human and economical resources, helps build a new kind of organization, independently from the nature more or less active on a political level of the organization or if it is religious or not. From a theoretical point of view, all organizations share a common idea of social justice and believe that everyone has rights to build their life project anywhere because freedom of movement represents self-determination capability. These organizations believe that if they work together there are more chances to oppose governmental hypocrisy and the false narrative of the migration topic. They also believe that this common work can help to contrast the aiding and abetting illegal immigration laws. The practical solidarity of dispensing food and distributing non food items (NFI) such as blankets, clothes and tents and also medical aid and all kinds of information needed are part of the day to day activities and are always followed by advocacy and raising awareness within the area of intervention in order to ensure protection of the transit migrants within the EU. In this study case methodology refers to reasoned choice sampling (Charmaz, 2014) focused on organizations helping people one the move. This network belongs to the third sector associations and is, of course, non profit. Being a social initiative, those building the network believe that cooperating and sharing experiences is the most efficient way in terms of solidarity. This social entity supplies the void of institutions and authorities building an innovative way compared to the pre-existing ones, giving voice to different points of view: the way that develops both solidarity and redistribution; means of exchange that links the gift and the norm (Schmit, Palutan, 2018). The relationship between activists and migrants is characterized by the loyalty linked to the advocacy (Sanicola, 1994).

association network, borders, freedom of movement, migrants, self-determination

1. PROBLEM FRAMING

It seems legitimate to ask whether in the time of globalization, the Internet, the "fluid society", and the assertion of supra-state and territorially untied forms of sovereignty, it still makes sense and is still relevant to think about borders between states.

It seems, in fact, evident that the classical paradigm based on "a territory (defined by borders) where a public power (the state) is asserted, called upon to regulate a collectivity (citizens) with legal instruments (norms)", is today in constant change being "territories without governments, mobile borders, global regulations dictated by regulators without territory, supra-state units" (Cassese, 2016, 10).

Yet, it seems that borders today acquire renewed importance and are strengthened precisely in the face of migratory phenomena. Evidence of this is the increasing number of walls and fences built in Europe and around the world in order to stop irregular migrant crossings; as well as the images and news reported daily by the national and European media to describe the humanitarian drama taking place in the Mediterranean and at the external borders of the European Union, but also extra-continental, if one thinks of the wall between Mexico and the United States.

The border stands as the paradigmatic place of "clash" between two, sometimes opposing, needs: on the one hand, the interest in security and border control, a classic expression of state sovereignty; on the other hand, the interest of those who want to cross it for the most diverse reasons, which generally concern the search for a better life.

The need for the protection of the integrity of the state seems to prevail at the expense of the fundamental rights of migrants.

What, then, is the relationship between the borders of states and the freedom to migrate? What is the relationship between state borders and universal human rights?

2. BORDERS AND FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

The starting point for the study is the relation between State borders and migration freedom as an universal human right.

Do borders still mean anything in this globalized world? As Mezzadra and Neilson argue:

> We are not only facing a multiplication of different types of borders, but also the reemergence of the profound heterogeneity of the semantic field of the border. Symbolic, linguistic, cultural and urban delimitations are no longer articulated in fixed ways by the geopolitical boundary. Rather, they overlap, connect and disconnect in often unpredictable ways, helping to shape new forms of domination and exploitation (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2014, p. 7).

Nowadays, "supra-state" borders are usually more important than national ones, except when it comes to migrations.

If the borders are established by the governments of the different countries and are therefore 'fixed', this investigation has led us to understand how the routes are changeable precisely in relation to the need to find passages in their rigidity, which lead from time to time to devise new 'games'.

The 'game' is the term used by migrants to describe the process of illegal border crossing, with the aim of reaching the more prosperous nations of the European Union and arises as a direct consequence of the intensification of controls and barriers. Some volunteers and activists from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, who participate in the Rebbio Network, claimed that "the most violent rejections occur on the most used route depending on the moment; this is why the routes are constantly changing".

The 'Fortress Europe' increasingly justifies its name and the bastions that protect it are increasingly impenetrable. Said a volunteer: "Arriving migrants take on more and more risks and must rely on traffickers and criminal networks more than in the past while paying higher prices for their journey".

Shahram Khosravi writes, in his beautiful book titled *I am Border*, about his own migration experience:

> The existence of an illegal migrant is marked by precariousness, unpredictability and wandering. His life is punctuated by drastic and sudden interruptions: arrest, deportation, or even an unexpected opportunity to continue the journey. Migrants disappear without a trace (Khosravi, 2019, 125).

We can talk about "elastic borders": looser for international trade and comunications, tighter when it comes to "people on the move" (barriers in Mexico, Spain, Hungary, Macedonia, Balkan countries and Israel).

With the process of European unification, internal borders have become more permeable while external ones, towards non-EU countries, have become more rigid.

The border, since it is loaded with political, social and emotional values, takes on a symbolic value and, in the case of this micro-investigation, through the mouth of an activist (who works as a freelance journalist and deals with issues linked to immigration for several years), can be problematized if not actually questioned: "the current migration system and the rules in force should be changed, first of all by abolishing the borders". In this regard, several authors have highlighted the complexity of this concept, which is susceptible to geographical, historical and cultural considerations (Aime, Papotti, 2023; Mezzadra, Nelson, 2014)[1].

3. THE FALSE SECURITY PROBLEM

The principal reason for which movement freedom is denied is 'security'. The Carta di Rebbio clears that instead the real cause of possible crime can be the irregular

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[1] In the volume *Confini*, Aime and Papotti highlight how boundaries can be traced in different areas: symbolic, color, cartographic, religious, social class, generational, linguistic, gender, culinary and so on.

transit.

Against the Dublin agreement the *Carta di Rebbio* proposes a migrant pact between the countries in order to destinate more financial resources to those countries with a bigger reception request. Better it would be investing these resources not to build walls increasing security measures but in aid for migrants. Also, considering that most of the migrants who arrive in Europe, after a long and difficult journey, are often strong, full of initiative and have a great resilience capacity, it would be a real shame not integrate them.

Other ways to make the passages safer according to other volunteers could be: "opening humanitarian corridors as happened with the 2015-16 corridors and those for Ukrainian refugees" or "giving visas to the countries of origin". All this should be added to "constant pressure on the institutions to take responsibility for fulfilling their obligations by respecting the rules that guarantee human rights".

According to the *Carta di Rebbio* (the document in which many voluntary associations together, express the reasons and the purpuses of the network), migration sets a moral issue: the right to search a better life not only to escape from war, poverty, climate disasters, but simply responding to a desire to move. This is why migration flows should not be regulated by the economic needs of every different country.

4. THE SOLIDARITY NETWORK

The present study analyses the Solidarity Network for the Freedom of Movement and the Carta di Rebbio (a document in which many voluntary associations together, express the reasons and the purposes of their network). These associations, located at the borders and along the migratory routes, help migrants with medical aid, information and insuring safe passages. In this way, they supply the "responsible" void of institutions and authorities. Networking enables its participants to share human and material resources, knowledge, experiences and solutions. Mostly, networking amplifies the voice of these organisations, underlining the pedagogical aspect of these issues: human enrichment due to the contact between volunteers and migrants.

Networking always requires the integration and coordination of available resources. Normally, and this case is no exception, the helping relationships that characterize social intervention are both formal and informal: they are formal because of the specific professional skills of volunteers (in this case, legal, psychological, relevant to the field of training); informal because contacts take place based on need and the support of civil society. As some volunteers have argued: "the network exists but changes depending on circumstances and needs". The network is useful for: "exchanging information and providing help in the field"; "cooperate for shared projects, conferences and tables but also in relation to specific episodes of violence and unfortunately death along the borders".

5. FROM MIGRANTS' SELF-DETERMINATION TO FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AS A UNIVERSAL RIGHT

According to Deci Ryan's definition, self-determination means the "ability to choose among various opportunities and to employ those choices to determine one's personal actions". This ability to choose is denied to migrants.

Self-determination is a fundamental step in the emancipation of every individual, but the ability to be able to experience it depends, in the case of migrants, as much on the laws and measures of the countries where they find themselves transiting and/or living as on their awareness of the range of rights available to them.

The *Carta di Rebbio* upholds freedom of movement, without any distinction made on the basis of whatever reason: persecution, conflict, famine, starvation or simply the search for a better life are migratory mandates of equal dignity. In it, human history is recognized as a history of migrations as opposed to the selective recognition of freedom of movement as a privilege of the few, linked to the randomness of being born in a particular country, having a certain citizenship and possessing a certain socio-economic status.

The Carta di Rebbio upholds Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes every individual's freedom of movement and residence within the borders of any state, the right to leave any country, including one's own, and, if one wishes, to return, since the Earth is a shared space common to all people.

5. THE PEDAGOGICAL HEART

From a pedagogical point of view, if pedagogy is understood to mean knowledge of man and about man, capable of responding to instances of transformation and the possibility of shaping oneself in a free and responsible way, in the experience reported here, individual and collective growth can be found: the activists of the Rebbio Network, in fact, through a 'civil disobedience' fight against policies that do not recognize the right to move, disregarding the pedagogical issues of inclusion. Through this experience, migrants gain awareness of their rights and regain the strength to continue their journey, while volunteers, working together for a common goal, increase their sense of identity, improving their empathy with the migrants.

Those interviewed share the desire to help people in need:

> "I would like to allow people to exercise their rights and receive the support they need"

> "I want to help people take control of their lives"

Volunteers care for migrants in both direct and indirect ways. They take care of them directly, not only by providing material assistance but, as Alessandro Vaccarelli says, through an empathic and lucid listening at the same time: "migrants' narratives become 'care' only when they are welcomed and when practitioners themselves are able to manage them emotionally in their professional role. (…) Managing

the inaudible becomes a professional need". [2]

Care for the other is expressed above all indirectly, acting to allow the other to take responsibility for himself (Mortari, 2015): providing information on the laws of the transit countries, making clear the procedure for obtaining documents, providing points of reference, offering to listen.

By getting involved in the world of solidarity, volunteers themselves experience a sort of 'resistance' towards social injustices and undertake a path that leads them to assert themselves as citizens and as a community (Mantegazza, 2000; Contini, 2009). For some of them, taking care of others responds to an act of responsibility:

"It's important to realize when people need help and take responsibility for being there in those circumstances. I find it essential to believe and live according to the principles of solidarity".

6. CONSTITUENS MEETINGS OF THE NETWORK

"Connect the Dots" marked the beginning of the journey, focusing on the importance of creating as safe passageways as possible for migrants through a support network linking humanitarian points scattered along the routes crossing Italy, whether through the Central Mediterranean or the Balkans. The primary goal was to unite the experiences and knowledge of the various initially involved organizations and ensure effective and coordinated support.

The second meeting delved into the operational aspects of the network through three thematic workshops:

1. The Liquid Frontier: highlighted the need for a detailed mapping of support stations and the creation of an accessible, always-updated digital information platform to inform people on the move about "safe shelters" and their services.
2. Borders and Internal Frontiers: highlighted the importance of an efficient communication network between the various stations to ensure safe passages where possible and a coordinated management of human and material resources in emergencies.
3. Monitoring, Reporting, and Legal Action: emphasized the need to monitor and report violations of migrant rights, creating a common platform to collect and share crucial information.

The third meeting culminated in the presentation of the "Rebbio Charter", a joint declaration that establishes the fundamental principles of the network: the right to freedom of movement and self-determination. The charter was presented in Rome on May 15, 2024, and remains open to new endorsements from associations and individuals—soon a webpage will be created to publish the manifesto, where it will be possible to sign it.

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[2] Vaccarelli A., (2019), Esistenze in fuga. Narrazioni, resilienza, cura educativa in Narrare la migrazione come esperienza formativa, Cerrocchi L. (a cura di), Milano, Franco Angeli. p. 253.

This manifesto represents a decisive step toward formalizing common objectives and consolidating the network Renewing the invitation to sign the Manifesto to all individuals and new associations invited to Rebbio 4.

These meetings have laid the foundation for a cohesive national network ready to face future challenges, with the aim of extending its reach at the European and extra-European levels. The Rebbio network, through continuous evolution and constant commitment, has strengthened, laying the groundwork for increasingly effective and coordinated action in supporting people on the move, with the core element being the on-the-ground presence.

Being pragmatically and territorially rooted among and with migrants in their effort for mobility towards a qualified and worthy life has been a unifying element from the start for all members. This call has a pragmatic implications: it allows for timely, updated knowledge of contexts and routes; it practices dialogue and support, thus pushing towards dialogical and more horizontal operational modes in solidarity with migrants. The idea of Rebbio as a workshop of solidarity networks aligns with this pragmatic condition of its components.

Uniting the solidarity dots is a challenge, a journey, and a practice of trans-associative dialogue that aims to overcome the self-referentiality proliferating within associations. The Rebbio project seeks not only to connect knowledge but to inaugurate a mode of sharing material and human resources capable of supporting, depending on circumstances, the most challenged support stations beyond borders, whether internal or external. The Rebbio Charter is a manifesto for grassroots social construction. It is a significant indicator that large associations, small stations, and individuals collaborate horizontally, as the importance of their presence is not dictated by the size of the association but by the impact expressed.

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SONRIE: SOCIAL ENTERTAINING ROBOTICS FOR INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SERVICES AND IN NURSERY SCHOOL

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This paper explores the potential of social robots to enhance intercultural education in early childhood, with a specific focus on the SONRIE project (SOcial eNtertaining Robotics for Intercultural Education). The study addresses the pedagogical use of culturally competent robots in multicultural contexts, particularly within early childhood education services (0-6 years). Drawing on the framework of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), the SONRIE project aims to develop a social robot capable of fostering cultural inclusion and facilitating interactions between children from diverse backgrounds. The robot integrates multilingual capabilities and culturally specific functionalities, such as traditional games, music, and storytelling, promoting inclusive learning environments. Moreover, the project emphasizes a participatory research approach, involving educators, parents, and children in the robot's design, ensuring adaptability to individual cultural and developmental needs. Ethical considerations, such as privacy and the safety of children, are central to the project's methodology, with strict adherence to ethical standards. The article concludes that the SONRIE robot, by supporting both formal and informal learning, has the potential to become a valuable tool in promoting intercultural understanding, inclusion, and social development among children in multicultural educational settings.

social robotics, Human-Robot Interaction, Intercultural Pedagogy, Culturally sustaining pedagogy, early childhood

INTRODUCTION

The issue of promoting understanding and respect for sociocultural diversity is a pressing challenge in contemporary social, political, and educational contexts, in building a cohesive and inclusive society, a more just and equitable multicultural society in which differences are not grounds for discrimination but are valued as

precious resources.

This process demands a continuous commitment to building a participatory dialogue to foster active citizenship and promote intercultural dialogue. The latter constitutes a pivotal factor in facilitating mutual understanding and knowledge among people from different cultural backgrounds. Indeed, intercultural dialogue promotes awareness of diversity and contributes to creating a cohesive community capable of addressing global challenges with a collaborative and inclusive approach.

Those engaged in pedagogy, particularly in the areas of inclusion and integration in various social contexts (Paris & Alim, 2014), have increasingly encountered a key question in recent years: how might technology and robotics help initiate virtuous cycles that enhance learning and social interaction, ultimately fostering successful inclusion processes? This paper contributes to this area of reflection, seeking to determine whether the use of robots can serve as a facilitating tool in the social integration processes among people from different cultural backgrounds.

The educational uses of robots are varied, and studies highlight their potential as allies in educational settings, as they are flexible tools capable of "bridging the gap by supporting both formal and informal learning" (Cheng, 2018, p. 145). Robots can facilitate learning processes, with the potential to prepare children for future challenges while fostering not only cognitive but also social and emotional development (Cheng, 2018; Tolksdorf et al., 2020). Furthermore, robots support the development of transversal skills such as problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and critical and reflective thinking. They also encourage autonomous learning and creativity by stimulating children to explore new solutions and to work both independently and collaboratively (Negrini & Bernaschina, 2018; Nugent, Barker, Grandgenett, & Adamchuk, 2009; Grimaldi, 2015; Beltrametti, 2014).

1. CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY

In 2012, Django Paris introduced the concept of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) as a critique of a deficit-based pedagogy that views languages and cultural identities as deficiencies to be overcome in order to learn the language of the host country. In contrast, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, as an alternative to this approach, aims to "seek to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 93). CSP is rooted in a deep understanding of the complex interplay between culture, learning, and human development, an educational framework that emphasizes the support and valorization of students' cultural identities within the school context (Paris, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2014). It underscores the need to create learning environments that not only respect students' cultural backgrounds but also recognize them as fundamental resources for the educational process (Buffington Day, 2018). Furthermore, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy promotes critical multiculturalism, encouraging an education that goes beyond mere tolerance of cultural differences to adopt a social justice-oriented perspective focused on "contending in complex ways with the rich and innovative linguistic, literate, and cultural

practices" (Paris & Alim, 2014). This entails creating spaces in which students can freely express their cultural identities, fostering constructive dialogue that recognizes students as agents of change and encourages their active engagement.

2. SONRIE: A SOCIALLY AND CULTURALLY COMPETENT ROBOT

De Graaf defines a socially competent robot as "a robot that elicits social responses from their human users because they follow the rules of behavior expected by these human users" (De Graaf, 2016). Unlike other technologies, these robots are perceived as social entities, evoking behavioral responses from human users as they are designed to adhere to shared social norms within the contexts in which they are embedded. Their sociality is programmed; they are designed to elicit social interactions by following typical human interaction patterns. Furthermore, they are capable of communicating and interacting in socially appropriate ways. For these reasons, they are integrated into real-life environments, such as schools and hospitals, to facilitate social interactions (Rudenko et al., 2024). Additionally, it is important to highlight that, in activities involving children (Neumann et al., 2023), these robots possess a physical body, enabling them to interact visually and form a meaningful connection: "Robots make the education process significantly more engaging and attractive, with many children" (Rudenko et al., 2024, p. 4).

The potential of the SONRIE project (SOcial eNtertaining Robotics for Intercultural Education) is based on evidence related to the use of socially competent robots in educational contexts and is actualized through a design that considers the multicultural richness of the settings in which it operates. Cultural competence is especially significant, given the lack of a clear definition in existing literature for culturally competent social robots. The SONRIE project aims, in an innovative manner, to observe robot interactions with children in a natural living environment—specifically, in early childhood educational services (ages 0–6), rather than in a controlled laboratory setting. The SONRIE project seeks to advance research on social robots by focusing on their potential to support culturally inclusive early childhood education. The research, in fact, aims to investigate the interaction between the robot and individual children as well as those within small groups, with the objective of gaining a better understanding of how the robot integrates into children's social contexts. A primary goal of the project is to ensure inclusive interaction, involving all children without exclusion. Therefore, the robot design will incorporate the children's perspectives, interests, and personal and cultural needs, taking into account the various stages of development and age groups. "To apply a social robot in a kindergarten requires a design that is accessible to all children and considers the diversity of the behaviors, needs, and interests of the children" (Tolksdorf et al., 2021, p. 133). This underscores the importance of defining pedagogical scenarios capable of proposing age-appropriate activities and games.

The research adopts a participatory approach in the culturally oriented programming of the robot, aiming to actively involve all relevant stakeholders at each project stage. Teachers, educators, and families will be involved in the co-design process

to develop a highly customized interactive design. This involvement ensures the robot's features are tailored to the specific needs of each educational context, ensuring greater alignment with the educational environments and practices (Maure & Bruno, 2023; Neto et al., 2021). A central aspect of the project is the robot's adaptability. Its functionalities can be modified and personalized according to the specific needs of educators, teachers, and children, thanks to flexible and modular methodologies. This allows for updating activities in line with the pedagogical objectives of the educational setting. Moreover, the co-design methodology, involving teachers, educators, and families (Tolksdorf et al., 2021), fosters an inclusive and culturally sensitive implementation, reducing the risk of stereotypes and ensuring an inclusive and respectful approach to cultural diversity. The project aims to implement a socially and culturally competent robot within an educational setting for children ages 0–6, promoting the integration and inclusion of children from different cultural backgrounds through the application of a framework capable of responding to multilingual, educational, and cultural needs. The robot will be programmed to facilitate interaction among children who speak different languages, leveraging its multilingual capabilities to support communication within school activities (Kim et al., 2021). Through a multilingual interface, the robot will enable effective and immediate communication, reducing language barriers and promoting an inclusive learning environment. This type of interaction aims not only to improve children's linguistic skills but also to foster mutual understanding between different cultures. Additionally, the project will use hardware tools, such as tablets integrated into the robot's design, to incorporate features for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). This approach represents an innovative solution to ensure universal communication among children with diverse linguistic abilities or special communication needs (Kim et al., 2021). The robot will not be limited to verbal communication but will also integrate visual and gestural modes to expand interaction possibilities.

Thus, the project will also serve as an opportunity to assess whether the socially and culturally competent robot, by promoting cultural recognition of all children in the educational services, can play a significant role in enhancing cultural awareness, curiosity, and decentering. To achieve this goal, the robot will propose culturally diverse games, music, foods, and rhymes as integral elements of the learning experience.

A prominent aspect of the research concerns teacher training, which, according to the CSP teaching approach, "takes dynamic cultural and linguistic dexterity as a necessary good and sees the outcome of learning as additive, rather than subtractive, as remaining whole rather than framed as broken, as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits" (Paris, 2017, p. 2). This will help to enhance intercultural competencies and foster familiarity with the robot's functionalities.

CONCLUSION

The SONRIE Project was conceived and operates within the complex and sensitive

context of early childhood, which demands careful attention to ethical considerations of robot-child interactions. From these reflections arises the decision to establish a multidisciplinary research team where pedagogical disciplines engage in dialogue with computer engineering through an integrative approach (De Graaf, 2016). This framework allows us to underscore that the ethical responsibility inherent in educational action is always intentional and mindful, never merely instrumental. It is an action in which "theories and practices, operational experiences, and scientific validation refer back to each other in a virtuous manner, within the unity of pedagogy's projective impetus" (Malavasi, p. 32). As De Graaf further argues, "once a robot has entered a social environment, it will alter the distribution of responsibilities and roles within that environment as well as how people act in that use context or situation" (De Graaf, 2016, p. 259).

The project, therefore, places particular emphasis on ethical and safety aspects, given the young age of its target audience. As noted by Tolksdorf et al. (2021), the robot's design will prioritize solutions that minimize any potential risks. The robots will be small in size and non-threatening in appearance to facilitate safe and reassuring interactions with children. Furthermore, human observations will be prioritized over video recordings wherever feasible to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the children involved in the activities (Rudenko et al., 2024).

The positive opinion of the ethics committee at the University of Genoa on implementing the research in services for children ages 0–6 forms the foundation of assurance for the privacy of children and their families, as well as for the rigor of the procedures and tools used in the various phases of the project.

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BEYOND INCLUSION. COEXISTENCE AND IDEOLOGY, BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL FIELDWORK AND PEDAGOGICAL SUPERVISION

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This paper addresses the issue of inclusion from a critical and intercultural pedagogy perspective, focusing on the problem of tokenism as a social and interdisciplinary issue. The concept of 'token' refers to a form of disguised exclusion, where seemingly emancipatory practices reinforce underlying subordination. The study begins by identifying latent forms of exclusion in educational practices through pedagogical figures' memos. A pedagogical supervision tool is then used to examine how these issues affect the professionals involved in critical-reflexive practices. The paper adopts a decolonial perspective in intercultural pedagogy, critiquing the 'token' concept by exploring the relationship between alterity and difference in pedagogical discourse. It also examines the role of ideology in education, clarifying the institutional functioning of tokenism and its effects on service cultures and educational settings. By analysing fields of experience marked by superficial agency and parity, the paper aims to uncover latent exclusion and propose alternatives that foster genuine cooperation and participation through a critical examination of education's material and symbolic conditions.

intercultural pedagogy; tokenism; inclusion; pedagogical supervision; educational relationship.

1. *TOKENISM*, SUBJECTIVITY, AND *SOCIAL JUSTICE* IN EDUCATION

The contribution addresses the general framework of a broader research study on the relationship between social inclusion and educational planning (Bianchi, D'Antone, 2024). This is done through an analysis, guided by lines of critical pedagogy, of the concept of tokenism and its articulation with the themes of the *Third International Conference* of the journal *Scuola democratica*, which relate to the issue of social justice in education. In fact, the issue of tokenism, understood as a phenomenon and practice, and consequently of the token, as a subject emerging from the experiential domain defined by this practice, raises questions regarding subjectivity and the contradictory nature that characterizes it, insofar as it defines a field of experience whose correlations with the social fabric and its related cultural, scientific, and ideological forms are highly significant. Before proceeding with an

argument on this issue, however, it is worth introducing the concept of 'token' to assess its applicability within pedagogical discourse. According to Hirshfield (2016, 1), tokenism can be defined as follows:

Tokenism involves the inclusion (usually perfunctory or nominal) of numerical minorities within an institution or group. Examples of tokens include the solo black member of an all-white fraternity, a blind or disabled person in a group of able individuals, or a woman police cadet in a class of all men cadets. This type of inclusion generally takes place due to changes in policies or procedures, yet these changes do not necessarily mean that the organization itself has become less discriminatory and more inclusive.

At the same time, according to Niemann (2016, p. 1), the "token-subject" can be defined as follows:

> Tokens are perceived as homogeneous. Their actions, decisions, values, and mannerisms are interpreted in a stereotype-consistent manner [...]. Stereotypic expectations may lead to the encapsulation and entrapment of tokens in particular roles, such as specialists in ethnic or gender matters and symbols of workplace diversity. They may trigger in the token feelings of inadequacy, stigma, inequity in the workplace, and stereotype threat, which refers to the fear of proving true the stereotypes about one's group [...]. Stress is added when tokens' imperfections and mistakes are perceived as reflective of their group, while their successes are deemed exceptions to the group stereotype.

In summary, it is possible to frame this practice and the subjectivation effect it produces in the following way.

On the level of the phenomenon and act, tokenism represents a form of instrumental inclusion (because it is entirely formal and aimed at portraying the institution that promotes it, whether consciously or not, as "inclusive") and mystified, as it does not guarantee freedom and agency to the subject involved in this practice. Instead, it positions them as a representative of a minority, which, despite its minority status, has the right to presence. This framework is not dissimilar to the lines on subordinate integration (Catarci, 2015; Burgio, 2015).

On the level of the subjectivation effect, the 'token' is inevitably subject to ambivalent consideration: on one hand, they are unique, a paradigmatic representative of a minority who assumes the role of an expert in the issues concerning that minority; on the other hand, they are anonymous, a member of a homogeneous and undifferentiated group, whose representational function takes on the purely pragmatic contours of the role that such formal representation plays in the image of the institution and its participants. These lines, in some ways functionalist and framed within the dynamics of corporate work contexts, were the foundation of Rosabeth Moss Kanter's pioneering work on the subject (2008).

The hypothesis of this contribution arises from these considerations, interpreting them through the relationship, in some respects untimely yet highly generative, between education and ideology. Such an articulation presents at least two significant characteristics. The first concerns the possibility of more closely connecting

institutions and society, reading power dynamics, subjection/subjectivation, and social reproduction between the lines (Papi, 1978). The second allows, by virtue of the implicit and automatic nature of ideological discourse, for the conceptual pair 'tokenism-token' to be understood not in an open or rationalist manner, but rather in terms of its impersonal and latent aspects. Following this hypothesis, the phenomenon of tokenism cannot have an interpersonal nature, if by this we refer to the relationship between singular individuals entering into exchanges and communication. Instead, it will have different characteristics that call into question the very concept of 'subject'. Specifically, by employing the concept of ideology, understood here in the sense it holds within the Marxian and Marxist tradition, it may be worth recalling the *Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach* (Marx, 2000, 172). Marx, as is well known, addresses the issue of human essence in this way: the Sixth Thesis critiques Feuerbach's idea that religious essence can be reduced to human essence. Marx argues that human essence is not something abstract or inherent within an individual. Instead, human essence is shaped by the totality of social relations. In other words, what defines humans is not an intrinsic quality, but the network of social interactions and conditions in which individuals exist.

The issue raised by the Sixth Thesis, shifting the concept of human essence outside of an "interior space" (Morfino, 2022, 25), allows for an important move. Following the insights of Cesare Luporini, it is possible to argue that "human individuals are not only situated within the social relations generated by their associated activity: they also internalize these relations, to which they are conditioned" (1978, p. 379). This relationship between production and reproduction points to the conflictual and ritualized nature of social relations themselves, as Louis Althusser (2014) had clearly understood by identifying specific apparatuses as the social and symbolic contexts for this ritualization. It thus becomes evident that even when a singular individual (a teacher, educator, mid-level manager, coordinator, etc.) expresses a particular instance of exclusion, this instance should not be immediately interpreted as purely individual, rational, and intentional. While this does not deny the possible characteristics of freedom and intentionality in individual and collective educational activity, both already have an inherently social nature. It is possible to trace the imprints of this in regulations and pedagogical projects, in the various service cultures and the norms derived from them, as well as in the different representations of the professional profile of pedagogical figures on both the explicit and latent levels. Now, Althusser defined "interpellation" as the process by which ideological discourse "grips" the individual, aimed at reproducing certain behaviours functional to the social order. Althusser writes (2014, 191) that, while the ideological discourse expresses an instance of mystified subjectivation, it also has margins for failure. Thus, this process of social reproduction and non-coercive persuasion contains a level of precariousness that allows for a space where, precisely through the materiality of behaviours and the interpretation of norms and their violation, there emerges the possibility of political and pedagogical maneuvering. We refer here to the possibility, identified within the range of counter-identificatory moves, of "dis-interpellation", as formulated by Tyson E. Lewis (2017, 314):

> Education is not simply an educational interpellation or counterinterpellation be-
> cause it does not concern itself with mirror recognition [...] but rather with the pos-
> sibility of dis-interpellation that makes the subject unfamiliar to itself and thus
> open to its own dissolution through the encounter with an outside. [...] the role of
> the aleatory teacher is to open a space for an encounter by setting up the possibil-
> ities for a clash and then to bear witness to the marks of subjective dissolution. In-
> stead of repressing such moments of disorientation, an aleatory teacher holds
> onto them.

The move described by Lewis, which closely engages with the critical-reflective ca-
pacities (D'Antone, 2023) of educational figures broadly understood, envisions the
possibility of breaking the very status of individual identity along a dual vector. On
one hand, the educational act is understood here in terms of encounter and con-
junction, thus as a process that is neither predetermined nor teleologically ori-
ented; otherwise, it risks falling into the traps of ideological discourse. This aspect
expresses the need for supervision and consultation, understood as second-level
practices for and with the professionals involved in educational projects. The goal
is to define the structure of the ongoing educational event and to identify any poten-
tial ideological encrustations and the possibilities for modification, connected both
to the educational style of the professional and to the multiplicity of times and
needs expressed by the educational situation itself (*ibidem*). On the other hand,
considering education itself as a possibility for resistance takes on not a *value-
driven*, but a *structural* connotation. In the educational experience, the encounter
with alterity (both personal and impersonal – Massa, 1986; Dozza, 2000) becomes
a *chance* of loss and disorientation with respect to the subjectivation coordinates
that tokenism, on the contrary, would implicitly expect. And, since this act and ef-
fect of subjectivation must be understood not in a Eurocentric sense but within a
logic that is also imperialist, efficiency-oriented, and adultist (De Giorgi, 2020),
these margins for dis-interpellation represent a form of disorientation from the co-
lonial logics that still constrain not only practices and policies, but also the more or
less explicit discourses on education.

2. TOKENISM AND DECOLONIALIZATION

As previously mentioned, the research explores the multiple implications, latent yet
active, or evidently expressed, that tokenism has in the educational relationship,
particularly in the intercultural context. It does so through a qualitative methodol-
ogy that draws from Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) and "Clinica
della Formazione" (Massa, 1992), and also refers to micropedagogy (Demetrio,
2020) and autoethnography. Data were collected through the writing of theoretical
and autoethnographic memos (Charmaz, 2014; Bianchi 2019) and through super-
vision meetings (D'Antone, 2023).

We start from the premise that "education cannot be neutral" (Catarci, 2016, 71)
nor can it avoid being "itself a political act" (*ibidem*) nor, again, can it be anything
other than "engaged pedagogy, more demanding than conventional critical or fem-
inist pedagogy" (hooks, 1994). If the first part of the work traced a complex path

linking tokenism to the construct of subordinate integration (a construct deeply anchored in the relationship between education and ideology), this section proposes a reconstruction, in an engaged and archaeological sense, that relates tokenism to the coloniality inherent in educational practices and more broadly referable discursive practices to the intercultural universe.

To attempt, in a first approximation, a restitution of the sensitizing concepts that the research group is considering in data analysis, the theme of decolonialization in education is chosen as an integrating background.

Intercultural pedagogy is inherently deconstructive (Fiorucci, 2020), critical, uncomfortable, aware of the need to dynamize learning and produce "imbalances", to support dialectical confrontations (Santerini, 2004), manage cultural shocks (Cohen-Emerique, 2015), work in the continuum that evolves from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism.

Shifting the center of the world (Thion'g o, 1993) and decolonizing, first and foremost, the mind (Thion'g o, 1986), become determining processes to be able to act on an engaged pedagogical perspective oriented towards social justice, capable of supporting processes of conscientization and real decolonization, that is, vigilant and capable of recognizing and addressing the drift of tokenism. What indeed seems appropriate is to propose a first distinction between the terms 'decolonization' and 'decolonialization,' bearing in mind that, from a critical pedagogical perspective, it is more urgent than ever to decolonialize, that is, to exit coloniality, because decolonizing has not been and is not enough (Borghi, 2020, 29).

Anti-racism, like anti-colonialism, has hidden—and still risks hiding—a Eurocentric posture. And this becomes even more dangerous when it exempts from keeping an eye on the oppressor within each of us: "fighting side by side each from their own position within the hierarchies of race, to break the yoke of an oppression of diversified tone, but of common matrix" (Palmi, 2020, 12). The unawareness of the necessary deconstruction of the implicit undermines the notion of dialogue at its root, making it evident that it is necessary to overcome both a "miserabilist" vision and a "utilitarian" vision of migration: that is, two reductionist visions that oscillate between paternalism and economic functionalism and tend to reduce migrants within categories predefined by host societies (Fiorucci, 2020).

Thus, what is passed off as inclusion is, with good approximation, a form, among the many possible, of tokenism. Talking about inclusion and acting on it, addressing the issues of racism and sexism, requires the awareness of embracing decoloniality in educational practices, starting from classrooms. bell hooks (2010) notes that discussing challenging, real-life topics in class can sometimes lead to emotional reactions, such as students crying. This is particularly observed in classes taught by black professors, where the crying student is often white. A black feminist colleague referred to this phenomenon as the "crying white woman syndrome".

When discussing racial dynamics between whites and blacks, tears often manifest in class because they represent shame and guilt; when talking about race, it is not possible to maintain the emotional distance that persists with other less heavy

topics.

As a research group, we constantly asked ourselves: how can we concretely go beyond tokenism in the materiality of educational settings? As mentioned, these and other questions cannot be immediately decided and want to configure themselves as sensitizing concepts, capable of supporting an argument as rooted and adherent to the data as possible.

Deconstruction practices and resistance practices become a categorical imperative for practitioners who, first and foremost, have the responsibility to emancipate themselves from internalized coloniality: hence, to quote Palmi: "the need for the convergence of autonomous processes, which with specific modalities and temporalities work together to unveil and disarticulate the mimetic functioning of the racial device" (Palmi, 2020, 13). The proposal of engaged pedagogy involves the enhancement of a teaching for the decentralization of viewpoints that can address topics such as: the Western knowledge model; Colonial and Decolonial Pedagogy; Power; Identities; Intersectionality; Race and Ethnicity issues; Disability and Ableism; gender and sexual orientations; the Anthropocene and its overcoming; cultural sensitivities, social justice; Equity; and, above all, provide a framework for practice or an action plan.

Educators must recognize that any effort to transform institutions (to reflect a multicultural perspective) must consider the fear of teachers, which manifests when they are asked to change their paradigms. Therefore, training centers must be established where teachers can express their concerns, and at the same time learn to create new ways of addressing multicultural courses and programs (hooks, 1994).

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INTER-ACTION: INTERCULTURE, SECOND LANGUAGE AND NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

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"Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers […] and there is no transformation without action" (Freire, 2005, 87). As can be deduced from the Brazilian pedagogue's words, one cannot separate the word/language from the transformative effect it can have on the world. Awareness of this bond is grounding, for example, in Second Language learning pathways aimed at migrants, where the main effect of this lost connection can result in the failure of the integration pathway. For those who make a migration, language becomes a significant element to relate to the new reality, to respond to social, communicative and normative needs. The paper addresses, through a qualitative research conducted in Rome between October 2021 and September 2022, the question of the role of non-formal education of adult migrants attending SL learning courses and the importance of intercultural activities and practices for the success of the inclusion journey.

Adult migrants; Second Language; Interculture; Social inclusion; Non-formal education

1. THE SECOND LANGUAGE TO STAY

In Europe many countries have introduced regulations that make knowledge of their national language an essential requirement that adult migrants must certify in order to be allowed to stay in the destination country, in some cases even before embarking on migration.

Given the centrality of language to the integration of adult migrants, the notion of *language integration* (Extramiana & Van Avermaet, 2010) has been coined, which indicates precisely the need to master the language of the country to which one has migrated, which, however, is not to be considered a foreign language, but rather a Second Language (SL)[1]. The attestation of language skills is not only related to the application for a residence permit, but is also necessary to obtain citizenship. In

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[1] It indicates language learned in the context in which it is normally used for everyday communication. It follows that learning does not only take place in didactically organized educational environments, as is the case for Foreign Languages, but, in some cases, it can also be learned entirely spontaneously.

order to design common educational paths and criteria for assessing language acquisition, the European Union has shared two useful tools:

- The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), a volume first published in 2001, can now be found in the updated version published in 2020. The CEFR contains descriptors of the language skills required for each level, evaluation criteria for the teacher and, also, descriptors for mediation, online interaction, multilingual/pluricultural competence and sign language skills (Council of Europe, 2020).
- The European Language Portfolio (ELP), is a very useful device for those who are learning a new language and consists of a personal document in which the learner can record his or her language and cultural experiences. It takes the form of a record that keeps track of the learning process and achievements (Lazenby-Simpson, 2012).

The European guidelines and the competence definition, assessment and monitoring devices presented confirm the centrality of language education to the migrant person's path of social inclusion once he or she arrives in the country of immigration. Taking into analysis the Italian legal framework with reference to the modalities of access to the residence permit, these are governed by the Presidential Decree of September 14, 2011, No. 179, Regolamento concernente la disciplina dell'accordo di integrazione tra lo straniero e lo Stato. This Integration Agreement consists of a mandatory integration process that begins with its signing at the prefecture by persons who are 16 years of age or older and who do not have Italian citizenship or citizenship of another European state.

The Agreement is based on a system of credits that must be obtained within two years of signing so that a residence permit can be acquired. The credits that in total must be collected are 30, of these 16 are awarded at the very moment of the signing of the Agreement, the remaining ones must derive from the certification of linguistic competence in Italian as SL, equivalent to 24 credits, and corresponding at least to an A2 level according to CEFR criteria.

A language learned at an A2 level enables the person to (Council of Europe, 2020):

- be able to understand, as far as listening and reading skills are concerned, familiar words and very simple and frequently used expressions referring to the person's personal sphere (family, work, surroundings) and to trace simple information in everyday written texts such as, for example, a restaurant menu or advertisements;
- be able to communicate simple and routine content characterized by a direct exchange of information, "[the person] can handle very short social exchanges but is rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of their own accord, though they can be made to understand if the interlocutor will take the trouble" (Council of Europe, 2020, 74).

2. SL SCHOOLS FOR ADULT MIGRANTS BETWEEN WORD AND ACTION

In Italy, SL can be learned both in formal settings, i.e., CPIAs (provincial centres for adult education), and in non-formal schools, i.e., associative and community realities in which volunteers and operators cooperate to provide Italian language courses free of charge. Both types of language learning pathways are based on CEFR guidelines in order to ensure that students are prepared to pass SL exams, especially those required by Italian regulations (level A2 for residence permit and B1 for Italian citizenship). The schools, however, have a strong intercultural imprint, oriented toward the active inclusion of immigrant people in the country, placing alongside the utilitarian view of language, aimed at obtaining certificates and documents, a narrative and participatory approach, the aim of which is the enhancement of the identity and biographical dimension of SL. From an educational and social point of view, one cannot ignore the fact that language has strong identity and social connotations, which Paulo Freire traces back to the transformative power of pedagogical processes, but only if words and action are not separated, as:

Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a *praxis*. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world (Freire, 2005, 87).

This fundamental link between language and action is one of the aspects that emerged in a doctoral research conducted in Rome between October 2021 and September 2022 in the context of SL educational services aimed at adult migrants. Rome sees the presence of an important network of associations, the Rete Scuolemigranti, which connects the realities of the territory that are involved in teaching SL to migrant people, whether these are children, adults or people who are illiterate or with a low level of schooling in their mother tongue.

The methodology that was adopted to carry out the research is qualitative in order to collect information regarding what are the personal experiences of the training courses of students and teachers. The data collection instrument used was the semi-structured interview, carried out in 8 SL schools, thanks to the collaboration of which 60 interviews were conducted, of which 25 were with teachers of SL courses – meaning tenured teachers of CPIAs, but also operators and volunteers of non-formal realities – and 35 students.

3. INTER-ACTION IN SECOND LANGUAGE SCHOOLS

Below will be reported the main results that emerged regarding the intercultural perspective in Second Language courses and the adoption of the communicative approach by teachers and volunteers to teach Italian to migrants enrolled in the courses. Interculturality and the communicative approach were found to be the most fruitful strategies for learning SL in the country of immigration, as well as being strongly directed to the active participation of students and the promotion of activities in the community.

The main results concern a general adoption of the intercultural perspective in L2

teaching, so there are multiple elements that schools pay attention to in educational programming. the SL schools that took part in the research are all characterized by a real personalization of the educational offer on the lifetime of the students. This means, for example, that schools take account of the often very pervasive labour dimension so that courses are offered at accessible times; or SL courses, if not whole schools, are organized only for migrant women, as they are to be considered vulnerable subjects and subordinate to forms of marginalization and self-exclusion traceable to the intersectional social category of gender.

The element that most of all is accountable to the intercultural perspective, and that is significant for the link between linguistic dimension and action, concerns the realization of activities aimed at cultural encounter and social inclusion:

> We do a lot of intercultural activities, let's say they are 50% of our action, so the film club where we show movies in Italian with Italian subtitles, we do the workshops, all free, if we do the photography workshop everyone brings the cameras they have because there will be a volunteer, also professional photographer. We do the theater workshop that has been going on for 9 years because among the volunteers we have a professional actress. Same we did for a while sewing workshops with a seamstress[2] (A., SL school coordinator, October 2021).

But in addition to the workshops, many of the schools surveyed offer a personal support service which helps those who interact with them to respond to legal, health and documentary needs. This type of service is described by teachers and volunteers as synergistic with SL courses, making language education sites true points of reference for migrant people, not only for learning Italian, but for responding to various needs that may arise during the path to inclusion:

> All those schools that don't have the personal support service and don't have competent staff for counter work, the needs don't always come out, in the sense that they often go to do the lesson, the teacher gives the lesson and it ends there. It's those schools that also have a reception association behind them that somehow, automatically, different needs come out, otherwise the school remains place where you go for two hours of lessons go away, if you know what I mean[3] (M., volunteer, November 2021).

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[2] Original version of the excerpt in Italian language: noi facciamo tante attività interculturali, diciamo che sono il 50% della nostra azione, per cui il cineforum in cui proiettiamo i film in italiano con i sottotitoli in italiano, facciamo i laboratori, tutto gratuito, se facciamo il laboratorio fotografico ognuno di noi porta le macchinette che c'ha perché ci sarà una volontaria, anche fotografa professionista. Facciamo il laboratorio teatrale che sono 9 anni che va avanti perché tra le volontarie abbiamo un'attrice professionista. Stesso abbiamo fatto per un certo periodo i laboratori di cucito con una sarta (A. SL school coordinator, October 2021).

[3] Tutte quelle scuole che non hanno lo sportello e non hanno personale competente per lavoro di sportello, non sempre escono fuori le esigenze, nel senso che spesso vanno a fare la lezione, l'insegnante impartisce la lezione e la cosa finisce là. Sono quelle scuole che hanno alle spalle anche un'associazione che fa accoglienza che in qualche modo, in automatico, escono fuori delle esigenze diverse, altrimenti la scuola rimane posto dove vai a fare due ore di lezioni andare via, non so se mi spiego (M., volunteer, November 2021).

Fundamental among the strategies adopted by schools is the teaching of SL based on the communicative approach, in which the learner plays a central role. Underlying this is the desire to develop communicative competence, i.e., the ability to use language appropriately in order to achieve a specific goal in a specific situation; therefore, not only the linguistic component is taken into consideration, but the communicative ability that can be defined as adequate with respect to external demands. For this reason, the learner, in addition to minimal grammatical and syntactic acquisitions, also acquires knowledge regarding paralinguistic and extralinguistic skills.

In SL courses this approach is characterized by: the importance of recognizing the cultural component of languages; creating interaction among learners; fostering the social component of language; and the use of glottodidactics to promote interaction and learning.

Of this approach, in addition, the development of *intercomprehension* (Doyé, 2005) and heterogeneity, defined from a cultural, linguistic, and L2 proficiency level perspective, have also emerged as relevant, as:

> in the multilevel class it often happens that the one who is a little bit ahead ends up helping those who are a little bit behind and this is a very very positive dynamic, which in the peer class maybe doesn't occur, it's a very interesting dynamic but it only occurs in very heterogeneous classes [4] (M., volunteer, November 2021).

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Language educational environments aimed at adult migrants are places that can be defined as *contact zone* (Pratt, 1992), places where diversity meets and where, through the educational experience, social inclusion is promoted in the host country. In order to re-signify the use of SL courses, so that they are not aimed solely at the acquisition of language certification to access documents, schools are well aware of the need to link learning to activities and workshops, as language can be a place of self-revelation (Lorde, 1984), of reconciliation, union, and renewal (hooks, 2015), and of deep connection to a sense of belonging (Gümüsay, 2022).

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Extramiana, C., & Van Avermaet, P. (2010). *Language requirements for adult*

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[4] nella classe multilivello succede spesso che quello che è un pochino più avanti finisce per aiutare quelli che sono un pochino più indietro e questa è una dinamica molto molto positiva, che nella classe di pari livello magari non si verifica, è una dinamica molto interessante ma che si verifica solo in classi molto eterogenee (M., volunteer, November 2021).

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"INTERCULTURAL KINSCRIPTING". PRETEENS WITH A MIGRATION BACKGROUND BUILDING INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND BELONGING IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

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Each person is configured as a *homo complexus*, as Morin points out: however, the sons and daughters of migration face the challenge of building a plural sense of belonging in a specific way, given the plurality of cultural references with which they deal. In the process of becoming and feeling part of collective belonging, the relationships that people experience assume an important function. In this perspective, intergenerational exchanges play a prominent role: within the family, but also potentially in the community dimension. In this sense, it seems interesting to look at a specific phenomenon: the "kinscripting", which takes on an intercultural connotation in migration situations. The contribution stems from the research *Nurturing the Roots: Memory and Intergenerational Responsibility in an Intercultural Perspective*, which analyses these kinds of ties and the value they take on in the experience of preteens with migration background. The study highlights how the chance to experience intergenerational relationships in the community dimension opens up possibilities for intercultural and interreligious dialogue, co-habitation and mediation between different cultural perspectives.

belonging; community; intergenerational relationships; kinscripting; migration background

INTRODUCTION

Migration is shaped as a transnational phenomenon. Families with a migration background experience the co-presence of cultural references from both the *here* and the *there* in their everyday lives, as Vertovec (2004) points out using the term *bifocality*. For this reason, the building of a plural sense of belonging is a challenge which is particularly relevant to the sons and daughters of migration. In fact, each person is configured as *homo complexus*, as Morin (2001) states: his or her identity can be understood by considering all the components related to belonging to plural collective dimensions, that are intertwined with the personal self (Jones & McEwen, 2000). In the experience of young people with a migrant background, these dimensions take on additional nuances that arise from the plurality of cultural references

with which they are confronted. The processes of rooting in the culture of origin are then relevant to their development, but at the same time they need to elaborate an identity that allows them to feel a sense of belonging to the *here,* to the context and the community in which their present and, potentially, future lives take place.

Along this path, the relationships that people experience have an important function, because they are relevant to becoming and feeling part of a collective belonging. In this perspective, a prominent role is assigned to the exchange between generations, through the function of transmitting memories and a collective history from older people. However, memories are not just passed on to the younger generations: they are flexible and open to interaction between different age groups and to the possibility of new contributions from new generations, playing an active role in this relationship (Pati, 2010; Amadini, 2018). Within the family dimension, this dynamic is evident in the ties between grandparents and grandchildren. The elder offer the youngest the opportunity to find their own place in the wider family history (Ferland, 2009), while at the same time confirming their belonging to the same collective dimension (Corsi, 2022). This is also the case when these roots and this belonging have to be established, as in the case of adoption: the grandparents play an important role in ensuring that the grandchildren can make the family biography their own, putting down roots in a history to which they can feel they belong (Dalcerri, Colombo & Negri, 2014).

The international literature has explored various configurations of the transnational grandparenthood and grandchildhood, the way in which these relationships are developing across borders and as "mobile" bonds (Cima, 2017). However, some authors have also explored how these relationships can be created in the immigration contexts, through a phenomenon that can be defined as *kinscripting*: a kind of social widening of the network of trust and kinship, but also support, which in these situations takes on a cross-cultural connotation (Bonizzoni, 2014; Ambrosini, 2019).

1. BUILDING 'FAMILY-LIKE TIES' IN A COMMUNITY DIMENSION

The relationships that fall into the category of *kinscripting* may exhibit characteristics associated with "family-like ties", despite the absence of a common bloodline. Some authors (see, for example: Ebaugh & Curry, 2000; Carsten, 2004) have put forth the concept of *fictive kin* to describe this specific kind of tie, although this proposal has also been met with some critical analysis (Nelson, 2013). In this connection, the care practices seem to play a significant role in such relationships, becoming a relevant opportunity to create these ties even in the absence of biological belonging (Drotbohm & Alber, 2015).

These insights have been adopted by authors such as Souralová (2019), who have applied them specifically to the study of the experiences of transnational families. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the ties that are created outside the family unit in migration experiences, including those that span different generations. Her research on sons and daughters of Vietnamese immigrants in the Czech

Republic shows how young generations say they have both Vietnamese grandparents and Czech grandmothers. The study revealed that these relationships are not mutually exclusive, as grandchildren cultivate ties with both biological and 'acquired' grandparents. Therefore, these are not alternative relationships, but rather they are experienced in their uniqueness. The research demonstrated that Czech grandmothers perform an important socialisation and acculturation role. These new ties are further extended to the grandmothers' own families and are also shown and recognised outside the family system.

Other authors have defined these processes as a social widening of the family network, whereby neighbours may provide childcare support to parents (Ambrosini, 2019; Bonizzoni, 2014) or other close figures offer assistance during significant life events, such as pregnancy (Neuman, 2008). In conclusion, an additional avenue for deepening intergenerational and intercultural connections is to focus on the community level.

2. INTERCULTURAL *KINSCRIPTING* AND LOCAL COMMUNITY: A PARTICIPATIVE RESEARCH

One of the principal areas of investigation in the research project entitled *Nurturing the Roots: Memory and Intergenerational Responsibility in an Intercultural Perspective* is precisely the phenomenon of kinscripting within a community context. The research examined the nature of these kinds of ties, how they are constructed, and the value they assume in the experience of preteens with migration backgrounds. The study is situated in the cities of Brescia and Bergamo (Northern Italy), both characterised by a high degree of multiculturalism. It involved representatives from a range of areas, including educational contexts, social services and religious institutions, as well as the volunteers who collaborate in these entities. Of particular significance was the involvement of the preadolescents themselves, who are given a voice in various stages of the process. The study was therefore structured as a *Research with Children (*Christensen & James, 2000), employing a participatory approach, specifically the *Mosaic Approach (*Clark & Moss, 2001), and it utilised the hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective (Van Manen, 1990) as a point of reference. The research suggested the potential for the formation of intergenerational relationships in the local community, based on findings from preteens' perspectives: these ties could be established in both informal contexts and non-formal educational settings.

2.1. Deepening the meaning of intergenerational and intercultural ties
The preteens discussed the relationships they have formed with the "grandmothers and grandfathers from here", and how they experience them in their particular, individual ways. These connections are regarded as significant by both those who have a closer, more personal relationship with their biological grandparents and those who have never had the opportunity to meet them in person. These ties are frequently established with people who occupy an educational role for the

preteens: this may include neighbours, but is more commonly observed in cases in which the preteens have encountered similar figures in educational settings and with whom they interact on a daily basis. With them, the young share moments of study and homework, but they also have fun together. Furthermore, there are opportunities for intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

The description of these people as "grandparents" can be understood as a reference to their educational role and the way they fulfill it, which entails providing affection and attention to the person as a whole, supporting the preteens during challenging moments, and offering guidance and care. For this reason, this role can also be attributed to teachers or young people, as this girl outlined: "Some people tell me that maybe [Young woman's name] could be my aunt, but I mean I don't know, I just feel the affection of a grandmother" *(ML04_F_12_Ilg, translated)*. It can be seen that the meanings attributed to grandparenting by preteens are not necessarily bound to the age of the people involved. It can be argued that grandparenting is perceived as a way of being and of being part of the relationship, of caring and of supporting the growth paths of the grandchildren.

The analysis demonstrates that the ties in question possess both constraints and benefits. With regard to the latter, both younger and older people derive benefit from the relational opportunities afforded by these ties. Furthermore, the bonds in question facilitate the deconstruction of generalising representations and prejudices.

The study also included the perspectives of senior volunteers, who engage with children through after-school educational programmes and offer support with their homework. The participants identified a number of meanings associated with the intergenerational experience, which can be grouped into the following dimensions:

- the educational one is, of course, paramount;
- the political intention: some volunteers emphasised that their commitment is oriented towards social justice, with the goal of providing more opportunities for young people and children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. However, some of them highlighted that this condition should not lead to a tendency to view the young in a stereotyped way, which could prevent from seeing the resources that they possess;
- personal growth and development opportunities: in addition to exploring the relational dimensions, the potential of knowledge and learning through the exchange with other cultures and religions is also a key focus, with an emphasis on cultivating an open and non-judgemental attitude. As an interviewee stated: "You downsize some of your beliefs, let's say the certainties that you have had. You downsize them for a moment and say to yourself: 'Yes, the certainties you have are fine. But there could be something else, something alternative'" (Int_FS_A1_62, translated);
- the intercultural and interreligious dialogue and mediation: there is no shortage of challenges associated with certain cultural practices and perspectives that may be difficult to comprehend. However, there are also

significant opportunities for encounter and mutual exchange, as this woman illustrated in her recollection of an afternoon of study at home: "At one point, a young boy said to me: 'Do you have the Koran?' 'Yes!' – I got it from my father-in-law – 'Be careful with it.' 'Yes, yes, of sure.' 'And do you also have the Bible?' 'Of course!' I mean, we compared some passages..." (Int_FS_A3_74, translated).

In a broader sense, the research indicates that the opportunity to engage in intergenerational relationships within the community context can facilitate the development of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, cohabitation, and mediation between diverse cultural perspectives. In light of the above, it is valuable to mention an interview passage that precisely highlights the way in which nurturing relationships in informal and educational contexts can facilitate a posture of dialogue and encounter, as well as the capacity to decentralise and adopt the perspective of the other. In the interview, an elderly man reflected on the after-school activities he initiated on an informal and spontaneous basis in the courtyard of a local building, which were attended by children and teenagers residing in the area. He stated that he personally had been welcomed by the families of these children due to his own diversity. Indeed, they adhered to a variety of religious beliefs, but all of them were devout:

> They [the immigrant families] gave me responsibility despite my difference, because I am not religious. Everyone here knows I am not religious. [...] The families, the mothers, accepted this difference, my difference, and they still entrusted me with their children. They trusted me and that is very, very important here: trust is also very important. [...] once they [the children] were arguing about: "My God is stronger than yours!", and I explained that they were talking about the same God. (Int_ML_A1_68, translated)

CONCLUSION

The findings encourage a reflection on the importance of addressing the proposed issues in a systemic way. This perspective offers a framework for understanding the crucial role of collaborative educational work with young people with a migration background, as well as their families and local communities, in order to foster a sense of shared belonging and engage in transformative, inclusive processes, leading to the emergence of genuine forms of co-belonging.

Finally, it seems relevant to focus on the role of the family in this type of process. Indeed, the research indicates that parents play a crucial role in determining the accessibility of meanings and intergenerational relationships for the preteens, both within the community and within the family dimension. This outcome highlights the necessity for a more comprehensive examination of intergenerational concerns, incorporating the perspectives of three generations concurrently: the older one, the younger one, along with the middle generation, that is the one of the parents. The three-generational perspective thus offers new avenues for future research, deepening the topic with a systemic approach. Finally, some pedagogical trajectories

could be further identified with a view to promoting similarly multifaceted actions, capable of involving plural educational actors in a logic of collaboration and widespread responsibility.

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CIVIC KNOWLEDGE AND STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRANTS IN SLOVENIA: INSIGHTS FROM ICCS CYCLES

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This paper examines the relationship between civic knowledge and students' attitudes toward immigrants in Slovenia, a topic of increasing relevance during global changes driven by migration. Immigration raises significant social, cultural, and economic concerns, making the attitudes of host societies an important point of public discourse in Europe. Theoretically, civic knowledge is widely regarded as an important driver of tolerant and inclusive civic attitudes. Initial findings from the 2022 ICCS data reveal that Slovenia ranks below the international average in positive attitudes toward immigrants, highlighting the need for deeper investigation. The paper explores how civic education influences these attitudes and reveals that civic knowledge is one of the important factors shaping students' perceptions of immigrants. It specifically examines this connection across three ICCS cycles: 2009, 2016, and 2022. Using descriptive statistics and linear regression analysis, the research offers insights that can serve as a foundation for further exploration in this field.

 attitudes toward immigrants; civic knowledge; ICCS; Slovenia

INTRODUCTION

Attitudes toward immigrants have become a pressing issue in contemporary society, with education playing a crucial role in shaping these perspectives (Bayram, 2022; Davidov & Semyonov, 2017; De Coninck, 2020). Recent global changes, including extensive migration due to conflict, economic inequalities, and climate change, have brought the status of immigrants to the forefront of European public discourse (Davidov & Semyonov, 2017). The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) is an extensive international research project that examines students' civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours and explores how young people are prepared to assume their roles as citizens (Schulz et al., 2018). Civic education, known for fostering active and responsible citizenship, can have a positive influence on attitudes toward immigrants (Diazgranados & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2015). This study aims to explore the association between civic knowledge and students' attitudes toward immigrants, a secondary analysis of ICCS is performed. Utilizing both descriptive statistics and additional linear regression analysis, the study aims to enhance our understanding of the dynamics between civic education and attitudes toward immigrants in Slovenia.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In today's world, attitudes toward immigrants are a central concern, and education has been acknowledged as playing a significant role in shaping these views (Lancee & Sarrasin, 2015; Schwarzenthal et al., 2017; Zick et al., 2008). How students, teachers, and other stakeholders perceive immigrant students can significantly influence their educational experiences and outcomes (Chiu et al., 2012). Civic knowledge is an especially important element influencing students' views on immigrants. Studies suggest that adolescents who possess higher levels of civic knowledge are more inclined to hold positive attitudes and show acceptance toward immigrant communities. Data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), offer valuable insights into the connection between civic knowledge and attitudes toward immigrants. The positive association between civic knowledge and attitudes toward immigrants is also in line with previous research (Claes & Isac, 2020; Lundberg & Abdelzadeh, 2022; Schulz et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2010), which suggests that civic education can foster the development of positive attitudes toward immigrants and promote social cohesion (Verkuyten, 2021).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN
2.1. About ICCS study

The purpose of ICCS is to investigate the ways in which young people are prepared to undertake their roles as citizens in a range of countries. ICCS was conducted by the Educational Research Center on the national level, while being coordinated by the IEA on the international level (Schulz et al., 2018).

It is essential to understand how young people's attitudes toward immigrants in Slovenia have shifted over time, and to examine how civic knowledge may shape these perspectives. In this study we wanted to see if civic and citizenship knowledge of Slovenian students affects attitudes toward immigrants and how this relationship changed throughout the years. For this we utilised the ICCS student test and student questionnaire from three cycles in which Slovenia participated (2009, 2016 and 2022).

In Slovenia, 163 schools participated in 2009. 3070 students were included from 8th grade while also 3042 students were included from 9th grade, since the average age of eight graders was too low. In 2016, 135 schools participated with 2844 students and in 2022, 177 schools with 4958 students. The samples are all representative. Students participated in ICCS study, were first taking civic and citizenship knowledge tests and after that they filled out a student questionnaire where they were asked about their attitudes and opinions on different issues of our society (Klemenčič M., 2023).

2.2. Research Questions

This paper focuses on two central research questions:

- *Research question 1:* Did the attitudes toward immigrants of 14-year-old students in Slovenia change between 2009, 2016 and 2022, and if yes, in which direction (more or less favourable)?
- *Research question 2:* How does civic knowledge relate to the students' attitudes toward immigrants in ICCS cycles 2009, 2016 and 2022?

2.3. Method and data analysis

While the ICCS survey instruments evolved slightly over time, especially regarding the number and variety of items measuring attitudes toward immigrants, there are four core items that remained consistent across all three cycles. These items enable a direct examination of trends and shifts in students' views.

In each cycle, students in their eighth year of schooling were asked to indicate their level of agreement (Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, or Strongly disagree) with the following statements:

- Immigrant children should have the same opportunities for education that other children in the country have.
- Immigrants who live in a country for several years should have the opportunity to vote in elections.
- Immigrants should have the opportunity to continue their own customs and lifestyle.
- Immigrants should have the same rights that everyone else in the country has.

To investigate shifts in attitudes over time, initial descriptive statistics were computed for each of the four items within each ICCS cycle. This involved calculating the percentage distributions of responses and comparing them across 2009, 2016, and 2022. Observing changes in these distributions provided a preliminary understanding of whether students' attitudes toward immigrants had become more or less favourable and helped identify any patterns or notable shifts that emerged over the three time points.

Following the descriptive analysis, the four items were reviewed for directional consistency. Where necessary, items were reverse-coded so that higher scores consistently represented more favourable attitudes toward immigrants. After ensuring that the coding was uniform, we aggregated the four items into composite scales for each cycle, resulting in three separate attitude scales: ATTIMM09 (for 2009), ATTIMM16 (for 2016), and ATTIMM22 (for 2022). These composite scores were computed using SPSS, taking care to preserve the integrity of the data and ensure comparability across cycles.

To examine how civic knowledge relates to these attitudes, we utilized the newly created composite scales as the dependent variables in a series of regression analyses. The independent variable of primary interest was the students' ICCS civic knowledge test scores, which serve as an indicator of their understanding of civic

concepts, democratic principles, and social responsibilities. By including civic knowledge as a predictor, the analyses aim to reveal whether higher levels of civic understanding are associated with more supportive attitudes toward immigrants.

3. RESULTS

This section first presents the descriptive findings for each statement regarding students' attitudes toward immigrants across the three ICCS cycles (2009, 2016, and 2022), highlighting how agreement and disagreement levels varied over time. It then discusses the linear regression analyses conducted to explore the relationship between civic knowledge and these attitudes.

Tab. 1. Students' attitudes toward equal rights for immigrants

	Strongly disagree			Disagree			Agree			Strongly agree		
	2009 (%)	2016 (%)	2022 (%)	2009 (%)	2016 (%)	2022 (%)	2009 (%)	2016 (%)	2022 (%)	2009 (%)	2016 (%)	2022 (%)
Immigrant children should have the same opportunities for education that other children in the country have.	2.3	1.2	3.4	5.6	3.5	3.4	37.7	46.0	32.3	54.4	49.3	60.8
Immigrants who live in a country for several years should have the opportunity to vote in elections.	4.9	2.8	4.8	14.5	16.2	13.5	45.8	50.5	47.8	34.8	30.5	33.9
Immigrants should have the opportunity to continue their own customs and lifestyle.	6.2	5.4	5.4	12.8	16.2	11.6	48.1	50.6	45.7	32.8	27.8	37.3
Immigrants should have the same rights that everyone else in the country has.	3.2	1.8	4.9	9.4	6.3	8.5	41.7	44.9	39.6	45.7	47.0	47.0

Table 1 shows how the attitudes of 14-year-old students in Slovenia toward equal rights for immigrants have changed over three ICCS cycles (2009, 2016, and 2022), combining "Strongly disagree" and "Disagree" responses into a single "disagree" category, and "Strongly agree" and "Agree" into an "agree" category, for better visualization. Overall, most students in Slovenia express positive attitudes (agree) toward immigrant rights across all statements and cycles. The statement receiving the strongest endorsement throughout all three cycles is that immigrant children should have the same educational opportunities as other children, with agreement levels at 92.1% in 2009, 95.3% in 2016, and 93.2% in 2022, indicating consistently strong support. Students also largely agree that immigrants should have the same rights as everyone else, reaching 87.4% in 2009, peaking at 91.9% in 2016, and remaining relatively high at 86.6% in 2022. On the other hand, the statements that consistently attracted the most negative sentiment (strongly disagree or disagree) across all three cycles were: "Immigrants should have the opportunity to continue their own customs and lifestyle" (19% in 2009, 21.6% in 2016, and 17% in 2022) and "Immigrants who live in a country for several years should have the opportunity to vote in elections" (19.4% in 2009, 19% in 2016, and 18.4% in 2022).

Overall, students' attitudes toward immigrants did not change substantially across the three cycles. While the general stance remains positive, a concerning minority of students continues to express less favourable views toward immigrants.

Tab. 2. National percentages and scale scores indicating students' positive attitudes toward immigrants. Source: Schultz et al., 2023

Country	Immigrant children should have the same opportunities for education that other children in the country have (%)		Immigrants should have the same rights that everyone else in the country has (%)		Immigrants should have the opportunity to continue their own customs and lifestyle (%)		Immigrants who live in a country for several years should have the opportunity to vote in elections (%)		Immigrants bring many cultural, social and economic benefits to country of test (%)		Average scale scores indicating students' positive attitude toward immigrants	
Bulgaria	86	(1.0) V	77	(0.9) ▼	82	(1.0) V	68	(1.0) ▼	63	(1.1) ▼	46	(0.3) ▼
Chinese Taipei	97	(0.3) △	96	(0.4) △	96	(0.4) △	94	(0.4) ▲	97	(0.3) ▲	57	(0.2) ▲
Colombia	94	(0.4) △	87	(0.6)	86	(0.7)	82	(0.8)	74	(0.9)	49	(0.2) V
Croatia[1]	96	(0.4) △	93	(0.6) △	92	(0.7) △	81	(1.0)	70	(1.1) V	51	(0.2) △
Cyprus	92	(0.6) V	84	(0.9) V	83	(0.8) V	80	(0.9)	64	(1.1) V	49	(0.2) V
Estonia	93	(0.9)	88	(0.8)	83	(0.9) V	75	(1.4) V	66	(1.1) V	48	(0.3) V
France	95	(0.6) △	91	(0.6) △	85	(0.8)	86	(0.7) △	81	(0.8) △	52	(0.2) △
Italy	97	(0.4) △	94	(0.8) △	94	(0.6) △	91	(0.9) ▲	80	(1.0) △	53	(0.3) △
Latvia[1]	88	(0.7) V	84	(0.8) V	82	(0.8) V	75	(1.0) V	62	(0.9) ▼	46	(0.2) ▼
Lithuania	92	(0.6) V	85	(0.7) V	89	(0.6) △	68	(1.0) ▼	70	(1.0) V	48	(0.2) V
Malta	93	(1.2)	87	(1.3)	88	(1.3)	84	(0.9) △	79	(1.4) △	51	(0.4) △
Netherlands†	92	(0.7)	86	(0.8) V	82	(1.1) V	83	(1.0) △	75	(1.1)	49	(0.3) V
Norway (9)[‡]	94	(0.4)	92	(0.5) △	89	(0.6) △	87	(0.6) △	80	(0.8) △	53	(0.2) △
Poland	96	(0.3) △	89	(0.6) △	89	(0.6) △	76	(0.7) V	72	(0.9)	48	(0.2) V
Romania	94	(0.8)	90	(0.9)	89	(1.8)	84	(1.6) △	76	(2.4)	50	(0.6)
Serbia	89	(0.8) V	78	(0.9) V	79	(0.9) V	65	(1.2) ▼	51	(1.2) ▼	46	(0.2) ▼
Slovak Republic	94	(0.6)	89	(0.9)	81	(1.0) V	82	(0.9)	73	(0.9)	48	(0.2) V
Slovenia	93	(0.6)	87	(0.7) V	83	(0.6) V	82	(0.8)	77	(0.8) △	49	(0.2) V
Spain	93	(0.5)	91	(0.7) △	88	(0.6) △	87	(0.6) △	81	(0.9) △	52	(0.2) △
Sweden[1]	96	(0.5) △	94	(0.6) △	89	(0.7) △	87	(0.8) △	79	(1.0) △	54	(0.3) ▲
ICCS 2022 average	93	(0.1)	88	(0.2)	86	(0.2)	81	(0.2)	73	(0.2)	50	(0.1)
Countries not meeting sample participation requirements												
Brazil	93	(0.4)	87	(0.6)	87	(0.7)	87	(0.6)	83	(0.8)	51	(0.2)
Denmark	95	(0.4)	90	(0.7)	87	(0.7)	86	(0.8)	69	(1.0)	50	(0.3)
German benchmarking participant meeting sample participation requirements												
North Rhine-Westphalia	96	(0.4) △	92	(0.7) △	90	(0.6) △	88	(0.7) △	77	(1.0) △	51	(0.2) △
German benchmarking participant not meeting sample participation requirements												
Schleswig-Holstein	96	(0.6)	93	(0.7)	87	(1.0)	89	(0.9)	76	(1.4)	52	(0.3)

Notes:
Because results are rounded to the nearest whole number, some aggregate statistics may appear inconsistent.
() Standard errors appear in parentheses.
(9) Country deviated from international defined population and surveyed adjacent upper grade.
† Nearly met guidelines for sampling participation rates only after replacement schools were included.
‡ National defined population covers 90% to 95% of national target population.

National ICCS 2022 results are:
▲ More than 10 percentage or 3 score points above ICCS 2022 average
△ Significantly above ICCS 2022 average
V Significantly below ICCS 2022 average
▼ More than 10 percentage or 3 score points below ICCS 2022 average

If we look where is Slovenia comparing to other countries participated in the last cycle of ICCS study, we can observe the Table 2. Slovenia ranks below the international average in terms of positive attitudes toward immigrants. In fact, only Romania is at the level of the international average, while in all other countries or educational systems, attitudes are either above average or significantly above it (the latter in the case of students from Sweden and Chinese Taipei), or below average or significantly below it (the latter in the case of students from Bulgaria, Latvia, and Serbia).

Tab. 3. Relationship between civic knowledge and composite variable of attitudes towards equal rights for immigrants in ICCS 2009, 2016 and 2022

	Coefficients	R^2	t-value
ATTIMM09 (2009)	0.0017	0.06	11.84
ATTIMM16 (2016)	0.0001	0.02	7.14
ATTIMM22 (2022)	0.002	0.07	13.97

The regression analyses aimed to determine whether civic knowledge predicts positive attitudes toward immigrants and to assess how this relationship varies across the three ICCS cycles, the results are presented in Table 3. The results indicate that civic knowledge is a statistically significant predictor in all examined years. The

weakest association emerged in 2016 (t = 7.14), while the strongest was observed in 2022 (t = 13.97). In the 2022 data, each one-point increase on the ICCS achievement test scale corresponds to a 0.002-point increase on the constructed attitudes scale.

Despite the statistical significance, the explanatory power of civic knowledge is relatively modest. In 2016, it accounts for about 2% of the variance in attitudes toward immigrants, while this figure rises to approximately 6% in 2009 and 7% in 2022. These limited R^2 values indicate that although civic knowledge consistently has a positive influence on attitudes, it does not fully explain the variability in students' views.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how civic knowledge relates to students' attitudes toward immigrants across three ICCS cycles (2009, 2016, and 2022) in Slovenia. The research question focused on whether higher levels of civic knowledge correspond to more positive attitudes toward immigrants and how this relationship may have changed over time. Despite shifts in the socio-political context, the majority of students have consistently maintained positive views toward immigrants, though a subset continues to hold less favourable opinions. The findings indicate a clear, though changing, association between civic knowledge and positive attitudes toward immigrants in all three cycles. Civic knowledge emerges as an important factor in shaping students' perceptions, with higher knowledge levels generally linked to more inclusive viewpoints. At the same time, the impact of civic education is limited, suggesting it is not the only driver influencing attitudes. Beyond the primary predictor of civic knowledge, for further research is it necessary to consider the inclusion of relevant control variables that are available within the ICCS database, such as gender, socioeconomic background, immigrant status and others. Such controls can provide a more nuanced interpretation of the relationship and help isolate the unique contribution of civic knowledge. Although civic knowledge is important predictor, it does not fully account for the complexity of students' attitudes toward immigrants. Future research would benefit from exploring additional factors, adopting a more holistic approach to understanding the interplay of individual, educational, and societal elements that collectively shape young people's perspectives on immigration.

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CONCEPTIONS AND ORIENTATIONS OF ITALIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS CONCERNING THE MANAGEMENT OF CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN SCHOOLS

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According to the latest report by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM, 2023), students with non-Italian citizenship in Italian schools total 872,360, representing 10.6% of the student population. Their distribution is uneven, with some schools having over 15% of students from non-Italian backgrounds. Additionally, various educational agencies, such as families, schools, religious groups, and non-formal organizations, enrich individual cognitive development. In today's diverse educational landscape, students encounter conflicting beliefs, values, and norms, requiring cognitive and emotional management. Schools play a crucial role in helping students make sense of these experiences, reducing fragmentation in their lives (MIUR, 2012). Different models for managing pluralism in schools range from promoting cultural and religious affiliations to limiting them. These models can be analyzed along two axes: the didactic-organizational conception (assimilationism vs. multiculturalism) and the philosophical conception (universalism vs. relativism) of pluralism (Berger, 2014). Teachers' orientations along these axes significantly shape their practices in intercultural education. This report presents an ongoing qualitative research project investigating primary school teachers' perceptions of pluralism, intercultural coexistence, and the strategies they employ. Using focus groups, the study aims to capture diverse teacher perspectives and practices in managing these challenges.

cultural pluralism; intercultural coexistence; cognitive dissonance; assimilationism; multiculturalism

This presentation aims to present some results of a qualitative research project developed from the research question: "What perceptions do primary school teachers have regarding the emergence of cognitive conflicts between what students bring from their family, cultural, and religious backgrounds and what they encounter in the school context, and what guidelines exist for managing these conflicts?"

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Pluralism

The Italian school system has become increasingly pluralistic since the 1990s, accommodating students from diverse cultural, religious, and ideological backgrounds. For instance, 10.6% of students do not hold Italian citizenship, a statistic that has remained stable over the past decade (MIM, 2023). Although data on students' religious affiliations are limited, 74.5% of the Italian population identifies as Catholic, 10.2% belongs to religious minorities, and 15.3% identify as atheist or agnostic (Cipriani & Di Sciullo, 2023). Among students, 84.5% participate in Catholic religious education, though this figure drops to 68.7% in high schools in northern Italy (CEI, 2024).

Beyond this diversity in cultural and religious backgrounds—often linked to, but not solely arising from, migratory movements—it is essential to consider the broader phenomenon of the pluralization of worldviews coexisting within society. As Berger (2014) and others have highlighted, recent decades have witnessed an increase in social interaction opportunities among members of different groups. This development is driven by factors such as urbanization, technological progress, mass literacy, the market economy, and the spread of democracy.

In pre-modern societies, the fundamental worldviews of each social group, their "taken-for-granted world" (Schutz, 1971), were passed down from generation to generation, ensuring the continuity of core beliefs and internal group cohesion. Children, therefore, entered a world that had already been interpreted by those who came before them (Mead, 1943). In modern societies, however, individuals interact with people from diverse groups, encountering multiple belief systems that carry differing and often conflicting information, values, and norms. Within this social framework, the taken-for-granted world loses its self-evident character, and various definitions of reality—rooted in cultural, religious, or ideological plausibility structures—compete for legitimacy.

In pluralistic societies, individuals often find themselves belonging to multiple affiliations—cultural, linguistic, religious, professional, and class-based. Each affiliation introduces knowledge, values, and norms that shape individuals' behaviors and perceptions of the world. While these structures are distinct and frequently intervene in different fields of action, they are often interconnected (Berger, 2014).

Sartori (2000) observes that the boundaries between different affiliations may either intersect or coincide. Frequently, the cognitive and axiological elements that constitute an individual's belief system across various affiliations, such as cultural and religious, are consonant and mutually reinforcing. However, in a pluralistic context, the lines dividing group structures often overlap, requiring individuals to reconcile discrepancies among their affiliations, which may carry divergent interpretations of the world. This process of questioning one's worldview within a pluralistic environment is described by Peter Berger (2014) as "cognitive contamination".

1.2. Cognitive Dissonance

In pluralistic Italian society, the various contexts of education and socialization create a scenario of polycentrism, where individuals encounter diverse cognitive and axiological elements that may be mutually discrepant. Children entering school often face relational styles and rules different from those in their family environment, perceiving a cultural discontinuity (Gobbo, 2012) between the school context and other non-school contexts, such as family, religious or cultural communities, and groups of family friends.

Leon Festinger (1957) defines the management of such discontinuities as cognitive dissonance. According to Festinger, all the information, values, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, awareness, and norms acquired by an individual or encountered in their environment constitute their cognitive equipment. Each element has its own intrinsic quality while also being interconnected with others and with the individual's socio-emotional experiences. When two cognitive elements are discrepant—conflicting or irreconcilable—this dissonance causes psychological tension, a discomfort that generates pressures to reduce or eliminate the dissonance.

At the heart of Festinger's theory lies the idea that cognitive dissonance is a motivational force aimed at resolving discrepancies between cognitive elements. To achieve this, individuals may reject the dissonant element by distorting its perception or delegitimizing its source, modify previously acquired cognitive elements to reconcile them with the new ones, or seek explanations that recognize the existence of distinct domains governed by different rules.

At school, students frequently encounter such situations. These can arise through the "explicit curriculum"—for example, when scientific experiments in class refute students' intuitive theories about physical or chemical phenomena. More often, however, dissonance occurs through the "implicit curriculum" of the school, comprising tacitly transmitted values, behavioral expectations, educational ideals, norms, and knowledge that shape the culture of the school environment.

The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance thus holds particular significance for schools, which uniquely foster cultural discontinuity. The success of the teaching-learning process often depends on the strategies students use to reduce dissonance. As a result, cognitive dissonance raises important pedagogical questions (such as how to accommodate students' diverse worldviews), didactic questions (how to ensure meaningful learning in a pluralistic context), and political questions (the role of schools as foundational institutions in a pluralistic society).

1.3. Models For Managing Social And Religious Pluralism

In public debate and political discourse, two fundamental ideal-typical models for managing pluralism have emerged over time: assimilationism and multiculturalism. The assimilationist model is centered on the value of equality, foundational to citizenship: one is a citizen because one is equal. To achieve this, particularistic identities must be relinquished in the public sphere and relegated to the private domain. The school, in this model, is tasked with building a homogeneous community

with shared values, and thus must be neutralized from specific affiliations. Conversely, the multiculturalist model seeks to recognize and preserve diversity, aiming to construct a society where distinct communities negotiate to pursue their interests and act with maximum autonomy. This model emphasizes ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries that maintain separation and treats culture as static and unchangeable rather than flexible and evolving. Within this perspective, the school is expected to enhance and preserve culturally and religiously determined values and traditions.

Within this framework, the presence of multiple religious communities in society assumes particular significance, as does the emergence of diverse religiously rooted cognitive elements within schools. Secularism, defined as the "system of institutional regulation and integration of the various value universes coexisting in society" (Scalon, 2019, p. 3), can manifest in various forms. Specifically, we distinguish between a negative and a positive vision of secularism. The negative vision of secularism excludes religion from the public sphere, either by restricting religions viewed as potentially dangerous or by adopting a stance of negative neutrality, wherein the public domain operates independently of religion. Advocates of this approach call for a school completely neutralized from religion, which is relegated solely to the private sphere.

In contrast, the positive vision of secularism upholds the right of religions to exist in the public space and to be recognized as essential interlocutors of the State. This vision can be further divided into two models: positive neutrality and valorization of the predominant religion. The model of positive neutrality ensures equal freedom for all religious denominations to participate in public life and collaborate with the State. Alternatively, the valorization model privileges a historically predominant religion, recognizing it as constitutive of a people's culture while respecting pluralism. Proponents of this latter approach advocate for teaching the predominant religion—such as Catholic religious instruction (IRC) in Italy—within schools. Meanwhile, supporters of positive neutrality often propose alternatives, such as offering instruction in multiple religious traditions to members of different faiths or instituting a "history of religions" course.

2. RESEARCH WORK

In light of this theoretical framework, we now present the research. The study aims to explore primary school teachers' perceptions and orientations regarding the cognitive implications of pluralism, as well as its pedagogical-didactic ramifications. The research was guided by the following questions: What are primary school teachers' perceptions of the phenomena of cognitive contamination occurring in their classrooms? What are their conceptions of pluralism, and what management models do they adopt?

The study employed qualitative methodologies, engaging teachers in focus groups—small discussion forums designed to examine the phenomenon, share opinions, and reflect on experiences, judgments, and perspectives.

2.1. Cognitive Dissonance

First, it is essential to analyze primary school teachers' perceptions of the presence of cognitive dissonance phenomena in their schools. Many teachers, during interviews, noted a frequent discontinuity between the familial education received by children and the education imparted at school. Cognitive elements of a religious nature were identified as the most likely sources of dissonance, a finding corroborated by scientific literature (Festinger, 1957). Focus group discussions highlighted how this intersection between cognitive dissonance and religious affiliation poses challenges for schools. For instance, teachers cited the presence of students with creationist beliefs, which conflict with scientific instruction, as a significant source of dissonance:

> anni fa avevo dei bambini testimoni di Geova in classe. La loro religione è creazionista, quindi per loro assolutamente quello che c'è scritto nella Bibbia è verità storica e quindi so che i genitori poi a casa dicevano che quello che il maestro aveva spiegato non è vero, era una menzogna, il maestro mente. Quindi si creava... ma poi i bambini lo riferivano, ovviamente. Quindi si creava questa difficoltà a dover lavorare e anche nei rapporti con i genitori e coi bambini (LU, FG no. 1).

This issue arises not only with minority religions but also in navigating content derived from Catholic teachings, which the majority of children encounter through catechism. Examples mentioned include tensions between the Creation myth or the Universal Flood narrative and historical instruction:

> problemi con la storia, in terza elementare, che è l'età... l'anno in cui i bambini fanno la prima comunione, ce l'ho anche con i cattolici perché spesso, quando vanno al catechismo, ma anche quando fanno religione a scuola, non viene ben chiarito che il mito della creazione è un mito, Adamo ed Eva non sono mai esistiti... per cui ho avuto delle difficoltà spesso, nella storia, a spiegare l'evoluzione, spiegare gli ominidi, a spiegare il fatto che Adamo ed Eva sono un mito, che il diluvio universale è un mito (LU, FG no. 1).

Another source of dissonance involves the pluralism of pedagogical visions and teaching styles. This challenge is particularly evident among children who have experienced schooling outside Italy within different educational models:

> se parliamo di metodo, lì ovviamente le incongruenze, come dicevamo prima, si possono creare necessariamente, ovvero se la bambina è abituata a un metodo tipico di un... nel sistema scolastico del suo paese, si trova ovviamente in una scuola italiana, necessariamente trova delle incongruenze alle quali, però, dovrà cercare di far fronte (CB, FG no. 3).

Moreover, discrepancies in pedagogical styles among teachers within the same class can exacerbate confusion. For instance, conflicting explanations about the origins of the world have been observed to increase psychological distress in students:

> non mi piace come viene svolta la religione a scuola, nel senso: se la maestra Susanna mi dice che Dio ha creato il mondo e poi il maestro Giacomino mi dice che

invece è stato il Big Bang, a chi devo credere? Comunque maestri sono tutti e due. Quindi diciamo che, secondo me, bisognerebbe anche un po' iniziare a togliere queste contraddizioni nella scuola (SF, FG no. 1).

Given Festinger's (1957) definition of cognitive dissonance as a state of psychological discomfort, it is critical to investigate teachers' perceptions of its emotional impact on students. Some focus group participants expressed concerns about the emotionally challenging nature of dissonance for children. One teacher noted that internal conflicts between school and family teachings might hinder integration and provoke feelings of resentment or anger in students:

> è molto difficile e complesso, però trovare un equilibrio è veramente essenziale perché altrimenti, come dice lui, uno si trova poi scisso perché mamma mi dice di fare A, però la maestra mi dice di fare B, io ho stima di entrambi e ha ragione la maestra che mi dice che quello che mi dice di fare mamma è sbagliato? Però mamma è sempre comunque mia mamma, quindi insomma... diventa uno scontro, poi, che fa... almeno, nella mia esperienza anche qui, invece, della zona dove vivo, purtroppo fa poi maturare, secondo me, in un certo senso, dei risentimenti. Cioè se viene gestito male [i risentimenti] maturano poi quando [gli alunni] sono alle medie, alle superiori o comunque quando crescono, dei risentimenti o verso uno o verso l'altro, o verso la società che non mi capisce, mi rifiuta, quindi [producendo sentimenti di] vittimismo, eccetera, eccetera, oppure verso la mia famiglia, che invece non mi ha permesso, non mi ha consentito di integrarmi, eccetera, eccetera, quindi... e quindi cerco di annullare tutto e andare dalla parte opposta, no? (...) questo ragazzino ha avuto nella sua esperienza, anche pregressa, questa scissione, diciamo, tra "mamma che mi diceva A, la famiglia che mi diceva A, a scuola invece mi dicevano: No è B", per cui a un certo punto ha rifiutato una parte ed è andato totalmente dall'altra con rabbia, come se urlasse "Io non sono al mio posto! Mi state dicendo che io non sono al mio posto!" (EC, FG no. 3).

This highlights the need for schools to manage dissonance effectively in the classroom. Teachers perceive their inability to address dissonance as a gap in their preparation as educators:

> il problema non è l'incongruenza dei pensieri ma l'incapacità di gestire questa incongruenza, quindi l'incapacità degli insegnanti di saper affrontare questa incongruenza di pensieri e (.) di conseguenza il pluralismo e la diversità (IT, FG no. 3).

Interestingly, some participants suggested that properly managing cognitive dissonance could transform it into a valuable teaching tool, using it to drive learning. Examples included leveraging religious myths to introduce the historical method and fostering an environment that encourages curiosity and positively welcomes questions:

> Io, tornando sempre all'esempio di storia, ne approfitto cioè colgo l'occasione per parlare del metodo storico, cioè di... per fare ragionare i ragazzi, cioè farli ragionare sui miti: "Abbiamo fatto i miti, quali sono le caratteristiche dei miti?" e fargli capire che la creazione raccontata nella Bibbia rientra appieno le caratteristiche della mitologia. [...] Quindi si cerca di sfruttare l'occasione per approfondire (LU, FG no. 1); l'assenza della paura della domanda, in qualsiasi cosa, in qualsiasi ambito, cioè

renderli divertiti dalla curiosità, in modo rilassato, secondo me è l'unico elemento che porta davvero poi a condividerla. Per cui "divertiti dalla curiosità" forse può essere un modo per far sì che chi si vuole esprimere si esprime, chi non si vuole esprimere non si esprime, creando poi dei collegamenti. Poi i bambini fanno anche domande in modo spontaneo (NV, FG no. 2).

2.2. Pluralism Managing

We previously identified two alternative approaches to managing pluralism that have emerged in public debate and political discourse: the assimilationist model, centered on the value of equality, and the multiculturalist model, focused on the value of diversity. During focus groups conducted with primary school teachers, a lively debate unfolded around these perspectives. Many teachers initially expressed, almost instinctively, a preference for the multiculturalist model, emphasizing absolute respect for all positions. In interviews, these educators argued that individuals should entirely maintain "their own origins" and that the school's role should be limited to fostering respect:

> è giusto che ognuno mantenga le proprie origini, che mantenga delle proprie origini tutto (LS, FG no. 1);
> nel momento in cui c'è una diversità così ampia, secondo me, appunto, la scuola deve semplicemente educare al rispetto, questo è l'unico valore che poi deve riuscire a trasmettere, ma neanche imporre (IT, FG no. 3).

Through further discussion and deeper reflection, some teachers, albeit a minority, leaned toward an assimilationist model. This group stressed the importance of shared values and common rules for coexistence, which they felt were not always upheld by all religions:

> ci devono essere delle regole di convivenza comuni come può essere anche il rispetto del corpo femminile, che in alcune religioni non viene ancora troppo rispettato. ... Nel senso che... sì, io insegno il rispetto delle diversità ma secondo me ci sono delle regole imprescindibili, nel senso che riguardano proprio l'intera umanità (SF, FG no. 1);
> la maestra, la scuola dovrebbe far passare il messaggio che "va bene, tu la pensi così, ma se questa è poi la tua modalità anche nella pratica ci sono delle conseguenze, perché la nostra comunità, la nostra scuola [si] sorregge su delle basi che sono, appunto, determinati valori, determinate norme. Nel momento in cui tu, per quanto sia stata approfondita la questione, continui ad avere un comportamento disfunzionale... [...] è chiaro che se non ti conformi a dei principi fondamentali ... mi dispiace per i tuoi valori, e li posso [rispettare]... anzi non li posso neanche rispettare più di tanto, nel senso, va veramente contro dei principi fondamentali che garantiscono... sono garanti, come diceva lui, della pacifica convivenza e del... sì, della pacifica convivenza e della comunità (MC, FG no. 3).

Another key issue in managing pluralism is secularism. Most teachers supported a model of secularism based on positive neutrality, promoting knowledge and respect for all religions:

> Qui a Torino invece ci sono moltissimi musulmani rispetto a Roma e quello che facciamo è, anche lì, parlare dei diversi luoghi di culto... insomma confrontare le

diverse religioni, le festività, come mangiano – perché anche quello suscita curiosità nei bambini (LS, FG no. 1).

However, criticism frequently arose regarding the teaching of the Catholic religion in schools. Many teachers expressed a preference for a non-confessional approach, such as a "history of religions" course, which would enable students to appreciate religious diversity without favoring a particular faith. The current approach to teaching Catholic religion was described as rigid and "catechetical", prompting calls for a more open and inclusive interpretation of religious themes. Teachers emphasized the importance of framing religion primarily through its cultural value:

> Sono assolutamente d'accordo che non deve essere "religione "cattolicaperché per quello c'è il catechismo, debba essere già dalle elementari "storia delle religioni". Poi ognuno va nella sua vita privata fa quello che vuole, quindi, appunto, fai il catechismo? Fai il catechismo. Però è importante secondo me conoscerle tutte, fare un excursus su ognuna delle religioni, e secondo me sarebbe carino anche creare un filone, un filo comune fra tutte le religioni (LS, FG no. 1);
> Io non sono contrario all'insegnamento della religione a scuola, perché comunque la religione cattolica fa parte della cultura italiana; per fare un esempio banale, non so come alle superiori puoi studiare Dante senza avere un po' di conoscenza di religione cristiana; ma, appunto, [l'insegnamento della religione cattolica va intesa] come religione a fianco alle altre, cioè una storia delle religioni, di tutte le religioni, almeno quelle più importanti (LU, FG no. 1).

Criticism also extended to the normative approach often adopted by religion teachers, which was seen as limiting opportunities for mediation and complicating collaboration with other educators:

> effettivamente se noi insegnanti di classe cerchiamo sempre di mediare diverse posizioni nel rispetto della cultura di ognuno dei bambini, invece gli insegnanti di religione la pongono come verità assoluta e questo è questo ci rende più difficile il lavoro (LS, FG no. 1).

3. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study underscores the intricate challenges and opportunities that cultural and religious pluralism presents in Italian primary schools. By examining teachers' perceptions of cognitive dissonance and pluralism management, the findings highlight the critical role educators play in navigating the complexities of a pluralistic classroom. While many teachers lean toward a multicultural approach, emphasizing respect and diversity, there is also recognition of the need for shared values and coherence in fostering social cohesion. Teachers reported differing approaches to addressing these tensions, from emphasizing neutrality and cultural sensitivity to maintaining firm adherence to established educational content. Disparities in pedagogical strategies, both within classrooms and across schools, further influence how pluralism is managed, revealing a landscape of varied and sometimes conflicting practices in intercultural education.

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HOW TEACHERS AT SCHOOL SHOULD PROMOTE COEXISTENCE AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP: PREJUDICES AND POWER AS A LIMIT

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Nowadays, in the contemporary globalized, multicultural and postcolonial society, the relationship between autochthonous and allochthonous replicates the dynamics and mechanisms of exploitation, subordination and intersectional discrimination in continuity with colonialism and European imperialism. School, as a social context, is one of the places which most suffers from these dynamics, implicitly and unconsciously implemented– even by teachers– making prejudices and power significant barriers for the promotion of coexistence and global citizenship. Therefore, the following pilot study through a questionnaire and two focus groups conducted with five teachers of an Italian high school, aims to investigate their awareness regarding past colonialism in general, Italian colonialism in particular and the current postcolonial condition, to discover stereotypes and prejudices they nurture and present in their classrooms, as well as their role in the classroom– beyond their mere teaching role– and their possible awareness of the power they hold to promote coexistence and global citizenship. The ultimate aim is to decolonize teachers' minds from stereotypes and prejudices in order to make school a more democratic environment.

minds decolonisation; prejudices; intersectional approach; power

INTRODUCTION

People should ask themselves how contemporary modes of proximity reopen prior histories of encounter (Ahmed, 2000, 13). In fact, the postcolonial perspective does not merely move beyond past European colonialism, instead revises and places it as the starting point to understand and explain the actual social relationships based on differences in power characterized by political, economic, cultural asymmetry and labor exploitation that still leads to discrimination, inequality, violence and prejudices dividing the word into oppressors and oppressed.

Hence, to pursue a process of decolonializzazione[1] – namely a process of peoples' minds purification from colonial logics and power mechanisms (Borghi, 2020), oppressors should subvert power relationships from the privileged situation in which

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[1] The Italian word here is used as a postcolonial position expressed by the author that rejects –when possible– the use of English as the most powerful language.

they are (Borghi, 2020), encouraged by oppressed people that becoming aware of their subaltern condition can liberate both parts from physical and mental coercion (Freire, 2004).

For that to happen in Italian schools, it is urgent to start by introducing the idea that intercultural pedagogy – an educational intentional project which cuts across all disciplines taught in school for the purpose of changing the perceptions and cognitive habits with which people generally represent the relationship between human natives and non-natives (Fiorucci, 2020) – must assume a postcolonial curvature to decolonize and transform in critical and democratic environments all the places where there is a self-other encounter.

At this point, the Italian school should benefit from educational practices suggested by foreign pedagogues. Teachers –supposed to be a "guide" – should transgress the canonical school roles, talk about themselves to students, to create a community based on an atmosphere of openness and on the recognition of the other and to subvert power mechanisms (Borghi, 2020; hooks, 2020).

Ultimately, the goal of critical learning is to question some culturally and unknowingly assimilated perspectives –that may also be stereotyped– in order to convert them in new perspectives, actions, visions of the world, of the self and the other critically acquired. In school, this critical process may arise by facing a 'disorientation dilemma' (Merizow, 2003) –a problem to which the subject's previous experiences and knowledge do not provide solutions– or enquiring on critical themes (Freire, 2004) that call into question deeply rooted values.

Hence, questioning decoloniality is now among the main objectives of pedagogy to ensure that in school students are educated in democracy and global citizenship.

1. THE STUDY

Based on the above, the exploratory pilot research[2] moves from the idea that very few, in terms of interculturality and critical education –for example, questioning the colonial past and subverting the postcolonial condition– is promoted in the current Italian school system.

These assumptions lead to the following questions: Do teachers harbor ethnic stereotypes and prejudices that can impoverish the relationship whit the other? Are they aware of the power dynamics inherited from the colonial past which continue to structure social relations even in school? And do they know that they are empowered to promote coexistence and global citizenship in school?

To answer to the previous questions, participants were subjected to a questionnaire and two focus groups. The questionnaire is designed to uncover teachers blatant and/or subtle prejudices; the first focus group aims to investigate the role of teachers in classroom and their consciousness about past colonialism and the postcolonial condition; the second one, not planned before, aims to discuss about some

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[2] The research will be further developed by implementing the sample and through other research modalities such as participatory observation of classroom educational practice.

cogent results and eventually decolonize wrong conceptualized ideas.

1.1. Sample

A linguistic lyceum in the Sicilian hinterland was chosen to scrutinize how prejudices and discrimination can arise also in a school where the percentage of non-EU students is low (0,8% of the total) and students' social status is medium-high.

The sample –table 1 below shows the main characteristics of the sample– included 5 teachers, all women of Italian nationality, but one with a migration background, aged between 52 and 64 years (mean age 58.2).

Tab. 1. Sample characteristics.

Nickname	Age	Subject taught
Rosanna	52	Italian grammar and literature; history
Lilly	64	Education teacher
Lucy	63	Spanish language and culture
Gianna	60	Mathematics
Sabrina	52	French language and culture

1.2. Instrument and procedure

A personalized adaptation of the Manganelli and Volpato (2001)[3] questionnaire about subtle and blatant prejudices was used. The questionnaire is divided into three parts: sociodemographic and general questions (age, gender, subject thought and perceived relevance of the importance of discussing themes like inclusion, ethnic prejudices, racism depending on the subject taught); 11 questions to test teachers restrictive or open attitude towards migration and 20 questions to test teachers prejudices about some topics –the defense of traditional values, the exaggeration of cultural differences, the denial of positive emotions, the perceived threat from and rejection of the outgroup, anti-intimacy– connected with the relationship between the self and the other. The score for each question was attributed through a Likert scale from 1 absolutely disagree to 6 absolutely agree.

Thereafter, these themes, combined with others –teacher role in classroom, colonialism, and privileged power position for a teacher– were discussed[4] in two focus groups chosen to facilitate a debate and interaction among participants.

The research was conducted in April and May 2024.

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[3] It is in turn the Italian transposition of the original Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) questionnaire.
[4] Both verbal and visual stimuli– direct questions, comments of photograph, quotations–were used.

1.3. Data analysis

Questionnaire answers were analyzed through Microsoft Excel. Table 2 shows participants score in attitude towards migration and prejudice, reports the profile of the person depending on the result obtained [5] and the answers to a relevant question[6].

Tab. 2. Questionnaire scores.

Nickname	A. Prejudice scale		B. Attitude toward migration[7]	Relevant question
Rosanna	Subtle	Blatant: 31,6% Subtle: 68,4%	53% open	Maghreb
Lilly	Subtle	Blatant: 33,3% Subtle: 66,7%	55% open	Moroccan
Lucy	Bigot	Blatant: 50% Subtle: 50%	26% open	Africans
Gianna	Subtle	Blatant: 40% Subtle: 60%	29% open	Moroccan
Sabrina	Equalitarian	Blatant:45% Subtle:55%	40% open	Moroccan

The entire corpus of focus groups was subject to a reflexive thematic analysis transversal to the group[8] at a semantic level adherent to the words and perspectives of the participant, capturing their explicit meanings and adopting an inductive approach[9] (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

2. RESULTS

To begin with, the idea that intercultural pedagogy should be the base of each discipline is not universally shared. For Lucy (63) discussing issues of inclusion, prejudices and racism in class is absolutely not relevant, while as Rosanna (52) explains history and literature constantly constrain people to know diversity and to confront with its many forms and Gianna (60) contemplates the opportunity that scientific subjects give to develop critical and rational thinking.

Apart from educating, teachers –emphatic, friendly, authoritative– seem aware of

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[5] Participants with high score on both scales are 'bigots', those low on both scales are 'equalitarians', and those low on the blatant scale but high on the subtle scale are 'subtle' (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995).

[6] When do you think about immigrants, which ethnic or racial group comes to your mind?

[7] Data in column A and B were analysed to predict the attitudes of teachers. Some attitudes were eventually reviewed based on the responses obtained in focus groups, showing greater closure for Rosanna and greater openness for Gianna.

[8] The corpus recorded was read 2 times before starting with the attribution of codes that were revised in two different moments to make themes arise.

[9] Themes: Do you want or must you integrate? this is the dilemma; Managing diversity: the colour of life; We are the last bulwark of education; Allah looks at me: feelings of distress, disgust and anger.

the necessity to be a life example, to promote integration and to create a climate of peace (Freire, 2004; hooks, 2020):

> We have a huge responsibility because today we are the last adult group stranger to the family with whom they can still dialogue. We are the last bulwark of education understood as democratic coexistence (Rosanna, 52).

Generally, teachers talk about themselves, also reporting anecdotic situations to create community, to be closer to students and to contrast discrimination (Borghi, 2020; hooks, 2003).

As an example, Gianna (60) anecdote that shows her younger insecurities, linked to discrimination suffered from having a 'too dark skin tone' to be Occidental, is also a way to contrast racism in class and promote critical reflection by practically confronting her skin tone to the one of a boy bullied for the color of his skin and showing how she –as a white Italian– is even darker than him.

However, this moment of 'decolonializzazione' is even more necessary for teachers since their main idea of the other is 'black'. The color of the skin is the main characteristic that arise when thinking about the other, even if in the school context Moroccan and Africans are not the most present in terms of numbers.

When teachers are forced to think about differences in school, they promptly discuss about a strong division between two migratory groups: Chinese on the one hand and all students from Africa on the other hand. Both are respectful and diligent, but the first group tends to isolate. The idea that they do not want integration while they should integrate emerges challenging the general intercultural relationship paradigm. In fact, from a postcolonial perspective Chinese are part of a diasporic migration, meaning that they never feel at home, since their home is the diasporic community through which they maintain a constant strong relationship (Burgio, 2022).

The Chinese group is another story (Gianna, 60) that opens many important questions, new critical conceptualizations and a deep reflection on the Italian condition abroad[10]. Truthfully integration[11]–or better inter-action– is an intentional mutual job that askes actions from both parts and helps in understanding that knowing each other could avoid rising cultural barriers and could help in managing diversities[12]. Practically and theoretically sharing the self –from both parts– is the key to respect and not being afraid of the other. Not doing that is a lack of opportunities: I would have loved to know about them, their culture (Lilly, 64).

In general, managing diversity is challenging. A better job could be done in a colored (Gianna, 60) classroom, a context with many diversities in terms of status and

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[10] Gianna (60) reports that, is son in China lives in an Occidental and Arabic area with a minimum interaction with Chinese people.

[11] Terminology used by them.

[12] Teachers assert that Italians do not know a lot about the other cultures, while the others are more prepared.

abilities –among the other characteristics– where nobody feels excluded. At this point, the concept of power emerges: inclusion or exclusion in classes is determined by the person that has power and is white, Occidental, cisgender, does not have disabilities and detain a higher social status.

Despite the good intentions and attitudes some teachers show in school, some culturally transmitted stereotypes –connected with strong emotions of distress, disgust and anger– both when talking about inter-action in school and when referring to the outside world.

To clarify, situations in which an Islamic woman is seen having a bath in the sea totally dressed, or Muslims in general reproach children for not eating pork meat are conceptualized as an avoidance in integration, a disgust in being like Italians and strongly connect the discussion to the idea that Islamic people who declare they feel observed by Allah in their lives respect their religion mostly for a political reason rather than a religious one. This expresses the task of the white person who has to free the other from oppression. But, Do we forget about our culture and our mentality when we go abroad? (Lilly, 64).

The evolutionary and ethnocentric perspective is generally adopted to compare Islamic and Catholics: They are not at our level of freedom (Gianna, 60). Be inclined to ethnocentrism in the sense that people generally prefer their habits and customs is common to every social group and does not mean distancing to the other (Agostinetto, 2022). However, to not fall in discrimination and racism, in the idea that perhaps we have been deluding ourselves that we have imposed democracy on them (Rosanna, 52), ethic relativism –opposition to the preventive claims of superiority of a group linked to power differentials– is the solution and this could emerge by stopping seeing just contrasts between the ingroup and the outgroup and starting looking at common aspects since we are all humans.

3. DISCUSSION

Overall, the school context analyzed and experiences reported by teachers slightly approach the idea of school as a 'community', with very few cases of discrimination, but teachers still have many prejudices that can limit its full realization.

There is little awareness about Italian colonialism and postcolonial condition, as well as power dynamics in relationships that are present but not recognized. Only Rosanna (52) –history teacher– and Lilly (64) –with a migration background– are aware about the Italian colonialism and postcolonial phenomena. Others ask why talking about some of the actual conflicts in the Orient is connected to interculturality and are cogent to conceptualize.

To conclude, the 'decolonializzazione' and critical transformation of thoughts are even more necessary in a school that is predominantly white, and with a high socio-economic status and therefore more subjects could potentially exercise power. This should make people aware that from such a position it is possible to subvert the dynamics of power and make school a more democratic place.

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DISRUPTIVE SUBJECT. THE USE OF DIAGNOSIS AS AN EFFECT OF THE LACK OF PEDAGOGICAL ANALYSIS ON THE SCHOOL DISPOSITIF

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The paper presents a critical and deconstructive reading of the multiplication of diagnoses in the school context. The reflection, articulated in three conceptual passages, will show how the absence of a look at the material and contextual dimensions of the school dispositif contributes to the creation of the mechanism underlying the processes of normalisation and the consequent production of rejection and deviance at school. The article offers a critical reflection on this mechanism and concludes by suggesting a change of perspective capable of questioning and framing the phenomenon from a new and different pedagogical perspective.

deviance; school; dispositive; diagnosis; pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

In the Italian context, when professional educators come to work in school contexts, they are called upon to act for the inclusion of children and young people who need additional educational support beyond the resources available in the school.

However, the right to an educator, and primarily to a support teacher, only exists if a functional diagnosis of the child has been made by the competent territorial neuropsychiatric service. We are therefore witnessing a real welding between the needs and shortcomings of the schools, the competences of the child neuropsychiatric services and the final convocation of the educator (Marchesi, 2010). In this way, the possibility of educational support necessarily passes through the convocation of the medical-psychiatric perspective and point of view. This paper will show that this process is far from neutral: instead, it has practical, operational and theoretical implications at the same time, which will be the main subject of analysis of the following pages.

The article analyses this process of treatment through Foucault's thought, taken up in the pedagogical field by Pierangelo Barone (2001, 2013, 2019). It focuses on the analysis of the practices and technologies of power that contribute to the creation of the figure of the abnormal or disruptive subject, in order to offer an interpretation of how the school contributes to the production of deviant disorders and

subjectivities through three main passages.

The first traces the transition from the visibility of behaviour to the functional irregularity of the subject. We will see how 'divergent' behaviour is traced back to an individual dysfunction, and how this affects both practical and theoretical levels.

The second step traces how the eclipse of a context-centred pedagogical perspective occurs, from the entry of diagnostic knowledge into the school to the recourse of educational support.

Finally, the third problematises the invisibility of the school form and the absence of pedagogical knowledge by opening up new avenues of interpretation.

1. FROM THE VISIBILITY OF BEHAVIOUR TO THE FUNCTIONAL IRREGULARITY OF THE SUBJECT

The sociologist Franco Prina (2011, p. 63) suggests that *visibility* is a primary criterion that guides the selection of problem situations and behaviours. In the school context, behaviour that deviates or does not conform to the regular functioning of the school organisation is immediately visible: it disrupts and stands out from a material background and its usual way of functioning (Tolomelli, 2022). In order to continue the smooth running of school activities, it becomes necessary for the organisation to deal with this behaviour. If the behaviour recurs, and if treatment by means of practices and tools that are entirely internal to the school proves ineffective in preventing its recurrence, the institutional procedure convenes and entrusts external and specialised knowledge with the mandate to investigate the deep-rooted causes of this behaviour. In doing so:

> Pedagogical knowledge, in its concrete applications, produces standardising effects [...]. Educational and training practices tend to measure and evaluate the subject, his abilities, his learning, his autonomy, his responsibility, his socialisation. It is clear that these issues seem to be constitutive for the theoretical and epistemological definition of pedagogical knowledge, and it is equally clear that they acquire substantial importance when the object of pedagogical reflection shifts to the gap, to the residual dimension that is produced as an effect of failed normalisation: what is precisely defined as "marginality" and "deviance" (Barone, 2001, p. 127).

This procedure generates a paradoxical game of cross-references between the pedagogical discourse and that of psychological, social and neuropsychiatric knowledge. Somehow the pedagogical implicit in the procedure is more or less this: since education/educational intervention has failed (because the subject does not conform to school norms) and the subject is hardly educable, we look elsewhere for an explanation of what has happened.

Education as a material background thus acts as a selector, distinguishing the regular from the irregular, indicating an anomaly and an irregularity in behaviour and delegating the plan of its 'treatment' to the knowledge of professionals who seek its cause in the internal functioning of the subject (Foucault, 2000).

First, according to Foucault (2000), this procedure of delegation *doubles* the irregularity that passes from the act to the behaviour, from the behaviour to the way of being. The transition is therefore from the irregular act, which, when repeated, doubles into the irregular behaviour – and from the irregular behaviour, which doubles into the individual personality trait:

> By organising this *phenomenologically open* but *scientifically modelled* field, psychiatry will bring together two things [...]: the norm understood as a rule of behaviour, as an informal law, as a principle of conformity; the norm to which irregularity, disorder, strangeness, eccentricity, unevenness, deviation are opposed [...] and the norm understood as functional regularity, as a principle of adapted and adequate functioning: the 'normal' to which is opposed the pathological, the morbid, the disorganised, the dysfunctional (Foucault, 2000, p. 147).

This leads to an explosion of the "symptomatic field", against which psychiatry reconstructs "all kinds of behavioural disorders". This transition from the violation of the norm as a regularity of behaviour/conduct (such as: not being able to sit at the desk, interrupting the class, reacting badly to the teacher...) to the individual personality trait is made possible by recourse to psychological, neuropsychiatric and social knowledge.

This knowledge describes the subject and constitutes him or her as irregular in terms of various dimensions: physiological, psychological, moral, social... all welded into a single point: the diagnosis that creates the individual and transforms him or her into a "case" ("he is an oppositional child", "he has ADHD"", "he is a recidivist", "he has a difficult family situation". ..) (Barone, 2019, Barbanti & Berni, 2024).

By showing the *similarity* between the individual (his functional irregularity, his emotional fragility, his social problematicity) and his "irregular act" (another "doubling" process – Foucault, 2000, pp. 27-28), the *character* of the irregular takes shape as a *truth about the subject,* that identifies him as sick and non-compliant.

Reading the divergence as a behavioural irregularity symptomatic of a functional irregularity therefore leads to the conclusion that the problem is the subject and his history, which must be corrected or, better, treated. The diagnosis and the previous irregular individual history run the risk of becoming the only or main element in the light of which to signify and read what is happening at school, and to precipitate the conclusion that the problem is the subject as a deviant/pathological individual. The *truth effect* that results from this mechanism, again, indicates that it is the individual who is sick and non-compliant. In this sense, it also runs the risk of being the only element on which to act: if the subject heals, if he controls himself, if he straightens up, if he learns to obey, etc., and if the professional accompanies him/her along this path, physically sitting next to him/her, "the problem is solved". A dangerous assonance is thus established between irregular behaviour and a deficient dimension of the subject, which proves to be dysfunctional in the face of the demands for normality coming from the school context.

2. FROM THE ENTRY OF DIAGNOSTIC KNOWLEDGE INTO THE SCHOOL TO THE RECOURSE OF EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT

The truth effects presented above *fits* perfectly into the school organization since, by identifying an unambiguous element on which to intervene with external knowledge and professionalism (educators, school psychologists, mediators...), it allows the school not to question its own structure and functioning. This confirms and guarantees the correctness and regularity of school activities, turning the educational context into "naked/mere empiricity" (Massa in Rezzara, 2004, p. 153): inert and invisible matter and background devoid of any agency in the production of effects.

The educational context (material – spatial, temporal, relational, affective – and symbolic), which helps to give body to the event and within which the educational process takes place, thus becomes a veritable 'missing mass', to use Latour's expression (Landri, Viteritti 2016), as an *absent* element in the interpretation of the educational event. In this way, the everyday life of the school and the episodes of "divergence" are never questioned on the axis of their contextualisation: where the scene takes place, at what time of day, how the day is organised, how the rhythms of the day work? In a word, the nature of the school and the relationship of the subjects living there to it are elements that ultimately have no weight in the interpretation process and produce a *darkening* of the pedagogical view.

Finally, this invisibility of context makes the social visibility of deviant behaviour a sign of deviant pathological individuality. This invisibility of context also means that educational responses to the problem are subordinated to the reduction, containment and control of symptomatology and the search for functional strategies that do not require a reconfiguration of the whole system.

3. THE INVISIBILITY OF THE SCHOOL FORM AND THE ABSENCE OF PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

In the light of the framework just reconstructed, in order to bring the functioning and form of the school and its role in the production of deviance back to the centre of analysis and intervention, it may prove useful to adopt a pedagogical perspective that takes as the unit of analysis the educational dispositif that shapes the experiential contexts experienced by the subjects. Indeed, the failure to see the power and the agency of the educational dispositif in contributing to the production of dynamics and effects prevents both the reading and the modification of the coercive dimension implicit in the organisation of the school experience. That is to say, the element which, within educational contexts, places the individual in a state in which he or she must adapt and respond. Questioning the relevance of the material context that forms the backdrop of everyday school life means paying attention to the variables on which it is possible to intervene in order to encounter and foster potential rather than disruptive characteristics in the field of social and affective relations and educational performance.

According to a structuralist and materialist pedagogical perspective (Massa 1986,

1987), these variables are to be found in the material structures of the educational process. It is therefore necessary to intervene in the spaces and times of learning, in the didactics, in the objects, materials, procedures, rituals of the school, in the pedagogical setting that translates and implements the form of the school itself (Massa, 1997).

In conclusion, this perspective proposes that the pedagogical gaze should be a lateral one, deflecting the 'subject' object and looking around it (in space) and before and after it (in time). From this perspective, it is necessary to look at the landscape, the scenario, the context and the set in which 'things' happen, as if it were a theatre scene whose plot can be changed by acting not only on the scripts of the subject-actors, but also on all the materiality that moves around and with them, forming with them the very body of the scene. This means interpreting the pedagogical gaze as a perspective that is attentive to the landscape and the *'contingent and current'* situation in which the subjects are placed, and as a gaze that has as its object of intervention the *future landscape* in which the subjects can learn something significant for their lives.

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Stream I
DIGITALIZATION AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE EDUCATIONAL FIELD

DIGITAL REPUTATION AND SOCIAL INJUSTICE. TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR MEDIA EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

It is hard to imagine that in today's highly digitized environment there are those who would still doubt that life is digital (Lupton, 2015), with all that this entails in the consequences of the high digitization of cultural and communicative processes, especially with regard to inequality and social injustice. The digital permeates every aspect of reality: culture, technology, and society are concepts that are firmly intertwined with each other (Miller and Horst, 2012). The latest technological devices are an integral part of the human body (Lupton, 1995), producing a shift from embedded to inter-corporated users, with interconnected machines becoming life companions in all activities. Thanks to social platforms, it is possible to search for news and information, maintain personal relationships, both emotional and professional, participate in the activities of groups and associations, become active on the political and institutional level, and take advantage of the opportunities offered by the digital in terms of study and education.

Van Dijk (2005) highlights the social dimensions that can produce social inequality (social attractiveness, mental access, and availability of computers and connectivity, material access), and the different skills that influence the level of utilisation (operational, informational, formal, and substantive) and those that can be transformed into social growth, which are strategic for the achievement of goals in life.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning the outcome of a research (Grollo et al., 2022) that shows how the use of devices has dropped to under two years of age (26%), according to a consumption trajectory that increases with age. Already in 2017, the European Commission, through a comparative survey carried out by the Joint Research Centre (Chaudron et al., 2017), highlighted the use of digital devices by children under the age of six, regardless of the national reference context. To go further overseas, we find that the use of tablets and mobile phones, in children under the age of eight, is an embedded habit, although this practice is mainly related to the enjoyment of online videos (Rideout and Robb, 2020).

All these reports are proof of a scientific interest that has been present for years on the subject, even if the urgency of dealing with the potential risks remains (Loon, 2002, 2014; Lupton, 2016) related to the use of digital technology in pre-school and school age, accentuating the focus on a highly topical subject, such as that of *digital*

reputation and the damage resulting from identity-damaging acts through personal data violations, cyberbullying, sexting, revenge porn, flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing and trickery.

The panel *Digital Reputation and Social Injustice. Tools and Strategies for Media Education* focuses on web reputation in order to open the discussion on possible courses of action, preventive measures and law enforcement bodies, forms of accompanying disruption and media education strategies, where politics and the educational system work together toward the same goal. Within its framework, the proposals presented are possible answers to the following points:

- Is there an awareness of a digital reputation?
- Does it find cultural adaptation and an appropriate form of socialisation?
- Having such social skills, what discriminating factors does it produce in the present and future lives of the subjects?
- How do we facilitate moments, formal and informal, to share these new forms?
- Do they translate into comforting forms of adult control and are they already internalized by digital natives?
- Is there a form of inequality, linked to fragile and marginalized areas, in which these digital-representational skills are not developed, with various risks that may affect the future social life of young people?
- What doors does knowing how to manage one's digital reputation open to the future?

Specifically, Chiara Bellotti explains how children's use of technology requires parental mediation in a way that promotes safe and educationally relevant virtual experiences. It can confirm its authority presence and be able to orient its members to explore new contexts, offering new languages, meanings, and new routes so that the child can develop the ability to know how to consciously construct his project of life, even with the presence of new media. Parents must educate the child's autonomy and development of critical thinking. They are asked to present themselves as credible educators, active mediators, able to establish a dialogue with their children in a participatory way about the risks and opportunities offered by the Web. The family has an important educational role in the responsible and safe use of media. Parents need to know how best to understand and deal with children's vulnerabilities so that they can protect themselves from danger and enjoy the opportunities offered by the digital world.

The intervention of Matteo Ficara and Cristina Pozzi aims to explore the connection between imagination, immersive practices, digital reputation, and identity in the social context, investigating possible future scenarios. It aims to propose immersive imagination as a media education strategy to address the theme of social distance in all its forms: injustice, inequality, and marginalization. Imagination is conceived as a universal practice capable of providing flexible tools, promoting empathy, and guiding decisions. From a neuroscientific perspective, immersion involves sensory stimulation, which elicits physical, physiological, and emotional responses,

activates emotional centres, and fosters empathy, enhances cognitive engagement and decision-making.

Rosanna Marino and Miriam Matteo present research that goes in this direction and investigates the issue of web reputation in relation to the online behaviors of new generations, both regarding the processes of popularity construction and personal branding, as well as the psychological and social distress caused by cyberbullying phenomena, sexting, revenge porn, privacy violations, identity theft, and many others. They have indeed negative effects on the reputation and dignity of the person intercepting young people's ability to learn from mistakes, activate problem-solving strategies and increase their digital awareness. The paper focuses on the topic of web reputation in social media, and analyses GenZers' web reputation management strategies on social network sites in relation to online risks such as cyberbullying, sexting, revenge porn, privacy violation and many others.

Nicola Strizzolo and Eleonora Sparano, with their contribution, aim to broaden the analysis of the impacts of new technologies on the social construction of identity in the digital age to identify the strategies of digital resilience that individuals and communities can adopt in the complexity of the web of online reputation, focusing on the different representations and practices of the self in the age of connectivity, which complicate the distinction between online and offline and make reputation a relational good linked to social capital. The analysis takes into consideration both spatial and temporal aspects, exposing subjects to risks of identity violation.

Andrea Velardi analyses web reputation from a philosophical perspective focusing attention on the right to oblivion real-life identity or off-line identity, Media Identity and Web identity. Subjects manipulate events and actions according to the moment and context focusing on implicit and explicit aspects, through private and public dimensions, according to different levels of importance, consistency, and priority. As a consequence, Web identity deletes privacy and life is externalized. Therefore, biography changes its gestaltic approach to an a-gestaltic one, overexposed, and atemporal perspective. The result is a moralistic and instrumental manipulation of subjects by mass- and web-media.

Overall, what emerges from the various contributions to the topic *Digital Reputation and Social Injustice* is that, from a sociological perspective, reputation is crucial for recognition processes, which can be both the origin and the result of inequalities, because not all individuals have the same power as reputation entrepreneurs and can determine discriminants in access to resources and roles, and therefore, reputation-related recognition practices contribute to maintaining a certain social order.

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DIGITAL REPUTATION. FAMILY RESPONSI-BILITY AND DIGITAL CHALLENGES

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We live today in a globalized and hyper-technological society that start a general process of increasing instability, including in the area of family relationships. Numerous research on the analysis of the most significant Italian socio-economic phenomenon highlights how today's family contexts are always more digital, and the technology is integrated into the daily routine. ICT, domestic and edutainment technologies, and act to initiate family relationships by building and negotiating rules, norms, roles, identities and values, both individual and family. The time spent by children online, through the use of their smartphones, is a potential risk factor for parents and one of the main sources of worry. Children's use of technology requires parental mediation in a way that promotes safe and educationally relevant virtual experiences. The family with its relational unique stands on the side of real experience, but it cannot stand in opposition to the virtual. In these relational dynamics, it can confirm its authority presence and be able to orient its members to explore new contexts, offering new languages, meanings, and new routes so that the child can develop the ability to know how to consciously construct his project of life, even with the presence of new media. Parents must educate the child's autonomy and development of critical thinking (Simene, 2021); They are required to present themselves as credible educators, active mediators, able to dialogue with their children in a participatory way about the risks and opportunities offered by the Web. Today's family challenge consists in the ability to sustain the educational relationship with children in the continuous technological transformations (Amadini, 2011). The family has an important educational role in the responsible and safe use of media. Parents need to know how best to understand and deal with children's vulnerabilities so that they can protect themselves from danger and enjoy the opportunities offered by the digital world.

Digital; family responsibility; education; educational relationship

INTRODUCTION

Today's technological transformations, with particular reference to the world of social networks, and their great diffusion in daily life, have increased the possibility for people to extend the network of their friendship, social, work, family relationships, as well as the opportunity to interact with physically distant people (Buckingham, 2020). The family context was also affected by the communication revolution, as regards both the management of daily activities and the exercise of relationships and parenting educational functions (Ferrari, Rivoltella, 2013).

In light of these transformations, numerous questions arise in parents, such as the

following: How can we understand the risks and opportunities of the use of new technologies? What educational strategies should be used to monitor and control the online activities of the children? How can we communicate with the children in a participatory way on the risks and opportunities of the Internet?

Pedagogy cannot disregard this important educational challenge for the families. Access to the Internet by minors requires the mediation of parents, in such a way as to favor the realization of significant virtual experiences. Today's pedagogy is called to attend families in the exercise of educational functions, to help the younger generations to seize the risks and opportunities generated by the new communication tools (Bellotti, 2020).

1. FAMILIES NETWORKED

The 2022 Censis Annual Report[1], on the analysis of the most significant Italian socioeconomic phenomena, highlights how today's family contexts are increasingly technological, so much so that technology appears to be integrated into the daily routine.

This has led to "domestication" (Aroldi, 2015), a gradual process of adaptation to new technologies within families and has contributed to the creation of what has been termed the "hybridised family" (Donati 2017), referring to the process through which digital technologies, such as the internet and social media, influence and shape the dynamics and structures of contemporary families.

Digital life is not something different and distant from real life, but it is an integral part of the daily life of the majority of Italians, who recognize that online has improved the quality of their existence by simplifying many of their activities.

ICT, domestic and edutainment technologies facilitate family interactions through which family members establish and negotiate rules, norms, roles, identities and values (Zanetti, Nardone, 2010).

This social framework is augmented by changes in the timing of home life management, the reconciliation of work commitments by parents and the erosion of time available for educational and parental tasks.

Certainly, the use of technology can be supportive to the family, simplifying household activities and facilitating relationships with children.

Looking at research in the USA investigating the consumption and impact of social networks in the American family, report how families use a wide range of media to keep in touch with each other (Kennedy, Smith, Wells, Wellman, 2018).

Also, households with children stand out because they have higher rates of Internet and mobile phone use, computer ownership and broadband adoption than other household configurations.

Most of them, affirm that the Internet has not changed the amount of time they spend with friends, with family. It is possible to say that new technologies for

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[1] Quinto Rapporto AUDITEL-CENSIS, *La transizione digitale degli italiani*, Roma 2022, p. 3.

American families favour a new connectivity (Faverio, Sidoti, 2024).

Data from empirical research by Cisf (International Centre for Family Studies) in 2017 and 2022 indicate a large diffusion of internet connection also by Italian households. Adult families with older children have a moderate web presence, while younger families with one or more minor children use the web extensively and continuously.

In these families, the relationship between parents and children makes use of social networks, giving rise to new forms of communication (in-presence and distant relationship).

The use of digital technologies in the family proves to be a valuable support for cultivating and enhancing family relationships (Donati, 2017; Belletti, 2022).

The way of using digital in the family, one-to-one, and more and more many-to-many (Floridi, 2014), is considered fundamental to everyday life.

Media contribute to the crossing of boundaries between the real and virtual worlds and the person experiences hybrid spaces at the same time, which include real and digital, private and public experiences (Riva, 2010, p. 96).

In these families, the opposition between virtual and real is now an outdated stereotype, as the subjects live daily and simultaneously in the virtual and the real world.

For our aims, it is important to note that the family is not only under the influence of the digital but can also profit from the new technologies in terms of increased relational potential. Within some families, the strategy of sharing browsing with their children "netting together" emerges as a positive strategy (Regalia, Rossi, Scabini, 2013, p. 11).

With it, parents relate to the new media together with their children, reducing the attitude of control, allowing them to experience the web as positively as possible. The challenge for parents is to be able to grasp, along with the risks, the opportunities that these new rich social spaces can offer.

With it, parents relate to the new media together with their children, reducing the attitude of control, allowing them to experience the web as positively as possible. The challenge for parents is to be able to grasp, along with the risks, the opportunities that these new rich social spaces can offer.

2. RISKS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The transformation in the practices of digital media use has now involved all generations, permeating not only the lives of adults and young people, but also those of the youngest, who develop an unprecedented relationship with these tools that affects all spheres of their lives, from play to social relations and the ways in which they learn.

Technology offers important opportunities and resources for learning, but at the same time leaves room for risks, dangers and fears.

Actually, there are more cases of cyberbullying and forms of Internet addiction.

The youngest are most at risk, as they are considered the weakest link in the chain of actors populating the web. Young people, even if they are more competent to internet explore are not aware of and underestimate the risks associated with their behaviour on the web. The European research project *Net Children go mobile*, found that young people's web surfing involves both risks and opportunities. The research managed to reconstruct the surfing experiences of 9-16 year olds. In particular, the data collected refer to experiences of the net that can be traced back to something they have seen or experienced online, but which caused them negative emotions or psychological stress (Livingstone, Haddon, 2009). The research reports three types of risks while surfing:

- Content risks: children are the recipients of inappropriate messages such as bullying, cyberbullying, situations and episodes of racism, discrimination or material inciting hatred online (hate speech);
- Contact risks: these concern the risk of online grooming by strangers;
- Behavioural risks: the young person creates digital content with the intention of causing harm to others;

Many studies mention that exposure to digital risks does not necessarily lead to negative experiences online or the occurrence of harm. However, it is important to take into account the vulnerability of young people in dealing with such situations.

According to D. Buckingam (2020), it is difficult to reduce risks without also minimising opportunities; concerns about dangers change depending on the particular characteristics of the technological tools used.

Risks and opportunities are linked: we cannot have one without the other, it is a matter of dealing with risky opportunities (Livingstone, Stoilova, 2021, p. 10).

For many children, online contact with risky content and communicative situations, just as with offline risks, can result in resilient attitudes (Mascheroni, Ólafsson, 2010). In these subjects, it is possible to observe the development of the ability to cope with stressful events in the network and to reorganise their life journey positively.

3. THE FAMILY'S EDUCATIONAL ROLE

The family plays a primary role in a child's education. On the affective experiences lived in the family and the educational models received depends the construction of the child's identity, and its ability to interpret the world around it.

The family with its relational singularity is situated on the side of real experience, but it cannot be set against the virtual.

In the educational relationship, father and mother act according to precise responsibilities and according to the choice of precise values (Pati, 2019).

H. Jonas (1991) interprets parental responsibility as taking responsibility for one's own educational actions. Responsible parental behaviour needs to extend into the future of the children, in continuity in time and space.

To address the dangers of the Internet, the family has the task of taking care of the

safety of minors. This is a way of saying that the safety of one's children requires the protection of their well-being, promoting the full development of their potential and their autonomy (Bellotti, 2022).

Parents must be able to better understand and deal with children's vulnerabilities, protect them from dangers and rejoice in the opportunities offered by the digital world (Rivoltella, 2019).

In the informational society, the media represent a way to increase the experience and experiences of our families, but their use must be accompanied by a strong educational intentionality.

The family must guide its members to explore new contexts, new routes also with the presence of new media. The parent is required to exercise his or her authority in a guiding way (Pati, 2014), to be a responsible educator, an active mediator, and to dialogue with his or her children in a participative way about the risks and opportunities offered by the network.

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DIGITAL REPUTATION. A MULTIDISCIPLINARY COMPARISON

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From a sociological perspective, reputation is pivotal in processes of recognition, maintaining a delicate balance between the value individuals attribute to themselves and the value collectively assigned by others. If reputation-driven recognition practices contribute to preserving a certain social order, those who position themselves as 'reputation entrepreneurs' – capable of defining both the qualifying elements and the qualified subjects – hold the power to influence individuals' lives. They regulate tensions and conflicts, create scapegoats, and shape personal and institutional trajectories tied to good or bad reputation. With each new dominant technology, the power dynamics within society are reorganised: the disintermediation of the internet, its network structure translated into virality, and open access have not only enabled global fame through self-promotion but also the potential for global discredit. These factors can amplify attacks, grievances, and dissent, causing severe reputational harm and, in extreme cases, leading to dramatic outcomes. Building on these premises, this contribution seeks to deepen the analysis of the impacts of new technologies on the social construction of identity, emphasising the findings of a multidisciplinary dialogue involving around twenty experts – scholars and professionals – on the topic of digital reputation.

reputational society, digital (risk), social inequality, multidisciplinarity

INTRODUCTION

Reputation, a cornerstone of social recognition processes, plays a pivotal role in human interactions (Mutti, 2007). It can be understood as a field of forces that validates the value individuals attribute to themselves, and the value collectively assigned by others. This dynamic often gives rise to inequalities, as not everyone has the same access to resources, roles, and recognition (Cavazza, 2012).

This concept finds a particularly compelling application in the field of Public Relations, where reputation is examined both in terms of concrete behaviours that shape it (Vecchiato, 2005) and through indicators enabling its measurement (Romenti, 2005). Reputation not only serves as an intangible asset beyond the material components of an organisation but also acts as a key resilience factor in navigating internal and external crises. It attracts talent and ensures premium pricing for products and services (Vecchiato, 2005).

Reputation is not limited to organisations or individuals but extends to physical places, such as city neighbourhoods, where their characteristics influence residents' social and economic interactions (Cavazza, 2012; Parker & Karner, 2010). Practices of recognition tied to reputation not only reinforce the existing social order but also introduce normative innovations, creating tensions around what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' reputation (Pizzorno, 2007).

The advent of the internet and digital technologies has propelled reputation into a phase of deep transformation. The disintermediation of the web, its viral structure, and global accessibility have created unprecedented opportunities and risks. Online reputation, or 'web reputation', defined as the social credit and consideration derived from published online content, is now shaped not only by deliberate actions but also by phenomena such as the spread of false or manipulated content, often beyond the control of those affected (Chieffi, 2024).

In this context, central figures such as influencers emerge as digital reputation entrepreneurs. They operate on two levels: building their own reputation through parasocial relationships with followers and shaping perceptions of brands, products, and organisations (Polesana, Vagni, 2021). From an organisational and corporate perspective, digital reputation is addressed to in various crisis scenarios and response strategies (Chieffi, 2024). However, it also encompasses phenomena such as cyberbullying, sexting, and revenge porn. In these cases, the online profiles of vulnerable or fragile individuals, who lack of resources to defend and reinforce their media narratives, come under scrutiny.

This introductory analysis underscores a critical point: the digital environment introduces unprecedented characteristics to reputational dynamics. The internet not only amplifies opportunities for self-definition but also exposes individuals to long-lasting reputational risks across time and space.

Building on these premises, we present the results of a collaborative effort involving around twenty scholars on the themes of digital reputation (Sparano et al., 2024, 13-19). From this work, several potential models have emerged, which we propose here as representative of the diverse perspectives analysed.

1. REPUTATION AS A SOCIAL AND RELATIONAL CONSTRUCT

Reputation develops through the interaction between individuals, communities, and cultures, represented or perceived as the relational onsite of symbolic communicative exchanges, nourished by shared expectations, values, and norms. In this regard, through the concept of the looking-glass self, Cooley (1902) highlights how self-perception is reflected in the eyes of others. This idea is later expanded by Goffman (1959, 1974), whose exploration centres on the role of self-representation and interpretative frames in the construction of reputation. Similarly, Bellah (1986) conceptualises reputation as a relationship between people rather than an individual possession.

This relational dimension finds direct application in the context of digital culture. As emphasised by Vardanega (2024, 45-52) and Rando (2024, 37-43), social networks

and digital platforms amplify the relational dynamics of reputation, partly due to the presence of networked publics and collapsed contexts (boyd, 2010, 2014). These environments foster the development of reputation through networks of semiotic and textual traces left by individuals, which others interpret and integrate into collective narratives. When combined with reflections on childhood as a carrier of an 'alternative' worldview (Gentile, 2024, 23-28), it becomes evident that reputation is a relational process rooted in mutual and reflective perception. Children, through interaction and self-management dynamics, show the ability to adjust their behaviour in response to social expectations.

Thus, the construction of reputation occurs within a dialectic between self and society, individuality and community, where social recognition plays a pivotal role. It is based on adherence to the values and norms of a given community and the fulfilment of the expectations its members have of the individual (Cavazza, 2012, 30).

2. CONTROL AND PLANNING

From this perspective, reputation is not merely the outcome of social interactions but becomes a strategically managed asset for individuals and organisations (Vecchiato, 2005). It functions as an intangible resource capable of generating economic, social, and cultural value through careful planning of communicative actions and identity narratives. This model highlights the proactive management of reputation and the importance of monitoring the semiotic traces left in the digital environment (Chieffi, 2024).

In this regard, Altheide (1997) underscores the media's power to frame certain issues, with significant repercussions on the reputation of the subjects involved. Similarly, Foucault (1988) views individuals as defined objects within a historically determined field of knowledge shaped by techniques, discourses, reflections, analyses, and practices. This framework appears particularly relevant to contemporary digital dynamics. As Vardanega notes, the analysis of web reputation grapples with contexts of increasingly undefined, blurred, and overlapping contours (2024, 46). This is echoed in the reflections of Carpegna Brivio (2024, 235-260) and Calzeroni (2024, 113-140), who, based on Zuboff's (2019) insights, observe how individuals simultaneously become the surveilled and surveillers through algorithmic metrics.

While providing an overview of the current complexity of the digital sphere – where individuals and organisations aim to enhance and position their reputational value – this strategic representation also raises ethical and accountability issues concerning the potential manipulation of social perceptions.

3. REPUTATION AS PERFORMANCE

In the emerging model, reputation takes on the characteristics of a social construct, shaped by the performative actions of individuals seeking to assert their identity. This is not merely a response to shared norms and values but rather an intentional practice aimed at influencing how others perceive them. This involves efforts to project consistency and authenticity on social platforms, where identity is continually

renegotiated (Boccia Artieri et al., 2017).

Key contributors to this discourse include Marwick and boyd (2011), who argue that on social media, reputation is less about a set of personal traits or external labels and more about an organic, ever-evolving performative practice. This practice relies on elements such as authenticity, access, and intimacy to construct a consumable persona (Rando, 2024, 38) tailored on the expectations of an increasingly fragmented and global audience. This process involves reflexivity, manifesting in the constant negotiation between self and community, as individuals attempt to reconcile audience expectations with their self-narratives.

This model emphasizes the importance of authenticity while also highlighting the vulnerability associated with the mounting pressure to meet shifting social expectations. This pressure can lead to new forms of conflict, identity control, and performative stress. Notably, it reveals the paradox of the narrator who, on social media, consumes themselves in the act of creating content grounded in the negotiation of their existence. Simultaneously, the consumer of goods or services becomes a narrator of their own online identity (Risso, 2023).

4. FURTHER PROPOSALS

The models described above, while not exhaustive of the phenomenologies observable in the web, encapsulate elements common to multiple interpretations. At this point in the discussion, it is pertinent to introduce other interpretative hypotheses, notable for their originality.

Drawing on extensive experience in the field of institutional reputation, Casini (2024, 177-204) explores an analogy between gravitational theory and reputational dynamics, comparing reputational crises to black holes and arguing that these represent the dark matter of social networks. Meanwhile, Guarino (2024, 261-288), focusing on the malleable boundaries between human and animal in the realm of digital transformations, investigates the reputation of companion animals through an analysis of social media platforms dedicated to them.

These brief and diverse insights provide additional valuable details for constructing a multi-layered understanding of digital reputation and the processes underpinning it. This effort is illuminated by the lens of contemporary mediatization (Boccia Artieri et al., 2022), which enriches both the concept of digital reputation and its associated dynamics.

5. TOWARDS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEFINITION OF REPUTATION

The analysis presented here reveals reputation as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon, integrating relational, performative, and strategic dynamics. These dynamics are amplified within the challenging context of digital environments, where reputation simultaneously acts as both process and outcome. It emerges from social interactions, manifesting in shared perceptions and narratives. Reputation is not merely an individual or collective attribute; it is a relational asset – a

genuine form of capital that crosses and connects identities, communities, and cultures.

This perspective frames reputation as a construct rooted in the interplay between social expectations, symbolic norms, and individual actions. Through this interplay, reputation becomes a 'bridge' between subjective and collective dimensions. It represents a continuous process of construction and negotiation, anchored in the mutual and reflective perception developed by individuals and communities. Within a digital context, this process is shaped by networked publics and collapsed contexts, which amplify the visibility and persistence of online traces, transforming every communicative act into a 'statement' about reputation.

Alongside its relational dimension, reputation also assumes a strategic perspective. Here, it is viewed as an intangible resource – a form of social and cultural capital – to be monitored and managed through deliberate actions.

Ultimately, reputation emerges as the product of processes encompassing multiple dimensions. These include identity and performative dynamics, organizational and corporate strategies, and ethical considerations. Such aspects call for an integrated, critical, and multidimensional analysis, one that accounts for digital complexity to decipher the various mechanisms, connections, and consequences involved. Reputation not only reflects social relationships but also the differential fields and forces that define them, along with the roles, potentials, aspirations, and ambitions tied to the pursuit of digital recognition. In this way, reputation becomes part of an interconnected identity, one that exists almost permanently on a global scale.

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UBIQUITY, EQUALIZATION AND *OMNI-SWITCHABILITY* OF THE TRACES. THE INSTRUMENTAL DEGENERATION OF THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY IN DIGITAL ERA

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The aim of the paper is to address the issue of web-reputation beyond the simplified perspective of the "right to oblivion" or "right to be forgotten" more restricted within a juridical account. We argue in favour the need of a new philosophy of the *Real Life Identity* RLI (or *Off-line identity*), *Media Identity* (MI) and the *Web Identity* (WI) or *On-line Identity*. We underline the change of the conception of human identity and biography in a more atemporal and agestaltic pattern menaced by traces ubiquity, equalization and *omni-switchability*. Using Floridi's theory of onlife and infosphere and Ferraris's theory of Documentality we also focus the emergence of the Identity Dilemma: our ontology needs traces for identity and memory, but we are subjected for that to a not manageable ocean of traces in the field of infosphere.

Web reputation; Onlife; Infosphere; Documentality

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is split in two most important purposes. First aim is to address the issue of the web reputation beyond the perspective of the "right to oblivion" or "right to be forgotten" more restricted within a juridical account. The question to answer is not only how to prevent bad aftermath for web reputation or rebuild that after it is damaged and undermined by ethic controversies, scandals, communicative manipulation or, in extreme cases, more complex and articulated character assassination plan or similar attempts to corrode one's biography. In our opinion it is necessary to provide a model of the way in which the new media and social network generates a kind of new concept of identity that results as a very suitable and exploitable tool for moralistic or instrumental manipulation and reputational undermining of new media.

The second aim is a consequence of this premise. As a matter of fact what we have to investigate is not the individual, collective and corporate enterprise to prevent damages against web reputation, but on one hand the connection between *web*

reputation and *web identity* and the *offline identity* and on the other hand the diffi-culty to protect the former cause of the distortion of the latters that contribute to misrepresent and pervert the natural and humanized notion of the identity, biog-raphy and biographical memory of persons and collective subjects. There is indeed something that is radically changed in the web age in the perception of the nature of the personal biography and consequently it is necessary to analyze the issue of web reputation within a more philosophical perspective.

We propose to address the issue of web reputation through the triple distinction between the *Real Life Identity* RLI (or *Off-line identity*), *Media Identity* (MI) and the *Web Identity* (WI) or *On-line Identity (*in the two meanings of 1. a temporary identity emerging from the activation of a specific, goal-directed and manipulable set of traces switched on by all new media, social network, web and real-life communica-tion channel or 2. more generally the pattern of our identity generated by the recol-lection of traces and events available or accessible, displayed or displayable in the web domain).

Therefore we have to radically change our view about web reputation and build a new philosophy of the reputation that is a philosophy of human identity and of the changes of the concept of identity in the web era. For that purpose we will analyze web reputation exploiting the philosophical theory of *Documentality* (Ferraris 2009) and Floridi (2009, 2014) in order to emphasize the role of the universe of the traces thereby it is continuously registered in our mind's world and in our life and the per-vasiveness of this traced universe in the construction of our permanent and tem-poral RLI and WI1 and WI2. We will show that there is instrumental change in the concept of biography and personal identity that in the web are affected by 1. *traces ubiquity and availability* without filtered and audience-sensitive accessibility; 2. *traces equalization* (traces of different period and different episodes of a life are equalized without any contextualization); 3. *traces ad libitum and anytime switcha-bility*, *displaybility*, *reawakening* 3. *digital information and data over-abundance* in which is missed the relevance and the organization of the knowledge of the identity generating information overload and information relevance indifference; 4. Overex-posure of traces of biography 5. Construction of a communicative bubble in which WI is not linked with RLI.

Our idea is that the traditional pattern of this identity and this biography is nowadays disrupted and changes from a more gestaltic, differing and harmonious way to con-sider the events of the life and the chain of this event in the recollection of biog-raphy. This shift is the thorny issue that affects human web and offline identity and undermines the possibility to manage web-reputation in a proper way as the many traces of the life and biographical memory are always in the possibility to switch on in an unpredictable and not manageable way.

This difficulty increases if we consider that this shift is a result of the online change that loops back to the offline pattern and conception of human life. The interplay of *offline* and *online*, that generates the domain of the *onlife (*Floridi 20009, 2014)**,** complicates the scenario requiring other further research to deepen the general

background of this theory and the finding of some new strategy for educate to reconsider the pattern of the human web and offline biography and the possibility to manage better web reputation not only in the horizon of web and social management, but in cultural horizon that encompasses a more complex change of the atemporal and agestaltic vision of identity and biography and a struggle against the reduction of this complex biography as an amount of traces that are not submitted to the right strategy of modulation of meaning and importance, the relativization to the phases and the stages of the life, the assessment of the context in which the single event is embedded.

1. WEB IDENTITY AMONG ONLINE, OFFLINE, ONLIFE.

As we anticipated above we propose to address the issue of web reputation through the triple distinction between the *Real Life identity* RLI (or *Off-line Identity*), *Media Identity* (MI) and the *Web Identity* (WI) or *On-line Identity*. We pointed out that the notion of human identity became very complex not only cause of the interplay and reciprocal affection and interferences among the three kinds of identity that we have distinguished, but overall cause of the interplay and the confusion between the domain of the *offline* and the domain of the *online*. This interplay provides many difficulties for a right characterization and a good treatment of the issue. As we highlight in the introduction we have to precise to what extent the change of the conception of identity to consider only a result of the internet and social era shift or if we have to enlarge our perspective in order to comprise all the interplay and the kickbacks of the offline and online intertwining and interference. The issue of web-reputation become increasingly difficult cause is the issue of the web-identity and of the interplay of *Real Life Identity* RLI (or *Off-line identity*), *Media Identity* (MI) and the *Web Identity* (WI) or *On-line Identity* that is getting harder and harder. In fact the online change loops back to the offline pattern and conception of human life and distort hugely the latter presenting only the surface of an online change. Thus web users and more generally people and even scholars have the tendency to consider only the online, web and social transformations or misrepresentations whereas the issue is more complex and concerns not only the surface of web and social practices, but the representations of our entire life and practices. More precisely are not the web and the life the domains that are affected but these changes and interferences as isolated blocks, but is a very complex, strange and new domain that emerges in that scenario as a new context for human life that is very related to the notion of *infosphere* and *onlife* of Floridi (2009, 2014).

In fact the interplay of *offline* and *online* generates the domain of the *onlife* that is a permanent, not completely discernable and separable domain of synchronic intertwining and diachronic cascade impacts between *offline* and *online*. *Onlife* complicates the scenario requiring other further research, but more generally need firstly a deepening of the notion of *Web Identity* (WI) and secondly the drawing out of the notion of *Onlife Identity* as the result of the interplay of *Real Life Identity* RLI (or *offline identity*), *Media Identity* (MI) and the *Web Identity* (WI).

We have to combine the theory of traces that we propose in the next paragraph in order to better distinguish two kinds of *Web identity* WI or *on-line identity*. In the first sense we have to characterize 1. a temporary identity that emerges in relation to the activation of a specific, goal-directed and manipulable set of traces switched within the convergence of the new media, social network, web and real-life communication scapes; 2. more generally the pattern of our identity generated by the recollection of traces and events available or accessible, displayed or displayable in the web domain.

We argue that this distinction is very suitable for our theoretical purposes and fit with the complexity of the notion of *Onlife* opening the field for the characterization of the notion of *Onlife Identity*.

It is not a case that the theory of *onlife* in Luciano Floridi's account is deeply concerning the new ways how do we relate to each other. This leading figures in contemporary debate argues that the surprisingly disrupting transformations in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) radically changes the entire concept of our life redesigning all the boundaries between life online and offline. This break down profoundly affects our life, but we want to emphasizes the risk that we continue to believe only that we view and are affected only by surface and online changes whereas is all our *offline* life that is radically distorted cause the interferences by the *online* and the generation of the domain of the *onlife*. This notion defines more and more of our daily activity: the way in which we interact each other, the way in which we communicate, conduct our relationships, work, learn, care for our health, entertain ourselves, behave as customers and users; the way in which interact with the domains of human rights and law, the way in which we create our politics believes and vote for parties.

As Floridi pointed out people became seamlessly connected to each other and surrounded by many intelligent devices as smart, responsive objects, that are integrated and at the same time integrate ourselves into the new human space of the "infosphere". The notion of *infosphere* and *onlife* are important basis of a new philosophy of human identity and specifically for the concepts of web-identity and web-reputation.

Floridi (2009) has claimed the domain of infosphere emerges in a complex way as it is being both developed and defragmented as it continues more or less simultaneously and spontaneously to erase barriers and generates confusion between databases of information and regard the level of the effective availability and accessibility to information, between potential and effective access to information, and, ultimately, between here (offline, analog, carbon-based) and there or better said *elsewhere* (online, digital, silicon-based). Floridi deepens the issue of the infosphere as a computational universe, but what is interesting for us is his claim (Floridi, 2001b) about the deep implication of this shift for human nature. He argues that digital information and communication technologies generates a *fourth revolution* that is reontologizing the very nature of the infosphere as reality by making it "frictionless" through the transition from analog to digital data and the ever-

increasing growth of digital space. The reontologizing currently in progress also affect the notion of human identity with many serious societal consequences.

We are aware that nowadays is impossible to mark a stiff border between *real life* and *web life* and that we have to propose a new kind of entity that is a more liquid and multidimensional notion of life and personal identity. As Boccia Artieri et al. highlighted in their *Phenomenology of Social Network* there is a strong continuity between offline and online reality and Facebook is the prototypical istance of this coalescence and of the creation of a spread horizon of an interplayed individual and collective sense of existence. But more deeply we think that this mixed notion of identity is a mandatory outcome of a previous careful survey of the situation of the contradictory and controversial domain of personal identity between reality and web.

2. UBIQUITY, EQUALIZATION AND *OMNI-SWITCHABILITY* OF THE TRACES

The consideration of the Floridi's notions and the link with the theory of *Real Life Identity* RLI (or *off-line identity*), *Media Identity* (MI) and the *Web Identity* (WI) are very interconnected with a theory of the trace and the inscriptions that build human life and the possibility to create what we call a memory and a culture. The philosopher Maurizio Ferraris (2009) calls that articulated amount of traces *Documentality* underlining how we is deep our need of traces and how this need become very manifest in the web era. We argue that we have to combine Floridi's account and Ferraris's account, the notion of onlife and infosphere and the notion of documentality in order to outline a new theory of human identity and biography in relation of the issue of web-reputation.

The notion of *Documentality* is condensed in eleven thesis among which we underline:

- 5. The constitutive rule of social objects is "Object = Inscribed Act".
- 7. Society is not based on communication but on registration.
- 8. The mind is a surface that collects inscriptions.
- 9. Documents in the strong sense are inscriptions of acts.

This selection is very important for us in order to emphasize the role of the universe of the traces in the construction of human identity and memory. More specifically we underline the pervasiveness of this traced universe in the construction of our permanent and temporal RLI and WI1 and WI2. The notion of the pervasiveness of *Documentality* is very important to precise our notion of the change of the concept of human biography and personal identity that becomes more and more affected by disrupting phenomena as: 1. *traces ubiquity and availability* without filtered and audience-sensitive accessibility; 2. *traces equalization* (traces of different period and different episodes of a life are equalized without any contextualization); 3. *traces ad libitum and anytime switchability*, *displaybility*, *reawakening* 3. *digital information and data over-abundance* in which is missed the relevance and the organization of the knowledge of the identity generating information overload and information relevance indifference; 4. overexposure of traces of biography 5.

Construction of a communicative bubble in which WI is not linked with RLI.

The more human and proper nature of biography is normally perceived and lived by subjcets like a temporal evolution with many zones of different relevances and developments. It is also normally displayable in a gestaltic way with a *figure-ground arrangement* of events, action and contexts, a multi-layered arrangement of more hidden and more explicit sides, more private and more public dimensions. WI cancels totally privacy and life is externalized as a whole in whatever details and any sides can be exposed with the same level of importance, consistency and priority according to the necessity of communication and manipulation of the moment.

In this process WI shift RLI. Biography is flipped and twisted from this gestaltic, more human arrangement to an a-gestaltic, disembodied, overexposed, atemporal and simultaneously present patterns of identity. In this a-gestaltic perspective every trace emerges and could be reawakened as a potential threat. This a-gestaltic overturn of identity is the effect of the back-impact of the features of the WI to the RLI. Therefore we have to more deeply analyze this a-gestaltic overturn of identity. This overturn is very suitable for the moralistic and instrumental use of traces by mass- and web-media.

That scenario brings out what I call *Infosphere and Documentality Dilemma* that we face and generates a very complicated scenario for our identity and for reputation: we need traces for the construction of our identity, memory and culture, but that need makes us subjected to a not manageable ocean of the traces proper of the environment of infosphere whose dynamical switchability is not completely predictable.

The dilemma above summed up complexifies the scenario and pushes us to further crucial investigations.

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DIGITALISATION PROCESSES IN ITALIAN SCHOOLS: LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC AND VISION FOR THE FUTURE AGAINST SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

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When on 1 March 2020, with the Decree of the Prime Minister, the teaching of schools of all types and levels will be transferred to digital platforms, inaugurating the so-called Distance Learning (DL) phase, the Italian school system could be defined as sufficiently digitised, at least at the infrastructural level, albeit in an imperfect way, as it is uneven according to territories and different schools, with situations characterised by ample technological equipment and others marked by deficiencies or absences. The two decades preceding the pandemic period show an important focus of educational policies on the issue of digitalisation, which, together with school autonomy, has been the main driver of the transformations carried out in the field of education. This process has taken place within a dominant discourse, started at the beginning of the century in international bodies such as the European Union and the OECD, in which the digitisation of education systems has been considered an essential strategy for transforming Europe into the most dynamic and competitive knowledge society in the world. A clear political direction towards the digitisation of education systems is already present in the Lisbon Strategy of 2000, which identified as one of its main objectives the development of a knowledge-based society to be achieved through massive investment in digital technologies for schools. In the same vein, in 2006 the European Parliament included digital literacy among the eight key competencies with which education and training should meet the challenges of globalisation. Shortly afterwards, in 2009, the OECD introduced digital literacy as an integral learning skill for secondary school students in the PISA surveys.

It is therefore within this plan that, also in Italy, starting from the same years and under the pressure of European regulations and OECD recommendations (Salmieri and Giancola, 2018), a series of educational policies (e.g. the Digital School Plan in 2007; the National Digital School Plan in 2015) oriented towards the theme of digitalisation are developed. At the same time, academic reflection on this issue has been enriched in recent years by important contributions that have highlighted the social, economic and organisational implications of digitisation processes in schools.

The ensuing debate can be summarised in terms of three levels of analysis. At the macro level, reflection has focused on the role of digitisation within the broader

process of reforming the education systems of European countries, which, albeit with differences linked to national specificities, have been largely inspired by the neoliberal principles of New Public Management (Gunter et al., 2016). In the regulatory scenario associated with these reform processes, digitisation is said to have played an important role in promoting processes of platformisation, datification and soft privatisation of schools (Cone et al., 2022), as a result of the delegation by the state to private actors, in particular large multinational IT companies, in the organisation, management and programming of digital learning environments. The predominant role that these actors have today in the educational system is particularly relevant in Italy (Grimaldi and Serpieri, 2013) and is also supported by the fact that 80% of teachers, from a sample of more than 2000 cases interviewed during the DL, declare to have used only three platforms for their online teaching: Google (48%), Zoom (23%), Teams (7%) (Carbone et al., 2021).

At the meso level, reflection on digitisation has focused on the impact of this process on the reorganisation of teaching functions within schools. Here, the debate has been polarised between those who see digitisation processes as contributing to the improvement of organisational processes (Wetston and Bain 2020) and those who highlight the contradictory effects on the working conditions of school staff and the consequent conflict dynamics that can arise (Selwyn and Facer, 2013).

However, it is at the micro level that the scientific literature has focused its attention, concentrating its analyses mainly on two themes: the degree of use and pedagogical areas of application of digital technologies by teachers, and the relationship between digitisation and student learning. Concerning the first theme, the research conducted in Italy testifies to the limited use of digital tools by teachers compared to the equipment available in schools and, above all, to didactics still very much focused on the technical-operational type of digital competence, i.e. linked to teaching 'of' technology and not 'with' technology or 'for' the critical use of technology (Argentin et al., 2013). About the second theme, numerous studies, agree in highlighting the existence of a low relationship between the increase in the technological equipment of schools and the improvement of teaching effectiveness (Digregorio and Sobel-Lojescki, 2010;) or the increase in students' competencies, even those that are more specifically digital (Gui et al., 2018). In particular, numerous studies carried out during the DL have highlighted the persistence of high levels of difficulty on the part of teachers in adequately ensuring their training and evaluation activities (Colombo et al. 2022). Other studies have highlighted teachers' difficulties in terms of the technological equipment available and the digital skills they possess, as well as shortcomings in terms of the support they receive from their institutions (Lucisano, 2020). Concerning students, research has highlighted the ineffectiveness of DL as a pedagogical tool (Puccetti and Luperini, 2020), the limitations of distance inclusion of vulnerable students (Chiusaroli, 2020) and, in some cases, the problems of school dropout (Rocchi, 2020).

Based on these findings, it seems clear that something has gone differently in the digitisation processes than what was envisaged, perhaps too optimistically, in the

planning of digital education policies in Italy and Europe. However, the criticalities that have emerged can, if properly considered, represent reference points that can be used for a readjustment of these policies. Moreover, DL itself has shown how digitalisation can also bring opportunities that should not be underestimated by policymakers. Indeed, this experience has shown how digital technology has enabled one of the most bureaucratic and complex sectors of public administration - the school system – to adapt very quickly to the upheaval in social organisation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This not only allowed teachers to continue their work and students to continue their education but also allowed the latter to emerge, at least partially, from the social isolation that characterised the early stages of the pandemic. The DL also enabled a significant reduction in daily travel, reducing the burden on public transport.

In other words, DL functioned as a great amplifier of both the criticalities and the opportunities offered by the digitisation of the education system. Overcoming the former to promote the latter should be the starting point for a recalibration of educational policies, also aimed at reducing social inequalities within the digitalised school.

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EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY INCLUSION AND CRITICAL ISSUES DURING THE PANDEMIC PERIOD. RESEARCH RESULTS

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The proposal presents the first outputs of the 'Universitabile' doctoral thesis based on the relationship between educational inclusion (Ainscow and Miles, 2009) and ICT. Using a mixed methods approach, the paper analyses interviews administered to operators of dedicated services, exploring the issue of barriers and facilitation mechanisms during the Covid-19 emergency, presenting technology as an element both of exclusion and inclusion.

digital inclusion; ICT; Universal Design; barriers and facilitators, students with disabilities

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The proposal illustrates the concept of Universal design for ICT (*Information and Communication Technology*), i.e. design of technologies that pays more attention to the concept of universal usability, in this perspective buildings and tools should be conceived, designed and constructed to be usable by all (Fiocco and Martinati, 2002, 232), inspired by the following principles (WAI, n.d.): perceivability, operability, comprehensibility, robustness.

From this perspective, the role of technology should be interpreted by linking to other concepts, such as the failure to increase digital cultural capital, the digital divide and related digital exclusion. The latter is to be understood as a lack of access to and use of information and communication technology (ICT) resources. As for the other terms under analysis, Selwyn (2004) outlines digital cultural capital by considering the relationship between capital, technology use and exclusion. They can be summarised as investing time to improve technological knowledge and skills through informal or formal learning; this acquisition, however, is also made possible through socialisation in the use of technology, implemented through sharing with online support networks (e.g. family, friends, tutors). These practices are still hindered by the persistence of the *digital divide*, which is even stronger for certain groups at risk of social exclusion.

In order to understand the role of ICTs in learning and university inclusion processes of students with disabilities and SLDs, it's useful to provide a terminological clarification on different concepts, but interconnected to the issue: educational

inclusion, technology as facilitator or, viceversa, as obstacle and, finally, Covid-19 pandemic, extendable to the definition of emergency provided by Perez and Thompson (1994). This emergency period disrupted, on the one hand, social habits and, on the other, the functioning of university institutions, in which, however, digital technologies made it possible to continue ordinary activities through the main tool of DaD, thus guaranteeing the right to study (Fasanella et al., 2020, 96). To conclude, it is useful to provide a definition of educational inclusion (Ainscow and Miles, 2009), i.e. a process of systematic improvement that administrations and universities must address in an attempt to recognise and remove barriers at different levels (macro, meso and micro), which limit students' learning and participation in university.

2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ICT AND INCLUSION. ITALIAN CONTEXT AND REGULATORY REFERENCES

In order to delimit the topic of the relationship between ICT and inclusion, it is appropriate to refer to the EU Strategy 2021-2030. It recognises, among the main guidelines for the concrete realisation of inclusive contexts, understood as accessible physical and virtual environments, the enhancement of ICT. Implementing, in this way, digital access through the preparation of the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 (European Strategy, 2021, art. 8). The latter provided for the allocation of resources to guarantee an accessible digital environment, in order to prepare inclusive digitised learning modes, promoting the concept of universal design for all. In Italy, back in 1992, art.8 of Law no.104 provided, for the inclusion and social integration of people with disabilities, measures to make the right to study effective with particular reference to didactic and technical equipment, programmes, specialised languages (L.n. 104/1992, art. 8, lett. d); the provision was completed, and further delimited, by Law no. 04/2004 laying down provisions to facilitate disabled people's access to IT tools, aimed at guaranteeing the right to access all sources of information and the relative services, including those that are articulated through IT and telematic tools (Law no. 04/2004, art. 1, par. 1). The law then provides, in Art. 2, a definition of accessibility to IT tools, as well as a further specification of the assistive technologies, to be understood as technical tools, hardware and software, that enable disabled person, overcoming or reducing their disadvantage, to access information and services provided by IT systems (L.no. 04/2004, art. 2, co. 1, lett. b), for the provision of computerised texts for public schools and universities, an aspect that, in the Roman universities we are interested in (La Sapienza, TorVergata, RomaTre), is not fully implemented, as we will read in the following paragraphs.

3. THE RESEARCH. OBJECTIVES, DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

The proposal analyses the issue of university inclusion of students with disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs), in relation to the role of digital technologies during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The aim of the paper is to understand, through the voices of professionals involved in the provision of specific services and through documents produced by the main universities in Rome (La Sapienza, TorVergata and RomaTre), whether and to what extent technology has acted as a facilitator. The analysis assumes particular relevance insofar as the evidence that will be presented will show that technology risks being configured as a tool of exclusion rather than inclusion.

The research design is based on a *mixed methods* approach (Mauceri, 2017), based on the combined use of qualitative (focused interviews and focus groups) and quantitative (questionnaire) techniques. It is divided into four main phases: 'background research' (Corbetta, 1999), in which the existence of a database per university was verified, while at the same time mapping the services by means of focused interviews (Merton and Kendall, 1946) on a voluntary basis to the heads of the dedicated offices; design of a semi-structured web survey administered to students with disabilities and SLD; monovariate and bivariate analysis (Di Franco, 2011); focus group (Corrao, 2000) for policy suggestions on a voluntary basis.

It should be noted that the evidence in the contribution relates to the first of the listed phases (background research), addressing, among others, the issue of barriers and facilitation mechanisms. These were carried out online, on Meet platform, from 13 May to 18 July 2021, with a maximum duration of 1 hour and 40 minutes and a minimum of 25 minutes. The 12 interviews (2 for the university of RomaTre, 4 for TorVergata, 6 for Sapienza) covered different topics with respect to service delivery, among these, those relating to technology and changes in the pandemic period were selected, with the vulnerabilities of the system being highlighted more than positive aspects of technology, as will be seen in the next section.

4. EVIDENCE FROM KEY INFORMANTS

Privileged witnesses have spoken on the provision of computerised texts for state schools and universities, as can be seen from the following excerpts. 'For example, there is always this rigidity of publishing houses, the granting of accessible material where it is needed. Especially for the blind or the pdf for accessible formats, we always buy the hard copy, but it is difficult' (Witness 8, TorVergata delegate). 'A further critical issue is accessibility from the teaching point of view: that of digital texts. Many times we have difficulty finding texts, it is a national problem, there is a problem with publishers that we are trying with the university libraries to solve' (Witness 3, Head, Sapienza). On the same subject, another employee (witness 12, delegate, RomaTre) states: 'we try to make these texts accessible, but we have to deal with the publisher, I got in touch with the head of digital publishing, she told me 'it is a matter of national policy not university policy'. We agreed to the possibility of accrediting ourselves as a body for text accessibility this year'. The interviewees then expressed their opinion on the pandemic period. Witness 8 (TorVergata delegate), on this subject, states: 'the covid crisis has completely changed the methods of access, of requesting, everything going on telematics', and, again, 'we have reduced to the essentials, means that we have focused on the problems that have suddenly

arisen due to the forced distance'. In this regard, Witness 6, an employee in the student tutor position, reinforces the concept: 'I almost only interact with students because now my work has moved online, which means I have to follow their lectures online'. This issue is echoed in the words of Witness 11 (TorVergata dedicated office): 'we focused on remedying the emergency, so we sought remedies for distance learning and all the problems'. The interviewee then goes on to point out that the pandemic has burdened the modes of communication between students, lecturers and the service: 'the problems have increased with the pandemic. Perhaps some communications can still be published and provided in a way that is not fully usable. The critical issue is communication'. It seems clear that the witness refers to the online modes of communication that are not always usable for students with disabilities and SLD. However, this is not the only element of complexity encountered, to date, in fact, the use of platforms for teaching (e.g. Meet, Zoom, Skype, Teams) also presents quite a few critical issues, as can be seen from the words of witness 2 (staff): 'Sapienza had to organise itself in a very short time and organising distance learning must not have been easy, also because we have some very experienced lecturers, saying to one: 'do the lesson on meet', oh my god! we found ourselves to be computer experts. As if you can't do without it now'. The testimony refers, on the one hand, to the individual resilience of professionals in adapting to the new systems and, on the other, to problems in the use of lessons delivered by teaching staff. However, excerpts demonstrate the benefits and resilience of universities in service delivery. Students, at this stage: 'preferred to study at home and used distance tutoring on Skype' (witness 2, Sapienza staff); in the same interview, further on, a somewhat surprising fact: 'we have students who studied and finished their thesis with the tutor from home, sharing the Word file on drive and editing it in real time'. Another professional (Witness 5, Sapienza tutor) on the issue states: 'think about online tutoring via Meet. How many students find it difficult to go to university? And how comfortable can it be this way? We have probably cleared customs in a new way. Today, even the request for study tutoring is made through online forms'. On the other hand, the witness, after commenting on the positive aspects of technology, defines his own tasks related to online tutoring as follows: 'Marx tells us about alienation? Let's talk about alienation at work, you imagine going into a Chat Meet and a Classroom, into a lecture and taking notes for a person you've only seen once'. The interviewee's statement has the effect of producing some practical criticism on the student side, regarding the realisation of active learning process (Cesareni and Pascucci, 2011), as can be seen from the excerpt: 'I stay at home, I follow the lesson while I do the laundry' (witness 2, Sapienza staff).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The aspect just mentioned is confirmed by further studies in which it's stated: change in educational offerings seems to have been characterised by a level of structuring and innovation that is not always adequate to keep students' interest alive, making their daily work difficult (Fasanella et al., 2020, 102). In this sense, according with Tsatsou (2020), technology, if conceived as a facilitator but

designed on the basis of able-bodied, can represent an obstacle factor, failing to fulfil its function of alleviating the stigma of people with disabilities. Considering, then, the condition of the *digital divide* to which our country is immersed, which is even more experienced by students with disabilities and SLD. The latter are often excluded from the design of lessons and activities aimed at them, becoming the subject of what Burgstahler (2015) calls the second *digital divide*, having access to technology but not all its advantages. Finally, with reference to the use of the *mixed* approach, in the *web survey* to students, there is a space reserved for technology, summarised in the question: 'If you could make a proposal to improve the service, what would you change?' many, pointed out its shortcomings.

The paper invites, therefore, to rethink digital technologies as a prerequisite for the development of concrete solutions, since these potentially break down boundaries and create a new deterritorialised space that can be accessed by a broader range of users than traditional students (Valentini, 2008, 17). This process has been accelerated by Covid-19 emergence, which provides the basis for rethinking technology in the light of Universal Design. The guidelines drawn up by the universities analyzed are also in this perspective, prescribing that according to the requests of the student with disabilities, it would be appropriate to adapt the teaching material, in the format most suited to the type of need (Vademecum Roma Tre, 9), especially through the use of digital.

In this regard, the university 'La Sapienza' goes further, providing criteria for *SLD-friendly* slides and lessons (Sapienza Guidelines, 2019, sect. 2, ch. 10), thanks to the use of ICT. The paper's concluding thesis is that university institutions should make use of digital technologies, to which several studies recognise the usefulness to the satisfaction of relational needs (Addeo et al., 2020) in an emergency context such as the pandemic. However, these are an option, as they cannot replace traditional socialising contexts. This is even more true for students with disabilities and SLD, for whom the university is configured as a peer socialisation space, which the pandemic, with its forced distancing, has contributed to reduce.

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LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE OF DISTANCE LEARNING: SOME USEFUL INDICATIONS FOR FUTURE POLICIES ON ICT IN SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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During the pandemic the majority of the states instituted measures to close schools and shift them to virtual platforms. This change happened in school systems that could rely on different infrastructures and levels of digitisation achieved so far. Starting from an analysis of the literature on distance learning, the paper will reconstruct its effects on the Italian school system and will give indications useful for the development of digital educational policies. In particular, with regard to the first aspect, the focus will be on the consequences of distance learning on three important dimensions that characterise school systems and directly involve teachers and students: school inclusion (Aroldi, Zaffaroni and Cino, 2021), learning processes (Giancola and Piromalli, 2020) and digital skills (Castellana and Rossi, 2021). Distance learning has functioned as an amplifier of both the criticalities and opportunities offered by the digitisation of the education system. Overcoming the former to strengthen the latter should be the starting point for the re-calibration of educational policies which, as we shall see, must be implemented starting from the centrality and relevance of the relational dimension in educational environments on which not only a successful learning process depends, but also the well-being of students and teachers.

digital education policies; distance learning; students; teachers

INTRODUCTION

For more than twenty years, the digitisation of education policies has been firmly on the agendas of European institutions: the European Union and the OECD, in fact, have seen it as the main driver for making Europe the most competitive knowledge society in the world. On a theoretical level, scientific reflection on the development of digital educational policies and their consequences is gathered within three levels of analysis: macro, meso and micro. At the macro level, the digitisation of educational policies can be seen in the broader process of educational system reform inspired by the neo-liberal principles of New Public Management (Gunter et al., 2016). In this sense, digitisation would have favoured processes of platformisation and more generally soft privatisation of schools (Grimaldi and Serpieri, 2013).

Europe's main digital education policies have been of two types: the first type, developed in the first decade of the 21st century, aimed at expanding infrastructure and endowments; the second type, implemented in the last decade, has focused on strengthening students' digital skills and training teachers operationally. In the same period, under European pressure, Italy also moved to implement digital education policies and the two most important policies, also from the investment point of view (over one and a half billion euros), were the Digital School Plan (2007) – pertaining to the first type of European policies -, and the National Digital School Plan (2015) – pertaining to the second type, which provided for intensive training programmes for teachers with the aim of developing digital skills, and the creation in each school of a group of digital animators dedicated to the ongoing training of teaching staff. In addition to these two important policies, the Italian government has been involved in the development of digital schools through other initiatives: LIM Action (2008), Cl@ssi 2.0 (2009), Scuol@ 2.0 (2011) e Wi-fi Action (2013).

Thanks to these investments, when, due to the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, in-presence teaching activities were interrupted, the Italian school was able to start the distance learning (DL) phase thanks to a fairly digitised school system, albeit with large territorial differences in terms of infrastructure and presence/availability of devices (Gui, 2019).

1. METHOD

On this basis, the article intends to provide suggestions to Italian policy makers in the field of digital education policies through two steps. The first step concerns the identification of the main objectives and rhetoric that characterised Italian policies on digital education before the pandemic, considering also the dominant discourse that characterised European policies. The second step concerns the evaluation of the achievement of these objectives from the perspective of students and teachers. In order to achieve the two steps just mentioned, we worked in two stages: in the first, we analysed the Italian digital school policy documents (Digital School Plan 2007; Action Cl@ssi 2.0 2009; Action Scuol@ 2011; Wi-fi Action 2013; National Digital School Plan 2015) through a deductive thematic analysis aimed at identifying the policy objectives. The objectives identified are: increasing student learning levels; developing students' (and teachers') digital skills and increasing school inclusion.

In the second phase of our work, we assessed whether and to what extent the objectives of Italian digital policies had been implemented according to the experiences of the main social actors in schools, i.e. students and teachers. This phase was carried out by means of a literature review based on empirical surveys (no. 5, see tab.1) that met two criteria: a) direct involvement of Italian students and/or teachers regarding their experiences with the DL; b) the focus of the investigation explicitly directed at one or more issues related to the previously identified Italian policy objectives.

Tab. 1. Methodological information about selected studies. Source: authors' elaboration

Name of the study	Carried out by	Method	Method of data collection	Target group	Sample
Survey of secondary school students 2021	ISTAT	Quantitative	CAWI	Students	National (N. 41.000)
SIRD national survey	SIRD	Quantitative	CAWI	Teachers	National (N. 16.131)
Being a teacher in the time of COVID-19	Univ. of Eastern Piedmont; Turin; Urbino	Quantitative	CAWI	Teachers	National (N. 2.000)
Adolescents at the time of pandemic	NIHMP; Univ. of Turin & Eastern Piedmont	Qualitative	Online focus-group	Students	North Italy (N. 134)
Impact of the pandemic on the teaching and organisational practices of Italian schools	INDIRE	Quantitative	CAWI	Teachers	National (N. 2.416)

2. RESULTS

With regard to DL and school inclusion, it emerges that students and teachers recognise the ability of Italian schools to react rather quickly to the crisis, albeit with certain limitations. While students grasp the important role played by DL in bringing younger people out of social isolation (Favretto et al., 2023), teachers emphasise how DL has failed to act on the infrastructural and social inequalities that characterise the country (ISTAT, 2022), especially in the South. The first type of inequality is related to the fact that some students were unable to participate in distance learning lessons due to problems with weak internet connections, especially in some areas of southern Italy (Bazzoli et al., 2022); the second type refers to problems concerning socially disadvantaged conditions of a part of the student population. In particular, the literature review revealed that less wealthy students did not have computers at their disposal but only smartphones. The use of such devices made it very difficult for students to participate in DL (ISTAT, 2022); and at the same time how they found themselves living in domestic contexts that lacked sufficient space to devote to DL (Fondazione Agnelli, 2020 and Mascheroni et al, 2021). The digital education policies of the pre-Covid 19 years resulted in schools equipping themselves with technologies that made it possible to react to the crisis of school closures in attendance, but they also brought to light the infrastructural deficiencies and inequalities that existed in the country, risking triggering mechanisms of cumulative disadvantage (Rocchi, 2020).

Regarding DL and learning processes, however, students and teachers agree that DL is an ineffective pedagogical tool. Students focus on the fact that DL has

negative consequences on the student-teacher relationship (Fondazione Agnelli, 2020) also making the assessment of learning very complex (Favretto et al., 2023). The teachers, while confirming the difficulty of online assessments, emphasise that online lessons are nothing more than traditional lessons in videoconferencing mode (INDIRE, 2020). In this sense, the DL highlighted a lack in teachers' skills with respect to the ability to manage teaching in the digital environment. This difficulty was also exacerbated by the fact that generic communication platforms such as Google Meet or Zoom were used for remote teaching in our country (Carbone et al., 2021). In general, it is useful to remember that in the pre-pandemic Italian school the use of teaching technologies from a pedagogical and educational perspective was very limited (Gui, 2019) and perhaps also for this reason DL was only delivered to transmit knowledge at a distance, without considering the relational aspect in the new teaching setting. Many studies on the Italian students' experience have indeed underlined how the DL has emptied the teacher-student relationship (among others, INDIRE, 2020 and Fondazione Agnelli, 2020).

Focusing now on digital competences, considered in the political and scientific debate as one of the desired effects of digital education policies, these include the ability to search, understand and evaluate information found in the digital environment through the use of ICT tools and the ability to develop innovation and critical thinking at the same time.

With regard to digital skills and DL, the literature review clearly shows how distance learning has helped students and teachers in developing at least basic digital skills. Students with families already possessing technological skills have developed additional ICT skills but still unrelated to the interpretation of media content (Castellana and Rossi, 2021), while teachers complain about the lack of specific training on methods for teaching in a digital setting (INDIRE, 2020). The adoption of the aforementioned model of face-to-face knowledge transmission even in a digital environment has undoubtedly limited the development of further digital skills in the student population and in particular seems to have negatively affected students' creativity and critical thinking in a digital setting (Masterman, 2018).

3 CONCLUSION

The analysis we presented provided insight into how DL was crucial in addressing the pandemic crisis in schools and in developing at least basic ICT skills. However, the experience of DL has revealed tensions between teachers and students, and this element makes it clear that the relational dimension cannot be overlooked when designing digital education policies.

Specifically, then, in the area of school inclusion, policy makers should focus on eliminating or at least reducing social inequalities, for example by investing in infrastructure to upgrade the Internet and providing devices for students to use at home, if needed. On the other hand, with regard to enhancing learning processes, educational policies should act to improve teaching in the digital setting by expanding and strengthening specific pedagogical skills of teachers. Finally, in the area of digital

skills, policy efforts should focus on strengthening digital skills useful for teachers to improve distance teaching methods and to develop students' skills related to the interpretation of online content.

In general, the need to take a bottom-up perspective (Tirocchi and Taddeo, 2019; Carbone and Calvi, 2024) in the construction of digital education policies that take into account the inequalities that permeate society, together with the adoption of a critical perspective (McLuhan, 2015) in the choice of technological tools to be adopted could be the lesson learned from the Italian experience and useful for European school systems.

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ASSESSING DIGITAL TRANSITION AND INCLUSION IN SCHOOLS: A TWOFOLD LEVEL SURVEY

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Since the late 70s, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has become more integrated in school process' of teaching-learning. Policymakers, including the European Union Council (2020), emphasize the importance of digital technologies in providing inclusive and high-quality education. Italy has integrated, at a regulatory level, digital skill development for teachers, crucial for modernizing education systems, in a more fairness perspective (Eurydice, 2019), starting with the PNSD and now with PNRR funds. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the effects of disadvantage and poverty on children's opportunities, expanding the "digital divide" beyond ICT's possession to include digital skills and competencies (Pasta et al., 2021). This evolving divide risks reinforcing social inequalities, disproportionately affecting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Marangi et al., 2023). This study would like to examine the digital transition in some Veneto's schools, adopting a holistic approach by querying teachers and principals on the strategies employed in effectively integrate ICT in learning-teaching processes. Through a twofold questionnaire, the research aims to assess both the challenges and opportunities presented by ICT in education, offering recommendations to enhance inclusion and the effective use of digital technologies, addressing particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with disabilities.

digitalization; inclusion; schools; disadvantages

INTRODUCTION

Today's society presents challenges and characteristics that are peculiar to previous periods. We are living a gradual migration of technologies into our lives, which increase our bodily and sensory experience, change the human-technological relationship, in a world that is more machine-oriented than human, hybrid and hyperconnected; there is also a need for knowledge, according to a lifelong learning approach, which creates an intertwining of school knowledge, professional and personal development, updating and acquiring new skills, and the new digital tools amplify the possibilities (Floridi, 2017; Rivoltella and Rossi, 2019, 2022). This development has led to implement digital transformation processes understood as the

integration of technology in educational processes as a tool, but above all as a way of reshaping teaching methodologies, learning processes and the educational eco-system in general, implying effective personalization (OECD, 2023). Consequently, the necessity to critically assess the impact of digital teaching technologies in schools has never been more pressing.

Our study aims to portray the digital educational landscape in selected Veneto schools. It aims to unearth both the limitations and prospects presented by ICT, providing targeted recommendations to enhance student inclusion and the effective integration of ICT within educational frameworks.

1. EDUCATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

Our society makes infinite and varied resources of information, knowledge and learning provision available at any place and any time. To take advantage of them, having digital competence could be important.

It implies interest in digital technologies, their use with familiarity, critical and responsible spirit to learn, digital-media literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, security, intellectual property issues, problem solving. As one of the eight key competences for lifelog learning, digital competence is useful for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion, a sustainable and fruitful life in peaceful societies, and active citizenship (Council of the European Union, 2018).

Today we are facing a process of digital transformation, accelerated by the pandemic crisis which has revealed more poverty and shapes of disadvantage, feeding further the "cycle of social disadvantage" (European Commission, 2013), which mostly affects minors and specific groups (e.g. migration-induced diversity, ethnic groups and minorities, SEN, low SES background). The concepts of "educational poverty" and "digital divide" are now wider than before:

- the first one is represented also by "digital educational poverty": lack in learning digital competences as new literacies necessary to experience citizenship, to be aware and develop oneself, the relationships with others, cooperation, and world's understanding (Pasta et al., 2021);
- the second one includes a secondary (skills required for effective ICT's use) and a tertiary level (ability to leverage ICT for tangible benefits, highlighting the necessity for advanced digital competencies) (Gremigni, 2019).

These shapes underscore the risk of perpetuating and exacerbating existing social inequalities, which can lead to exclusion, diminished community engagement, restricted access to educational resources, and disproportionately impact students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, though not exclusively (Marangi et al., 2023).

It seems fundamental to encourage digital competence with the aim to provide fair and equitable education and life's possibilities. Schools are agents in ensuring that all students benefit from digital technology (enable social inclusion), developing inclusive environments that meet diverse needs and capabilities, provide equal

learning opportunities, supporting well-being (Kim et al., 2021; Gottschalk and Weiser, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Digital transformation

> would imply a fundamental change in some educational processes, integrating technology not just as a tool, but as a way to reshape teaching methodologies, learning processes, and the educational ecosystem at large, to make it more effective. Currently, the incorporation of technology in education often replicates traditional methods rather than reinvents them. The main benefit of a digital transformation lies in the personalization of education, both in terms of learning and of student support (OECD, 2023, 3).

Schools should prioritize the development of technological infrastructure, cultural-technical appropriation, reflection on the profession trainings, guided by inclusive pedagogy. However, based on various studies, there are some limitations and challenges, such as infrastructures, teachers' competences and attitudes, etc. (Ferrari and Rivoltella, 2011; Kim et al., 2021; OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023; ISTAT, 2024).

The pandemic emergency generates the opportunity to invest on these multiple factors, through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). In this context we planned our research.

2. A TWO-FOLD LEVEL SURVEY

2.1. The research context

This study is funded by PNRR in the iNEST project (Interconnected North-East Innovation Ecosystem), within the task S5 RT4.3 – Teaching and Learning in emerging hybrid schools. It has the aim to investigate the adoption of digital teaching technologies at school, involving teachers and students. The study also represents the first step of a participatory research-action-training on the active involvement of teachers in the care of vulnerability's situations through community technologies, as a new and innovating action within the national P.I.P.P.I. Programme (Intervention Programme to Prevent Institutionalization) (Milani, 2022).

2.2. Objectives

We planned a twofold level survey in order to achieve an update data on technological equipment of schools and on real teaching-learning experiences and practices. The final aim is to develop a better understanding of the equity and inclusion's level for every student, in particular those who live in different situations of vulnerability. So, the ultimate objectives are:

- examine digital transformation processes, the grade of accessibility and digital inclusion within schools;
- trigger, with school staff, a learning process focusing on ICT's power to enhance inclusion, participation and the effective integration;
- highlight the needs of local educational ecosystems, allowing for the identification of priority areas for intervention.

2.3. Methods, tools and participants

The survey, submitted through Limesurvey, is divided into two level questionnaires allowing for a comprehensive and holistic analysis: a school one for principals (i.e. technological equipment and infrastructures, technological aptitude, leadership), and an individual one for teachers (i.e. teaching practices, technological aptitude, professional development and self-efficacy, digital-school-social inclusion of students). This second one would pay particular attention to questions regarding students with disabilities or from socio-economically-culturally disadvantaged backgrounds. We submitted the survey to the Comprehensive Schools of Padua, which include primary, middle schools and Kindergartens in some cases, and we used Limesurvey statistics resources and R to analyse data.

2.4. Schedule and outcome implications

Between November 2023 and January 2024, we subjected the school level questionnaire to Padua's schools, thanks to the collaboration of the Provincial School Office; among February and March 2024 we analysed data and we defined the individual level questionnaire. We plan to submit it in October 2024.

Regarding the outcome implications, we assumed the questionnaires as self-assessment's tools for schools to empower them to identify and proactively improve their technological setup and teaching approaches; moreover, data can be used to encourage reflective discussions, fostering the exchange of good practices between schools.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data analysis of the school level questionnaire, the schools involved (which answered the survey) have been 20, for a total class of 138 and an average students' number of 891. Specifically, the percentage of Special Educational Needs' students (SEN) is 3.20, the percentage of Specific Learning Disorders ones (SpLDs) is 2.81 and the percentage of students with sensory, physical or cognitive disability is 3.19. These percentages are calculated relative to the total student population reached by the survey.

Regarding the items, here are some results and data:

- cloud access and connectivity coverage are limited and unequal between school degrees: they are respectively present in 10 and 9 % of primary schools, in 1 and 3 % of kindergartens and around 1 and 7 % of middle schools;
- slight inconsistency and a lack in systematic implementation regarding teachers' training: an average of 60 % of Comprehensive Schools;
- positive attitude towards technologies and their potential for educational use (an average of 50% of principals) and a discreet confidence in teachers' skills regarding ICT's use (around 50% of principals believe in a little and in enough ability);
- a timid start could be inferred about the investments in digital

transformation in Early Childhood Education: there is about 1 kindergarten with, for example, a computer and a tablet;

- low technologies' provision for students with SEN, disabilities, or those living in disadvantaged situations: e.g. there is a peak of about 5 Augmentative Alternative Communication's and Voice to Text's software's and an average of 0,5 screen reader, in primary schools only, any smartpens and tactile tables;
- good collaboration and support among teachers internally (e.g. almost 100% and a 70 % of principals promote meetings to share and develop hybrid teaching and involve teachers in the Digital Strategy); however, it is not equally implemented externally (almost 80 % don't promote the collaboration within other schools about ICT's topics).

With regard to research objectives, we achieved an initial photograph of the digital transformation process to begin a comprehension about the needs of local educational ecosystems. Compared with the PNRR's missions and aims, it is conceivable that there is a delay in the digital transformation process: for example, about the school plan connected, the PNRR expected an Internet and an ultra-broadband connection of schools before 2025. Moreover, it expected a strengthening of innovative learning environments which include a change in teaching-learning methodologies and techniques, digital technologies for inclusive education, coding, artificial intelligence and robotics, also from kindergarten.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The European Union Council's declaration (2020) recognizes digital education as crucial for digital transformation and ensuring inclusive high-quality education for all. Technologies are versatile and effective tools in the development of various skills, and in meeting the diverse needs of children as well as teachers' ones.

We had a first picture of the process to examine the grade of accessibility and digital inclusion within schools. However, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the transition, according to a holistic approach, we need the results of the teacher's questionnaire, to plan a return of data, to highlight school's needs and to suggest some recommendations on effective ICT's integration and student's inclusion within educational framework. We expected, at the end of the data collection, to trigger a reflection on ICT's use with schools, promoting a pedagogical and ecosystemic perspective.

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EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION DIGITALIZATION IN THE ITALIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: RETURN TO NORMALCY?

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The digital evolution has profoundly transformed education in Italy, significantly influencing both the pedagogical, educational and organisational processes within schools. This potentially innovative phenomenon impacts the planning of activities by teachers as well as the learning processes adopted by students. However, challenges have arisen due to the rapid pace of technological advancement, which risks excluding those unable to keep up with these changes. Furthermore, the proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) may foster digital addiction, with detrimental effects on emotional well-being and interpersonal relationships. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues, highlighting pre-existing social inequalities and professional challenges, such as some teachers' lack of acquaintance with digital tools. With the return to face-to-face schooling, the need has emerged to reflect on the effective integration of the competencies acquired during the lockdown. Are ICT tools perceived as occasional aids or essential components? This question underscores the importance of continuous professional development and critical reflection on teaching professionalism in the digital age. This study examines the conditions for ICT use and the developmental perspectives of primary school teachers in Sardinia, providing an initial analysis based on a quantitative approach.

Distance learning; ICT; Digital Competencies; Teachers' Professional Development; Educational innovation

1. DIGITAL LITERACY IN ITALIAN SCHOOLS: AN INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

The health emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated a profound reflection on the traditional school model, underscoring the urgency of advancing toward a more digital and flexible educational system capable of addressing the challenges of an ever-evolving context.

Distance Learning (DL), implemented on a national scale in response to pandemic-related restrictions, represented a paradigmatic shift: technologies, previously regarded as optional and complementary tools, became essential components of the educational process.

It is important to note, however, that the digitalisation of the Italian school system

was not initiated by the pandemic but had begun much earlier. Indeed, as early as the 1985, Italy had launched a series of initiatives to promote the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education, in alignment with European policies. Among these, the Lisbon Strategy (2000) marked a pivotal moment, fostering digital literacy and technological enhancement in the educational sector (Farina, 2022).

In this context, numerous national policies progressively followed, representing initial steps in the technological innovation of school environments. A representative example is the Digital School Plan (2007), as well as the large-scale implementation of Interactive Whiteboards in classrooms (2012) and the subsequent National Digital School Plan (2015). The latter, introduced in Italy through Law 107/2015, constitutes a turning point for the Italian education system, envisioning a redefinition of the traditional concept of teaching in light of the needs of an emerging digital society.

The introduction of a wide array of technological resources and tools has been accompanied by the recognition and development of specific professional roles and structures, such as the *digital facilitator* (*animatore digitale*) and the *digital team*. These strategically designated roles were tasked with facilitating, coordinating, and supporting the transition toward new methodological paradigms, significantly contributing to the conscious dissemination and adoption of ICT (Gremigni, 2019).

In light of this evolving landscape, the European *DigCompEdu* framework (2017) provides a valuable reference point for educators' digital competencies, emphasizing the importance of collaborative strategies, innovative practices, and the dynamic management of learning environments (Bocconi, Earp, & Panesi, 2018).

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: THE IMPACT OF DIGITALISATION

The primary challenge lies in integrating technologies not as accessory elements but as essential tools for enriching educational processes and fostering the acquisition of critical skills. The impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has underlined a transformation already underway, while simultaneously exposing the difficulties and contradictions of an educational system compelled to modernise rapidly without compromising fundamental values such as inclusion and equity. It has also highlighted the urgent need to revisit educational models, overcoming the complexities of adapting to technology and encouraging a deeper dialogue between pedagogy and digital tools.

In this context, the transformation of educational environments has revealed certain structural weaknesses and pre-existing inequalities within the education system. On the one hand, digitalisation experienced an unplanned but necessary acceleration, prompted by the precariousness of the period, opening new opportunities for teaching and learning. On the other hand, the digital divide widened, highlighting the difficulties some student groups face in accessing technology and the inadequacies in many teachers' digital training (Finestrone, Scarinci, Berardinetti, & Savino, 2022).

With the "return to normality" and face to face teaching, it is critical to question whether, and to what extent, teachers are able to effectively apply the competencies developed during the lockdown.

To what degree do the virtual lessons adopted to address immediate needs retain their relevance within the current structure of educational programmes? How do teachers conceive of and incorporate technology into their teaching practice? Are these tools perceived merely as occasional aids, or as essential instrumentsof learning that influence instructional design?

These questions emphasise the need for a broader, more reflective perspective on the stance of teaching professionalism in the digital age, placing significant importance on the continuous development of competencies.

2. METHODS AND RESEARCH TOOLS

This study is part of a broader action research project employing a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Picci, 2012; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003; Terrell, 2012). The research forms a key component of a doctoral project in *Learning Sciences and Digital Technologies* at the University of Cagliari, entitled *Integration of Information and Communication Technologies in the Teaching Process: Challenges and Opportunities in the Development of Teachers' Professional Competencies*.

The findings presented here reflect the outcomes of the initial phase of the research, conducted using the Italian adaptation of the *Intrapersonal Technology Integration Scale – ITIS* (Benigno et al., 2013). This online questionnaire was administered to a voluntary group of teachers and aimed to explore both the conditions under which ICT is utilised and the professional development opportunities available to educators.

The ITIS scale, originally developed by Niederhauser and Perkmen (2008), investigates teachers' beliefs regarding perceived self-efficacy, interest, and outcome expectations related to the use and integration of ICT in their teaching practice.

Cross-analysis of demographic characteristics, frequency of ICT use, and teachers' perceptions of their digital competencies provides insights into the relationship between declared mastery and the actual integration of ICT in school settings.

The questionnaire is divided into three main sections. The first section gathers demographic and contextual information, with flexibility for customisation by the administrator. The second section includes four ordinal-scale questions with five levels (none, low, medium, good, high), designed to assess proficiency in using essential technological tools, software applications, online resources, and collaborative platforms. The final section incorporates the ITIS scale, consisting of 21 five-point Likert items, intended to measure levels of *Self-Efficacy*, *Interest*, and *Outcome Expectation*.

This structured approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the interplay

between educators' perceptions, competencies, and practices regarding the integration of digital technologies.

3. SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS AND RESULTS ANALYSIS

The convenience sample for this study consists of 602 primary school teachers from Sardinia. Between 18 March and 5 April 2024, participants voluntarily completed an anonymous online questionnaire administered using the CAWI method.

For the final analysis, 594 responses were considered, as 8 participants (1.3% of the total) reported not using technological tools in their teaching and as stipulated by the questionnaire design, did not proceed further.

An examination of the demographic data from the first section reveals that the non-probabilistic sample is heavily characterised by female participants, comprising 95% (n = 564) of the respondents. The majority of the teachers fall within the 45–56 age range, with a significant representation from the Southern Sardinia province, followed by the province of Cagliari.

Further evaluation shows that a substantial portion of the sample has between 6 and 11 years of professional experience. Additionally, 28.4% (n = 169) of the respondents are employed on a fixed-term basis, while 71.6% (n = 425) hold permanent teaching positions. Regarding the second section, which examines the frequency of ICT use, 3.2% (n = 19) of teachers report using ICT tools occasionally throughout the year, 7.2% (n = 43) several times a month, 26.3% (n = 156) weekly, and 63.3% (n = 376) daily.

The responses to the four questions in the second section, focusing on perceived competencies with commonly used technological tools (Figure 1-ICT), reveal an interesting trend: no teacher reported a non-existent level of competence. Instead, 4% (n = 24) identified their skills as low, 21.3% (n = 126) as moderate, 48.1% (n = 286) as good, and 26.6% (n = 158) as high.

Regarding proficiency in using major software applications (Figure 1-APP), only 0.3% (n = 2) of teachers reported no competency. Meanwhile, 5.9% (n = 35) rated their skills as low, 24.8% (n = 147) as moderate, 46.6% (n = 277) as good, and 22.4% (n = 133) as high.

Responses to the question on perceived internet skills (Figure 1-INT) indicate that the majority of respondents, 47.5% (n = 282), perceive their competence as good, followed by 34% (n = 202) who rate it as high. Meanwhile, 14.5% (n = 86) report a moderate level, and 4% (n = 24) describe their skills as low. Finally, in terms of collaborative writing platforms (Figure 1-WRI), 2.8% (n = 17) of respondents report no skills, 13.8% (n = 82) rate their skills as low, 28.4% (n = 168) as moderate, 41.4% (n = 246) as good, and 13.6% (n = 81) as high.

Fig. 4. Perception of ICT Competencies: Applications, Internet, and Writing.
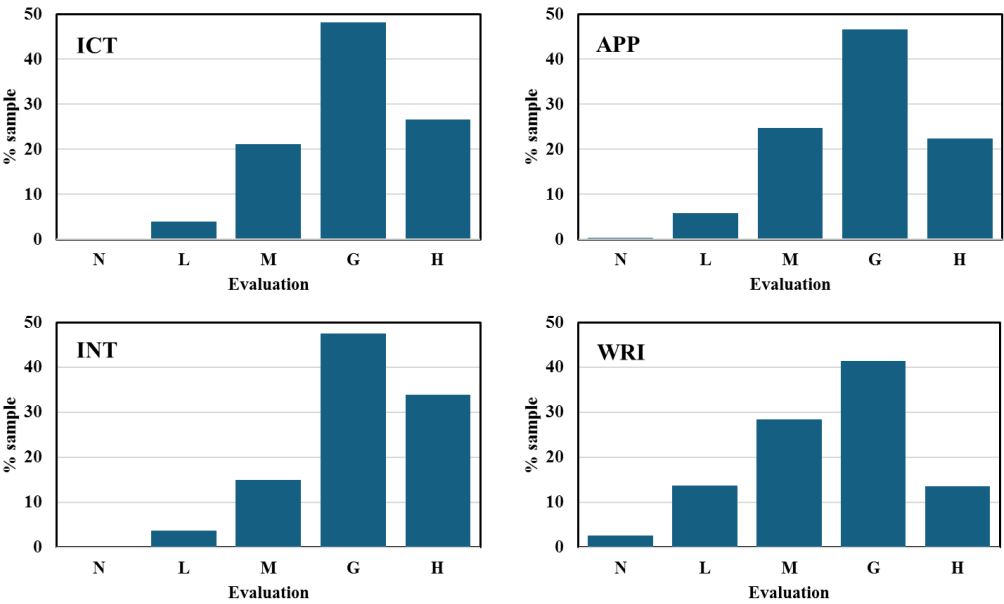
The evaluation of the data reveals a significant difference related to years of service, particularly regarding competencies in collaborative writing. In this regard, an interesting and significant phenomenon emerges: teachers with fewer years of service tend to perceive higher levels of competence in the four areas considered, compared to teachers with greater seniority (Figure 2). This is reflected in higher averages among groups with fewer years of service across all the competencies analysed.

Fig. 5. Analysis of Perceived Competencies Divided by Years of Service
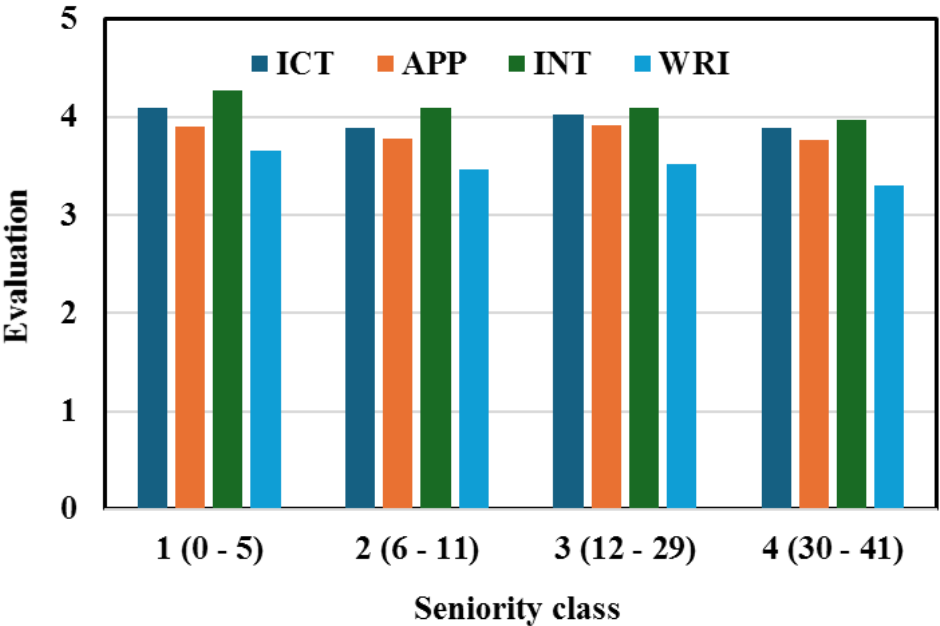
An interesting phenomenon emerging from the data analysis is that teachers with fewer years of service tend to report higher levels of perceived competence across the four areas examined compared to their more senior counterparts. This suggests an inverse relationship between years of service and the perceived proficiency in using ICT tools.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

This research forms part of a broader doctoral project aimed at understanding the dynamics that facilitate the integration of technologies into educational design, with the ultimate goal of promoting teachers' professional development.

This study brings to light certain noteworthy issues that merit consideration. Firstly, the sample analysed belongs to a single region, Sardinia, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, the sample is non-probabilistic and could lead to a non-representative of the entire teaching population. These limitations underline the need for further studies to learn about the distribution of the Sardinian teaching population.

Nonetheless, the data collected provide a valuable starting point for reflecting on future investigative approaches in the subsequent phases of the project. The next phase will focus on the potential to establish collaborative working groups to support teachers in designing educational activities that incorporate Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

In this context, an action-research pathway will be implemented, involving a selected group of teachers. The aim is to delve deeper into their experiences, professional practices, and perspectives related to the use of technology. This approach seeks to enhance teachers' awareness of the challenges that hinder the design of educational interventions, enabling the adoption of ICT in daily teaching practices.

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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN MONGO-LIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

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The integration of digital technologies has significantly influenced Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), yielding transformative potential for the development of educational practices worldwide. The present article outlines the aims, findings, and implications of the Lifelong Learning for Mongolia: Occupational Health & Safety Project (3L4MOHS), aimed at promoting digital transformation of the curriculum and lifelong learning (LLL) within Mongolian HEIs. Guided by European best practices, the project integrates innovative digital tools to address Mongolia's unique socio-economic and environmental needs. The present paper presents the findings of a review of European best practices for LLL and e-learning at HEI level as the foundational steps of a collaboration with Mongolian partners and the introduction of advanced digital tools and innovative pedagogical methodologies. The findings reveal, along with trends and practices, the critical barriers, including digital inequalities and institutional rigidities within implementations of technology-enhanced learning for occupational health and safety.

digital education; e-learning; higher education; lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning (LLL) has emerged as a critical focus in education policy and practice as there has been an increasing acknowledgement of its role in skill development and sustainability (UNESCO, 2023a, p. 10). LLL encompasses all forms and stages of learning, making it a foundation for achieving such sustainable education systems (Yang et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2023a). Such a universal vision of LLL is important for global development and as such it is also important to consider the unique implications that LLL has within different contexts. For example, it has been noted that in Mongolia the term 'Lifelong Learning' is used to describe specific institutions such as Lifelong Learning Centres (LLC) and therefore is associated with non-formal, alternative education rather than all types of continued learning (UNESCO, 2020, p. 18). Higher Education Institutions (HEI) play a pivotal role in promoting LLL by equipping graduates with relevant skills to thrive within rapidly changing industries. However, UNESCO (2020) highlights critical gaps between what

Mongolian HEIs offer, and labour market requirements, citing the "narrow scope" and a lack of such programs cultivating employability skills (UNESCO, 2020, p. 71). Such gaps stand as barriers to LLL and the development of skills to thrive in the present day.

The digital transformation of education, accelerated by the demands of Education 4.0 and the COVID-19 pandemic, presents significant opportunities to bridge gaps in LLL. E-learning, characterized by its flexibility and accessibility, offers a promising solution to the geographic and logistical challenges faced by learners in Mongolia, where low population density and vast distances often impede traditional education delivery (Ananga, 2020; Sharavjamts et al., 2022). Digital tools enhance learner autonomy and adaptability, allowing individuals to engage with content that is both relevant and personalized (Moore, 2020), as well as being cost-effective in a way that traditional classroom methodologies and environments cannot compete (Haleem et al., 2022). However, digital inequalities and the digital divide- exacerbated by socioeconomic and infrastructural disparities, remain imperative issues, limiting equitable access to these resources (UNESCO, 2023b).

This article explores European best practices for LLL and digital education, identifying European implementations of LLL strategies and e-learning within Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) education, a critical area for Mongolia's workforce development. By addressing the pedagogical, technological, and structural barriers, this review stands as a foundational step to the implementation of Lifelong and digital learning within Mongolian HEIs, in order to promote a more dynamic and accessible education system, aligned with global trends and local needs.

1. BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTING LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Conesa et al. (2023) emphasize that technology plays a pivotal role in fostering a self-directed learning environment essential for LLL. They suggest that tools such as social media, online teaching platforms, and digital learning materials can significantly enhance personalized learning experiences. However, they also caution that while technology continues to advance, these solutions must be adapted to individual user preferences and requirements. This is particularly relevant to the project context and the need to be attentive to the specific needs of the Mongolian HEIs. Conesa et al. (2023) also critique the current approach to LLL in HEIs, pointing out a lack of flexibility in regard to assessment methods, course start dates, and the pace of learning. They argue that making LLL more accessible requires institutions to accommodate students' varying schedules and commitments by moving away from rigid academic calendars, thus affording the ability to balance learning with work and family commitments.

Cendon (2018), in a discussion of the findings from two exploratory studies focused on teaching and learning in blended learning programs, highlights that structured learning pathways help students develop independence. They propose that such learning pathways, supported by digital tools, provide an organized framework for

their education. Cendon (2018) also highlights the importance of technology, suggesting that digitalization enables teaching concepts to be adapted for various delivery methods, leveraging web-based technologies to reduce the technical and administrative workload for educators.

In a systematic review, Moore (2020) examines the use of heutagogy, or self-determined learning, in LLL, emphasizing how web-based tools enable students to act as content creators. He argues that HEIs should transition from instructor-centred approaches to student-focused course designs. Moore also echoes other research highlighting technology's key role in engaging students to take active responsibility for creating and consuming learning materials. Downes (2011) proposes potential solutions to barriers to the implementations of LLCs through a European framework. He emphasizes the need for accessibility, describing LLCs as offering a more inclusive and less intimidating alternative to traditional education for disadvantaged individuals. Though digitised education offers up increased opportunities, the digital divide must be acknowledged as a significant barrier in allowing many learners to utilise said opportunities. UNESCO highlights the importance of digital technology skills as a fundamental requirement for engaging in modern society (UNESCO, 2023b, p. 3). In fact, the definition of the digital divide has been extended to include not just access to but whether one can effectively utilise digital tools, or not (Gunkel, 2003, cited in Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2021).

Ultimately, the research suggests that LLL models should not only focus on pedagogy and the promotion of learning but also ensure that the process is seamless, flexible, and convenient for learners (Conesa et al., 2023). As well as this, steps must be taken to address digital access inequalities in order to ensure inclusive learning processes.

2. EUROPEAN IMPLEMENTATIONS OF DIGITAL TOOLS FOR E-LEARNING AND OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY TRAINING

A review of best European practices revealed important lessons from case studies of implementations. Stecula and Wolniak (2022) explored how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the uptake of e-learning tools in Polish higher education. Within a sample of 621 students, they observed a significant increase in familiarity with innovative digital learning tools. Students with higher technological competencies and interest in e-learning reported greater ease in understanding course material, and sufficient access to resources further enhanced outcomes. The findings from the study are particularly important due to its distinct focus on student perspectives rather than solely educators, which emphasized the need for comprehensive teacher training to improve e-learning readiness. Degner et al. (2022) within a systematic review of digital media in informal learning, define digital tools as flexible carriers of information that promotes inclusive, personalized learning based on individual preferences, prior knowledge, and pace. Their findings suggested that though digital tools can enhance knowledge acquisition, motivation, and media literacy, they require interactive features in order to fully benefit self-directed

learners. Athonysamy et al. (2020) explored the link between self-regulated learning strategies (SLRS) and digital literacy, identifying three critical areas: metacognitive knowledge, resource management, and motivational beliefs. These strategies help learners manage online learning independently, offering valuable insights for implementing LLL systems, including in Mongolian HEIs.

The University College Cork's (UCC) Adult Continuing Education (ACE) Centre in Ireland, which offers LLL programs, aims to enhance access to higher education for marginalized groups. The centre delivers both fully online as well as hybrid courses, in order to meet students' diverse needs and schedules. Though successful, challenges such as out-of-hours IT support for teachers and learners, as well as the need to ensure up-to-date online content, were identified (UNESCOc, 2023). Similarly, the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) in Spain, a fully online university, offers LLL through its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and has found the VLE to be effective in fostering both learning and social inclusion (Bañeres et al., 2023). Such social interaction is particularly relevant to the Mongolia context and could be part of addressing the challenges that come with the low population density.

Regarding the digitisation of Occupational Health & Safety (OHS) training, studies have highlighted the potential of gamification, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR). Lipnicka (2020) found strong openness to gamification among Latvian OHS workers, with self-paced schedules promoting user motivation and effectiveness. They also found strong internet infrastructure and employer awareness of benefits to be key factors for successful implementation (Lipnicka, 2020). Similarly, van Gaalen et al. (2021) reported that gamification strengthens learning outcomes in health professionals' education by integrating assessment and challenge elements, with no negative impacts observed. Rodeghiero Neto & Amaral (2024) emphasized combining active learning strategies, such as gamification and problem-based learning, for better outcomes, and identified challenges such as teacher workload and resistance to change from students, echoing previous findings.

Moreover, AR and VR tools have shown positive effects on hazard control and cognitive retention, decreasing workplace accidents (Junaini et al., 2022) Referencing the "wow effect", Lacko (2020) also reported on how VR enhances how appealing the content is for learners, thus improving engagement and retention. As well as this, the immersion offered by VR allows incidents to be simulated that would normally be too dangerous to simulate in real life, rendering it particularly useful in the context of OHS for such demonstrations (Lacko, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Lifelong learning plays a crucial role in addressing the evolving societal and workforce demands of a digital era. Reflecting on European implementations has demonstrated the importance of integrating digital tools, fostering inclusivity, and adopting flexible, learner-centred approaches. The review has also identified the challenges and potential barriers that can and have been encountered within implementations and integrations of LL and digital learning. For the Mongolian

context, leveraging these insights while addressing the specific needs of the context can help in the integration of digital tools and effective LLL implementation for OHS learning. Sharavajamts et al. (2022) investigated the readiness of Mongolian students for digital learning, identifying factors such as adequate access to the Internet and personal computers, technological competence, and effective student-teacher communication. Thus, ensuring that these areas are addressed within the implementation of LLL and digital education will be crucial to the success of the project within the Mongolian context. By focusing on accessibility, infrastructure, training, and personalisation, HEIs can play a pivotal role in promoting LLL and preparing learners for a dynamic global landscape, and this will be an important component for consideration in the Lifelong Learning for Mongolia: Occupational Health & Safety (3L4MOHS) project.

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INCLUSIVE DIGITAL HORIZONS: NAVIGATING POLICY CROSSROADS IN EU AND ITALY FOR DIGITAL PROVISION OF CONTINUING TRAINING IN THE AI ERA

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[a]INAPP

This study explores the intersection of digital policies, workforce inclusion, and digital continuing training in the EU and Italy. Against the backdrop of rapid technological advancements, the research examines how policies shape the socio-economic landscape, focusing on workforce integration within the digital realm. It highlights digital continuing training as a vital tool for fostering adaptability and resilience in workers facing technological disruptions. The paper explores challenges in digital and transversal competencies and investigates the growing use of microcredentials and digital badges to certify skills acquired through short courses. This trend, accelerated by the post-pandemic demand for new skills, aligns with the EU's Digital Compass 2030 strategy. The study combines qualitative analysis of policy documents, legislative frameworks, and institutional strategies with quantitative data on workforce participation and digital training initiatives. This interdisciplinary approach offers a comprehensive understanding of the digital transition's challenges and opportunities. In conclusion, the study emphasizes the role of continuing training in navigating the digital and AI-driven future, advocating for proactive skills development that integrates human values, ethics, and technological innovation. Continuous training is presented as a key strategy for building a resilient and adaptable workforce in an evolving technological landscape.

digital training; workforce inclusion; digital transition; microcredentials; ai.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies and the growing integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) have fundamentally reshaped the labour market and the nature of work. In response, the European Union have intensified efforts to promote digital transformation, with a strong emphasis on digital skills development through continuing training. As technological innovations increasingly outpace traditional educational systems, reskilling and upskilling have emerged as critical strategies to enhance workforce adaptability and resilience. This study investigates the interplay between digital policies, workforce inclusion, and the evolving landscape of digital continuing training in the EU and Italy, focusing on the unique challenges and opportunities posed by the AI era. It critically examines how these policies shape

workforce integration within the digital sphere and evaluates innovative tools—such as microcredentials and digital badges—as solutions for addressing skills gaps across public and private sectors.

The integration of digital technologies into workplaces has created new opportunities to enhance workforce skills and productivity. However, these advancements have also exposed significant inequalities in access to digital learning, threatening to widen existing socio-economic divides. Research consistently highlights that individuals with lower socio-economic status, limited education, and employment in less technologically advanced sectors face the greatest challenges in accessing digital training (Centeno et al., 2022).

The combined pressures of digital and green transitions, the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing geopolitical instability present both hurdles and opportunities for workforce development. The pandemic, in particular, accentuated gaps in digital access and capabilities, as the technological divide between highly digitalized companies and less advanced organizations widened during the crisis (Berlingieri et al., 2020).

To effectively address these challenges, it is essential to adopt a comprehensive framework that considers the multi-dimensional nature of the digital divide, as outlined by van Dijk (2005):

- Access: Availability of infrastructure and technology.
- Use: Skills, knowledge, and motivation to employ digital tools effectively.
- Quality: The relevance and utility of digital resources.
- Empowerment: The ability to use digital competencies for socio-economic participation.

Bridging the digital divide necessitates targeted interventions that promote inclusivity in digital learning. These include investments in accessible digital infrastructure, the development of tailored training programs, and the establishment of inclusive policies that support skill enhancement across all workforce segments. Ensuring equitable participation in the digital economy is not only vital for improving individual employability but also for fostering social and economic cohesion.

Building on this context, the present study explores strategies to advance equitable digital training, particularly within the European Union and Italy. By addressing structural barriers and fostering inclusive learning ecosystems, policymakers can empower workers to navigate the complexities of an AI-driven future while advancing socio-economic equity.

1. SHAPING INCLUSIVE DIGITAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT: THE ROLE OF MICROCREDENTIALS IN WORKFORCE TRAINING

The European Union's strategic commitment to digital transformation, exemplified by the Digital Compass 2030 initiative, places a strong emphasis on fostering digital skills to enhance economic competitiveness. In response, Italy has revamped its continuing vocational education and training (CVET) framework, prioritizing more inclusive and accessible digital upskilling opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic

accelerated the digitalization of workplaces, driving businesses and public administrations to rapidly adopt new digital technologies. This shift has increased the demand for flexible, remote, and personalized learning pathways. Innovations such as microlearning and microcredentials have emerged to address these needs, offering modular and on-demand training that can be customized to the evolving demands of the workforce (OECD, 2023).

Microcredentials have become a central tool in CVET, facilitating both upskilling and reskilling at national, regional, and sectoral levels. These credentials enable workers to gain specific, relevant skills in a flexible format, enhancing employability and supporting the recognition of prior learning. By emphasizing clear learning outcomes, microcredentials help define the knowledge, skills, and competencies learners are expected to acquire, ensuring the transferability and recognition of these skills across different contexts and aligning them with national and international qualifications frameworks (Cedefop, 2023).

For effective integration, microcredentials require strong supporting frameworks that ensure their quality and value. Key elements of these frameworks include the development of common descriptors, quality assurance mechanisms, and stackability, ensuring that these credentials align with National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and can be integrated into broader education and training systems. A well-structured qualifications framework promotes lifelong learning by linking formal, non-formal, and informal learning across various levels, from basic skills to higher education, and enhancing mobility through credit transfer systems. Regularly updated national qualification standards provide transparency by clearly outlining the competencies required for specific qualifications, ensuring that learners' skills are well-defined and recognized. These frameworks not only support individual learning pathways but also aim to bridge gaps in access to education, particularly in digitally marginalized regions.

Italy's CVET landscape faces broader challenges in digital adoption, with large enterprises progressing faster than SMEs and public administrations. This uneven digital transformation has created disparities in access to digital training programs, especially for workers in smaller organizations with fewer resources for comprehensive upskilling initiatives. Microcredentials, supported by both European and national strategies, can help bridge these gaps by standardizing learning outcomes and aligning individual career paths with organizational needs. By ensuring that microcredentials meet labour market demands and focus on measurable learning outcomes, they offer a significant tool to increase workforce resilience and adaptability in an AI-driven, digital economy (Pedone, 2024).

2. BRIDGING GAPS IN WORKFORCE TRAINING: THE ROLE OF DIGITALISATION, MICROCREDENTIALS, AND POLICY INNOVATION

The digitalisation of workforce training presents significant challenges due to the diverse needs of the workforce. Expanding access to continuing training methods, such as digital delivery and microlearning, increasingly depends on mechanisms

like Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs). While these digital opportunities can enhance worker resilience and skill development, their effectiveness is contingent upon foundational digital and transversal skills, which are often lacking among low-skilled and working poor populations (OECD, 2019). In Italy, the situation is further complicated by territorial disparities, fragmented guidance services, and limited resources, all of which hinder efforts to support low-skilled individuals. A recent Cedefop study (2023) highlights the urgent need for clearer institutional roles, more systematic guidance services, and targeted professional training for operators to address these challenges effectively. Moreover, low levels of digital literacy and insufficient proficiency in the key competence of "learning to learn" limit engagement with digital training opportunities, underlining the importance of addressing these gaps to ensure equitable access.

Adding to these challenges is the disparity between the public and private sectors, where varying levels of technological readiness create further inequalities in access to and participation in continuing education. In Italy, large enterprises have rapidly adopted digital tools, while SMEs and public administrations often struggle to keep pace with technological advancements. Bridging this gap requires tailored training approaches that not only equip workers with essential digital skills but also foster a cultural shift within organizations, encouraging the adoption of lifelong learning practices. The integration of micro-credentials supports this goal by certifying newly acquired skills, standardizing learning outcomes, and aligning training with both individual career development and organizational needs. These measures align with national and European strategies for workforce recovery and resilience, preparing workers across sectors for the evolving demands of the digital economy while promoting inclusivity and adaptability.

As digital technologies and AI continue to evolve, inclusive and adaptive continuing training becomes crucial. The EU and Italy's digital transition policies emphasize a proactive approach to skills development—one that is flexible, personalized, and responsive to the needs of both workers and employers. By integrating innovative tools such as micro-credentials and digital badges, and prioritizing digital literacy across all sectors, these policies can build a resilient workforce capable of navigating the challenges and opportunities of the digital revolution. A culture of lifelong learning, embracing technological innovation and the human values underpinning a sustainable, inclusive labour market, will be essential for future success.

Italy's continuing training system has evolved through a multifaceted framework of support measures aimed at enhancing corporate competitiveness, fostering social inclusion, and promoting professional development. The European Social Fund (ESF) has played a key role at the regional level, while Joint Interprofessional Funds, managed by employer associations and trade unions, have implemented targeted programs for businesses and employees. Additional measures, such as the 4.0 Training Tax Credit (until 2022), incentivized the development of technological skills. The newly introduced Transition 5.0 framework finances workforce training focused on digital and energy transition skills relevant to production processes.

Training under this framework can be delivered remotely and must include a final examination with certification.

Another significant initiative is the New Skills Fund (Fondo Nuove Competenze), which supports companies adapting to new organizational and production models in response to ecological and digital transitions. This fund offers financial contributions to private employers who restructure working hours for skills development programs, reimbursing the cost of hours spent in training. By enhancing human capital, this initiative helps workers acquire the skills needed to adapt to the evolving labour market.

For over 20 years, Joint Interprofessional Funds have been a cornerstone of workforce training in Italy, supporting employee skill development through initiatives aligned with national strategies for economic and technological transitions. Financed through payroll contributions, these funds play a crucial role in enhancing workforce adaptability and competitiveness. A key element in ensuring the success of these initiatives is skills certification, which bridges the gap between workforce capabilities and labour market demands. Certification formally recognizes an individual's competencies, enhancing employability, supporting qualification standardization, and encouraging lifelong learning. It also motivates workers to continually update and validate their skills, improving adaptability and facilitating labour mobility.

Microcredentials, as a new form of certification, align seamlessly with these objectives. As Italy and the EU address the challenges of the digital economy and an AI-driven workforce, microcredentials offer a flexible, targeted approach to learning. They enable individuals to acquire relevant skills quickly and efficiently, directly responding to the evolving demands of the labour market. Microcredentials are increasingly recognized as a key mechanism for inclusive and adaptive training, supporting workers across sectors and ensuring that their skills align with current labour market needs.

The Ministerial Decree of July 9, 2024, builds on these advances by making competence certification mandatory for certain funding initiatives. This decree, involving Joint Interprofessional Funds and training providers, sets clearer guidelines for competence validation. By enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of skills development programs, it strengthens the connection between formal qualifications and the dynamic needs of the labour market.

Microcredentials contribute to this effort by offering modular, recognized qualifications that bridge the gap between formal education and the on-demand learning needs of workers in the digital age. They provide a scalable, flexible model that addresses disparities in access to training, accommodating diverse learning preferences across small businesses, large enterprises, and rural and urban areas. Their integration into national qualification frameworks ensures they are recognized, portable, and stackable, fostering lifelong learning and equity in access to digital training opportunities.

The integration of digital learning through microcredentials into continuing training

represents a significant advancement in addressing skills mismatches, particularly by designing digital learning pathways (Unesco, 2024) tailored to socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

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WHEN EDUCATION BECOMES OPEN: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE OLA PROJECT

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One of the main goals of the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement is to enhance the free accessibility for all to quality educational resources. But, is free accessibility enough to guarantee the capability of OER to really contribute in making education more inclusive and of quality? This paper aims at exploring this issue analysing an educational practice, the European Project Open Learning for All (OLA). The Social Justice perspective, as enhanced by Nancy Fraser and adapted to the specific context of open education, is adopted to analyse to what extent the OLA approach to OER meets the 3 dimensions identified by Fraser, to perceive its potential contribution to a more quality and inclusive education.

digital platforms; inclusion; competences; stereotypes; Open Education

INTRODUCTION

As highlighted by UNESCO (2023) and enhanced by European Commission (Vuorikari 2022), education is the place where societies can imagine and build their futures in view of more inclusive, peaceful and sustainable societies. Being the place where knowledge is created and transmitted and where students have the opportunity to connect to the others and to the world (Montessori 1989; Dewey 1923; Biesta and Miedema 2002; Morin 1993) and to develop talents to live a meaningful life (Valente et al. 2024), education is the heart of every possible transformation at individual and social level (Bertoni Jovine 1966; Pennacchiotti et al., 2023).

In this perspective, Open Educational Resources (OER), routed in the openness principles (UNESCO 2019) and giving all students the opportunity to have free access to educational resources, may have a great potential in supporting poorer contexts (Pina & Moran, 2018).

But, are these conditions (openness and free access) enough to guarantee the capability of OER to contribute in making education more inclusive, accessible and of quality? Studies evidence that costs savings are not necessarily accompanied by real improvements in students' learning outcomes (Disha & Vollman 2023). This would suggest that the economic value proposition for OER is not automatically connected to pedagogical, cultural or political improvements (DeRosa & Robinson 2017). Rather, OER may inadvertently lead to greater cultural imbalances if they are

used uncritically and not considering some relevant dimensions of the educational context as, for example, technical and structural constrains (Orwenjo &Erastus, 2018), cultural and social criticalities. Indeed, following Foucault perspective (2003), educational processes should not be viewed as culturally neutral: several studies pointed out that they are vehicles for certain social realities, values or norms, power relationships and, often, hegemonic discourses and stereotypes (Curdt-Christiansen & Weninger, 2015; Valente & al. 2021). Additionally, the classrooms in which they are used are social ecologies constantly in flux with the live negotiation of contents and meanings between students and teachers (Smith & Sheyholislami, 2022). Therefore, whether becoming authors or using already existing educational materials, teachers should become conscious that OER can't be adopted regardless to the specificity of the cultural context in which they are used (Keddie, 2020; Vincent 2020). Thus adaptation, revision, integration to make resources more locally "relevant" with respect to contents (Kasinathan & Ranganathan, 2017), languages (Oates & al., 2017) and epistemologies are needed.

Drawing on the concept of Social Justice, this paper aims at reflecting on how and under what circumstances OER can contribute to a more quality, inclusive, accessible and just education.

Whit this aim an educational practice, the European Project Open Learning for All (OLA), coordinated by the Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies of the National Research Council of Italy and involving 5 European countries (Italy, Greece, Spain, Romania and Cyprus), was critically analysed. During the OLA lifetime (2020-2023), through a participatory approach, researchers, teachers and students co-designed a theoretical framework and practical guidelines (Pennacchiotti & al. 2023) to support lower secondary school teachers to work with high quality, inclusive and equitable OER in the form of educational scenarios, embedding them in formal education. 82 OER are now available in the OLA/INCLUDE Repository.

1. THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE

Social Justice is an umbrella concept with a non-univocal meaning in the scientific debate. In our work we refer to the multidimensional perspectives theorized by Nancy Fraser and Iris Young and their adaptation to the OER field made by Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter (2018). Even if Fraser and Young never applied their perspectives directly to the field of education, their extensive and multidimensional approach to justice claims helps us to consider the complex and interconnected dimensions in which educational processes are articulated.

Particularly, Fraser conceives Social Justice as parity of participation (2007) rooted on 3 different but interrelated dimensions:

- *Redistribution*: following Rawls (1971), redistribution refers to the principles by which goods are distributed in society. In Fraser view: people can be impeded from full participation by economic structures and oppression that deny them the resources they need in order to interact with others as peers (Fraser 2007).

- *Cultural Recognition*: in Fraser view injustices arise when institutionalized or hierarchical patterns of cultural value generate misrecognition or status inequality for particular social groups. This dimension entails an openness to "unassimilated otherness" (Young 1990) meaning otherness as a result of a process "by which discourse divides or segregates a particular group as not us" (Van Dijk & Van Deursen 2011).
- *Political Representation*: this dimension has to do with having voice and being heard in decision-making. The importance of representation, for Fraser, requires re-constituting political spaces so that all are accorded a voice.

These 3 dimensions are interconnected and interrelated and, when applied to the educational context, they may contribute in overcoming the different understandings on how equity can be enhanced at school. Indeed:

> although most of the teachers would agree that it is important to remove the barriers or obstacles that prevent some students from participating on par with their more privileged peers, there is far less agreement about what these obstacles might be and how they might best be overcome (Keddie, 2020).

2. OLA APPROACH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Starting from Hodgkinson-Williams & Trotter's adaptation to OER (2018) of Fraser's Social Justice perspective, and hybridizing it with inputs from UNESCO (2019, 2023) and European Institutions (EC 2020; Inamorato dos Santos 2016; CoE 2018) we conceptualized the economic, cultural and political dimensions as exemplified in Table 1.

This conceptualization was the basis to critically investigate the extent to which OLA framework meets the 3 dimensions theorized and their respective sub-dimensions:

- *economic redistribution*. Accessibility is integrated in OLA OER at two levels:
    - from a technical point of view, OER design takes into account that not everyone has access to high performing ICT devices, software and internet connection. Moreover, OLA OER are described by metadata and stored in an open repository to ensure their findability and adopt Creative Commons License to allow their free sharing and modification;
    - while designing OLA OER teachers must take into account the different learning and cognitive strategies students can adopt, to give them all the same opportunity to reach the learning outcomes. For this reason, OLA OER include a variety of multimodal digital resources (texts, videos, conceptual maps, quizzes, interactive learning objects).

      Moreover, the OLA framework enhances OER designed to be embedded into the curricular learning and to count as micro credentials.

Tab. 1. OER conceptualization through the lens of Social Justice

DIMENTIONS	SUB-DIMENSIONS		
	INJUSTICES	AMELIORATIVE RESPONSE	TRANFORMATIVE RESPONSE
Economic redistribution	Sharing quality OER only through digitals means OER access requires high ICT standards and expensive software as a pre-requisite Lack of students and teachers' digital competences	Sharing for-free, quality and digitally/non digitally mediated OER to make them accessible also in technologically impoverished contexts Students and teachers have the digital literacy needed for using OER	Ensuring access for all to quality and intellectually rich OER OER are freely and legally shared OER are embedded in formal education processes, giving students microcredentials Students and teachers have the digital competences needed for revising and creating OER
Cultural recognition	Intellectual Property rules allow sharing OER only without any modification/adaptation OER give not voice to different and underrepresented points of view, epistemologies and cultures Competences enabling a critical approach to OER are not widespread among teachers	Educators are legally allowed to re-circulate each other's materials openly, but without any modification except for prudent translations Competences enabling a critical approach to OER are not sufficiently widespread among teachers	OER can be remixed, revised and reused adopting participatory processes, debating power relations, social hierarchies and cultural hegemonies Non-dominant or marginalized cultures are represented Teachers own advanced competences to critically revise, remix and adapt OER
Political representation	Curriculum decisions are made in a top-down approach	Teachers and head masters are involved in curriculum decisions but asymmetries in political power and in deciding what counts as worthwhile knowledge remain unchanged	The political space is re-constituted overcoming asymmetries of political power The opportunity to have voice in deciding on what is educationally important is given to all the relevant stakeholders

- *cultural recognition*. The different perspectives, personal and collective histories, cultures and epistemologies (Haraway 2010) that permeate the specific context in which the OER will be used must be taken into account with the aim of making every student feel part of the community and giving him/her a voice "irrespective of sex, age, ethnicity, ..." (UNESCO 2019). OLA framework enhances OER free from stereotypes that may generate discrimination and a specific MOOC was designed to improve teachers' critical competences in this field. Moreover, being developed in different countries, OLA OER embed/reflect a cultural variety.

- *political representation*. The curriculum represents a conscious and systematic selection of knowledge, skills and values, shaping the way teaching, learning and assessment processes are organized, covering an essential role in providing an education that is relevant for students and society. Thus, it is crucial that in defining and revising school curricula the points of view of all actors involved are considered. With the aim of reconstructing a political space of participation, OLA enhances a participatory approach to OER creation involving teachers from different disciplines and, where possible, students and other school actors, giving them the opportunity to take actively part in knowledge production and decide what is really important educationally.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In a nutshell, OLA framework can be seen as an example of a quite transformative approach to OER with reference to the tree dimensions analysed, supporting the idea that OER, going beyond a merely redistributive approach, can effectively contribute to enhance equity in education. However, some conditions must be taken into account and some challenges still remain open at educational and political level. First of all, the participatory approach to OER design should be fully realized, giving voice to the actors involved in the education processes, students included, in deciding what is really important educationally in their specific context. This requires a cultural shift both in the school staff and at system level.

Moreover, creating OER and embedding it in the Social Justice perspective requires new competences for teachers: not just digital, but also competences in the field of critical and visual literacy, open pedagogy and the capability to identify misinformation and stereotypes conveyed by texts and multimedia.

Finally, in order to enable OER to realize their full potential in promoting quality and inclusive education, new ways to embed them in school curricula must be identified and adopted at institutional level.

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THE ANTHILL MODEL OF COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE IN AI SYSTEMS: SOME CRITICAL CONCERNS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

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This contribution is focused on the concept of "collective" intelligence and its reinterpretation in the contexts of digital platforms. I will claim that today's AI systems, and the tech companies that control them, in most cases appear to embody a conception of collective intelligence that could be defined as "Anthill Model". This model consists in a system that as a whole exhibits an intelligent behaviour, even though the individual participants contribute to it mainly being unaware of the way the systems functions and of the role they play in it. Such a model entails some deeply problematic implications in terms of social justice and democratic education: firstly, it appears in contrast with the promotion of critical and autonomous thinking. Secondly, appears to be in line with an educational ideal aimed at providing quality education only to a privileged minority, reducing investment in the education of the majority of the population. I will conclude proposing some questions: is the presented scenario an inevitable doom, or is it still possible to act trying to promote a different future? Is it possible to use digital technologies to design forms of collective intelligence which are not conceived as an anthill, but rather as a dialogic community?

Artificial Intelligence; Collective Intelligence; EdTech, Critical Pedagogy; Platformisation

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, some branches of Artificial Intelligence are undergoing significant developments, like Machine Learning (which consists of creating learning systems, where learning is understood as the ability to improve performance after a task has been performed, thanks to the data that the system has processed) and Deep Learning (which is a subset of Machine Learning based on artificial neural networks). These developments are having a pervasive effect on our lives, so being able to understand them should be a central objective in education today. The fact that we talk about learning in reference to machines raises new questions about what learning is:

Where is the most significant and influential learning happening in our societies, and what kind of systems are undertaking learning? How is 'our' learning (as citizens, students, workers) intermingled with the ways that machines learn? Who is ultimately benefiting from the outcomes? (Selwyn et al., 2020, 3).

From a socio-economic point of view, the most influential type of company through which AI is used is the digital platform. A digital platform can be defined as a digital infrastructure that acts as an intermediary between two or more groups of users, enabling interaction between different types of actors (customers, advertisers, service providers, manufacturers, suppliers) but also physical objects and machines (Bratton, 2015). It includes very different kinds of companies: Google, Meta, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Uber, AirBnb, General Electric, Siemens, Jhon Deere, Monsanto, etc. What do such different companies have in common to justify their categorisation under a common definition? Mainly two features: they rely on data as a fundamental resource from which to extract value, and they tend to assume a monopolistic position in the market (Srnicek, 2017; Hindman, 2018).

Currently exist an intense and ongoing debate around the questions: are Big Data and AIs initiating a paradigm shift in our ways of knowing? This contribution intends to propose a critical analysis of the ways through which AIs and digital platforms produce knowledge by processing the enormous masses of data they collect on a daily basis. The analysis will focus on how digital platforms and AIs reinterpret the concept of collective intelligence.

1. THE ANTHILL MODEL

Nowadays, the most widespread approach to collective intelligence in the Big Tech environment is following a trend that I propose to name the "Anthill Model" (Corazza, 2022). The Anthill Model is to be understood as an ideal type, in Max Weber's sense: a conceptual framework that does not correspond to any specific historical reality, but is to be used as a term of comparison to evaluate real social phenomena (Weber, 2019).

AIs are not purely artificial entities, but rather are part of complex socio-technical systems (such as digital platforms) based on the interaction between humans and machines (Kitchin, 2017; Porter, 2020). Therefore, a crucial question for analysing the different forms these systems can take is: what role do humans play within them?

The Anthill Model constitutes a conception of collective intelligence in which priority is given to centralised data processing, to which people contribute largely unconsciously, like ants within an anthill. Which roles do human beings play within it? Few of them programme AIs, manage and own digital platforms, while the majority of people have the role of users, which means that they contribute to the system simply by providing the data upon which the functioning of AIs is based (either unintentionally, by leaving digital traces, or actively, by creating contents on digital platforms). They do it without being aware of the goals and ways of functioning of the system of which they are part. The purpose of such a collective intelligence does

not include the personal growth of individuals nor their learning, as the objective is solely to improve the knowledge held by those who control the platform. Therefore, most people rely on the answers provided by these forms of centralised collective intelligence, without being aware of how such knowledge is produced. We rely on them for answers in more and more areas of our lives: from suggestions on the next video or song to listen to, to what might be the most suitable job for me or even the party to vote for in the next election (Dormehl, 2015; Harari, 2016). This means that there is a risk of these systems coming to be regarded as oracles, impartial and capable of generating a type of knowledge 'superior' to human knowledge.

2. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ANTHILL MODEL

If we decided to orient the education system according to this logic as well, the consequent approach could be: education would no longer be oriented towards promoting critical and autonomous thinking, but simply providing 'ants' with the skills required to be useful to the platforms that process knowledge. Indeed, if we consider this educational horizon in connection with the current trend towards the automation of work (which also affects cognitive work), it would no longer appear necessary to teach people to undertake complex cognitive tasks, if it were believed that these could be performed more efficiently by algorithmic systems.

Does this mean that the Anthill Model tends towards a society in which the contribution of human beings becomes irrelevant? No, because the trend towards irrelevance does not concern all humans, since the functioning of digital platforms depends on the work of the narrow élite of individuals who programme and control them. This means that the conflict looms along the lines that divide social classes: the opposition is not between humans and machines, but between different classes of humans (Harari, 2016). Thus, if one were to adhere to the anthill model, the most consequential approach would be to provide quality education only to the élites who manage AIs and digital platforms, while significantly reducing the investment in educating the majority of the population, whose instruction no longer appears indispensable (Caligiuri, 2018).

3. IS A DIFFERENT FORM OF COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE POSSIBLE?

The current trend towards the Anthill Model appears strong and widespread in many domains, yet it is not inevitable. If we do not want to surrender to it, we should face the following question: is it possible to create a kind of collective intelligence that is different from the Anthill Model?

In order to avoid the tendence towards the Anthill, we can use technologies to realise forms of collective intelligence on a human scale, which means trying to create what Ivan Illich (1973) called "convivial technologies". Such a collective intelligence would have as its purpose not only the improvement of the knowledge processed by the central brain (as in the Anthill Model), but also the personal and intellectual growth of the people who participate in it (Lévy, 1997). And should should promote in its members an awareness of how the system of which they are part

works, since this is an essential precondition for acting as conscious subjects and not as cogs in a machine.

Is it possible to realise forms of collective intelligence on a human scale?

If we consider societies as a whole this issue appears difficult to address, because the Anthill Model appears to be aligned with the ever growing tendency towards bureaucratisation and specialisation of knowledge that has characterised Modern societies in recent centuries (Weber, 1917; Weil, 1934). However, in the field of education the possibility of realising forms of collective intelligence on a human scale is much more concrete: there are in fact many experiences that have explored practices in which the growth of individuals and groups is based on dialogue and mutual exchange.

4. SOME POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR THE EDUCATIONAL WORLD

4.1 Learning to deconstruct the functioning of digital platforms and AIs

In order to create alternative forms of collective intelligence to the anthill model, a fundamental first step is to develop a Data Literacy aimed at analysing the complexity of socio-technical systems, recognising the hybridity between human and non-human components. Deconstructing the narratives that present the knowledge produced by AIs as neutral or objective, instead highlighting how each technology inevitably incorporates biased and situated points of view, which often risk reproducing and reinforcing gender, racial and socio-economic oppressions (Eubanks, 2017; O'Neil, 2017).

Ultimately, dealing with technology inevitably means dealing with the question of power: on the one hand, power always needs technologies to sustain itself, and its exercise is to a large extent conditioned by the characteristics of the means on which it relies; on the other hand, research and design in science and technology are inevitably conditioned and, in part, motivated by the logic of power (Latour, 1993). Therefore, an educational approach that seeks to form conscious citizens cannot avoid facing the connections between the processes of knowledge construction and the power dynamics that are intertwined with them.

4.2 Learning to ask good questions to AIs

In order to interact consciously with AI, it is essential to learn how to ask them the right questions (prompting) and critically evaluate their answers, recognising their limits. This was already important in the interaction with search engines (such as Google), today it is even more so with AI-based chatbots (such as ChatGPT and similar). This can be done not only on an individual level, but on a group level: the classroom can become a research community (Kohan, 2014), i.e. a human-scale form of collective intelligence, capable of creative and critical interaction with AIs.

4.3 Promoting forms of democratic control over the digital infrastructures used by educational institutions

There is an urgent need for educational institutions to address the issue of the control of the digital infrastructures on which they rely. Such infrastructures in indeed play an extremely strategic role in contemporary societies, because they allow to control the flow of a fundamental and sensitive resource: data. In the case of education these are data about students, families, teachers, etc. We must therefore ask ourselves: to whom do we want to entrust control of the data, software and digital platforms on which the functioning of public educational institutions is based?

Who controls the platforms used for teaching and management in educational institutions? According to 2022 data, 86% of Italian schools use Google services and 18% uses Microsoft services, which are private companies, pursuing their own objectives according to profit logic (Zoja, 2022). A possible alternative is using data centres and educational platforms controlled by public institutions.

Who owns the software? Currently, the majority of educational institutions use proprietary software owned by private companies. A possible alternative is: the use of free software. Free software also offers a considerable educational opportunity: it allows to teach coding according to a philosophy based on the transparency and accessibility of codes, thus promoting a conception of knowledge as an open and collaborative activity (Corazza, 2023).

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DATA CITIZENSHIP AND DATA LITERACY. THE CHALLENGES OF THE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ERA

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The future of Artificial Intelligence is unpredictable by definition, facing benefits and threats that impact actuality more than any other ones. However, we can learn how to adapt our choices and organize our behaviors to move forward and even shape what the future holds (Margiotta, 2019). The issue is crucial moreover in the educational sector where a new literacy is required to affirm human intentionality as a key factor in interaction with technologies like AI. The proposed case study relates to the experimental introduction of the AI discipline at the Marconi-Pieralisi Secondary High upper in Jesi (IT).

artificial intelligence, edtech, digital educational poverty, rights and social responsibility

INTRODUCTION

The digital technological revolution, which includes disruptive AI, has a significant impact on all aspects of social and political life (Balbi & Magaudda, 2022).

To educate for democracy, active citizenship with conscience and a critical spirit must be strengthened (Spadafora, 2018). The case study emphasises the role of the school in designing learning experiences, beginning with the acquisition of digital skills to promote critical and conscious active citizenship (Riva, 2017).

1. DIGITAL LITERACY IN THE EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK

Digital literacy is a critical educational issue for the development of the knowledge society (Banzato, 2011). It translates into the ability to use new media and new technologies to actively participate in a now largely digitalised society (Rivoltella, 2020), as well as to critically analyse the production and fruition of digital content, acting as consciously on the Web (Pasta, 2021).

According to the Council Recommendation May 22, 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning,

> Digital competence involves the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity), intellectual property related questions, problem solving and critical thinking.

Several European policy initiatives recognise the value of digital competence, including the DigComp Framework (updated to DigComp 2.2, and the DigCompEdu, specific for edu sector), the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), and the Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030.

As a result, the European Union is systematically working to develop basic and advanced digital skills and competencies in order to drive digital transformation and social inclusion.

Digital literacy is essential for AI literacy, but it encompasses more than just technical skills (Long & Magerko, 2020); it includes a critical, ethical, and inclusive perspective for participation in an AI-driven society.

This point is significant according to EU Reg. 1689/2024 which highlights the vital importance to equipping providers, deployers, and those affected by AI systems with the essential competencies to comprehend the functionality, potential, limitations, and associated risks of AI technologies.

The European Union has published guidelines to raise awareness about AI and data in education, starting with the Ethical Guidelines for Educators on the Use of AI and Data in Teaching and Learning (EC, 2022).

2. DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND DATA LITERACY

Citizenship has runs 'in' and 'through' the digital dimension; as a result, a lack of digital skills is a barrier in the post-media society, where it is necessary to understand how to analyse and manage the creation and use of various digital content (Pasta & Rivoltella, 2022). Digital literacy ensures that individuals can exercise their rights and have equal opportunities in both digital and physical contexts, promoting personal development and tackling digital educational poverty as a combined deprivation of rights and new literacy (Rivoltella, 2020).

Defining digital citizenship is complex and constantly evolving, deeply tied to the development of the digital age.

The Council of Europe states that

> Digital citizen is a person who masters the competences for democratic culture in order to be able to competently and positively engage with evolving digital technologies; participate actively, continuously and responsibly in social and civic activities; be involved in a process of lifelong learning (in formal, informal and non-formal settings) and be committed to defending continuously human rights and dignity (CoE, 2019).

According to the European Union

> Digital citizenship is a set of values, skills, attitudes, knowledge and critical understanding citizens need in the digital era. A digital citizen knows how to use technologies and is able to engage competently and positively with them (COUNCIL, 2020).

Digital citizenship remains central to the Council of Europe's agenda, as stated by the Education Strategy 2024-2030, which renews education's democratic and social mission by promoting the digital transformation of civic responsibility based on human rights.

Although Italy lacks a legal definition of digital citizenship, its meaning is outlined in Law 92/2019, which established civic education as a transversal discipline.

Article 5 of Law 92/2019 lists seven areas of interest that are directly related to the European DigComp Framework (now updated to 2.2). This highlights the core theme of digital citizenship education, which encompasses a wide array of educational goals. These goals address both cognitive and non-cognitive competencies, including the digital dimension, making meaningful connections between different areas of learning.

3. ITALIAN SCHOOLS' STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING DIGITAL LITERACY AND CITIZENSHIP

Law No. 92/2019, enacted through Ministerial Decree No. 183/2024, establishes the creation and sharing of curricular paths and resources among schools to address participation, digital identity, and risks associated with digital citizenship. Following the Civic Education Curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education, Italian schools are developing their own digital citizenship projects to support teachers and students.

During the 2017/2018 school year, the school leaders of secondary lower and upper schools in Val di Non and Val di Sole (TR) signed a network agreement with the goal of developing a digital citizenship curriculum based on the DigComp 2.1 model, taking into account the state-of-the-art in the use of ICT in network school teaching.

The Trentino Alto Adige School Network's curriculum (https://curriculum-digitale.iprase.tn.it/) is developed vertically, from secondary lower school to the first two years of secondary upper school; at the heart of the project is the idea that digital competence is as important as basic skills throughout life because they all interact as equals in the formation of a competent and responsible citizen.

The curriculum was completed in May 2022 and validated by experts from IPRASE – the Provincial Institute for Educational Research and Experimentation of the Italian Region of Trentino-Alto Adige.

Inspired by the IPRASE's Digital Curriculum, a group of Valle d'Aosta teachers propose an alternative model that focusses on using the most recent version of DigiComp 2.2 (https://curricolo-digitale.scuole.vda.it/). The project's primary goal was to create a vertical digital curriculum that outlines guidelines and best practices for students at various educational levels.

The Valle d'Aosta's 'Vertical Digital Curriculum' is divided into two years, from secondary lower school to the first two years of secondary upper school, and is organised around DigComp's five areas. Using time scans, the curriculum divides each competency area into three sections (competence development, activities, and

resources). This is not a rigid structure, but rather an indicative temporal and conceptual progression that aims to provide useful support to regional schools in developing the institute's digital curriculum.

Both projects promote digital competence as an orientation tool for the conscious and civic use of technologies, including AI.

4. THE CASE STUDY OF MARCONI PIERALISI SECONDARY UPPER SCHOOL

The proposed case study refers to the experimental introduction of AI as a subject of study at the Istituto Marconi-Pieralisi in Jesi (AN), an upper secondary school in the Marche region, in the Computer Science and Telecommunications department of the fourth and fifth classes for one hour per week thanks to the use of the institute's autonomy (PTOF, pp. 44-45, https://www.iismarconipieralisi.edu.it/index.php/nostro-istituto/offerta-formativa/piano-offerta-formativa). The issue was also included in the cross-curricular Civic Education Curriculum, which focusses on the thematic nuclei of digital citizenship, constitution, freedom, and artificial intelligence for the fourth and fifth grades, respectively, and on the themes of legality and solidarity for the fifth grades, which include issues such as profiling and cyber security (PTOF, pp. 36–38).

The primary goal of integrating AI and Education was to promote an interdisciplinary approach that encouraged the comparison and joint design of models, actions, and practices in order to achieve participatory, concrete, effective, and ethical outcomes (Panciroli et al., 2020).

In May 2024, some of the teachers who teach AI and civic education, as well as the school's leader, were interviewed.

Tab. 1 lists the pseudonyms assigned to the interviewees.

Pseudonym	Role
Luca	computer science teacher
Paolo	computer science teacher
Laura	philosophy teacher
Silvia	School Leader

The survey, based on unstructured narrative interviews (Muylaert et al., 2014), investigated teachers' and managers' strategies for incorporating AI into educational settings. The analysis centred on key words to identify recurring themes and cross-cutting connections.

> The Computer Science department proposed introducing AI as a subject to better prepare students for university and meet external needs. Approval from the Teachers' Board was required, emphasizing teamwork and management consensus (Luca).

> Discipline planning focused on standard content, despite no specific guidelines. In-house training was crucial for teachers to understand both the historical and technical aspects of AI (Paolo).

> The Institute plans to introduce AI as a separate subject in its three-year computer science curriculum, leveraging the expertise of teachers who studied AI extensively. [...] Recognizing the importance of preparing students for future challenges, the Institute has noted a demand for AI skills from local companies, highlighting its role as a regional educational resource (Silvia).

The ethical aspects of AI were also addressed in civic education classes to ensure that students understood the technology's potential and the ethical responsibilities that come with its application.

> The goal is not to train experts in AI, but rather to provide students with the skills to debunk clichés and understand AI as a useful technological tool (Paolo).

The experience with IA didactics resulted in an innovative operational suggestion for improving cooperative and lab dynamics.

> Introducing AI in the curriculum requires structured practical and lab activities to foster experiential learning and enhance student understanding (Luca).

> Lessons are structured to alternate practical applications with theoretical aspects, focusing on developing students' ability to independently research and complete work within a set timeframe (Paolo).

The interviewees highlighted that inclusive design required teachers to recognise and accommodate diversity in learning in order to fully develop students' specific abilities and potential.

> For students with special educational needs, the lab offers significant advantages, as computers often serve as a compensatory tool. However, some students may struggle, so we've implemented cooperative work in pairs to support classmates with fragile needs through tutoring (Paolo).

> The teaching of the IA discipline in classrooms primarily focuses on workshop activities to enhance communication and promote inclusiveness (Silvia).

AI literacy entails raising students' awareness of issues concerning the control and protection of data contained in information collected and reused by artificial intelligence applications.

> AI has also been integrated into the civic education curriculum where the ethical aspects of the application of technology are mainly addressed. It is important that students understand the ethical and social implications of AI, not only as a technological tool, but also as something that can influence everyday life and social dynamics (Laura).

According to the philosophy teacher, taking a collaborative and practical approach to teaching AI involves mutually enriching the student-teacher dialogue relationship.

> The students were unfamiliar with philosophy, which allowed them to freely express their views. This led to an interesting mutual learning experience between us. We engaged in a philosophical dialogue about the ethical rules and principles that should guide the development of artificial intelligence systems for lawful purposes (Laura).

The narrative fragments showed the digital curriculum's interdisciplinary nature, highlighting its interactions with various fields of study while also addressing the ethical and legal implications of acquiring digital skills and promoting collaboration among teachers across all disciplines.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This contribution provides an overview of one of the implementation scenarios for the teaching experience of digital citizenship.

The Italian decision to emphasise the interdisciplinary nature of civic education teaching adheres to European and international documents on citizenship education and promotes the integration of digital technologies into each discipline's syllabus. This allows for a comprehensive education that prepares students to face modern-day challenges and to be informed and competent citizens in the digital age.

Emphasizing the need for both technical skills and critical reading abilities, digital citizenship education prepares students to understand information processes and engage with technology ethically and responsibly, fostering active social participation.

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NON-HUMANS AT SCHOOL. BLACK-BOARDS, ROBOTS, PLATFORMS…

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Educational spaces are relational and material environments, characterized by unstable sociomaterial configurations, where humans and non-humans continuously interact. A posthumanist approach analyzes humans as entities interconnected with resources and material forces, expanding the boundaries of social analysis. Material and digital objects, such as blackboards and technologies, do not replace humans, but influence education and its practices. Drawing on Science and Technology Studies (STS), this analysis explores how objects co-construct social and moral orders, with a focus on traditional technologies, robots, and digital platforms.

Education, STS, materiality, robots, digital platforms

PREMISE

Educational spaces are relational and material environments characterized by unstable and constantly changing sociomaterial configurations, shaped by the interaction between humans and non-humans (Nespor, 2012; Roehl, 2012; Fenwick & Landri, 2014; Landri & Viteritti, 2016; Orlikowski, 2007; Decuypere, 2019). This complexity requires an approach that transcends the humanist perspective by analyzing humans as relational entities interconnected with resources, material forces, and possible worlds. The boundaries of social analysis are thus expanded by including the often-overlooked contribution of non-human, inviting a shift towards a posthumanist perspective (Braidotti, 2014), where humans are part of heterogeneous networks. Materiality, often marginalized, is thus placed at the core of the educational discourse. Far from replacing humans, material and digital objects are considered allies that influence educational action and its consequences. Objects such as blackboards, desks, digital technologies, and platforms contribute to transforming educational spaces, curricula, practices, and policies, making visible the everyday work and relationships between materiality and humanity. Drawing on the approaches of Science and Technology Studies (STS), the analysis thus focuses on objects as co-constructors of social life, establishing and prescribing moral, social, and political orders. The aim is to foster a vision of the educational field that integrates both social and material aspects.

The following sections of this manuscript will explore: (1) traditional objects such as blackboards and registers and their digitalization, (2) robots as new sociotechnical tools that introduce innovative methods and challenges, and (3) digital platforms that are redefining educational environments in a neoliberal sense, particularly within the university context. The conclusions will provide cross-sectional reflections on the objects analyzed.

1. BLACKBOARDS AND REGISTERS IN SCHOOLS

The blackboard and the school register represent two emblematic objects of the educational space, whose evolution—from tradition to digital—reflects profound changes in educational practices and relationships.

The blackboard, originally a static and physical device, embodied a means of unidirectional knowledge transmission, a tool of moral and cognitive order. In Suchman's (1988) studies, the blackboard is seen as a relational space for visualization that mediates interaction between teacher and students, organizing signs and knowledge systematically. It thus becomes a cognitive territory and a space for collective confrontation, where the inscribed signs transform into tasks and future projects. With the introduction of the interactive whiteboard (IWB), its role undergoes a redefinition, from a static tool to a fluid and participatory device. The IWB enables the connection to external knowledge networks, opening up broader and more dynamic learning spaces. According to Sørensen (2009), it transforms into a platform for collective design, a place for confrontation and co-creation, fostering more horizontal and participatory practices. Far from being a simple tool, the IWB emerges as an active infrastructure that organizes interactions and shared standards, transcending the boundaries of the traditional classroom.

The school register, on the other hand, has undergone a transition from a private, paper-based, discretionary object to a public, standardized electronic register. Traditionally, the register was a moral device employed to monitor students' behaviors and performance, used with some discretion by teachers. Digitalized electronic register, on the other hand, stands as an informational infrastructure that redefines the relationship between school, families, and students. According to Albanese (2023), this object not only dematerializes its use but also becomes more invasive and present in daily school life. From a personal tool, the electronic register transforms into an official accountability device, influencing evaluation practices and teachers' time organization.

Both objects, analyzed through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), reveal how the interaction between humans and materiality produces distributed effects. While they confirm traditional knowledge transmission practices, they also introduce new forms of participation, inclusion, and sharing. These objects are not closed entities but components of heterogeneous networks undergoing phases of change, generating ambivalences and tensions. Their activation creates innovative learning spaces, yet uncertain and contradictory, where relational and material dynamics intertwine. The blackboard and register, both in their traditional and digital

forms, demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between technology and educational practices. Their evolution is not a mere technical adaptation but a socio-material process that should be observed for its ability to transform pedagogical practices and social relationships. These objects illuminate the need to view the educational field as a dynamic ecosystem, where materiality plays a crucial role in shaping experience and innovation.

2. ROBOTS IN SCHOOLS

A new complex object has recently entered educational practice: robots. Nao, a humanoid robot developed in 2006 by the French company Aldebaran, stands 58 cm tall and is equipped with cameras, touch sensors, microphones, and speakers that enable it to interact with its environment. This humanoid robot was introduced into schools in response to pressures from the EdTech market and national policies promoting the development of computational skills (Bers, 2020; Zeide, 2020). In this paragraph, we shall explore its use in educational practices, providing examples of how robots are translated into schools.

In the first case, we observe Nao being presented at a school fair, "Didacta" in Florence, in which schools entwine with the technology market. The company Campus Store, a leader in the event, displays various educational tools, including robots. The company's engineer presents Nao as a highly programmable robot, emphasizing ease of use and its educational potential, particularly in teaching computational skills. Campus Store sold around 300 Nao robots between 2020 and 2022, supporting schools in their purchase and training on robot usage. Educational policies push for the adoption of these technologies as tools for digital skill development, creating alliances between the market, schools, and policies to support educational innovation.

In the second case, we see how Nao is concretely used in the classroom. In a workshop organized by a network of schools in the province of Rome, Flavio, a 10-year-old student, shares his experience of using the robot. However, Nao refuses to function during the demonstration. Flavio explains that the malfunction is due to connectivity issues, such as an unstable Wi-Fi connection. Despite the failure, he enthusiastically describes how Nao helped them in lessons, such as telling the story of the Pharaohs in history and testing their multiplication tables in math. Additionally, Flavio learned to program Nao using an application called Choregraphe, similar to games like Minecraft, which helped him understand programming concepts. This situation highlights how Nao is adapted to school practices and how students and teachers find solutions to malfunctions, raising awareness about the use of technology. Nao fits into an educational context that requires spatial and infrastructural adjustments, considering the limitations of schools. Despite this, new, often interdisciplinary practices emerge, where robots and technologies are used creatively.

Fairs, school events, and experiments show how the robot becomes visible and accessible to schools. Technologies, supported by educational policies, foster the

micro-privatization of school life, with the introduction of technological objects into classrooms. Ongoing research suggests a complex framework where objects like Nao, with their materiality, influence sociotechnical networks, creating tangible effects in the educational sphere. The sociomaterial approach allows exploration of how these objects become non-human actors in educational practices, with significant effects on how schools evolve.

3. DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN UNIVERSITIES

Digital objects have become central elements in universities, profoundly influencing their practices. These technological artifacts mediate all academic activities, creating connections between human and non-human actors such as multimedia whiteboards, EdTech platforms, software, and academic rankings. This complex landscape comprises visible objects, such as computers and projectors, and hidden ones, like cables and servers, interacting in an environment where the boundaries between digital and analog often blur (Jandrić et al., 2018). This entanglement involves heterogeneous actors, contributing to the formation of a complex university ecosystem.

The STS approach provides a fruitful lens to explore the relationship between universities and digital objects. Scholarship focusing on data studies and artificial intelligence highlight how digital technologies may strongly influence higher education, fueling platformization, standardization, and datafication processes (Selwyn & Gašević, 2020). The posthuman perspective sees the university as an entanglement of relationships, rather than a system of rigid boundaries (Taylor, 2018). From this viewpoint, technological materialities within the university are not neutral but form complex ecologies that act as actors capable of producing significant effects on educational practices (Piromalli, 2023).

Four critical issues emerge in the relationship between universities and educational objects. First, digital technologies tend to rationalize education. As Neil Selwyn observes, digital systems act as "systems of social rationality", creating an "institutional order" that limits available options. In many cases, digital technologies do not simply "disrupt" educational practice but rather tend to consolidate traditional models and grammars such as rigid platforms for instructional design that restrict innovation. Second, the use of digital systems in universities is strongly tied to issues of power and control. Technologies fuel "neoliberal anxiety" (Espeland & Sauder, 2016) and the logics of new public management, as evidenced by rankings among researchers and universities, performance indices, and global metrics. These may become governance tools, fostering organizing processes and practice in higher education based on performance and comparison. This process might distort university culture fabricating a vision of education that emphasizes measurability and comparability, often at the expense of more inclusive and diversified approaches. A third issue concerns the emergence of continuous surveillance practices through the use of digital objects (i.e, "dataveillance"). Technologies are sometimes used in (higher) education to monitor, order, and control the activities

of students and faculty by analyzing data related to performance, behaviors, and progress. Algorithms are used to predict and segment students' futures, such as predictive algorithms that identify "at-risk" students to apply specific intervention strategies (Williamson et al., 2023). Finally, another critical aspect concerns the extraction of profit from user data by EdTech companies. These companies exploit student data for economic and political purposes, as highlighted by the concept of "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017); for example, during the pandemic, many Italian universities accepted free use of EdTech software, allowing "big tech" companies to gain economic and political advantages. This "soft privatization" phenomenon has led universities to rely on private software that generates revenue through data usage.

The use of digital technologies in universities thus establishes a contested space in which technological interconnectedness accelerates marketization processes, leading to a seemingly irresistible exacerbation of neoliberal and neo-managerial logics in educational and academic practices and logics. However, it remains important to remember that digital systems are inherently vulnerable and subject to constant negotiation – despite the apparent stability of their constituents and the discourses they incorporate. Therefore, rather than viewing these objects as fixed and unchanging, we should act upon them as "epistemic objects" (Knorr-Cetina, 2001), that is, as actors always subject to change and reinterpretation through different or alternative points of view (Lumino & Landri, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

The educational field is characterized by interconnected analog and digital objects that are not neutral and interact daily in the formation of practices, values, and cultures within heterogeneous networks of human and non-human actors. These artifacts link education to complex external social networks, such as businesses, institutions, technology markets, and policies, with significant implications for pedagogical practices. Sociomaterial analysis highlights how the materiality of objects influences the educational field, creating tensions between politics, the labor market, and the EdTech market, blurring the boundaries between digital surveillance and the use of data for student empowerment (van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018; Landri, 2018). Technical objects exert transformative power both in the visions they help to construct and in the everyday practice of students and teachers.

This implies the need for continuous training for educators and practitioners, providing them with a cultural understanding of the central role of objects in school life. This reflection must actively involve all actors in the educational system to anticipate the scenarios of interconnections created by technology. Moreover, there is a strong link between the introduction of technological objects, educational policies, and the technology market, all of which are transforming the educational arena. The pressure from technology markets on educational imaginaries is increasing, and objects are becoming mandatory steps for building the education of the future. Educational policies and institutions must be aware of the growing

dependence on the technology market. The adoption of educational technologies involves significant economic commitments and presents risks, such as fueling technological inequalities or underutilizing technologies due to insufficient teacher competencies. Technical objects must be introduced in a user-friendly and negotiated manner, avoiding impositions from the market or policies. Finally, an approach focusing on the materiality of educational objects helps to overcome transmissive conceptions of learning, instead promoting social processes centered around a relational view of learning. This approach requires the critical and reflective participation of educational communities.

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NAVIGATING THE ONLIFE ERA. RETHINKING EDUCATION IN A DIGITAL WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of onlife articulates the intricate interdependence of our existence in the digital era, where the boundaries between our online and offline lives are increasingly blurred (Digennaro, 2024). This notion underscores the idea that technology and the digital sphere have become fundamental components of our daily experience, influencing our modes of communication and interactions with the world. A comprehensive understanding of onlife necessitates an exploration of the complex interplay among individuals, technology, and culture, urging a re-evaluation of our educational frameworks to align with this newly integrated reality.

In the current societal evolution, there is an imperative need for a transformative approach to education that embodies the principles of an *onlife pedagogy*. Such an educational paradigm should emerge from the novel forms of existence proliferated by the virtual realm and promote a critical, conscious engagement with this duality. It seeks to cultivate an integrated existence that harmonises the virtual with the physical. It is not merely about adding technology to our teaching and learning practices; it is a call to reimagine the very ways in which we engage in teaching and learning.

The primary challenge for educators lies in fostering a critical awareness capable of grasping the nuanced relationships between the individual, technology, and culture. This awareness must be reflected in contemporary educational practices that are not only inclusive but also inherently democratic. Education should not passively acquiesce to the rapid evolution of digital culture; rather, it should actively harness digital technologies to navigate and shape the new sense of existence emerging within younger generations.

By adopting an integrated and thoughtful perspective that bridges tangible life with virtual existence, this new educational model possesses the potential to address the contradictions and complexities that characterise the modern era. It can offer practical solutions to the challenges the digital age poses, fostering resilience and adaptability among future generations. More importantly, it can give education the necessary role it must assume in modern society, which seems to be diminishing: the role of facilitating societal evolution.

Ultimately, adapting education to these emergent forms of existence and digital culture is essential for the holistic development of new generations. This adaptation is not merely beneficial; it is crucial in seeking a balance between virtual and authentic physical identities, enabling individuals to thrive in both spheres of their

lives. It is essential to guide an era where direction is unclear.

1. A NEW DISCOURSE ON EDUCATION

A significant portion of contemporary educational discourse highlights a critical concern regarding the impact of technology on new generations. Many educators and scholars argue that the rapid and unpredictable evolution of digital technology has reached a level where it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to manage the effects of such changes (UNESCO, 2023; Anderson, 2017). Considering this, there are proposals advocating for reducing technology's role within educational settings. This perspective suggests a return to more traditional educational practices, emphasising a curriculum perceived as purer and more authentic (Parker, 2015). Such discussions prompt a re-evaluation of the balance between embracing technological advancements and preserving foundational educational values.

The influence of technology on teaching methods requires thoughtful examination, particularly regarding how it transforms our educational practices and, ultimately, our way of life. Many scholars argue that, unless technological contributions are anticipated to enhance educational practices, a contradictory stance exists regarding the relationship between individuals and education. Numerous studies indicate that the challenges younger generations face—particularly in areas such as socialisation, emotional well-being, and self-reliance— are significantly influenced by the pervasive presence of technology in their daily lives (Digennaro & Tescione, 2024). Consequently, it is crucial to critically examine how technology can be leveraged to foster constructive educational outcomes rather than simply exacerbate existing issues.

In conclusion, the urgent need for a new discourse on education emerges from the recognition that technology, while offering vast potential for enhancement, also presents significant challenges to the foundational values of learning and personal development.

The calls for a return to traditional practices reflect a broader anxiety about whether the rapid integration of digital tools genuinely supports or undermines educational objectives.

This dialogue must not only advocate for a reduction in technology's omnipresence but also explore ways to harness its capabilities to foster deeper engagement and meaningful learning experiences and improve the efficacy of the teaching and learning process. Critical examination, without prejudgments of the interplay between technology and educational methodologies, is essential, ensuring that any integration enhances rather than complicates the learning environment.

The discussion about education needs to evolve to address the complexities and contradictions of technology's role. We should move beyond simplistic arguments that create a binary view and instead focus on a more nuanced understanding that appreciates both traditional educational practices and innovative technological integration. By doing so, we can create an educational environment that prepares

young generations for the complexities of modern life while promoting a contemporary approach to education.

2. ONLIFE EDUCATION: TWO STEPS TOWARD A REVOLUTION

To accommodate the profound transformation associated with an onlife existence, it is imperative to develop innovative pedagogical and educational paradigms. Integrating technology within educational frameworks represents a critical shift that redefines both formal and informal learning environments (Wilson & Thompson, 2022). The introduction of technological tools not only encourages the renovation of traditional teaching methodologies but also necessitates a comprehensive re-evaluation of our approaches to pedagogy.

Recent advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence, exemplify the ongoing evolution in educational practices and underscore the urgency for educators to adapt to these changes (UNESCO, 2023). Thus, we must critically assess and understand how these technological innovations can facilitate deeper engagement, foster collaborative learning, and ultimately enhance the teaching/learning experience. Embracing onlife education is not just a reaction to technological advancements; it is a crucial strategy for creating a dynamic and effective learning environment. This approach prepares individuals for the complexities of the modern world, where the distinction between tangible life and the digital landscape becomes irrelevant. The integration of tablets in educational settings, when employed solely as a substitute for traditional blackboards, represents merely a superficial transformation in instructional methods rather than a substantive evolution in educational practices. If educators continue to use the same teaching methods while integrating modern tools, they may inadvertently reinforce existing paradigms instead of creating innovative learning experiences. Most importantly, if they do not grasp the implications and impact of technology on new generations, they will lose their ability to effectively educate. It is essential to recognise that genuine educational reform requires not only the adoption of new technologies but also a rethinking of pedagogical strategies to fully harness their potential and enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

3. NEW SCENARIOS

To bring about meaningful and lasting change in education and face the complexity of modern societies, we must move beyond simply adding new technology into classrooms. Real reform requires creating an educational landscape where teachers are not just users of technology but active co-creators in an evolving cultural landscape. This education should not passively accept the evolution of technology but should be able to use digital technologies as tools for managing the new sense of existence that seems to have emerged in the younger generations. Through an integrated and conscious view of tangible life with the digital, concrete existence with digital existence, this new form of education can potentially overcome the contradictions and issues that arise in the modern era, providing practical answers to the challenges posed by the digital age.

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EMPOWERING EDUCATORS AGAINST DISINFORMATION: A STUDY ON ASSESSING MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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This study explores the media literacy skills of Italian secondary school teachers, focusing on their ability to teach critical evaluation of digital sources and tackle disinformation. The research analyzed data from 63 secondary school teachers participating in a professional development course on evaluating digital content reliability. Results indicate significant deficiencies in teachers' abilities to assess deceptive news, manipulated images, and decontextualized content, with less than 46% achieving sufficient scores in each question of the pre-test. The findings underscore the urgent need for systematic teacher training initiatives to bridge these gaps and empower educators to foster students' critical thinking and information resilience. This preliminary analysis contributes to the broader discourse on integrating media literacy into education and emphasizes the importance of equipping teachers with the skills necessary to counteract disinformation effectively.

media literacy; teachers education; sources evaluation; disinformation

1. INTRODUCTION

Disinformation, characterized as the intentional spread of false or deceptive information, is a substantial danger to democracy, public health, and societal trust (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023; Bennet et al., 2018). While the use of digital sources for information among young people continues to grow (Rossi et al., 2023; Common Sense, 2022), gaps in the educational system's capacity to alleviate the effects of disinformation have become increasingly evident: students frequently find it challenging to differentiate between trustworthy, biased, or incorrect information, rendering them susceptible to manipulation (Wineburg et al., 2016; Jones-Jang, 2019).

In light of the escalating prevalence of disinformation, academic, civil, and governmental organizations increasingly acknowledge the necessity of integrating media literacy skills into education. International organizations like UNESCO and the European Union assert that media literacy—the capacity to critically analyze, assess,

and comprehend information sources—provides a robust basis for countering disinformation. Frameworks such as DigComp 2.2 and DigCompEdu emphasize the necessity of providing students with the competencies to proficiently access and critically evaluate digital content by embedding the development of media and information literacy skills in formal education (European Commission, 2022).

Research regularly indicates that numerous educators perceive themselves as inadequately equipped to impart these competences, highlighting a discrepancy between institutional expectations and teachers' capacity to fulfill educational requirements (Breakstone et al., 2021; Erdem et al., 2018).

A report by IDMO (2023) reveals that both educators and students consider themselves regularly exposed to disinformation and exhibit considerable interest in engaging in media literacy initiatives. Nonetheless, despite the potential of media literacy interventions, they predominantly exist as standalone efforts without systematic integration into school curricula and adequate teacher training (Jones & Shao, 2011).

Educators are essential to the effectiveness of media literacy teaching in schools. Although some educators proficiently integrate digital tools in the classroom (McNelly, 2021), their capacity to instruct on the critical assessment of information frequently lacks effectiveness (Ranieri et al., 2018). This gap underscores the pressing necessity for professional development initiatives aimed at enhancing media literacy and disinformation resilience among educators (European Commission, 2022).

Building on these considerations, this study analyzes the existing media literacy abilities of Italian secondary school educators, emphasizing their readiness to instruct on disinformation and information resilience. This research analyzes pre-test data from educators in a professional development course to identify deficiencies in teachers' media literacy skills and their use of these competencies in the classroom. The findings enhance the existing literature supporting systematic media literacy education, with the objective of enabling educators to cultivate a generation of students possessing critical awareness (Livingstone, 2012; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Ranieri et al., 2021).

2. METHODS

The research is realized using a one-group pretest-posttest design (Ary et al., 2010). We administered a pre- and post-test to teachers in courses on the changing landscape of digital information, methods for verifying websites, techniques for identifying manipulated images, and strategies for assessing data sources and visualizations.

The questionnaire, administered according to CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) methodology and inspired by similar instruments by Stanford University (Breakstone et al., 2021; Breakstone et al., 2022), collected data in four areas:

1. general information;
2. media habits;
3. knowledge of course-specific topics;
4. the ability to evaluate the reliability of textual/visual sources.

The sources to assess in the fourth part of the questionnaire were:
- reliable/misleading website;
- reliable/misleading news content;
- sponsored content;
- verified social media profile;
- satirical content;
- decontextualized image;
- doctored photo.

For each typology of content, we asked teachers to evaluate its reliability through two questions:

1. *Closed question* (25% of the final score): "Do you consider this content Reliable / Not reliable / I don't know" or "Which one of the following do you consider more reliable?". Teachers would get one point for answering correctly.
2. *Open question* (75% of the final score): "Can you explain why?". The two authors independently assessed each teachers' answer on a scale from 1 to 5. The score has been calculated as the mean between the scores given by the authors.

Afterwards, we calculated the final score between 0 and 4 for each source by summing 25% of the score of the closed answer with 75% of the open answer.

This solution allowed us to distribute the scores on a more detailed scale and to consider both the correctness of the answer and the reasons behind it in the final score.

The study presented here shows a preliminary analysis of the results of the pre-test administered to 63 teachers in one of the courses in the research, in particular, a 40-hour online training course delivered in the project "Digital Active Schools", funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan in "Scuola Futura" teachers' training program. It provides a depiction of teachers' levels of media and data literacy through the tools of descriptive statistics.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sample is made of 63 units after removing missing values.

Figure 1 shows a summary of the main features of teachers in the analysis. Teachers mainly had a high level of educational attainment as Master Degree (50.8%) or Specialization Courses (34.9%). They taught in secondary schools, and there is quite a variety of subjects taught: humanities (41.3%), science (22.2%), technical fields

(12.7%), foreign languages (11.1%) and others (12.7%). Half of them were residents of North Italy.

Figure 1 – Teachers' general information (N=63).
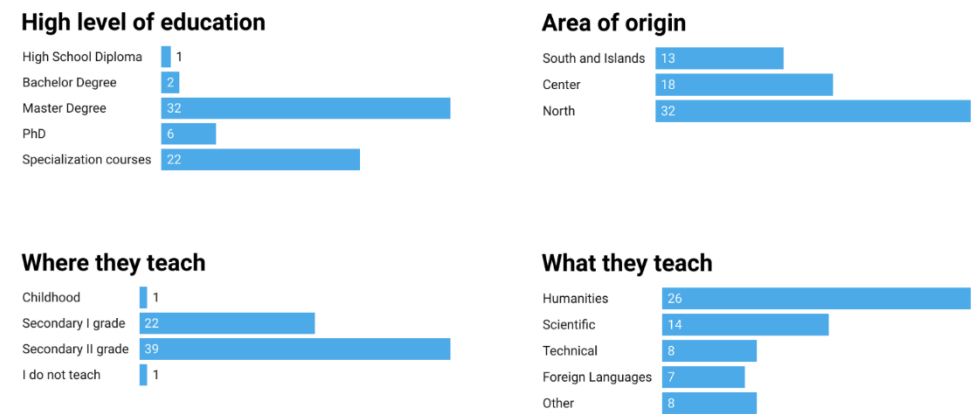
The social networks used by more than half of the teachers in the sample were WhatsApp (95.2%), Facebook (74.6%), Instagram (66.7%), Telegram (54.0%). One-third of teachers used less than 3 social networks; 57.1% used between 4-6; the remaining 12.7% had between 7-9 social networks (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Percentages of social network use by teachers (N=63).
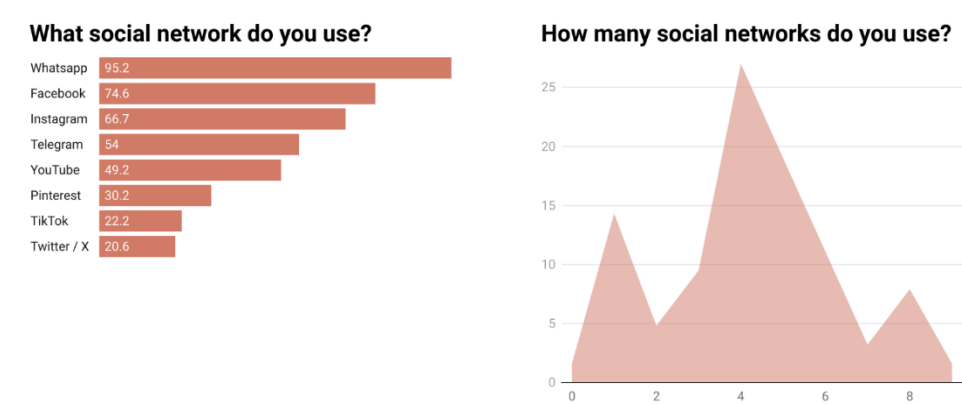
As seen in Figure 3, the sources that teachers mainly used to get information were TV (74.6%), online newspapers (73.0%), and social media (61.9%). Radio was less chosen by teachers for information (38.1%) but is among the most trusted sources for them, together with online newspapers and family. On the contrary, social media, even if chosen by a high percentage of teachers to get information, was the tool considered the least reliable by them.

Going to teachers' ability to recognize the reliability of textual and visual sources, Figure 4 shows the percentage of teachers who received a sufficient score. Before attending the professional development course, generally, the percentage for sufficient scores in each question was lower than 46.0%, showing that many teachers

in the sample are not ready to assess the reliability of the sources and, as a consequence, to make their students acquire this skill.

Figure 3 – Percentages of preferred sources of information by teachers (N=63). [the percentages on the right graph are the sum of teachers choosing 4 or 5 to express their trust on a scale between 1 and 5].

On what sources do you inform yourself about current affairs?

Source	%
TV	74.6
Online newspapers	73
Social media	61.9
Web sites and Apps	57.1
Family	54
Friends/colleagues	41.3
Radio	38.1

What sources do you trust more?
% of teacher with 4+ score

Source	%
Online newspapers	28.6
Radio	23.8
Family	23.8
TV	20.6
Friends/colleagues	17.5
Web sites and Apps	11.1
Social media	7.9
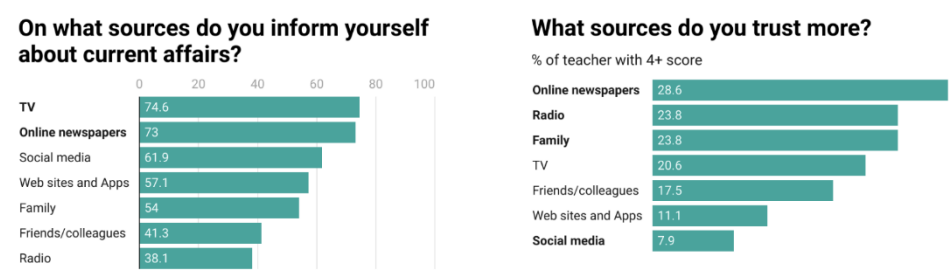
Figure 4 – Teachers' ability to assess the reliability of digital content: percentage of teachers that were assessed with a score higher than 60% (N=63).

Ability to evaluate digital content
% of teachers above the pass mark (2.4 out of 4)

Source	%
Source 1	46
Sponsored	41.3
Satirical	38.1
Verified	31.7
Doctored	14.3
Decontext	12.7
Source 2	7.9
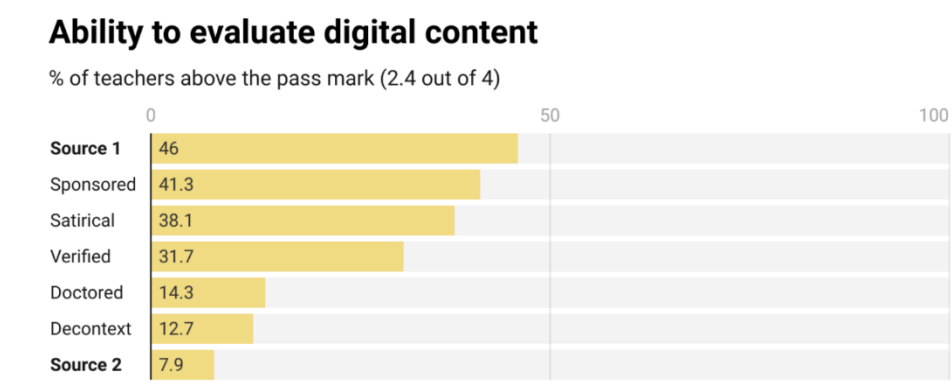
Most teachers had strong difficulties in evaluating visual content (decontextualised or manipulated images, respectively 12.7% and 14.3%) and misleading news content (7.9%).

About half seemed to have minor difficulties in identifying:

- reliable website (46.0%);
- sponsored content (41.3%);
- satirical content (38.1%).

DISCUSSION

This study's findings indicate substantial gaps in the media literacy skills of secondary school teachers, underscoring an urgent requirement for focused interventions. Educators exhibited significant obstacles in assessing deceptive news, altered photos, and decontextualized material, corroborating prior studies that highlight

the difficulties of actively understanding the digital information environment (Breakstone et al., 2021; Erdem & Eristi, 2018). These inadequacies are especially alarming in light of the rising prevalence of disinformation and the essential role educators have in cultivating critical thinking abilities in their students.

These findings align with previous research indicating that although educators may proficiently integrate digital methodologies into their classrooms, they frequently exhibit a deficiency in confidence about the instruction of crucial media literacy skills (McNelly & Harvey, 2022). The gap between institutional requirements and teachers' readiness highlights the critical necessity for professional development programs designed to enhance resilience against disinformation.

Notwithstanding its merits, this study possesses significant drawbacks. The sample size was limited (n=63), hence constraining the generalizability of the findings. Increasing the sample size in future studies will result in a more thorough comprehension of educators' media literacy levels across various contexts. This study provides initial findings from the pre-test data; however, subsequent research should incorporate pre- and post-test comparisons to assess the training's efficacy (Ary et al., 2010). This would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the influence of professional development programs on educators' capacity to critically appraise digital material. Furthermore, examining the relationships among variables like demographics, media use, and prior knowledge may illuminate the elements that most profoundly affect instructors' skills (Dupont, 2019).

This study's broader ramifications involve the systemic incorporation of media literacy into educational settings. García, Seglem, and Share (2020) emphasize that integrating media literacy into teacher preparation is essential for providing educators with the resources necessary to enhance students' important cultural competences. In the absence of systematic initiatives to train educators, the capacity of media literacy to counter disinformation and foster informed digital citizenship will remain insufficiently leveraged. This is particularly significant given research demonstrating that persons with robust media literacy abilities are more adept at identifying and combating disinformation (Breakstone et al., 2022).

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CHALLENGES OF *ONLIFE* EDUCATION BETWEEN THE THIRD SECTOR AND SCHOOLS. CRITICAL ISSUES, STRATEGIES AND RELATIONSHIPS IN A FLORENTINE CASE STUDY

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The article analyses the critical issues and potentialities of an after-school project (called DAD) for children with migrant origins, organized by a non-profit association based in Florence (Italy). In particular, the article explores the perspectives of volunteers and coordinators of the project about *online* education during the pandemic (2020-2021) and its *onlife* transformation after the emergency period (2024). The relationship between the association and the school institutions was also analysed. During the pandemic, the non-profit sector was a promoter in terms of action and support in structuring activities aimed at socio-psychological and educational assistance. The comparative research is based on data collected through a questionnaire addressed to DAD volunteers (2021) and through 4 semi-structured interviews with coordinators (2024). The results show potentialities of the Third Sector in the construction of *onlife* educational spaces, characterised by informality, flexibility and bureaucratic simplification. A central element emerged concerns the need for recognition for the activities carried out by the educating community, first and foremost the association.

onlife education; Third Sector; afterschool; inclusion; pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The educational system has been one of the sectors most affected by the covid-19 pandemic since Decree-Law No. 6/2020 converted into Law No. 13/2020 (Cuccaroni, 2020), suspending face-to-face teaching for a fully digital one. Several sociological studies have highlighted the criticalities of the Italian school system in such a didactic conversion. It has been noted, for example, the uneven collaboration among teachers, the inexperience in the use of digital platforms, the insufficiency of technological devices (Ranieri and Gaggioli, 2020; Ranieri, 2020; Giancola and Piromalli, 2020; Capperucci, 2020). The Third Sector has played a central role thanks to informal education, in which it is possible to experiment new educational methods, and by paying attention to the relationship with families (Colombo, Poliandri, Rinaldi, 2020). The article analyses the criticalities and potentialities of an

after-school activity, organised by an association in Florence during the pandemic period, and its transformation into an *onlife* activity (Floridi, 2015).

1. DIGITAL EDUCATION: A CHALLENGE BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND THE THIRD SECTOR

During the pandemic, mandatory digital education amplified existing inequalities in school systems and migrant family contexts by reducing the ability to level out disparities related to the access to digital technologies and to different economic and housing contexts: first of all, the inclusion of students with disabilities and from socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds or isolated areas (Ciani et al., 2021).

Some studies have pointed out a misinterpretation of the digital education aspect in the sole 'school-pandemic binomial, moreover, often overlapped and confused with the school-distance learning (DAD) binomial, precisely because of the lack of skills [...]. DAD has replaced the same virus within the scope of adverse factors to be defeated' (Martinelli and Oliviero, 2021). With digital education, socio-cultural distances and learning possibilities have had a major impact on the efficiency of learning skills outside the school walls (Landri and Milione, 2020).

A large part of the hindrances can be identified in the digital gap: the digital divide, i.e. the lack of appropriate tools (computers, tablet), the absence of connection to the web, and computer illiteracy. Digital education, in fact, has also led to problems in extracurricular services (privatisation, deregulation, residual welfare dominance, stigmatisation of vulnerability). This is where the Third Sector comes in, which has played an improving role in this social branch (Salmieri, 2023).

2. CONTEXT ANALYSIS: BIRTH OF AN ONLINE PROJECT AND ITS EVOLUTION ONLIFE

During the pandemic, *Gli Anelli Mancanti*, an association based in Florence, organised a stay-at-home educational project called DAD. In this case, the acronym was used for *Alternative Education of Children's Rights* (November 2020-September 2021). DAD was an after-school digital project lasting seven months and aimed at the betterment of linguistic, mathematical, scientific and digital skills of 45 children aged between 8 and 13. The goal was to support pupils with a migrant upbringing in conditions of socio-economic fragility and at risk of educational poverty through homework and social support. At the end of the pandemic, the association maintained the after-school activity in presence and online opting for *onlife* teaching. The online teaching was requested by secondary school pupils who were autonomous in the management of the technological device and were able to obtain real benefits from the online meeting.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The research used a dual qualitative methodology: a questionnaire addressed to 29 volunteers at the end of the DAD project (2021) and 4 semi-structured interviews

addressed to the after-school coordinators (2024). The questionnaire was designed with 20 open-ended and close-ended questions to collect structural data and highlight the characteristics of the support activities carried out in such period.

The interviews were conducted with two former after-school coordinators in the online/offline mode, an after-school coordinator and the former president of the association. The semi-structured interview was planned to follow the first analysis of the results from the questionnaire, with a series of customised questions according to the in itinere and ex post coordination activity.

3.1. The volunteers' voice: advantages, disadvantages and challenges of online after-school activities

Most of the interviewees stated that the connection during meetings was 'quite good'; however, in cases of difficulties, they had to find solutions to facilitate communication, such as the use of 'lighter chats like WhatsApp'. The discontinuity of the meetings was caused by the lack of technological devices, which would cause the desire to attend to decrease. The use of mobile phones (small screen, typing difficulties, etc.) worsened the children's attention levels, which are already normally difficult to maintain in that age group.

According to one volunteer, a student 'was very distracted by the mobile phone at the beginning, because this tool was not usually associated with learning activities', but with playful activities (video games). Later on, after digital teaching began to be a well-established routine, he was able to concentrate more consistently 'by associating learning with something that could also have playful aspects of interaction'. The difficulty of supporting children in the case of specific learning disorders (DSA, BES, 104 Certification) and hardships related to the familiar contexts (indigence, socioeconomic vulnerability) emerged. It is, therefore, essential to discuss with the school on 'individual information's and/or programs for each child' to tailor the learning method.

Furthermore, 'the families did not lose confidence in the school institution. They understood the centrality and benefits of school for their child's well-being and felt empowered about their role at home. They seem to give importance to a more effectively communication with teachers. The communication desired by the volunteers revolves around 'how the child behaves at school and whether he or she manages to have serene relationships with his or her peers'. The relational sphere with the family, 'who often have problems with the Italian language', confirms how difficult and networked education is. The volunteers feel the need to 'work all in the same direction' and 'find common solutions' supported by a joint educational pact.

3.2. Coordinators' reflections: perspectives on a future and possible onlife after-school service

The analysis of the interviews with the coordinators was carried out with the help of a programme for qualitative data analysis: the NVivo software (2020 release). The research questions concerned the coordinators' (key informants) perspectives about *onlife* learning and the reflections on its benefits and potentialities as well as

its most critical issues. Moreover, the relationship between the association, the school and the families was analysed to take up the topics addressed in the first phase of the research, in favour of studying the association's strategies in pursuance of strengthening the network of the educational community.

The coordinators' considerations were examined using a top-down approach, starting from the results from the questionnaire. The interview structure included questions on four issues already addressed during the pandemic period: 1) the relationship between the association, the family and the school; 2) the advantages and 3) disadvantages of *onlife* education and 4) their reflections on the Third Sector.

Regarding the first issue, the observations revolved around the benefits from the after-school service, between the association and the school institution, and between the school and the families. In agreement with the results of the questionnaire, the coordinators affirmed the importance of being in regular contact with the teachers and the propose to introduce the service at the beginning of the school year. In this way, teachers can put the association in touch with children who feel they need this after-school service.

With respect to the advantages of *onlife* education, the coordinators referred to the flexibility and availability of the volunteers and the children; the social inclusion that was experienced thanks to this blended learning project; the maintenance of the relationship with the children who had started the face-to-face activities. Instead, the disadvantages of *onlife* education highlight the accessibility, the loss of attention, the loneliness of the volunteers during the pandemic and the issue of privacy of online activities. The increase in educational poverty comes back with the category of digital divide, which is a major concern for less affluent families. The former president of the association described the course of action during the emergency period:

> We wanted to maintain a link with the children with whom we were doing education [...]; they had no guidelines; they had no examples. It was a gamble that saw a lot of constructive activism on the part of the volunteers and allowed them to think differently about the experience.

The extracurricular support can be positively appraised. During the pandemic, a prompt and effective response was given and, thanks to the experience of that period, a new way of supporting the students was initiated.

CONCLUSIONS

Onlife activities in the Third Sector, characterised by flexibility and informality, take on a legitimacy in being socially recognised. The fact that the considerations of the coordinators (2024) are similar to those of the volunteers (2021) describes an ambivalent condition, in which openness and acceptance towards *onlife* tutoring requests remain present, but no significant improvements in the relationship with the school have emerged. This has evident repercussions on personalised support for the child.

What emerges, finally, from the research concerns the need for the Third Sector to be recognised by schools as a truly effective actor in the construction of a formal-informal axis of *onlife* lifelong learning rooted in the territory. Despite some Third Sector's limitations in the financial/planning sphere, this social institution remains a point of reference for families especially thanks to its informality and flexibility.

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HIGHER EDUCATION BETWEEN DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND ORGANISA-TIONAL CHALLENGES. A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

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By 2030, the global population of university students is projected to reach 414 million, necessitating an overhaul of existing education and training systems to address their needs. Cultivating digital skills is essential for fostering lifelong learning and mitigating inequalities. This transformation requires a comprehensive evaluation of teaching paradigms, organizational structures, management practices, evaluation processes, and competency frameworks. This study presents key findings from the Erasmus+ project ECOLHE, which employs a mixed-methods approach to conduct exploratory and comparative analyses based on six transnational case studies. The primary objective was to investigate the transition to digital processes and the adaptation of supranational directives, capturing differences and similarities and the developmental and risk trajectories within this complex process. The research contributes to understanding national public policies surrounding e-learning in Higher Education, focusing on translating critical concepts from supranational to national levels.

digital transformation, higher education, quality assurance, digital competencies

INTRODUCTION

Numerous policy documents have highlighted the potential of digital technology to enhance learning in Higher Education in recent years. However, it is crucial to explore how digital transformation can ensure inclusivity, equity and expanded opportunities for all within the real contexts of our universities.

Drawing on the translation-translation model in policy analysis (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987), it has been demonstrated that regulatory texts undergo a complex translation into practice, involving continuous reinterpretation and adaptation at various levels. Examining the processes underlying implementation and the inevitable adjustments and reinterpretations during the negotiation phase is essential.

To this end, the Erasmus+ project ECOLHE – Empower Competences for Onlife Learning in Higher Education aimed to investigate the concept of a European Higher Education Area for e-learning within the broader framework of the Bologna Process. The project sought to examine how this model was operationalized at the national

level by academic bodies. Its primary objective was to analyze how national policies interpreted European policies in practice and how the participating universities implemented these regulatory frameworks (Makrides et al., 2023).

1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary research question addressed in this study was: "How did universities promote innovation and confront digital challenges within their teaching and learning processes and activities?".

The research hypothesis was grounded on several key premises. First, more than the mere availability of technological infrastructure was needed to ensure the appropriate use of learning and knowledge technologies among faculty, students, and research groups (Capogna, 2020). Second, European policies advocated for a model of digital universities (Landri, 2018; Capano & Regini, 2015). Third, the pandemic emergency led to a hybridization of organizational and teaching models. It was important to note that the sudden and unexpected changes caused by the pandemic occurred at a time when digital technologies were not widely integrated into professional practices and teaching methods, particularly in traditional universities (Capogna, 2014; Capogna et al., 2021; Ball, 2005). At that time, universities were undergoing a transformation that would permanently alter their pre-pandemic state.

The main goal of this research was to examine the shift towards digital processes in academia and the adoption of international guidelines to identify differences and similarities. Additionally, it aimed to analyze developmental and risk trajectories in creating a common Higher Education Area, with an increasing focus on digital resources for innovation and competitiveness.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research took place in 2020-2023, and it is grounded in the concept of "circularity" between theoretical frameworks and empirical investigation, as articulated by Ardigò (1988), Lewin (1946), and Merton (1967, 2000). A mixed-methods approach was employed to conduct an exploratory and comparative analysis of six selected case studies, which were informed by the methodologies of Strauss & Corbin (2012) and Zack (2006). The institutions examined include Link Campus University (Italy), Roma Tre University (Italy), University College Cork (Ireland), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Spain), University of Patras (Greece), and LAUREA University of Applied Sciences (Finland). The study investigated how each participating university formulated its strategic approaches to digitalization. Specifically, we examined the distinct policies of each institution and their implementation of digital initiatives following the national framework. The research activities developed included different levels of analysis:

- Meta-level: A supranational theoretical framework was established in the preparatory phase to provide a common starting point, guided by European Union recommendations for the digital revolution and quality education. A

detailed research design for a multiple case study analysis was also developed and shared among partners (Serrano, 1994; Schumpeter, 1912; Yin, 2003).

- Macro-level: A literature analysis outlined the national legislative and regulatory frameworks for Higher Education institutions (HEIs) and efforts to implement digital transformation in line with European policies. This included examining national laws, e-learning policies, lifelong learning strategies, support services, funding plans, and quality assurance initiatives.
- Meso-level: Each partner country conducted three in-depth interviews with policymakers to explore the connections and coordination among stakeholders involved in the digitalisation of universities.
- Micro-level: The methodology included in-depth interviews, focus groups, and an online survey to analyze local trends affecting digital innovation in higher education. Focus groups identified best practices and support needs, while an online survey collected quantitative data on student experiences with digital transformation.

To this end, the case study analysis reports were organized as follows:

- Reconstruction of the national policy framework about digital innovation in Higher Education, supplemented by interviews with policymakers.
- Articulation of specific university policies through comprehensive document analysis.
- Qualitative analysis of focus groups comprising academic personnel (including professors, researchers, tutors, and technical-administrative staff) alongside semi-structured, in-depth interviews with academic governing bodies.
- Quantitative analysis of student experiences regarding digital transformation in teaching, derived from an online survey.

3. FINDINGS RESULTS

The outcomes of this extensive analysis have been articulated into a set of recommendations for academic institutions. These recommendations specifically focus on eight salient areas of concern: the impact of digital technologies on universities, strategies for fostering digital innovation, the dynamics of teaching and learning processes, the ramifications of the pandemic, the establishment of quality standards, the integration of digital technologies within academic frameworks, the development of innovative online training models for the professional advancement of university faculty, and the implementation of gamification practices in the realm of Higher Education. Analyzing the eight identified clusters has yielded several pivotal policy recommendations designed to facilitate the digital transformation of HEIs.

The key recommendations can be synthesized as follows:

- Establishment of digital literacy standards: Formulating both European and national standards delineating digital literacy is imperative. Such standards will ensure that students and educators acquire the requisite

competencies to succeed in an increasingly digitalized milieu.

- Augmentation of management support: Effective digital transformation initiatives require robust backing from senior management. This support should encompass the development and refinement of policies and active engagement in cultivating a technology-embracing institutional culture.
- Enhancement of funding opportunities: There is a critical need to bolster funding to fortify technological infrastructures and provide effective training for educators. Such investments are vital for empowering faculty to integrate technological tools and methodologies into their pedagogical practices.
- Promotion of Open Educational Resources (OER): Advocating the use of open educational resources can significantly improve accessibility and foster collaborative efforts among educators and students. This strategy encourages the exchange of knowledge and resources, transcending institutional and geographical boundaries.
- Investment in professional development: Ongoing professional development opportunities for educators are essential. Continuous training equips educators with the skills to incorporate new technologies into their teaching effectively and fosters a culture of lifelong learning within HEIs.
- Leverage of artificial intelligence and technological solutions: Prioritizing adopting artificial intelligence and various technological innovations can enhance learning experiences. Institutions are encouraged to explore diverse technological solutions that enable personalized learning and optimize administrative processes.
- Prioritization of cybersecurity and digital safety: Given the increasing digital engagement within HEIs, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of cybersecurity and digital safety. Institutions must implement comprehensive measures to safeguard student data and institutional assets.
- Encouragement of gender and cultural equality: Fostering equality across gender and cultural dimensions is vital in establishing inclusive educational environments. This initiative will ensure the representation of diverse perspectives and equitable opportunities within the digital educational landscape.

These recommendations collectively form a strategic framework aimed at advancing the digital transformation efforts within HEIs and promoting a holistic, innovative, and inclusive approach to education.

4. DISCUSSION

The analyses and recommendations provide a snapshot of the ongoing transformation in Higher Education, highlighting the interplay between supranational directives and the involvement of various actors in complex social dynamics. Historically, a dichotomy existed between micro-level social foundations and macro-level institutional structures, with rational choice theories focusing on individual actions and structuralist views emphasizing structural influences on actions.

In the early 1980s, a third approach emerged, bridging these perspectives by examining how individual actions contribute to emergent macro-social properties, notably discussed by Coleman (1990). Frameworks developed by scholars like Archer (1995) and Sawyer (2004) explored the interplay between micro and macro levels, while Li (2012) introduced a "meso" level that connects organizations and their environments.

The social and organizational dynamics of HEIs operate across various levels, governed by distinct rules and processes that facilitate coordination. A case study analysis revealed diverse approaches to translating supranational policies, with notable differences in Ireland and Finland, where national digital innovation strategies enable HEIs to evolve their social mission. The Finnish "Digivisio 2030" project illustrates a collaborative change management strategy. Italy and Greece's national plans show a commitment to the Anglo-Saxon model, focusing on evaluation systems and digital infrastructure. However, Italy has struggled with digital challenges due to institutional gaps. The analysis indicates a shift towards a digitally oriented model, influenced by market principles and reshaped by "platformisation" (Piromalli & Viteritti, 2019), signalling a transition from universities as tools for national priorities to a market-oriented academic capitalism aimed at fostering innovation.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

The digital revolution has fundamentally changed the role of technology. It is no longer just a tool for communication; it has transformed into a relational space that can transcend spatial, temporal, and hierarchical boundaries. Our research shows that digital maturity is a complex concept not solely tied to the "digital" domain (Capogna, Greco, 2025).

Digital transformation uses technology to alter how an organization operates and delivers value fundamentally. In education, this means integrating digital technology into the educational system to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching and learning. Over time, Learning and Knowledge Technologies (LKTs) have progressed from simple organizational aids to essential components of organizational and teaching practices. This evolution, characterized by an overload of information and relationships, has prompted supranational efforts to establish improved standardization processes at all levels of organizations. However, individuals' role and ability to engage in meaningful relationships is becoming increasingly important.

The ECOLHE action-research initiative was conceived before the pandemic, driven by a growing awareness of the need to reflect on how LKTs are integrated into the teaching, learning, and organizational processes of HEIs. Currently, the objectives and research questions underscore the importance of understanding the numerous variables involved in the complex phenomenon of digital transformation. The goal is to open new research pathways to inform guidelines and shape political planning, organizational strategies, and teaching practices. This will be achieved through

developing vision competencies, strategic planning, integrated communication, staff development, transformative and inclusive leadership, social innovation, and organizational co-design within the European Higher Education Area.

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ME, MYSELF AND (VIRTUAL)I. THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG PRE- TEENS AND ITS BODY-RELATED CONSEQUENCES. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Image-centric social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat are significantly influencing identity formation, particularly among preadolescents, despite age restrictions. These platforms facilitate user-generated content sharing, impacting emotional well-being and digital identity shaping. The pervasive use of beauty filters correlates with negative body satisfaction, especially among preadolescents, who often engage in self-comparison with peers. The research highlights the risks of prolonged exposure to filtered images, which can create a disconnect between reality and virtual representations, exacerbating body dissatisfaction and mental health issues. This study involving 2,378 Italian pre-teens revealed that 87.5% use social media, with TikTok and Instagram being the most popular. Excessive use and physical inactivity are linked to lower body satisfaction. The study found that females are more affected by social media-induced body dissatisfaction than males. Physical activity is shown to counteract negative body image effects, promoting self-esteem and well-being. Efforts to foster responsible social media use and encourage physical activities are essential. The study emphasizes collaboration among parents, educators, and institutions to enhance preadolescent well-being by educating them on managing online time and promoting positive body image. Despite its limitations, the study provides crucial insights into the interplay between social media, body satisfaction, and preadolescent well-being.

preadolescents; education; body image; social media

1. INTRODUCTION

Image-based social media platforms have gained significant popularity in contemporary societies, impacting how individuals shape their identities. However, the full extent of their influence remains unclear. Despite age restrictions for creating accounts, using image-centric platforms like Instagram and Snapchat has become common. Unfortunately, the use of filters and apps to modify one's appearance to enhance social media reputation has been associated with negative impacts on body satisfaction (Tatangelo and Ricciardelli, 2017). While social media can provide valuable support to young people (Kysnes et al., 2022), recent research

indicates that prolonged exposure to filtered images, combined with increased interpersonal ambiguity during preadolescence, can heighten the risk of creating a disconnect between reality and fantasy, as well as between one's actual physical appearance and their virtual portrayal.

1.1. Preadolescents and social media

Social media platforms are a set of internet-based applications that have been developed on the technological and ideological foundations of Web 2.0. These platforms facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content, which includes messages and photos that can reveal different aspects of users' personalities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The objective of these interactions is to enhance emotional well-being, foster social connections, and shape digital identity. As a result, social media has gained immense popularity among people of all ages, particularly the younger generation.

Generation Z, also known as "digital natives" or "screenagers", is the first generation to have been raised entirely on the internet and social media era (Turner, 2015). This era, marked by the increasing integration of information and communication technologies, is commonly referred to as the "onlife" dimension (Floridi, 2014, 2015).

Within contemporary societies, the advent of image-centric social media platforms has engendered a unique context for the formation of individual identity. Despite the widespread usage of such platforms, the full extent of their impact on identity development still remains elusive. In accordance with prior research, it has become evident that social media usage has become habitual in contemporary times, despite the age restrictions imposed for creating social media accounts. Notably, image-centered social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat are among the most extensively used and popular among the younger generation (Fardouly et al., 2020).

1.2. The use of beauty filters

The use of filters as well as dedicated applications for the purpose of modifying one's physical appearance with the aim of building a better reputation on social media platforms has been found to have a negative correlation with body satisfaction (Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023b; Jones et al., 2004; Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2017).

The present-day social media landscape is characterized by a fervent pursuit of a higher social standing. This pursuit is often accompanied by the use of filters and dedicated apps that are designed to conform to sociocultural models deemed desirable. This trend is particularly prevalent among preadolescents, who often engage in cognitive self-evaluation by comparing their appearance with that of their peers. However, this behavior can lead to negative consequences, such as an unstable identity commitment, feelings of insecurity, and health-related issues (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Steers, 2016; Tremblay et al., 2021).

Although social media may create a supportive environment for young people (Kysnes et al., 2022), the data suggests that continuous exposure to filtered images, combined with increased interpersonal uncertainty during preadolescence, increases the risk of creating a gap between fiction and reality, as well as between the actual body and the virtual representation of the body image.

1.3. Social comparison

It is not surprising that when it comes to using social networks, preteen females tend to focus more on their appearance and seek appreciation more than males, according to the results of a study exploring active and passive use of social networks for various activities (Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023b).

According to the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), people have a tendency to compare themselves with others who are similar to themselves in order to fulfil the need for self-evaluation. This comparison can either be in a downward direction, to profiles considered worse, or in an upward direction, to profiles considered better (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). In our society, physical appearance has become a significant construct as it represents an essential component of how individuals perceive themselves as a whole (Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018). A study conducted by Chua & Chang (2016) showed that adolescent girls compare themselves and their appearance to peers with higher appreciation on social networking sites, using the number of likes as a parameter for the social comparison process. Upward social comparison, with posts receiving a higher number of likes than usual, could result in a decrease in perceived self-worth and body satisfaction. In contrast, downward comparisons, with social network users receiving fewer likes than usual, help to maintain body satisfaction and self-esteem.

1.4. Body image

Body image is a multifaceted and deep-seated experience connected to our physical selves. It encompasses different aspects, including how individuals perceive, think about, feel, and act concerning their body's appearance and functionality (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Digennaro, 2021).

The concept that body image is a pliable and modifiable human experience that can be influenced by external factors such as peers and media has been posited in the literature (Cash, 2012). To comprehend the effect of such external variables on the different dimensions of body image, the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999) is commonly employed.

The Tripartite Influence Model offers valuable insights into how technology and social media impact our body image. As Giddens (1997) observed, modern society has afforded us greater control over our bodies. However, technology has also enabled us to manipulate our bodies to conform to certain standards. Social media is a significant contributor to this phenomenon, often showcasing unrealistic, touched-up images of the body (Eyal & Te'eni-Harari, 2013; Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2017). Consequently, spending time on social media can trigger body image concerns as we compare ourselves to these unattainable ideals. The

proliferation of artificial intelligence and filters has further exacerbated this issue (Digennaro, 2022; Iannaccone, 2023).

1.5. The potential role of active lifestyles

Engaging in physical activity can prove to be an effective tool in managing stress and anxiety (Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023a; Iannaccone et al., 2020; Leggett-James & Laursen, 2022). By participating in sports or physical activities, individuals can experience a more positive body image and less negativity (Sabiston et al., 2019). Research has demonstrated that engaging in sports or physical activities can positively influence individuals' perceptions of their body image, boosting self-esteem and overall well-being. It's clear that physical activity is vital for enhancing both physical and mental health, contributing to greater self-confidence and a more positive self-view (Leggett-James & Laursen, 2022).

Therefore, the primary objective of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the social media usage patterns of preadolescents and its correlation with body satisfaction, while accounting for variations in physical activity levels. This research aims to provide valuable insights into the effects of social media on the body image of preadolescents, which can be used to foster a more positive and healthy relationship with social media platforms.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Participants and Study Design

The present cross-sectional study involved 2378 Italian pre-teens aged 11-13 years (Mage=12.02 years, SD=0.82). Overall, 778 (32.7% of the total sample) (males: 54.1%; females: 45.9%) participants were 11 years old, 766 (32.2% of the total sample) (males: 51.9%; females: 48.1%) were 12 years old and 834 (35.1% of the total sample) (males: 52.5%; females: 47.5%) were 13 years old. The data collection was implemented during school hours in collaboration with the teachers at secondary schools.

To collect data, two self-administered and anonymous questionnaires were given to a convenience sample of participants. This method enabled a diverse group of individuals from different geographic areas to take part, resulting in a wide range of perspectives and experiences. While the findings may not be applicable to the entire population, they provide valuable insights into the relationship between social media, body representation, and body image within this particular sample. The questionnaires aimed to explore participants' social media usage, including the type, frequency, and use of image-based content, along with their body satisfaction and physical activity levels.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Human Sciences, Society, and Health at the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio (Approval number: 3RA2.2022.06.15). Additionally, informed consent was obtained from parents, and authorizations were obtained from all schools involved in the survey.

2.2. Instruments

Initially, participants were asked to identify their main social networks and specify whether they use them for less than two hours or for two or more hours each day. The study aimed to assess body satisfaction using a modified version of the Italian Body Image State Scale (BISS) (Cash et al., 2002; Carraro et al., 2010). The survey includes six items, each with a nine-point response format, and the body satisfaction score is calculated from the average of these six items. To ensure respondents' opinions were accurately captured, the response format was adjusted to a four-point scale, which has been shown to have good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.83$), two-week test-retest reliability, and structural validity among preadolescents.

The study utilized the Italian version of the Physical Activity Questionnaire for Older Children (PAQ-C) (Kowalski 2004, Gobbi, 2016) to measure the level of physical activity. The PAQ-C is a self-administered questionnaire with nine items, each rated between 1 (low level) and 5 (high level). It summarizes the physical activity score based on the activities that took place in the seven days before the questionnaire was administered.

3. RESULTS

The present study surveyed 2,378 pre-teens and found that 87.5% of them reported using social media. Additionally, 99% of them use messaging apps like WhatsApp or Telegram. Among the social media platforms used, TikTok was the most popular at 74.4%, followed by Instagram at 57.2%, and Snapchat at 27.9%. WhatsApp emerged as the most widely used instant messaging app among the participants at 99.9%.

Regarding daily usage, the survey discovered that 66.2% of respondents reported spending 2 or more hours on TikTok, with female respondents representing 72.7% of that group. For Instagram, 41.9% of respondents reported spending 2 or more hours daily, with 55.7% of female respondents spending this amount of time. Snapchat had the lowest reported usage, with only 9.2% of respondents spending 2 or more hours daily, and female respondents representing 68.9% of that group. WhatsApp had 54% of respondents reporting spending 2 or more hours daily, with female respondents representing 57.6% of that group.

With regards to the physical activity levels, it emerged that overall, the PAQ-score resulted in 2.57 ± 0.70, with males reporting higher values (PAQ-score: 2.73 ± 0.7) than females (PAQ-score: 2.40 ± 0.66).

To explore the level of body satisfaction among preadolescents, with the aim of gaining insights that could help improve their overall well-being, the Body Image State Scale was administered to 1308 participants, 692 of whom were male. The questionnaire started with a question on how they felt about their physical appearance. The findings showed that the majority of participants, both male (59.9%) and female (33.8%), reported feeling slightly/moderately satisfied (39.9%) with their physical appearance.

The second item on the BISS scale was designed to measure how individuals feel

about their body size and shape. For the entire sample, the most common feelings reported were slightly/moderately satisfied (463; 37.3%), with similar responses from both males (270; 58.3%) and females (193; 41.7%).

The questionnaire also focused on individuals' feelings about their weight. The most common feeling for the entire sample was slightly/moderately satisfied (389; 31.3%). For males, the results were consistent with the overall results (209; 53.7%), while for females, lower scores were obtained, with the most common feeling being moderately/slightly dissatisfied with their weight (183; 48.9%).

The study results also indicate that a large proportion of participants (42.7%) perceived themselves to be slightly/moderately physically attractive, regardless of gender. This perception was reported by both male (54.1%) and female (45.9%) participants. Additionally, the study found that the majority of participants (47.2%) shared similar feelings towards their looks, with male (55.3%) and female (44.8%) participants reporting similar results.

The final item of the BISS scale inquired about the emotions of the participants in comparison to their peers' appearance. It emerged that the most common sentiment was feeling somewhat or slightly better (476; 38.6%) about their looks in comparison to their peers. Males' results were consistent with the overall findings (294; 61.8%), whereas females had lower scores, with the most frequent feeling being moderately or slightly dissatisfied with their weight (215; 53.4%).

On average the body satisfaction score was 2.5 ± 0.9, with a higher score for males (2.6 ± 0.9) than females (2.4 ± 0.8).

The present study provides a comprehensive analysis of the association between individual characteristics, including sex, physical activity levels, and daily time spent browsing Instagram and TikTok, and overall body satisfaction. The results are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively, showcasing the descriptive statistics of the aforementioned variables.

Figure 1. Descriptive statistics for body satisfaction according to daily use of Instagram, physical activity levels, and sex.
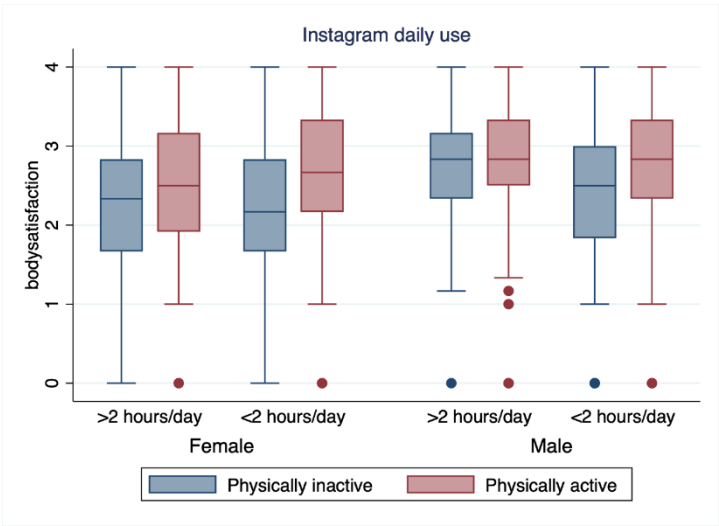
Figure 2. Descriptive statistics for body satisfaction according to daily use of TikTok, physical activity levels, and sex.
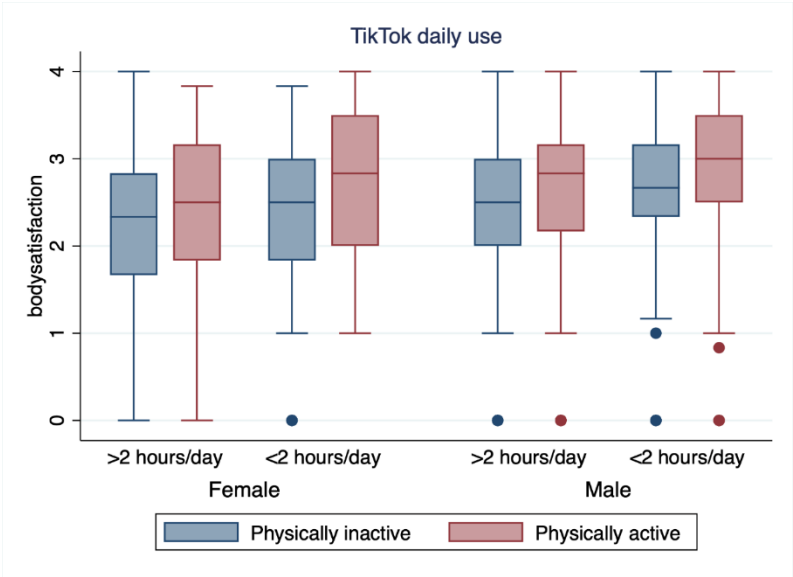
4. DISCUSSION

This research, conducted as a cross-sectional study, sought to explore the connections between social network usage, body satisfaction, and physical activity levels in preadolescents. The findings indicated that Instagram and TikTok are the most popular platforms, and that preadolescents who are inactive and spend more than two hours daily on these platforms experience reduced body satisfaction. The association between excessive social media usage and negative body image is worrisome. Parents and guardians should actively promote physical activity and manage children's social media usage. It's essential to educate preadolescents about the dangers of excessive social media use and to prioritize their physical and mental health.

In today's society, there is significant emphasis on outward appearance and its impact on self-esteem (Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018). Social media likes serve as a common means for individuals, especially teenage girls, to engage in self-comparison with others. Research indicates that receiving positive feedback can enhance happiness (Chua & Chang, 2016; Meshi et al., 2013). Nevertheless, it is crucial to be aware of the potential for a relentless cycle of modifying images on social media to conform to beauty standards and garner more likes (Eshiet, 2020).

Research has also demonstrated that when a social media post, such as a selfie, fails to garner the expected number of "likes" or followers, it may be removed (Jang et al., 2015). This behavior is particularly common among girls who seek peer validation through social media interactions (Chua & Chang, 2016). Furthermore, exposure to photo editing can lead to reduced body satisfaction, particularly in young girls (Kleemans et al., 2018). Social comparisons have also been associated with negative mental health effects in preadolescents (Fardouly et al., 2020). It is

important to understand that body dissatisfaction describes a condition where an individual feels unhappy with their physical appearance.

Research has shown that incorporating physical activity into one's routine can effectively mitigate the harmful effects of negative body image. A study by Fernández-Bustos et al. (2019) found that individuals who participate in sports or engage in physical activity experience lower levels of negative body image. However, it's important to recognize that the relationship between physical activity and body dissatisfaction is complex. Sabiston et al. (2019) observed that body image can either motivate or discourage participation in sports and physical activity. Additionally, it's important to consider that pre-teens who spend a lot of time in sedentary activities, such as using digital media, are at a higher risk of becoming overweight. Therefore, it is recommended to include physical activity in daily routines to foster a positive body image and enhance overall well-being.

For this purpose, research was conducted to promote an active lifestyle among pre-adolescents as a way to counteract the detrimental impact of stress. To motivate the students, their physical education instructor employed several strategies, such as daily step tracking with pedometers, inspirational talks, and specialized lessons on the human body. The initiative resulted in heightened levels of physical activity and improved stress management skills for the young individuals under study (Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023a).

In today's digital age, it's essential to pay attention to the amount of time our children and adolescents spend on screens. The 2020 WHO guidelines recommend limiting recreational screen time to no more than 2 hours a day (Bull et al., 2020). It's also important to make sure they take regular breaks, especially when spending long hours sitting.

In this context, physical education plays a crucial role in every child's development. It helps them acquire a motor skills repertoire that contributes to their overall growth. This motor alphabet is related to other alphabets such as reading, writing, mathematics, and drawing, and their developmental stages are interdependent. Numerous studies have highlighted the significant impact of physical education on the different areas of a person's development, including motor, cognitive, affective, behavioral, and social, and their interconnections (Colella, 2018; Edwards et al., 2017; Whitehead, 2010, 2019). By encouraging children to engage in Physical Education from an early age, teachers and educators can help them develop the necessary skills and abilities to lead a healthy and active lifestyle. It's imperative to prioritize their well-being and ensure they have access to the tools they need to thrive both physically and mentally (Bailey, 2006; Dudley et al., 2022).

Physical education is a key element of school education, contributing significantly to the comprehensive development of individuals by providing essential transversal skills crucial for everyday life, personal advancement, and maturity. To deliver a high-quality experience, well-structured lesson planning and educational strategies are essential for enhancing the learning process and positively influencing these skills. Through the integration of movement, education, and learning,

students acquire important insights into developing both critical physical and cognitive abilities, paving the way for a more engaging and holistic educational experience (Abate Daga et al., 2024). Including educational experiences that focus on physical education and sports, especially during primary school, can greatly enhance the educational system's effectiveness. These experiences create a supportive learning environment that encourages active student participation, fostering knowledge building and socio-emotional development within the classroom community (Gravino et al., 2023).

In this framework, the theory of embodied cognition allows to understand the role of the body, movement and experience in learning contexts and in the development of the cognitive area, as well as to use movement as a tool to support learning in more formal educational contexts in later stages of development (Kontra et al., 2012). Embodied learning is a contemporary pedagogical theory that emphasizes the use of the body in educational practice and the interaction between students and teachers both in and out of the classroom (Kosmas & Zaphiris, 2018; Smyrnaiou et al., 2016). Embodied learning argues that a transition from action to abstraction includes a variety of body-based techniques (e.g., gestures, imitation, simulations, sketches, and analogical mappings) (Weisberg & Newcombe, 2017). From this perspective, educational experiences are always embodied and relational, and the body plays a central role in shaping the personal experience of the world.

CONCLUSIONS

The research has provided valuable insights into preadolescents' social media habits, highlighting Instagram and TikTok as the most popular platforms among this age group. These platforms dominate by offering spaces for sharing experiences, peer connection, and self-exploration. However, spending more than two hours a day on social media can adversely affect preadolescents' body satisfaction. Exposure to idealized images and constant self-comparison can lead to dissatisfaction with physical appearance, diminishing self-confidence and psychological well-being.

The study also found that lack of physical activity is linked to decreased body satisfaction. Conversely, engaging in sports and regular exercise not only offers physical health benefits but also enhances positive body image and boosts self-worth and confidence.

The findings stress the importance of collaboration among parents, educators, and institutions to encourage responsible and constructive social media use. Educating preadolescents on managing their online presence, filtering content, and critically evaluating the information they encounter is crucial. Additionally, promoting physical activities and sports can enhance both physical and mental well-being and encourage socialization. Teaching positive body image can help counteract the unrealistic beauty standards seen in media and promote appreciation for diverse body types.

It is important to note that the study's cross-sectional nature prevents establishing

causal relationships. Nonetheless, the research provides insightful findings and highlights the need for further investigation into the complex interactions between social media, body satisfaction, and preadolescent well-being. The study's limited sample size underscores the need to replicate it with a larger population to validate and generalize the findings. Despite its limitations, this research has significantly contributed to understanding social media's impact on preadolescents, aiding in the development of targeted interventions to promote healthy social media use and foster positive body image in this age group.

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SYNTHOGRAPHIES. THE AESTHETIC AND EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES POSED BY AI GENERATED IMAGES

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This article explores the aesthetic and educational implications of AI-generated images, examining their potential to redefine visual literacy. By drawing on the contemporary aesthetic debate, it discusses how text-to-image technologies challenge traditional notions of representation, and reconfigure both the word-image relationship and the documental value of images. Finally, it advocates for a renewed approach to visual literacy, combining pedagogical and aesthetic frameworks to foster a deeper and more critical engagement with the ethical and creative dimensions of AI-generated imagery.

AI images; Aesthetics; visual literacy.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of Aesthetics, the contemporary debate discusses the hypothesis that synthographies (AI-generated images) represent a new frontier in the visual arts, as they transpose the image-creation process from the analog arts to the notational ones (D'Isa, 2023) creating a possible new artistic field within the category of artificial intelligence art (Arielli and Manovich, 2024). Secondly, the discussion regards whether AI-generated images imply a radical linguistic transformation in the visual arts, causing an epistemological shift (Bolter, 2023), which reconfigures the word-image relationship. Thirdly, such a debate explores how TTI (Text-to-image technologies) have been applied within visual culture, and how they affect aesthetic and epistemological issue (Somaini, 2023).

1. ALGORITHMIC IMAGES AND THE CONTEMPORARY VISUAL CULTURE

The latter aspect has been recently discussed by Somaini (2023; 2024), who deepened how artificial intelligence is transforming the ways in which images are generated, modified, captured, and seen.

With 'captured' the author refers to processes embedded in modern cameras, such as those integrated into smartphones, that employ deep-learning algorithms to handle what were traditionally post-production tasks. These include enhancing sharpness, adjusting contrasts, and applying stylistic corrections in real-time. The process transforms images into machine-readable data that includes metadata

and incorporates user-preferred aesthetic standards derived from social media.

'Modified', as AI has automated image-editing processes such as inpainting, outpainting, upscaling, and style transfer. These tools allow users to refine or transform images with minimal manual intervention.

This emergent non-human vision diverges markedly from human perception, as it relies on artificial neural networks that mathematically process pixels. Somaini defines is it as an 'algorithmic gaze', a term that heralds a cultural shift in which images are frequently produced by machines for other machines, without human viewers playing a central role.

Finally, they are generated by generative models emerged with text-to-image systems such as Stable Diffusion, DALL-E 2, and Midjourney, capable of generating static images from textual prompts (which the author defines algorithmic images) and sometimes from a combination of text and image inputs. By 2023–2024, this trend intensified with the introduction of text-to-video models like Gen-2 and Sora, which can produce highly photorealistic videos—currently up to one minute in length—again guided by textual prompts, or a combination of images and text:

By recalibrating the relations between images and word, text-to-image technologies are leading us towards a new visual culture in which images and words are inseparable: a visual culture in which the visible and the dicible are algorithmically connected (Somaini, 2023: 78).

2. RETHINKING THE OF THE WORD-IMAGE RELATIONSHIP

The redefinition of the word-image relationship generated by the development AI generated images has been recently analysed by Hannes Bajohr (2024), who noticed how text-to-image technologies are transforming the conceptual boundaries between text and image. Bajohr developed the concept of 'operative ekphrasis', a term that redefines the traditional understanding of ekphrasis as a performative process in which text does not merely represent or describe visual content but actively generates it. In contrast with the modern understanding of ekphrasis, which focuses on ekphrasis as an interactive process that involves a viewer and a material artifact, "a poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art" (Spitzer, 1955). Bajohr shifts the focus from representation to performance, arguing that the advent of digital and AI-driven technologies demands a rethinking of ekphrasis as an operative mechanism.

Central to this argument is the distinction Bajohr draws between traditional, sequential computing paradigms and the connectionist architectures that underpin modern neural networks. Sequential models, characterized by deterministic and transparent algorithms, contrast sharply with the probabilistic and non-linear operations of connectionist models like DALL·E. In the latter, meaning emerges from complex, multilayered neural interactions, making it impossible to directly trace input to output in a linear manner. This technical evolution enables a mode of interaction in which text and image are no longer discrete entities but are processed within a shared representational space.

Bajohr illustrates these ideas through the analysis of three visual texts, each produced using distinct technological substrates: analogue typewriting, classical digital algorithms, and neural networks. While analogue methods rely on physical manipulation to create visual structures, classical algorithms translate syntactic instructions into predetermined visual outputs. Neural networks, by contrast, introduce a fundamentally new paradigm in which text and image are encoded as the same type of data. This collapse of medium-specific distinctions, Bajohr argues, challenges established notions of digitality, representation, and creativity.

A particularly compelling aspect of the author's analysis lies in the analysis of multimodal AI systems. These systems integrate text and image within a unified computational framework, effectively dissolving the boundaries that have traditionally defined their interaction. For instance, DALL·E's architecture employs models like CLIP to create a shared embedding space, where text prompts and their corresponding images are mapped onto a common semantic field. This process not only enables the generation of novel visual outputs from textual inputs but also suggests a form of "artificial semantics". While this semantic capacity remains limited in comparison to human cognition, it nonetheless signifies a shift in how meaning is generated and interpreted in computational contexts. By foregrounding the performative, rather than representational, aspects of text/image relations, Bajohr's perspective allows, in our, view, a future fruitful exploration of the aesthetic and epistemological dimensions implied in the field of AI generated images.

3. SYNCRETIC IMAGES

A profound reconfiguration of the relationship between words and images has emerged as a central theme in the aesthetic debate on AI-generated images, with scholars exploring how these technologies reshape longstanding conceptual boundaries. Among the most insightful contributions is Montani's exploration of "inert syncretism", which examines the structural pairing of words and images intrinsic to text-to-image and image-to-text systems. The author developed a perspective which focuses on the inert syncretism of these algorithmic outputs (Montani, 2024). Firstly, the author argues that the structural syncretism in AI-generated images results from the algorithmic pairing of words and images that is inherent in TTI and ITT systems. However, the author argues that this syncretism is inherently limited. AI systems learn to generate images based on pre-existing datasets, which consist of enormous collections of labeled images. These systems operate within a latent space, where images are not seen as representations of reality but as combinations of alphanumeric data. This latent space is a black box, a zone of unknown processes that does not contain conventional images but instead complex data structures that AI uses to generate outputs. Montani asserts that AI's ability to generate images is limited by its dependence on existing datasets. These datasets are inherently biased and constrained by their source material, which is often culturally and socially specific. Therefore, AI-generated images do not represent the world directly but are, at best, images-of-images, with a meaning confined within the

system's internal logic. The creative potential of these systems, according to Montani, is thus fundamentally limited to combinatorial creativity. This form of creativity, akin to Chomsky's Rule-Governed Creativity, involves generating new combinations from a finite set of elements according to predetermined rules, but it lacks the capacity for Rule-Changing Creativity, where new paradigms or categories might emerge.

In our perspective, the most significant aspect lies in the shift of image production from analog arts to what Nelson Goodman would classify as notational, or from autographic to allographic art forms. Within this framework, AI-generated images may be considered partly autographic and partly allographic: linguistic prompts constitute only the notational component of the resulting file, just as a musical score serves as the notational backbone of a musical composition. Unlike conventional notations, however, text-to-image (TTI) prompts do not unambiguously determine the final output. The same prompt can yield different images due to the inherent randomness and variability of the AI's generative process. This indeterminacy implies that TTI cannot be wholly allographic, as the prompt does not guarantee a fixed, repeatable result.

While Montani emphasizes the inherent limitations of AI-generated images, seeing them as confined by the structural biases and constraints of their datasets, our view highlights the productive tension between these constraints and the creative possibilities introduced by the hybrid nature of their production. Where the author critiques the inert syncretism of AI systems as fundamentally limited to recombining existing elements, it might argued that such a process transposes the image-creation process from the analogue arts to the notational ones or, by drawing on Nelson Goodman's terminology (1968), from the autographic to the allographic forms of art.

In our view, the production of synthetic images using TTI software is allographic in its initial design phase, which involves formulating prompts that precisely specify the image's elements. In the subsequent phase, the process becomes autographic, as it centers on the execution of a series of linguistic prompts that shape the image's final characteristics. Ultimately, the production history of the image plays a key role in differentiating two images created with the same prompts but at different points in time.

4. THE REDEFINITION OF THE DOCUMENTAL VALUE OF IMAGES AND THE EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS INVOLVED IN AI GENERATED IMAGES

A further aspect involved in AI images is the redefinition of the documental value of images. In this regard, Fontcuberta (2024) argues that the contemporary proliferation of algorithmically generated, photorealistic images mark a watershed moment, forcing us to confront longstanding assumptions about photography's credibility as a documentary medium. Whereas some critics fear that these developments undermine the evidentiary value of photographs, the author reframes the issue, highlighting society's longstanding reliance on photography as a de facto proof of

reality—a belief system he characterizes as "an act of faith". He maintains that generative AI does not simply blur the line between authentic and fabricated images. Rather, it exposes and challenges our ingrained faith about the photographic medium itself.

Fontcuberta envisions a future in which cameras, once at the heart of image production, are reduced to functions akin to surveillance devices, much as paintbrushes have persisted as niche tools in the digital era. Generative AI, he observes, democratizes image creation by removing the need for specialized skills or labor-intensive processes. Yet, this technological ease raises fundamental questions: does it foster deeper intellectual engagement with visual culture, or does it contribute to cultural superficiality? Despite the automation of image production, Fontcuberta emphasizes that interpretation, agency, and the pursuit of deeper comprehension remain distinctly human responsibilities.

Moreover, the author links the shift from a camera-centric paradigm to generative AI with broader cultural transformations, noting the displacement of once-utopian visions such as Moholy-Nagy's modernist ideal of universal visual literacy. In this emerging AI-driven landscape, the notion of visual illiteracy evolves: the critical challenge is no longer mastering camera techniques but rather understanding and navigating AI systems.

If the advent of digital photography re-defined the image, which moved from a permanently marked surface to a transient surface, the possibility to easily create synthographies almost indistinguishable from real photographies might separate the interaction between the detective and the depictive functions to the advantage of the latter.

In our view, this emerging scenario requires the development of new forms of visual literacy. This calls for a dual approach, rooted in both pedagogy and aesthetics, to cultivate a deeper understanding of how we engage with images in an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

On the one hand, there is a need for a renewed visual literacy, a process of learning to see, understand, and critically engage with images. This involves reflecting on the very nature of images, asking fundamental questions about what an image is and how it reveals itself to us. It also means examining their historical and cultural meanings, understanding the truths they carry, and exploring their role in shaping our emotional and cognitive landscapes. Equally important is learning to live ethically with images, questioning how we interact with them and how they, in turn, influence us. Such an approach would not only foster the ability to decode and interpret images critically but also to recognize the intentions and implicit strategies they often carry.

These images can play an active role in new forms of visual literacy, offering opportunities for reflection and critical engagement. They remind us that the act of seeing is not passive but a dynamic interaction between the viewer and the image—a space where meaning is constantly negotiated and reimagined.

By intertwining these perspectives, we can move toward a more thoughtful and

responsible engagement with images. AI-generated imagery, with its unprece-dented capacity for creation and manipulation, challenges us not only to under-stand what we see but to question how we see and what those visions mean for our shared cultural and ethical future. This journey is not merely about mastering new technologies but about fostering a deeper connection between our visual world and the values that shape it, ensuring that innovation serves as a tool for enrichment rather than alienation.

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IDENTITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA ADDICTION IN THE ONLIFE ERA: A SOCIAL MEDIA DIET PROPOSAL

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In the processes of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing the digital self, along with its public and private externalizations, social media addiction (SMA) emerges as a genuine pathology with diverse manifestations. The digital revolution within the infosphere not only encompasses technological advancements but also influences how we conceptualize and perceive our identities, increasingly characterized in computational and digital terms. With hyperconnectivity defining the prevalent linkage between artifacts, information, and individuals in Western society (Hoskins, Tulloc, 2016), proposing a Social Media Diet (SMD) to contrast forms of SMA is essential, particularly as newer generations struggle increasingly to differentiate between online and offline activities (Floridi, 2014). Identity requires a greater adaptive skill, because the virtual environment invades every social and personal sphere, forcing us to manage our "user agenda" (Costa, 2018). In reality, digital technologies are imposing themselves; In this sense, Floridi (2014) argues that the current technological (r)evolution is of such magnitude as to determine a re-ontologization of our world. Consequently, OnLife Education embraces concepts such as the society of life (Floridi, 2015), hypercomplexity, and sympoiesis (Haraway, 2016), thus engaging in a journey of invention and transubstantiation within education (Di Felice, 2020). This journey leads to the development of inventive, sympoietic, and gamified pedagogical practices as a counterbalance to SMA. ICTs have ushered in widespread feelings of emptiness, disconnection, and a sense of unreality of self (Turkle, 2016). Phenomena like FoMo (Fear of Missing Out), JoMo (Joy of Missing Out), and FoJi (Fear of Joining In) require deep exploration within the pedagogical realm to understand how hyperconnectivity shapes the identity-building process for young people within the OnLife horizon and promotes critical awareness. The objective is to codify guidelines and best practices that mitigate addiction, overexposure, or any behaviour that impedes the healthy development of an autonomous, confident, and empowered "self" in terms of both thought and action (Boyd, 2014). ISTAT data from 2023 reveals that the daily use of mobile phones among the 11-17 age group increased from 86.6% in 2018/19 to 89.2% in 2021/22. The implementation of a SMD, complemented by behavioural therapies, operates at two levels: i) at the user level, it involves integrating emotional AI to monitor and correct the user's state using device sensors, while also enhancing algorithmic awareness. ii) at the network level, encompassing both family and peer groups, strategies range from monitoring screen time to addressing social disparities (such as gender-based differences in usage or new forms of exclusion arising from disconnection). Protective factors, including support from school, family, and social networks, are crucial, as are interventions targeting vulnerability factors in identity formation (e.g., self-disclosure, uncritical consumption of personal data, and the need for validation). Established therapies such as the "Reality Approach" (Young, 1999),

emphasizing activities independent of smartphones, and "Mindfulness" techniques (Chan et alii, 2022) are integral components of the Social Media Diet. Additionally, promoting an active lifestyle emerges as a successful strategy, as evidenced by a recent study (Digennaro, Iannaccone, 2023) highlighting the positive coping mechanisms of physically active pre-adolescents in stressful situations.

filter bubbles; echo chambers; identity; Onlife

1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, social media have taken on a preponderant role in the creation of relationships, influencing many aspects expressed so far by face-to-face relationships, including the process of identity formation. However, selective exposure and confirmation bias (i.e. the tendency to seek information that adheres to pre-existing opinions) contribute to the generation of filter bubbles which in turn create "echo chambers" (del Vicario, 2016), a phenomenon that has relevant implications for youth identity and the development of critical thinking.

In recent years, echo chambers have emerged as a relevant butterfly effect within virtual communities of online information and – more generally – in the field of digital communication. Users rely on social media as a source of information and interact mainly with individuals/groups who share the same opinions, values and beliefs, excluding or ignoring those that differ.

This behaviour has a significant impact on the formation and affirmation of identity, especially on generations Z and Alpha. Among the undesirable effects mentioned by the literature among the most impactful is the risk of limiting sources of information encouraging users to stay within their comfort zones of self-confirmation may lead to the polarization of opinions on a societal level. (Courtois, Slechten, & Coenen, 2018).

While echo chambers do not have a specific and consistent definition as a media effect (Bright, 2008), Sunstein builds upon anecdotal evidence and experiments in his analysis (Sunstein, 2008). Various studies utilize echo chambers as a foundational concept to investigate a diverse range of phenomena including selective exposure (Garrett, 2009), cognitive dissonance (Bright et al., 2020), and political polarization (Barbera, 2000).

This article also aims to reflect on the epistemology and dimension of the objects of study as contributors to broader phenomena – in this case social media addiction – considering the large-scale use of AI to regulate the algorithmic selection of content.

Echo chambers tend to favour the polarization of opinions, as individuals within these virtual communities are mainly exposed to content that confirms their pre-

existing ideas. This can lead to a radicalization of positions, creating an ever-increasing distance between different social groups and policies. This polarization can in turn influence identity, as individuals may perceive opinions as an integral part of their self, leading to an attitude of rejection and closure towards alternative points of view. Furthermore, echo chambers can influence the construction of reality, exposing only certain types of information or perspectives and create a perception of the reality of social events and problems, based on this partial – potentially false – information. Finally, echo chambers are pushed and fuel confirmation bias, building a virtual environment in which unambiguous opinions are constantly supported and validated. This constant confirmation strengthens the identity of individuals, increases their value with the community to which they belong, making it difficult to consider or accept alternatives or divergent points of view.

Understanding this connection is critical to addressing the challenges that echo chambers pose to diversity of thought and social cohesion in contemporary society. The methods of access to information and the distortions in the development of critical thinking are relevant for socio-pedagogical reflection on new media education and social media addiction.

2. DEFINITION OF PHENOMENA

Over the years, studies on the phenomenon have coined various definitions, including: information cocoons (Sunstein, 2007), information bubble (Liao&Fu, 2013), personal ecosystem of information (Helberger, Kleinen-von Königslöw, & van der Noll, 2015), partial information blindness (Haim, Graefe, & Brosius, 2018) and [online] echochamber (Möller et al, 2018). However, we will use the more well-known term "filter bubble" to frame "that personal ecosystem of information that is satisfied by some algorithms" (Pariser, 2011). For the purposes of the study, this essential definition must be completed; the algorithmic logic of preferential selections and the low permeability to novelty combined with a high level of self-referentiality mean that "a filter bubble is the intellectual isolation that can occur when websites use algorithms to selectively assume the information that a user would like to see and then provide information to you based on this assumption. [...] A filter bubble, therefore, can cause users to have significantly less contact with contradictory points of view, causing the user to become intellectually isolated" (Techopedia, 2018).

The development of filter bubbles can be attributed to user confirmation bias, the network's structure, its inherent algorithm, or a combination of these factors. (Bozdag et al, 2014). From these definitions emerge some characterizations that distinguish filter bubbles in the first instance from their purpose.

A filter bubble with a political connotation and one for IT and commercial purposes bring out different problems underlying each type. Profiling algorithms – and consequently the bubble for commercial purposes – create the problem of protecting digital identity and privacy in a circuit: an automated processing performed on personal data with the aim of evaluating personal aspects of the user/group. The

bubble for political purposes reveals a more intrinsic danger as it acts negatively on the formation of collective and political critical conscience, representing "an instrument of annihilation of democracy and of individual conscience in general" (Rodotà, 2012). Previous studies assert that homogeneous groups tend to become more extreme in their positions (Spohr, 2017). As a result, extremist groups convert (consciously or unconsciously) news or events into emotionally charged and politically biased news (Rehm, 2017). Furthermore, filter bubbles can indirectly impact the proliferation of fake news or online challenges (Bhatt et al., 2018; Seargeant & Tagg, 2018), thanks to the same distorting logic.

3. DATA AND RESEARCH

After excluding irrelevant studies and conducting a thorough analysis, a classification of the proposed research studies is carried out. This classification is then utilized to introduce a comprehensive architecture for a tool that synthesizes previous studies and introduces new features to combat filter bubbles.

The study describes the characteristics and elements of the proposed design and ends with a discussion of the implications for the suggested tool. There are two main research paths related to the filter bubble. The first path, influenced by Praiser's research, concentrates on the effects of recommendation systems (Divyaa, Tamhane, & Pervin, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2014; Sanz-Cruzado & Castells, 2018). These systems utilize user demographic data, browsing history, and search patterns to recommend new content from social media and search engines, leading to a filter bubble in the information received by the user.

This research stream is being increasingly challenged by the second wave of studies that shift the focus to the role of social media users rather than recommendation system technologies (Garrett, 2017; Möller et al., 2018; Resnick et al., 2013). This perspective is supported by empirical research, including a study on Facebook content that found only 5%-8% of content presented to individuals with different political views is based on their profiles (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). However, recent events such as the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018) and the widespread use of bots on social networks to influence political campaigns (Lazer et al., 2018) have highlighted the significant role these platforms play in creating filter bubbles.

Among previous research by Bozdag and van den Hoven (2015) stands out a study that examines two different perspectives on democracy, specifically a liberal view and deliberative democracy, and introduces several software projects aimed at addressing filter bubbles. The study proposes design criteria based on these democratic models to combat filter bubbles, noting that most existing tools do not explicitly define the filter bubble and are primarily focused on U.S. politics (Bozdag & van den Hoven, 2015).

Eventually, no research was found that delves beyond algorithmic enhancements of recommendation systems to explore the social phenomena contributing to filter bubbles and how these factors can be addressed by the system.

4. DISCUSSION

Examining optimization algorithms involves considering various factors like accuracy, transparency, and serendipity. The current discovery highlights a potential concern wherein recommendation services could lead users to overly rely on the system, resulting in partial information blindness known as filter bubbles. Consequently, research on recommendation systems should focus on encouraging users to seek additional information and cultivate a more balanced perspective. Additionally, policymakers should explore preventive measures to mitigate filter bubbles and enhance AI literacy. (Cho et al. 2023)

However, beyond the algorithmic selections of social media, the epistemic origins of confirmation bias – which consists of an individual cognitive tendency, the tendency towards homophily and the logic of polarization of homogeneous groups – can be traced back to psychological and social dynamics before digital technologies existed. Nonetheless, the appearance of these bubbles in the digital realm introduces new features that should be carefully examined: Loneliness within one's own bubble, since it is a condition of intellectual isolation, the virtuality of the same and the constraint of being there, often not known to the user, being the result of an algorithmic construction. On an individual level, the cognitive lever underlying the algorithmic creation of filter bubbles is confirmation bias: it consists of the tendency to focus attention mainly on information that confirms one's previous beliefs, while neglecting those that put them into question. discussion and provide alternative views (Nickerson, 1998). First, confirmation bias tends towards homophily. If this tendency is predominantly supported, without being counterbalanced by the presence of different points of view, the result is to form groups that are highly homogeneous from the point of view of opinions. When this happens, in these segmented environments, dependence is created on certain sources to receive information and (also) behavioural advice. Political extremism, for example, significantly raises the likelihood of being part of a similar group (Boutyline and Willer 2017), which can reinforce or amplify strong beliefs (Schemer, Geiß, and Muller, 2019). Homophily, the inclination for individuals to engage with others who they perceive to have similar views and values, is shown to boost the probability of forming homogeneous social circles, is at the basis of the phenomenon of echo chambers, within which it acts by combining with some particular group dynamics. This is what algorithmic systems do when they select content that confirms the user's opinions more frequently, thus inserting them into a kind of confirmation bubble. Once a homogeneous group has been created, or a digital bubble that reproduces its dynamics, polarization phenomena can take place within it: this occurs when, in a group whose members have similar starting opinions, the discussion causes so that in the end people arrive at more extreme beliefs than they had at the beginning, such that mutual reinforcement pushes homogeneous groups to become radicalized (Sunstein, 2002).

Fragmentation refers to the expansion of information sources from limited traditional channels like newspapers and news broadcasts to a diverse array of online

platforms. This shift has led to the fragmented nature of online culture, contributing to the formation of echo chambers where individuals reinforce their own beliefs through online controversies and the building of collective identities (Cinelli et al. 2021; Jamieson and Cappella 2008; Nguyen 2020).

Finally, polarization occurs when the public diverges and is segmented based on an issue or interest, trapping the user from receiving information from the outside (Bakshy et al., 2015; Foth et al., 2016; Lahoti, Garimella, Gionis, 2018; Quraishi, Fafalios, & Herder, 2018; Thonet et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2017). When the public can choose between many sources of information presenting different opinions, the possibility of fragmentation and polarization increases, creating an environment conducive to the development of an echo chamber.

Once a homogeneous group has been created, or a digital bubble that reproduces its dynamics, polarization phenomena can take place within it: this occurs when, in a group whose members have similar starting opinions, the discussion causes so that in the end people arrive at more extreme beliefs than they had at the beginning, such that mutual reinforcement pushes homogeneous groups to become radicalized (Sunstein, 2002). This dynamic arises when the drive to align with the dominant opinion in the group prevails in the participants and the tendency to bring alternative contributions and points of view disappears.

The outcome is a one-sided conversation where the group fails to consider all perspectives as members only share information that aligns with their existing beliefs. This hinders meaningful debate and instead strengthens the group's shared viewpoint, leading to a consensus rather than a diverse exchange of ideas (Wallace, 1999).

Many studies (e.g. Shatz, 2018) show that there are two main cognitive mechanisms that motivate why people activate a confirmation bias:

- Avoidance of confrontation — i.e., people tend to avoid finding out that are mistaken,
- Reinforcement seeking — i.e., people tend to find that they are right (in their ideas)

These two elements are strongly connected even if not correlated and contribute to the reduction of cognitive dissonance (i.e. the psychological stress you feel when you have two contradictory thoughts at the same time).

In the end, people mainly consume polarized content due to confirmation bias. This happens because they typically seek out content that aligns with their existing beliefs and avoid content that challenges them, to minimize cognitive dissonance. As involvement grows, polarized users broaden the focus of their attention to a greater number of topics and pages while maintaining consistency with their behavioural attitude (Brunelli, Cinelli, Quattrociocchi et al., 2019).

Several social science studies (Awan, 2017; O'Callaghan et al., 2013; Spohr, 2017) have argued that homogeneous groups are more prone to becoming extreme in their positions and consequently the creation of these groups as a result of chambers echoes can lead to extremism.

The negative consequences linked to filter bubbles have been intensively analysed, highlighting some directly related ones. The scheme below outlines the main ones: (adapted from Amrollahi, 2021):

Table 1. Negative consequences of filter bubbles (Amrollahi, 2021)

Consequence	Explanation
A decline in user trust	Social media platforms do not disclose the methods they use to filter the content displayed to users. This lack of transparency can ultimately impact the user experience and diminish trust over time (Nagulendra & Vassileva, 2016).
Limit people's access to information	Users depend on a few sources for news that do not follow professional editorial guidelines and are frequently influenced by particular ideologies. (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lahoti et al., 2018).
Social fragmentation	Filter bubbles lead to a cycle of reinforcement for users who are exposed to similar information, ultimately leading to the formation of more divided and isolated communities in the future (Möller et al., 2018).
The proliferation of fake news	A lack of exposure to reliable information from sources outside of one's own community can lead to the circulation of emotionally charged and distorted news within that community without any accountability for its accuracy (Rehm, 2017).
Extremism	The propagation of extremist ideologies is facilitated by ideological polarization in social media filter bubbles (Spohr, 2017).

The phenomena underlying filter bubbles and echo chambers, i.e. confirmation bias, the tendency towards homophily and polarization dynamics, call into question broad issues that extend well beyond the context of digital technologies and the limits of this contribution. What appears significant to underline, for the purposes of the reflection conducted in these pages, is the fact that the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers is generated by profound instances of human psychology. However, there are no studies that go beyond algorithmically augmented recommendation systems and that identify the framework and social modalities that lead to the creation of filter bubbles nor on how these instances can be managed by social system. The topic becomes relevant for sociological reflection to the extent that it concerns the ways in which individuals have access to information and develop critical thinking through the construction of a digital identity. A partly different notion of identity where the "digital" attribute indicates not only a technical

modality through which this identity comes to be circumscribed and recognized. Digitalization has made a disconnect between real identity and digital identity possible, through the creation of a virtual profile that can differ from the real one and can multiply. The creation of a different connotation of the notion of identity is no longer limited to the physical or moral dimension of the physical person but must deal with the representation of the person in the digital world. In this "other" dimension, identity takes on a dynamic connotation, as it is not only the interest in a faithful representation of oneself, but it is also the interest in updating one's identity over time, through correction and cancellation. of data and content over time.

The primacy of "relevance" operated by algorithms often excludes points of view that differ from ours, avoids showing us contents that undermine our opinion or that represent intellectual challenges for understanding all the factors that make a choice; The exclusion of different points of view in the section of posts shown or in the results list of a search limits the user's horizon of referentiality, annihilating critical thinking.

For this reason, platforms that provide content base their survival on "stickiness", that is, the ability to attract users, keep them connected to their site for as long as possible and make them come back again and again (Hindman, 2018). Therefore, algorithmic systems are programmed to maximize stickiness levels. Furthermore, algorithmic systems self-regulate based on environmental feedback and autonomously identify the best strategies to achieve them (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011). Therefore, it is not easy to define to what extent filter bubbles are the result of intentional design or a "side effect" of content personalization, but, in any case, it remains clear that filter bubbles emerge because they have proven to be attractive to users. Users, and therefore the platforms, exploit them to maximize their profits.

It is therefore necessary to reiterate that, in this as in other cases, the phenomena linked to the use of technologies can never be considered as merely "technical" issues disconnected from society, but must instead be interpreted as parts of complex socio-technical systems, systems "hybrids" generated by the intertwining of human and non-human components (Latour, 1995).

This means that education, if it wants to effectively promote in the new generations a critical ability to navigate in this alternative world, must promote a reflection that is capable not only of analysing technologies in their technical component, but also of highlighting their dimensions. socio-political and ethical-philosophical assumptions. If this is not done, the risk is that of falling back into forms of reductionism and "technological solutionism", that is, believing that it is possible to resolve ethical dilemmas and socio-political problems simply by relying on sufficiently sophisticated technologies (Morozov, 2013).

Apart from influencing youth identity, the broader implications of echo chambers extend to their impact on political discourse. The scientific community has engaged in a debate regarding the influence of echo chambers on the openness of online political discussions. Recent research indicates that in synthetic networks, echo chambers are expected to magnify the spread of information (Törnberg, 2018).

However, a comprehensive understanding of their effects in real communication networks is currently lacking.

CONCLUSION

Furthermore, it is unrealistic to imagine solving the problems connected to filter bubbles and echo chambers simply by simply programming the algorithms of digital platforms differently, without taking into consideration the underlying psychological and social dynamics (Bruns, 2019).

Secondly, although it is true that the phenomenon of filter bubbles is based on psychological and social dynamics that largely predate the advent of digital, at the same time we must not overlook the new elements connected to the peculiarities of recent technological innovations: each user is alone inside your own bubble, the bubble is invisible and you find yourself inside it without having chosen it. In this sense, the present reflection intends to fit into the perspective of a new media education oriented towards combining two components which have historically been the basis of two different ways of understanding media education: "on the one hand, critical analysis and on the other creative production" (Cappello, 2010).

Ultimately, the importance of adequate Digital Literacy should not be overlooked (even if it appears necessary to add a form of Algorithm Literacy) – to use social media correctly by developing the ability to control and filter what is placed in our virtual accounts.

A necessary first step to be able to consciously move one's growth on social media is critical analysis, which would provide the conceptual tools needed to direct attention to the mediating role played by digital platforms, highlighting the inevitable partiality resulting from algorithmic choices governed by AI. This means, in the case of filter bubbles and echo chambers, first of all becoming aware of their existence and their functioning, in order to be able to question their implications both at the level of individual experience and in terms of social consequences. It is also possible to raise the investigation to a meta-reflective level, asking whether and for what reasons similar issues appear worthy of being investigated, and how much the perception regarding certain themes is conditioned by the prevailing narratives in the public debate. For example, it is possible to observe how interest in the issue of filter bubbles and echo chambers has recorded a notable increase since 2016, the year of Donald Trump's election and Brexit: several commentators have identified the spread of these phenomena on social networks among the causes of these electoral results, while others instead responded that filter bubbles and echo chambers were used by those who lost these elections as scapegoats, to avoid recognizing the social problems and the lack of political responses of which these elections were an expression (Moggia, 2017). If therefore critical analysis appears indispensable, it nevertheless risks proving sterile when it is not accompanied and compared with the experimentation of concrete practices: "critical analysis, in order to take on some pedagogical value, must be situated, the thought abstract must be channelled and embodied in the flow of emotions, pleasures and creative action

activated during practical work" (Cappello, 2010).

With respect to the topic of filter bubbles, this means that the users themselves, once they have acquired a certain awareness regarding the phenomenon, will have to choose whether and how to inhabit these digital "bubbles": for example, they can decide to exploit their positive potential, such as the possibility of consolidating the network of contacts with whom you share opinions and interests, or on the contrary, if you intend to counteract the tendency towards homophily, you can try to diversify your bubble by interacting with people and sites that express different points of view than to your own. Or you can decide to stop using certain applications if they are identified as "toxic", once you realize that they are designed to trigger dynamics that are harmful (Lanier, 2011). In summary, when it comes to interfacing with technologies there are many possibilities, and new media education can contribute to them by offering, on the one hand, conceptual tools to analyse what exists, and, on the other, spaces and times. in which to discuss the uses made of technologies and experiment with different practices, starting from an enhancement of the knowledge and practices already developed in everyday life (Aagaard, 2021). Many current methods for modelling and identifying echo chambers have emphasized polarization without a clear definition of the concept. Another popular approach is to use the frequency of interactions as a way to detect the presence of echo chambers. However, recent studies have emphasized the importance of measuring individuals' leaning or opinions to accurately quantify echo chambers, going beyond simple interaction metrics. Additionally, stance detection methods show promise in this domain. However, a notable drawback in current research is the lack of focus on strengthening beliefs within echo chambers, with only a limited number of studies tackling this issue. Mahmoudi et al. (Mahmoudi, 2024) seek to shed light on the value of echo chambers, questioning the widely held notion that they are only harmful. Their goal is also to create a unified definition of the concept by reaching consensus among various definitions.

The concept of echo chambers encompasses various associated aspects, including modelling, detection, mechanisms, and attributes, each extensively researched. However, most studies tend to focus on specific facets, with comprehensive investigations covering all aspects being relatively rare. Many studies tackle echo chambers without following a specific criteria.

Therefore, developing the idea of echo chambers should be a key focus of research. Additionally, studying the lifespan of this phenomenon can offer valuable insights into how information spreads, opinions evolve, and social inequality exists within networks.

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH: NAVIGATING THE COMPLEX TERRAIN OF BEAUTY STANDARDS AND BODY IMAGE DISTORTION. A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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In recent years, the widespread adoption of social media has immersed users in content dominated by conventional beauty ideals and the relentless pursuit of perfection. This pervasive influence has significantly altered the perceptual landscape for young individuals, particularly pre-adolescents and adolescents, shaping their self-evaluations and contributing to distorted notions of beauty. The virtual realm, saturated with carefully curated and idealized images promoting unattainable beauty standards, has intensified concerns about body image. This study aims to comprehensively examine the intricate interplay between social media use and the body image of preadolescents and adolescents. Through a meticulous systematic review of 16 studies, a consistent consensus emerges, highlighting a noteworthy correlation between key variables such as the duration of social media usage, problematic engagement patterns, specific activities within these platforms, and heightened levels of body dissatisfaction.

social media; body image; adolescence

INTRODUCTION

Body image is a multifaceted construct encompassing four fundamental dimensions: the individual's perception of their physical appearance, emotional experiences related to their body, and cognitive beliefs and attitudes about their physical self (Cash & Smolak, 2012). Distortions in body perception can significantly affect psychological well-being (Tomas-Aragones & Marron, 2014). Numerous studies underscore the crucial influence of sociocultural factors in the development of body dissatisfaction (Cafri et al., 2005). A negative body image can stem from various sources, including family influences, peer interactions, media portrayals, and social pressures (Shen et al., 2022), all of which can impact self-esteem, competence, and social functioning (Hosseini & Padhy, 2023).

In recent years, the rapid proliferation of social media has exposed an ever-expanding user base to content promoting conventional beauty standards, idealizing thinness, and glorifying perfection. Consequently, body dissatisfaction often arises from internalizing these aesthetic ideals and the difficulty of meeting the beauty standards perpetuated by the media (Jiotsa et al., 2021). Those who spend

significant time on social platforms are frequently subject to continuous feedback on their physical appearance (De Vries et al., 2016). Social media offer young users' constant evaluations of their looks through comments and "likes" (De Vries et al., 2019).

Online communities, often defined by shared interests, ideologies, or lifestyles, play a significant role in shaping an individual's identity, values, and beliefs. In some cases, these online communities exert a stronger influence than physical social contexts (Lüders et al., 2022). These dynamics can greatly affect self-perception, leading to body dissatisfaction and image-related issues. Constant exposure to seemingly perfect lives and experiences on social media can fuel feelings of inadequacy and envy, influencing self-esteem and overall well-being (Samari et al., 2022). Furthermore, the pursuit of online validation, in the form of "likes" and positive comments, can foster dependence on external affirmation, linking self-worth to online approval (Chen & Sharma, 2015; Papaioannou et al., 2021).

A critical feature of social networks is their interactivity, which allows users to actively participate in creating and curating content. This interactivity enables individuals to shape their online presentation and self-perception (Dwivedi et al., 2022).

This issue is particularly relevant during preadolescence, a transitional stage characterized by the anticipation of impending puberty. Preadolescence is recognized as a vulnerable developmental period, heightening susceptibility to various issues, including eating disorders, social anxiety, and depression (Khan & Avan, 2020). As preadolescents anticipate the onset of puberty and the associated bodily changes, they often experience increased sensitivity and self-awareness regarding their appearance. The formation of body image begins during this developmental phase, and constant comparisons with the beauty ideals promoted by social media can significantly impact body satisfaction.

Sociocultural factors exert a substantial influence on the development of preadolescents' body image, and it is essential to acknowledge that in the digital era, social media play a leading role in this domain (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019). In the digital context, preadolescents are exposed to an abundance of images promoting stereotypical beauty ideals. These platforms often showcase individuals embodying flawless beauty, adhering to unrealistic standards. As a result, this exposure encourages heightened self-criticism and fuels a desire to conform to these unattainable ideals, sometimes leading preadolescents to fear judgment and rejection based on their physical appearance (MacCallum & Widdows, 2018).

Despite age restrictions on many platforms, preadolescents often find ways to gain unauthorized access to social networks, exposing themselves to content that may not align with their developmental needs. Although this phenomenon is often underestimated and rarely investigated, it highlights the importance of thorough examination and understanding, as it poses potential risks to their cognitive and emotional well-being.

For adolescents, scientific research is more extensive, mainly due to the recognized critical nature of this stage and their legal accessibility to social platforms.

Adolescence is considered a crucial developmental period (Dorn & Biro, 2011), leading to a broad array of studies on the influence of social media on adolescents (Boursier et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2019; De Vries et al., 2016; Ho et al., 2016). Moreover, legal regulations typically allow adolescents to access and engage with social media, contributing to a more substantial body of research on this age group.

Implementing educational initiatives aimed at fostering a positive body image, promoting resilience, and encouraging safe and appropriate use of social media emerges as a potential solution to mitigate the negative effects of early exposure to beauty standards during this critical developmental stage (Thai et al., 2024). Addressing this issue comprehensively considering both internal and external factors influencing body image and well-being is essential for creating a more supportive and nurturing environment for younger generations.

This study examines the influence of social media use on young individuals' body image by analyzing published research to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between these platforms and body image-related issues.

1. SOCIAL MEDIA AND BODY IMAGE

In contemporary society, a prominent transformation is the progressive convergence between the real and the virtual realms, a phenomenon primarily driven by the dynamics of social networking platforms (Floridi, 2015). These digital mediums, exemplified by platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and others, serve as environments where individuals curate and mold their digital identities. In this context, users are meticulous in selecting and presenting facets of themselves, often portraying an idealized version of themselves.

The virtual interactions facilitated by these platforms enable individuals to engage with others, share multimedia content, and create a digital presence that can exist independently of their physical experiences. Furthermore, individuals frequently engage in social comparisons with the content they encounter on social networks, which often features meticulously edited and filtered imagery. These comparisons can give rise to unrealistic beauty standards and engender concerns regarding one's body image.

Moreover, the feedback and validation received through social networks wield a substantial influence on an individual's self-esteem and self-worth. The reception of likes, comments, and reactions from one's social network, which includes friends and followers, can either bolster or diminish one's self-perception.

Online communities, often characterized by shared interests, ideologies, or lifestyles, can substantially contribute to the construction of an individual's identity, values, and beliefs. In some cases, these online communities can exert a more pronounced influence than one's physical social circles.

These dynamics can significantly impact self-perception, potentially leading to body dissatisfaction and a negative self-image. The continuous exposure to seemingly perfect lives and experiences portrayed on social media can foster feelings of

inadequacy and envy, thereby affecting an individual's self-esteem and overall well-being. Furthermore, the pursuit of online validation in the form of likes and positive comments can instigate a dependence on external validation, linking one's sense of self-worth to online approval.

A critical aspect of social networks is their interactivity, which empowers users to actively engage in content creation and curation. This interactivity enables individuals to play an active role in shaping their online presentation and self-perception.

These dynamics raise substantive concerns, particularly regarding younger users. Adolescents and young adults are notably susceptible to the influence of social media on self-perception, given that they are in a pivotal phase of identity development and are more susceptible to the beauty standards and ideals projected via social media.

Social networks play an instrumental role in the dissolution of the boundary between reality and virtuality. They serve as platforms for the construction of digital identities and exert a substantial influence on self-perception, including its impact on self-esteem and self-worth. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics is indispensable for addressing potential challenges that emerge from the influence of social media on self-perception, especially among younger users.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Search Strategy

The aim of the present systematic review was to analyse and comment the studies that has investigated the influence of social networks on the body image of pre-adolescents and adolescents. This paper was performed following PRISMA guidelines (2020). The search strategy included a combination of terms: body image, social networks, and preadolescents/adolescents. Inclusion and exclusion criteria have been predefined to investigate all titles, all abstracts and full text of identified records. Inclusion criteria:

1. Cross sectional and longitudinal studies that investigated the connection between social networks and body image of pre-adolescents and adolescents.
2. Studies that employed quantitative method.
3. Studies that involved pre-adolescents and adolescents.
4. Studies that investigated body image as first outcome.

Exclusion criteria:

1. Type of studies excluded: review and metanalysis.
2. Sample with a mean age over 19 years old.
3. Studies written in a language other than English.
4. Editorials, commentaries, case and protocol studies, conference proceedings, books and book chapters, theses.

Data and study characteristics from all the final eligible studies were imported into a database including study title, authors, publication year, journal, study design and keywords.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Overview of findings

The sixteen studies analyzed in this review aim to clarify how modern media and social networking platforms influence body image concerns among preadolescents and adolescents. The studies' objectives are divided into several categories. The first category focuses on the effects of social media use and exposure to idealized body images (Boursier et al., 2020; Brajdić Vuković et al., 2018; Fardouly et al., 2020; Kaewpradub et al., 2017; Mesce et al., 2022; Sagrera et al., 2022; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). The second explores the processes of social comparison on social networking sites (SNS) and their impact on body dissatisfaction (BID) and the drive to achieve aesthetic ideals (Martinac Dorčić et al., 2023; Meier & Gray, 2014).

The third category examines the relationship between self-objectification, beliefs about appearance control, and body image management through photo-sharing, as well as problematic social network use among preadolescents and adolescents (Chang et al., 2019; Çimke & Yıldırım Gürkan, 2023; Digennaro & Iannaccone, 2023). Lastly, the fourth category investigates the role of peers and celebrities in the body objectification process related to social network use (De Vries et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2016).

The analysis also identified three key dimensions: the time spent on online platforms, activities performed on social media, and the likelihood of developing social network addiction. Regarding time spent on social platforms, Tiggemann and Slater's (2014) study revealed a positive association between prolonged use of platforms such as MySpace and Facebook, increased body surveillance, and internalization of thinness ideals. Similarly, Brajdić Vuković et al. (2018) confirmed a significant correlation between time spent on social media and adolescent girls' tendency to monitor and critically judge their bodies.

De Vries et al. (2014) hypothesized that greater use of social networks could lead to increased body dissatisfaction. The findings supported this hypothesis, suggesting that frequent social media use contributes to a negative body perception.

Three studies focused on specific activities on social media. Ho et al. (2016) explored the impact of exposure to various types of content, finding that social comparison with peers is strongly associated with greater body dissatisfaction and a desire for a slim and muscular physique. Meier and Gray's (2014) study examined the relationship between Facebook use and body image among adolescent girls, highlighting a significant correlation between Facebook use, the internalization of thinness ideals, and self-objectification. The study also found a negative correlation between Facebook use and satisfaction with one's weight, even when considering body mass index (BMI). Comparisons between Facebook users and non-users showed significant differences in age, self-objectification, and physical appearance comparison, with higher scores among Facebook users.

The study emphasized that time spent on photo-related activities on Facebook, rather than total time on the platform, was more strongly associated with body image disturbances among adolescent girls. These findings underline the importance of

examining specific Facebook features in research, with practical implications for parents, healthcare professionals, and prevention programs.

Seemingly harmless activities, such as using filters and apps to alter one's appearance, can negatively impact body satisfaction, as shown by Digennaro and Iannaccone (2023). A positive correlation was also found between adolescents' tendency to manipulate their images in photos and problematic social network use (Boursier et al., 2020). Chang et al. (2019) explored the influence of posting photos on social media, revealing a significant positive correlation between this activity and body self-esteem. The study examined three types of selfie-related activities on Instagram: "browsing", "posting", and "editing".

"Browsing" involved viewing others' photos, measured by how often girls checked Instagram and scrolled through peer posts. "Posting" referred to sharing selfies, quantified by the number of selfies posted weekly. "Editing" included pre-posting preparation, such as using apps or taking multiple shots to enhance one's appearance.

Finally, an important variable is social network addiction. Overall results from these studies showed a significant positive correlation between social media addiction and body image concerns, with no gender differences (Mesce et al., 2022).

3.2 Social Comparison and Self-Objectification

In light of the results discussed, it is clear that social network use can have a significant impact on body image among adolescents and preadolescents. The studies analyzed reveal that exposure to idealized images on social media and the time spent on body image-related activities, such as posting and editing photos, are associated with greater body dissatisfaction and an increasing tendency toward self-objectification and body surveillance. In particular, the research highlights how specific features of social networks, such as the ability to compare oneself with peers and the use of apps to alter physical appearance, can exacerbate these issues, contributing to an increased desire to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. One of the most relevant aspects that emerged is the difference in impact between overall social media use and time spent on specific activities, such as photo-related interactions. While general social media use does not always correlate directly with body dissatisfaction, activities involving image manipulation and social comparison appear to have a more pronounced effect. This suggests that it is not so much the amount of time spent on social networks that is decisive, but rather how these tools are used. Social comparison on social media plays a central role in reinforcing body dissatisfaction. When adolescents and preadolescents use platforms to compare themselves with idealized images of their peers or celebrities, they tend to internalize beauty standards that are often inaccessible or unrealistic. These dynamic fuels feelings of inadequacy and drives many young people to attempt to alter their appearance through filters or editing apps, further accentuating the gap between their real bodies and the idealized ones.

Another crucial aspect is the social pressure generated by the platforms: constant interaction with "likes", comments, and reactions from followers can create a psychological dependency on external feedback, making young people more vulnerable to judgment from others. This can contribute to the development of a distorted sense of self-worth, which becomes tied not to personal qualities or skills, but exclusively to physical appearance and its social approval.

3.3 Gender differences

A significant aspect that emerged from the existing literature is that a considerable portion of the studies focuses predominantly on female groups, while research involving male groups is relatively limited. This gender imbalance in research suggests a potential bias in the current body of knowledge and highlights the need to include more diverse gender perspectives. While most of the studies analyzed report differences between males and females, indicating that females tend to experience body dissatisfaction more frequently (De Vries et al., 2016; Boursier et al., 2020; Fardouly et al., 2020; Sagrera et al., 2022; Martinac Dorčić et al., 2023), this phenomenon should not be considered solely a female issue. Understanding how social media influences body image in both genders is essential, as it could reveal distinct vulnerabilities. Existing studies highlight that, although body dissatisfaction is particularly pronounced among adolescent girls, boys also face increasing pressures regarding aesthetic ideals. However, body image concerns in boys often manifest differently than in girls. While girls are generally more inclined to desire a slim and toned body, boys tend to focus more on developing a muscular and strong physique, adhering to male beauty standards characterized by hypermasculinity and physical strength. The use of social networks by boys can therefore increase the pressure to develop a muscular and defined physique, fueled by images of ideal bodies promoted on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which often promote the idea of almost unattainable physical strength.

While social comparison is a central theme for both genders, the processes through which it manifests may vary. Girls tend to compare themselves to idealized images of female beauty, often based on characteristics such as thinness, perfect skin, and well-groomed hair, leading to an increase in self-objectification. This phenomenon causes girls to internalize the idea that their value is primarily determined by their physical appearance, pushing them to conform to unrealistic aesthetic standards through the use of filters and photo-editing techniques.

Boys, on the other hand, compare themselves more with ideals of strength and masculinity, and although the phenomenon of self-objectification is less studied in them, it is still present. Male beauty standards promoted on social networks often encourage young people to build an image of hyper-masculinity, linked to a sculpted physique, fueling the desire to achieve a muscular body. This type of pressure can lead boys to engage in intensive workouts or use supplements, and in some extreme cases, steroids to reach the ideals proposed online.

In addition to the differences between males and females, it is crucial to recognize and include in the analyses people who do not identify within the traditional binary gender categories. Non-binary, gender-fluid, or transgender individuals face unique challenges related to body image, often exacerbated by the rigid gender norms promoted on social media. These individuals may experience a double level of pressure: on one hand, comparing themselves to the idealized bodies of both traditional genders, and on the other, facing invisibility and the lack of realistic representations of non-conforming gender identities on social networks. Studies that consider the experiences of people outside the binary categories are still scarce but essential to fully understand how body image is influenced by social media in a nuanced and inclusive way. Ignoring these aspects would be a serious oversight, as it would prevent a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the various ways in which social media affects body image perception. Therefore, it is crucial that future research includes a broader range of gender identities and considers the specific experiences of boys and those non-conforming to traditional gender roles. Only in this way will it be possible to develop more targeted interventions and more effective support strategies for all young people, regardless of their gender identity.

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of this review was investigating the relationship between the use of social networks and preadolescents and adolescents' body image. This section reflects upon the findings and considers the implications for practice and future research. All studies have found a correlation among the variables under consideration: the time spent using social networks, the problematic usage of these platforms, the type of activities conducted on social media, and body dissatisfaction. While exploring the impact of social networks on body image in preadolescents and adolescents, it is important to note certain considerations that can further enhance the depth and accuracy of research in this area.

Firstly, it is noteworthy that a substantial proportion of existing studies tend to focus on female groups, while studies involving male groups are relatively limited. This gender imbalance suggests a potential bias in the current body of knowledge and highlights the need for more research that encompasses diverse gender perspectives. Understanding how social media affects the body image of both genders is essential, as it might reveal distinct vulnerabilities and coping mechanisms. Furthermore, as we delve deeper into the study of body image and its relationship with social media, it's imperative to recognize and include individuals who do not conform to conventional gender categories, which are traditionally defined as male and female. The experiences and challenges faced by individuals who identify outside of these traditional gender binaries also play a crucial role in understanding how social media influences body image perceptions. Neglecting this aspect would be a significant oversight, as it's essential to gain insights into the diverse and nuanced ways in which social media can impact the body image of all individuals, regardless of their gender identity.

Secondly, it's worth highlighting another important consideration in the realm of body image research related to the age categories used in various studies. Many studies employ relatively broad age categories, often encompassing terms like 'adolescents' or 'preadolescents.' While these general age groupings can provide valuable insights, they might not capture the intricacies of age-related experiences.

A potential refinement in the research approach involves the adoption of more specific age categories. This can mean breaking down the broad categories of 'preadolescence' and 'adolescence' into finer-grained segments, such as early preadolescence, late preadolescence, early adolescence, mid-adolescence, and late adolescence. Each of these developmental stages comes with its unique challenges, both in terms of body image concerns and social media exposure. By delving into these more specific age categories, researchers can uncover age-specific trends and vulnerabilities.

Furthermore, the influence of culture and ethnicity cannot be understated. The experience of body image in preadolescents and adolescents may vary significantly across different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Research should consider these variables in a more systematic manner to ensure that findings are applicable across diverse populations. Different cultural norms and beauty ideals can shape how social media impacts young individuals' body image, and addressing this diversity is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, research on preadolescents and adolescents' body image in the context of social network usage is a crucial area of study that requires a multifaceted approach. Acknowledging the existing gender imbalance in research, narrowing down age categories, and incorporating culture and ethnicity considerations into studies are steps that can enhance the accuracy and applicability of findings.

As the role of social media in young individuals' lives continues to evolve and grow, it is imperative that researchers embrace these considerations to ensure their studies provide insights that can inform effective interventions and support for preadolescents and adolescents navigating the complex landscape of body image in the digital age. Additionally, fostering a more inclusive and diverse research approach will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, with findings that are more universally applicable.

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NURTURING BODY LITERACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND VIRTUAL REALITY IN SHAPING CHILDREN'S BODY IMAGE WITHIN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

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The rise of virtual reality has reshaped identity formation from childhood, particularly in how children perceive their bodies. This perception is often distorted, and influenced by social factors such as family, peers, and social media. Social media promotes unrealistic body ideals, leading to early self-comparison and, in some cases, body dissatisfaction. Many children now engage with social media before the legal age, accelerating its impact on body image (Neves et al., 2017). Childhood is a critical period for developing body image, which continues to evolve throughout life. Concerns about body weight and appearance can emerge as early as childhood (Bozzola et al., 2022). As a result, education should prioritize promoting body literacy, encompassing body awareness, interoception (recognizing internal sensations and emotions), perception (socially influenced body evaluation), and comprehension (understanding body functions and health). These skills enable children to develop a positive body image and make informed health decisions (Digennaro & Visocchi, 2024). This study underscores the importance of educational interventions that foster body literacy through embodiment, highlighting the role of educators in promoting body awareness. Schools provide an ideal setting to cultivate these skills, supporting children's holistic development and well-being in an era dominated by virtual reality and social media.

body literacy, educational intervention, children, social media, culture

INTRODUCTION

Body image, defined as an individual's perception and attitude toward their own body, begins to develop remarkably early in life. Body image can be considered a multidimensional concept, and it is the mental representation of own body (Burychka et al., s.d.). It plays a fundamental role in shaping a child's self-esteem, emotional well-being, and social development. From a very young age, children are exposed to various influences, including family, social settings, and increasingly, digital and media content. These factors converge to create a framework through which children start to perceive their bodies and form expectations about appearance (Bozzola et al., 2022). Through observation and imitation, children absorb and

internalize societal standards, often associating personal value with physical attributes based on external cues. Family interactions, for instance, can have a lasting impact; a parent's comments about weight, appearance, or their own body image can profoundly influence how a child sees themselves. Parental attitudes and communication about the body provide a foundation for how children learn to regard their own bodies, either instilling a sense of self-acceptance or unintentionally contributing to self-critical perspectives (Gardam et al., 2023).

Cultural context also plays a crucial role, as different societies uphold distinct ideals and norms surrounding beauty, which shape the ways children think about their bodies. In some cultures, thinness may be idealized, while in others, different body types are celebrated, affecting how children learn to value or critique themselves. The rise of digital media adds another layer of influence, exposing children to filtered, idealized images that can create unrealistic expectations even at an early age. This exposure, if unmediated, can lead to internalized pressures to conform to narrow beauty standards, thus undermining body confidence (Abdoli et al., 2024).

Educational interventions focused on promoting body literacy—defined as the understanding, respect, and acceptance of one's body—are therefore essential in early childhood. Such programs equip children with the tools to develop a positive and resilient self-image, emphasizing diversity in body types and fostering critical thinking toward media representations. By teaching children to appreciate the natural diversity of bodies and encouraging open, positive dialogue within families, these interventions can mitigate the risk of early body dissatisfaction. Early body literacy is not just preventative; it lays the foundation for lifelong self-acceptance, resilience against social pressures, and a healthier approach to self-image in a world that continually imposes narrow standards of beauty (Digennaro & Visocchi, 2024; Visocchi & Digennaro, 2023).

The primary objective of this article is to emphasize the importance of proactive intervention in nurturing a healthy, positive body image from early childhood, primarily through educational programs focused on developing body literacy. Body literacy encompasses a child's understanding, respect, and acceptance of their own body, as well as the critical skills needed to navigate and evaluate the often-unrealistic body standards perpetuated by social media. Given that children today are exposed to digital environments at increasingly younger ages, the urgency of this topic cannot be overstated. The influence of social media on children's body image has been linked to a concerning rise in anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and an increased risk of developing eating disorders, often beginning during formative years when children are especially impressionable (Suhag & Rauniyar, 2024).

On a global scale, extensive research underscores the profound effects of social media on young people's self-perception and body image, though the specific impacts can vary significantly across different cultural settings. In many Western countries, for instance, thinness and idealized physical perfection are often promoted, potentially intensifying body dissatisfaction among young viewers. In contrast, other cultures may value different body standards or hold varying

perspectives on physical appearance, making it clear that a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient. Tailored, culturally sensitive educational interventions are necessary to address these nuanced perceptions and to build resilience against negative body image in diverse populations (Xie, 2024).

Moreover, the family and social environment play a crucial role in shaping children's attitudes toward body image, often either reinforcing or counteracting the messages encountered online. Recognizing the interwoven influences of culture, family, and social media exposure is essential for developing comprehensive and effective interventions. Future research should further investigate these multifaceted dynamics to inform culturally responsive, evidence-based programs that empower children with the tools to maintain a positive body image amidst a media landscape that often promotes unattainable ideals (Collin, 2015).

1. BODY LITERACY

Body image refers to a person's perception, feelings, thoughts, and behaviours related to their physical self. This concept starts developing in early childhood, generally between ages 9 and 12 for girls and 10 and 13 for boys and continues into adolescence. However, body dissatisfaction can appear even earlier, with some children, starting around age 6, expressing unhappiness with their bodies due to early comparisons with societal ideals of appearance (Navarro-Patón et al., 2021).

Social influences, especially from family, friends, and media, play a powerful role in shaping body image. According to Thompson's "Tripartite Influence Model", these influences impact body image both directly, by setting societal ideals, and indirectly, by encouraging comparisons with these ideals. This often leads to body dissatisfaction, especially as children become more aware of appearance standards and start comparing themselves to these unrealistic ideals (Thompson et al., 1999).

With the rise of social media, body image issues are emerging at younger ages. Platforms like Instagram and Snapchat present carefully curated images that set unrealistic beauty standards, often altered with filters and editing. In Italy, a significant percentage of children ages 6-10 regularly use social media, exposing them to these edited images and idealized body types. Research highlights that this exposure correlates strongly with body dissatisfaction, as children and teens who don't meet these ideals often struggle with negative body image and related concerns (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022).

This constant exposure has led to a "real vs. virtual" body conflict, where children invest heavily in their online image, often struggling to separate it from reality. Consequently, body image concerns during childhood have become more common, emphasizing the need for interventions to promote healthier body perceptions and counteract the effects of social media on young individuals (Visocchi & Digennaro, 2023).

To reduce the harmful effects of social media on children's and young people's body image, it is essential to focus early on building and strengthening their ability

to withstand negative external influences that could impede healthy body image development. This requires a proactive approach, equipping young people with the knowledge, skills, and resilience necessary to navigate the digital world with a positive self-image. Promoting a culture that celebrates body positivity, and a deeper understanding of the embodied human experience is fundamental (Mazzeo et al., 2024).

Educational institutions are ideally positioned to provide young individuals with the skills needed to interact safely with virtual environments. Schools offer a structured setting to guide young people in understanding the complexities of body image development, which is increasingly intertwined with digital influences. Additionally, schools present a valuable opportunity to develop "body literacy"—a comprehensive awareness that includes body perception, awareness, interoception, and comprehension (Digennaro & Visocchi, 2024).

These aspects are defined as follows: *body awareness* involves understanding one's body concerning space, others, and surroundings; *body interoception* involves recognizing and interpreting internal bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts; *body perception* relates to one's subjective evaluation of their body, influenced by sociocultural factors such as personal experience and social context; and *body comprehension* refers to a knowledge of bodily functions and maintaining well-being (Digennaro & Visocchi, 2024).

Additionally, gender differences significantly impact body image, shaped by societal ideals often portrayed in media. Women and men face distinct pressures, with women often experiencing dissatisfaction related to perceived excess weight and men focusing on muscle mass. These gender-specific ideals highlight a thin ideal for women and a V-shaped physique for men. Regardless of these differences, internalizing these ideals can lead to body dissatisfaction, affecting behaviour, self-esteem, mental health, and overall quality of life (Fischetti et al., 2019).

Another critical factor is *emotional literacy*, which includes emotional intelligence and emotion regulation, both vital for fostering a healthy body image. Emotion regulation entails monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting emotional responses, while emotional intelligence involves recognizing, appraising, and managing emotions effectively. High emotional intelligence is linked to positive attitudes, adaptability, and better physical health. Conversely, low emotional intelligence has been shown to predict body dissatisfaction and symptoms of eating disorders, particularly among adolescents (Amado Alonso et al., 2020).

2. THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON BODY IMAGE

Social media platforms play a significant role in shaping perceptions of body image, and this influence extends beyond adolescents and young adults to include even children. Studies indicate that children are accessing social media at increasingly younger ages, exposing them to curated and often idealized representations of beauty and body standards. This early exposure can have profound effects on body image, as children may begin to internalize unrealistic standards of attractiveness

and physical appearance before developing a stable sense of self (Anderson, 2018; Collin, 2015; Neves et al., 2017). The interactive nature of social media—where users, including children, can like, comment, and share content—exacerbates these effects by encouraging social comparisons and amplifying the pressure to conform to societal ideals. Moreover, the widespread availability of filters and photo-editing tools allows users to alter their appearances in ways that distort reality, further promoting unattainable body ideals (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Research has linked these factors to increased body dissatisfaction, reduced self-esteem, and heightened risk of eating disorders among younger users (Pelc et al., 2023). This paper aims to explore the mechanisms through which social media impacts body image, especially in children and adolescents, and discusses possible interventions and policy measures to mitigate these harmful effects.

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL, FAMILY, AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Cultural, familial, and social contexts are fundamental in shaping children's perceptions of body image, influencing how they internalize media representations and societal expectations. Cultural norms, which vary significantly across countries and communities, play a central role in defining what is considered an 'ideal' body shape, thereby affecting how social media impacts young users. In cultures where thinness is highly valued, children may feel increased pressure to conform to slim body ideals, often leading to body dissatisfaction (Abdoli et al., 2024). Conversely, in cultures that appreciate diverse body types, children may experience more flexibility and acceptance regarding body image, which can act as a buffer against the pressures of social media (Abdoli et al., 2024). The family environment further influences children's body image by serving as a critical source of either positive or negative reinforcement. Parents and caregivers play a key role in shaping children's self-perception; through supportive parenting practices, they can help mitigate the adverse effects of social media (Rodgers, 2012). For example, open conversations within the family about media representation, combined with critical discussions on body image and societal expectations, can empower children to interpret media messages more critically. Such family practices are instrumental in fostering a healthy self-image and promoting resilience against unrealistic beauty standards. This paper explores the complex interaction between cultural ideals, family dynamics, and media influences, highlighting the importance of culturally sensitive and family-centred approaches to fostering body positivity in children and reducing the negative impact of media on their self-image (Merino et al., 2024).

4. PREVENTIVE EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS: STRATEGIES AND BEST PRACTICES

To counteract the negative effects of social media use on body image, it is crucial to implement preventive educational interventions to develop and maintain positive body image from early childhood. These interventions aim to promote healthy body image in children by incorporating strategies that emphasize body literacy,

embodied learning, and family involvement as core components (Digennaro & Visocchi, 2024). School-based body literacy programs are essential in fostering body awareness, physical diversity, and self-acceptance by developing curricula that are not only informative but also adaptable to various cultural sensitivities and local values. Embodied learning, which emphasizes engaging children in direct, physical experiences, is a critical aspect of these interventions. Through interactive activities such as storytelling, role-play, and hands-on workshops, children can explore and internalize concepts of body acceptance while learning to critically assess media messages. Practical activities in an embodied learning context encourage children to connect with their bodies in positive ways, reinforcing healthy self-perceptions that extend beyond appearance (Grauduszus et al., 2024). Additionally, involving families is essential to reinforce these messages at home. Educating parents on open dialogue practices and media literacy equips them to support their children's development of a healthy body image, helping to create an environment where media influence is openly discussed and critically evaluated. This paper examines best practices for preventive educational programs, highlighting the importance of embodied learning and family collaboration in building resilient, body-positive self-concepts among children (Digennaro & Visocchi, 2024).

5. IMPORTANCE OF FUTURE RESEARCH

The need for expanded qualitative studies in the realm of body literacy is paramount, as current research remains limited in scope. To fully understand the experiences and perceptions of children regarding media influence, it is essential to conduct more in-depth qualitative research that includes diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts (Abdoli et al., 2024). Such studies can provide valuable insights into how children interpret and engage with media messages about body image, allowing researchers to identify common themes and unique challenges faced by different populations (Collin, 2015; Neves et al., 2017). Additionally, it is crucial to evaluate the long-term effects of body literacy interventions on children's psychological well-being and self-esteem. By closely monitoring the outcomes of these programs, researchers can assess their effectiveness and make necessary adjustments to enhance their impact on fostering positive body image among children (Digennaro & Visocchi, 2024).

CONCLUSION

In summary, adopting a preventive educational approach is vital in mitigating the negative influence of social media on children's body image. A robust body literacy framework established from early childhood can help children navigate media messages more critically and develop healthier self-perceptions. Given the global nature of social media's impact, fostering international collaborations to share best practices and tailor interventions to specific cultural contexts will enhance the efficacy of these programs. As social media continues to evolve, our understanding of educational tools and practices must also adapt to ensure that children grow up

with a positive body image. By prioritizing research and implementation strategies, we can equip future generations with the skills needed to cultivate a healthy relationship with their bodies in an increasingly media-saturated environment.

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LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS AT UNIVERSITY: PEDAGOGICAL, ETHICAL AND INTERACTIVE IMPLICATIONS

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This research explores the impact of Large Language Models (LLMs), like ChatGPT, on university education, focusing on ethical and pedagogical implications. The primary focus of the paper is to go beyond mere technological adoption and try to focus attention on the interactions between teachers and students with AI. When examining the interaction between AI, lecturers, and students, it becomes clear that the quality of the prompt given to the AI is crucial. This research intends to investigate how both subjects (professors and students) interact with Chatgpt, as well as how they derive useful information for educational goals from this technology. It offers a qualitative perspective on how AI tools can enhance learning experiences and academic skill development when used appropriately. Furthermore, the research addresses ethical considerations surrounding AI integration in education, including algorithmic transparency, accountability in decision-making, and privacy protection for students and lecturers. This exploratory investigation contributes to the debate on responsible AI implementation in universities, acknowledging its transformative potential while emphasizing ethical imperatives.

artificial intelligence; university education; pedagogy; ethics; prompt quality

The diffusion of Artificial Intelligence (AI)[1] in everyday life brings with it the need to address not only certain critical issues for the social world, but also new ones in specific domains, such as education (Ranieri et al. 2022; Panciroli et al. 2020; Ranieri, 2024). Large Language Models (LLM) – such as ChatGPT – represent one of the most significant innovations in contemporary technology. These models, based on deep learning algorithms and fed by enormous amounts of data, now pose a challenge that goes beyond the realm of "hard sciences", increasingly involving social sciences as well. The analysis of AI in education (AIEd – Artificial Intelligence in Education) is not new: the debate is characterized by an appealing interdisciplinarity that includes education, psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, sociology and anthropology (Panciroli et al. 2020). Indeed, AI is becoming a broad tool capable of

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[1] From now on, the acronym AI will be adopted to refer to Artificial Intelligence.

influencing the way we learn, work and interact with the world. Recent studies (Adeshola & Adepoju, 2023; Caligiore, 2023; Cristianini, 2023) highlight how LLMs are reshaping the boundaries of knowledge, stimulating critical reflections on epistemological, ethical and pedagogical issues.

In particular, university education is now at the center of a transformation in which AI promises to redefine the way teaching, learning and research are done (Roumate, 2023). And yet, while on the one hand, LLMs offer impressive benefits, such as support for the personalization of educational pathways, access to advanced teaching resources and the automation of repetitive activities (Cristianini, 2023; Ranieri, 2024), on the other hand, they raise complex questions related to the ethics, data protection, the risk of plagiarism and the need to train students and lecturers in the conscious use of technology (Ranieri, 2024; Roumate, 2023). ChatGPT, with its user-friendly interface, its translation, question-answer and text-creation functions, has become part of the routines of educational systems, especially at the level of higher education. This has generated worldwide a strong mobilization of the educational community, institutions and expert commissions to define guidelines for the use of generative AI in education (Romero et al. 2023).

This research experience enters the debate to analyse the influence of AI on university education. In particular, it aims to explore, even if partially, the pedagogical applications that LLMs can offer, as well as the ethical implications related to their use (Ranieri, 2024; Roumate, 2023; Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). Through an interdisciplinary approach, the contribution aims to reflect on how AI can be responsibly and sustainably integrated into educational contexts, contributing to the improvement of the educational experience for students and teachers (Ranieri, 2024).

1. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Our goal was to focus on some issues relating to the AI debate from the perspective of user behaviour. The context in which our reflection took shape was that of a study day on the subject in order to discuss with a number of national experts emerging aspects of AI: from the point of view of the technological artefact and its characteristics, from that of its possible uses in different spheres, including the university, to that of the critical aspects of its dissemination. The conference included a workshop on the use of AI and, in particular, Chat GPT in its free version 3.5[2]. This was an exploratory work, designed to set the foundations for a future, more articulated research project. The project was oriented towards the acquisition of qualitative

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[2] The ChatGPT 3.5 model, released by OpenAI on 30.11.2022, represents a significant advancement in the field of automatic natural language generation. GPT-3.5 introduces substantial improvements over previous versions, enhancing contextual understanding and consistency in responses. The model makes use of a supervised, reinforcement learning system known as Reinforcement Learning with Human Feedback (RLHF), a method that optimises generative behaviour through the integration of human feedback into the training phases. This approach aims to reduce phenomena such as narrative inconsistency and so-called 'hallucinations', thus ensuring greater reliability in responses. In terms of structure, GPT-3.5 is characterised by an improved ability to process complex requests and provide diverse textual outputs. Its design lends itself particularly well to application contexts such as language learning and content creation (coherent and well-articulated texts).

data through participant observation (Semi & Bolzoni 2022).

There were 18 participants in the workshop, and since their contribution was voluntary, it was not possible to have balanced numbers among the different types either with regard to basic socio-anagraphic characteristics or to the different academic roles represented – lecturers, students, PhDs. Regarding the use of AI, there was a mixed participation between those who had and those who did not know generative AI, or experience in its use. For the proposed activity, the assigned tasks are divided into two main areas of activity, involving lecturers, students and doctoral students, with distinct objectives and advanced technological tools to support research.

> Tasks for lecturers: A group of 9 lecturers, divided into two subgroups, is tasked with writing a scientific article for an academic journal. The research topic was the concept of integral ecology, with a focus on its relevance in teaching and research contexts. The lecturers used PCs equipped with ChatGPT version 3.5 to support the writing and research process. The aim was to stimulate reflection on an interdisciplinary and topical issue, while promoting the integration of artificial intelligence tools in the scientific research process.
> Tasks assigned to students and PhD students: The students took part of a group of 4 members and all the 5 PhD students were part of another group. Both groups were assigned to conduct an in-depth desk survey. This activity consists of a literature review related to integral ecology, with a particular accent on how this topic can shape new careers and skills.

The data acquired related to the behaviour of the four groups during the workshop phase, the output from the chat opened on ChatGPT by each group and any notes taken by the participants. The analysis focused mainly on the content of the chats, through identifying both themes at the content level and formal and structural traits of the conversation, reserving for the other types of data mainly a role of confirmation or disconfirmation of the interpretative line. The analytical process included some content coding steps (Cardano & Ortalda, 2020). In particular, the analysis delved into the dimension of the use of prompts, to understand how teachers and students relate to technology.

2. MAIN RESULTS

It is interesting to note that, from the requests made to the moderators, the groups of teachers turned out to be those who had had the least experience of using generative AI; conversely, the students showed to be more familiar with the tool. They turned out, in fact, to be less needful of advice from the moderators. They all reported of using even other applications different from ChatGPT, albeit always on the free version.

The small size of the student group, and the fact that the participants knew each other, as participants in the same year of the degree course, thus the greater ease of negotiation as to how to question ChatGPT, contributed to the establishment of a fluid usage dynamic.

The uncertainties expressed by this group to a facilitator referred only to a specific

aspect of the task: that of the scientific character of the text to be composed. From the other groups, on the other hand, a number of questions focused on the functioning of the web app, as well as on the assigned task, almost all of which were asked at the beginning of the workshop, while in general, an intense discussion activity was noted within all the working groups, which lasted until the end of the workshop. Analysis of the transcripts (Fig. 1) also shows that students had the longest interaction: 27 of their exchanges with the ChatGPT, while the PhD group, more than twice as numerous, had only 6 exchanges. Lecturers settle on similar degrees of interaction with the application.

Fig. 1. Number of interactions between different groups and ChatGPT. Source: IUSVE (2024).
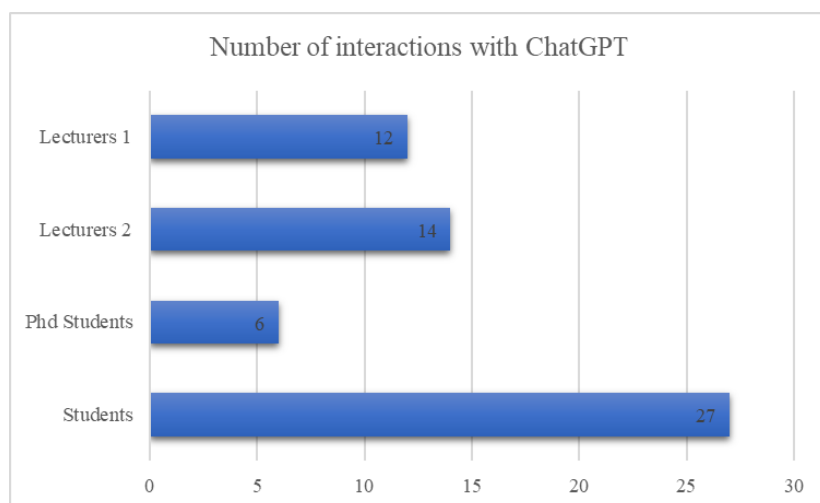
As Suchman (1987) points out, interaction with technologies, far from being influenced simply by the way they are designed, is dependent on the skills, experiences and expectations of users, but also on the context and environment, all elements of a process that should always be considered as situated. Confirming what has been previously stated, the analysis of interactions with ChatGPT across the different groups (Lecturers, PhD Students, Students) highlights the emergence of four distinct idealtypes, corresponding to different interaction styles, each reflecting the users' competencies, expectations, and cultural context. In particular, we noted:

- *Lecturers – Group 1 –* Colloquial and iterative style: informal and friendly tone: they kindly ask, they never give orders. They addressed ChatGPT informally. Humorous and critical when ChatGPT makes mistakes and this implied very long replies by ChatGPT.
- *Lecturers – Group 2 –* Competitive and Exam-Like style: Detached and formal tone. Competitive: they test AI and check errors in responses. Exam-like: resembles an oral examination rather than a consultation. Command strings longer than those of other groups.
- *PhD Students –* Google Style: Short Questions, Use of Keywords, Short Replies by ChatGPT. They write but do not have the feeling of a "real" entity responding.

- *Students* – Task Oriented Style: Sequential Questions (Step 1 – Step 2-etc), Funnel Questions, Request for clarification of limits and possibilities of AI, Use of the imperative tense, They address ChatGPT informally. They obtained very long replies by ChatGPT.

The different interaction styles were set out in a chart (Fig. 2) in which the cartesian axes represent a continuum according to a criterion ranging from "To Ask" to "To Order" and the tone, formal or informal. The graph aimed at clustering the prompts provided to ChatGPT: it allowed us to highlight the substantial differences between the styles adopted. Among participants there were different ideas of what AI can do, as well as different levels of competence in the use of AI and all of this impacted on the interaction style of our groups.

Fig. 2. Interaction styles between different groups and ChatGPT. Source: IUSVE (2024).
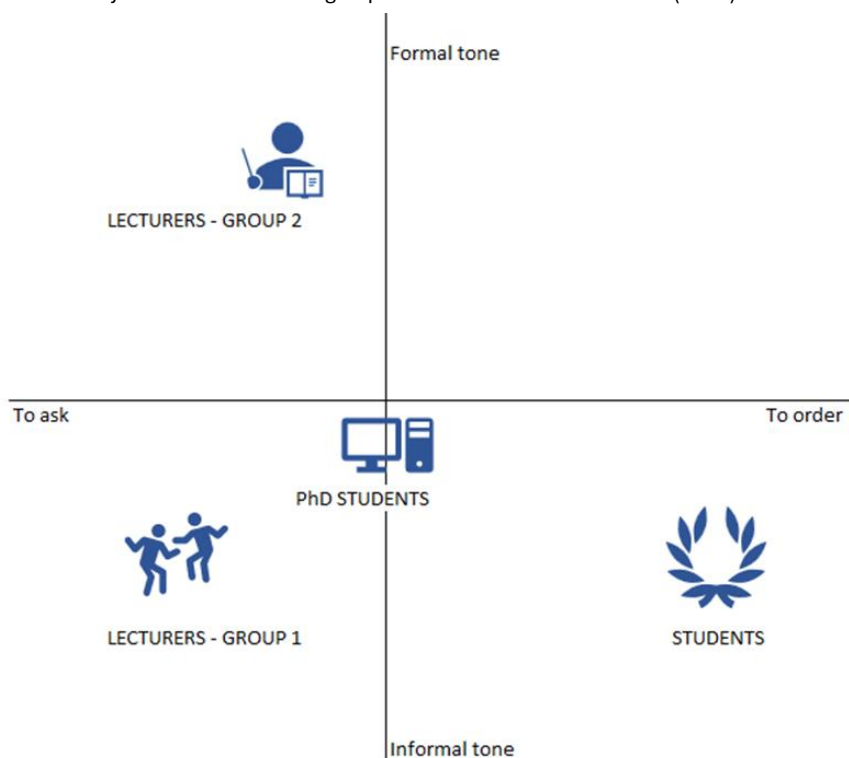
The occurrence of these different styles allows us to state that technologies, when at an initial level of diffusion, present a certain flexibility, both of use and interpretation. At a later stage, the use made of it by social groups will contribute to influencing developments in the technology, to the point of crystallization. This will be established in relation to needs, skills, social relevance, and agency intended as the ability to assert one's interpretation over others (Pinch & Bijker 1987). In this, above all, may lie the potential to foster interest in using a tool such as generative AI on the part of many different social groups.

CONCLUSIONS

Within the study, it is possible to trace an initial element related to the evaluation of the impacts of interaction with AI (ChatGPT), that is, Artificial Intelligence Literacy – AIL (Ranieri et al., 2024). AIL is the ability to understand, use and critically evaluate AI. This implies knowledge of how AI works, its applications and its ethical and social implications. The article, as already reported by Ranieri (2024), highlights the importance of going beyond the passive use of AI applications. The analysis of human-IA interactions, conducted through the examination of data streams, shows how different user groups (students, doctoral students and professors) display distinct interaction styles and levels of competence in the use of large language models (LLM). This diversity underlines the complexity of human-IA interactions, which are influenced by individual factors, context and type of AI (Ranieri, 2024; Ranieri et al., 2024). The importance of experience and familiarity with AI in human-computer interaction, which emerged from the analysis, supports the need for an active and aware approach to AI, encouraging continuous learning and updating of skills, as suggested by the AIL (Integrated Approach to Languages).

The quality of the prompts given to the AI is crucial for accurate and relevant answers. This relates to the AIL, which emphasizes the importance of formulating clear and precise questions and adapting language and communication styles to the characteristics of AI. This ability is crucial for effective interaction with this technology. In conclusion, this reflection highlights the importance of remaining intelligent in an intelligent world (AI), as stated by Gigerenzer (2022).

This exploratory research emphasizes the importance of investigating the dynamic relationship between technologies and users, particularly in the context of generative AI in education. As suggested by Kline & Pinch (1999), it is crucial to acknowledge the process of mutual adaptation between technology and users, considering AI as a product of socio-technical co-production shaped not only by its creators but also by users, institutions, media and culture (Latour 1992, 2005; Volonté 2017). In line with the concept of 'non-human agency', AI, by interacting with humans (Cristianini 2023), affects the world. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the situated relationship between human and non-human actors, understanding the complexity of the phenomenon and its ethical implications.

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ARE WE ALREADY THERE? ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR ENHANCED LESSON PLAN CREATION AND PERSONALISATION

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The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in education offers promising opportunities for enhancing teaching and learning through personalisation. This study examines the use of AI-driven technologies to support lesson planning and foster personalized learning experiences. Teachers reported significant improvements in content creation speed and student engagement, although challenges such as technical barriers and software. These findings provide actionable insights into the potential of AI to transform education, emphasizing the need for human oversight to ensure ethical, effective, and equitable applications of these technologies.

artificial intelligence, personalisation, lesson content creation, ethics, teachers' perception

INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of education, through artificial intelligence (AI), offers improvements in teaching and learning. The role of AI gains more and more importance in designing interventions that meet the needs of individual learners, highlighting the importance of personalised education amidst its complexities and potential risks (EC, 2023). Such personalisation capabilities of AI aim not only to improve educational outcomes, but also to ensure student well-being; a promising shift towards more responsive and adaptive educational practices (Molinaar, 2021). Education must adapt pedagogy to the complexity of modern societies and policies often tend to lag behind due to the speed of technological advances. Ongoing discussions should address ethical implications such as using AI to empower and enhance teaching and learning, assessing, and managing the educational process (Miao et al., 2021) and the need of transversal human skills for supporting one's ability to communicate and collaborate with AI tools in life, learning, and work (Carvalho et al., 2022). Also the role of human oversight within the use of generative AI-driven technology is essential not only to ensure educational quality, ethical standards and relevance (Hutson & Lang, 2023) but also to make this technology a powerful enabler to meet the multifaceted needs of students (West, 2023).

1. THE ROLE OF AI IN EDUCATION

Education with AI involves leveraging digital tools to enhance and enrich the learning experience, offering engaging alternatives that foster innovative teaching and learning approaches previously out of reach before the advent of such technologies. Effectively integrating AI tools into lesson plans requires a deep understanding of how these technologies can be employed to personalize learning, deliver constructive feedback, and promote peer collaboration. (Niewint-Gori, 2023). Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) holds significant potential in education, particularly for creating personalised lesson plans that reduce teacher workload while accommodating diverse learner needs (EC, 2023). However, its effective implementation necessitates careful oversight by educators to address variability in output quality and ethical challenges, such as bias and equity (Karpouzis et al., 2024; Kloker et al., 2024). The applying of hybrid models that combine AI-generated outputs with educator review and adaptation are essential for ensuring quality and pedagogical alignment (Kehoe, 2023) and studies highlight that GenAI tools significantly reduce the time required for lesson planning while producing adaptive materials aligned with learner needs (Karpouzis et al., 2024; Pesovski et al., 2024). Comparisons among AI-only, teacher-only, and hybrid approaches suggest that hybrid models may offer the best outcomes, combining efficiency with pedagogical depth. Moreover, variability in AI output quality, underscores the necessity of educator oversight to ensure reliability and relevance (Powell & Courchesne, 2024; Dornburg & Davin, 2024). The implementation of GenAI also raises critical ethical concerns. Bias in generated content, inequities in access, and data privacy are key challenges that necessitate the adoption of inclusivity frameworks and transparent AI system designs (Stefaniak & Moore, 2024). Technological disparities further propagate inequities, particularly in underserved regions (Kloker et al., 2024; Faresta, 2024). Additionally, over-personalization risks diminishing learner autonomy, emphasizing the need for a balance between customization and pedagogical freedom (Stefaniak & Moore, 2024).

The aim of the research conducted is twofold:

1. To illustrate the research training provided to teachers on didactic personalization using AI tools.
2. To present an initial analysis of teachers' final evaluations.

This study explores the types of AI tools used in lesson planning and their implications for personalizing educational content. Specifically, it investigates whether shifting teachers' roles from content creators to evaluators enhances the personalization of educational materials. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of educators being aware of the ethical implications associated with the use of AI in the classroom (EC, 2022). Such awareness is critical for making informed and responsible decisions, ensuring that these technologies contribute positively to creating personalized learning environments.

2. RESEARCH

2.1. The research questions, Methodology, Participants, Tools and procedures, Data analysis, Methods and tools

The study involved a total of 92 teachers from 37 schools. Of these participants, 83 were women and 9 were men, with an average age of 38.4 years. The study employed a mixed methods approach (Trinchero & Robasto, 2019, p. 14) with a research design based on an explanatory sequential type, characterised by an initial quantitative data collection that has been deepened using a qualitative approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research questions (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). A final survey and interviews gathered feedback from teachers on their experiences, challenges and perceived benefits of using these platforms. Data were collected through an end-of-course questionnaire focusing on the use of AI in education. The responses were analyzed using a Grounded Theory approach (Corbetta, 2005; Cipriani & Bolasco, 1995; Kuckartz, 2014), which allowed for the identification of key themes and patterns emerging from the participants' experiences and perceptions.

- The answers for the following survey questions were analysed:
- What teaching software have you used and with what objectives;
- What are the main challenges of AI in the classroom;
- Whether and how has it improved teaching;
- Has the role of the teacher in the classroom changed
- Has student motivation changed
- What are the prospects of using AI in the classroom

Then, the data analysis was conducted by interpreting the responses through a SWOT analysis, a valuable method for systematically evaluating internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and threats. This approach is particularly effective in educational research for guiding instructional design and assessing interventions (Trinchero & Robasto, 2019).

2.2. Results

From the analysis of the data, it will be possible to present initial findings and illustrate the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the use of the proposed tools to enhance teaching and learning activities to support the development of students' skills. The results will contribute to a better understanding of the potential of integrating these AI driven technologies in the design of teaching for the different school orders to support the unique needs and potentials of each learner. Teachers reported using a variety of AI tools, including Magic School, Teachable Machine, ChatGPT, and Canva Generator. Some respondents also mentioned additional AI tools, reflecting a diverse range of technologies integrated into their practices. The majority of teachers indicated that they incorporate AI tools into their teaching activities on a monthly basis.

The primary motivations for using AI tools in education included enhancing efficiency, fostering digital skill development, and personalizing learning. Teachers

highlighted AI's role in streamlining lesson planning, accelerating activity creation, tailoring educational content, and adapting materials to diverse student needs. Participants expressed a strong intent to continue using AI tools due to their practical benefits, despite technical challenges in integration and the need for better adaptation in artistic disciplines. AI tools significantly improved content development speed, enhanced lesson planning efficiency, and increased student engagement. Most teachers found these tools easy to integrate, underscoring their potential to transform education.

The analysis of the answers through the grounded Theory approach highlighted several core themes:

- Diversity of AI Tools: A wide range of tools tailored to different educational needs.
- Efficiency and Speed: Enhanced productivity in planning and content creation.
- Skill Development and AI Literacy: Building foundational competencies in digital technologies.
- Technical Barriers: Occasional challenges in tool integration and interoperability.
- Innovation in Teaching: Expanding creative approaches and ideas.
- Customization and Adaptability: Personalizing content to suit varied learner needs.
- Personalized Learning: Tailoring education for individual students.
- Evaluation and Assessment: Developing tools for effective student evaluation.

As part of this study on the integration of AI tools in education, a SWOT analysis was conducted (Table 1) to systematically evaluate the internal and external factors influencing their adoption and perception of effectiveness (Gürel, 2017)

Tab. 1. SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Increased Speed of Content Development: Teachers have observed a significant increase in the speed of developing educational content using AI tools. • Enhanced Student Engagement: There is an increase in interaction and engagement among students with the introduction of AI-driven personalized content. • Versatility in Tools: Various AI tools (Magic School, Teachable Machine, ChatGPT, Canva Generator) are being used, indicating a range of applications and adaptability. • Ease of Integration: Most respondents did not face significant obstacles in integrating AI tools into their teaching routines.	• Technical Challenges: Some difficulties were reported in getting certain software to interact seamlessly within the educational context. • Limited Knowledge on Improvement: There are uncertainties about how to improve AI software to better suit educational needs, especially in specific subjects like art. • Frequency of Use: Despite the benefits, the usage frequency is generally monthly, suggesting that daily integration may still be a challenge.
Opportunities	**Threats**
• Training and Professional Development: Providing targeted training for teachers on how to effectively use and integrate AI tools can further enhance adoption and efficacy. • Customization and Personalization: Further developing AI capabilities to better tailor educational content to individual student needs and learning styles. • Collaborative Development: Engaging with AI software developers to address specific educational challenges and improve tool functionalities based on teacher feedback. • Expanding Usage: Encouraging more frequent use of AI tools can lead to greater familiarity and better integration into daily teaching practices.	• Resistance to Change: Potential resistance from educators who are less familiar with or distrustful of AI technology could slow down adoption rates. • Technical Limitations: Ongoing technical issues and software limitations could hinder the effective use of AI tools. • Resource Constraints: Schools may face budgetary constraints that limit access to the latest AI tools and necessary training programs. • Data Privacy Concerns: Ensuring the privacy and security of student data when using AI tools remains a critical concern that could impact adoption.

3. Discussion

The integration of AI tools in education presents both opportunities and challenges, underscoring the need for strategic actions to optimize their use. Development initiatives are essential to ensure educators are equipped with the skills needed to maximize the benefits of AI tools and integrate them seamlessly into their teaching practices. Another critical area is the establishment of a feedback mechanism between educators and AI developers. Creating a robust feedback loop can enable continuous improvement of AI tools, ensuring that they evolve based on real classroom experiences. Insights from teachers using these technologies can inform refinements, making the tools more user-friendly, effective, and aligned with diverse educational needs. Promoting best practices and sharing success stories within the educational community can also drive wider adoption of AI tools. By highlighting innovative applications and demonstrating their impact on teaching and learning, educators can inspire their peers to explore creative uses of AI and embrace its potential. A shared repository of best practices can serve as a valuable resource for fostering collaboration and innovation across schools and regions. Addressing data privacy concerns is another vital aspect of successful AI integration. Implementing stringent privacy measures is essential for building trust among educators, students, and parents, ensuring the safe and responsible use of AI tools. By prioritizing data security, schools can mitigate risks and encourage confidence in adopting these technologies.

By investing in training, collaboration, and privacy safeguards, education systems can unlock the transformative potential of AI to enhance teaching and learning while fostering trust and innovation.

4. CONCLUSION

The role of human oversight in generative AI-driven curriculum creation is essential to ensure educational quality, ethical standards and relevance. Generative AI has the potential to help create educational content more efficiently. However, human oversight is necessary to verify the accuracy of the generated educational material, maintain ethical standards, and ensure that it aligns with the intended learning objectives (Hutson & Lang, 2023).

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EMPOWERING TEACHERS IN THE AI-DRIVEN EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE: FOSTERING SELF-EFFICACY AND FAMILIARITY WITH AI TOOLS

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In the rapidly evolving landscape of educational technology, the integration of Artificial Intelligence presents both opportunities and challenges for educators. This paper examines the critical intersection between pedagogical practice and AI implementation, with a specific focus on empowering teachers through enhanced self-efficacy and technological familiarity. Through the analysis of INDIRE's CATIA model, we explore how proper question formulation and critical thinking skills are fundamental for effective AI utilization in educational settings. The research highlights the importance of structured professional development and hands-on experience in building teacher confidence and competence with AI tools. Our findings suggest that successful AI integration in education depends heavily on teachers' ability to understand and effectively interact with these technologies. The study presents practical strategies for developing these skills, emphasizing the role of well-constructed queries in generating meaningful AI responses. Furthermore, we discuss how fostering self-efficacy among teachers can lead to more innovative and effective classroom implementations of AI technology. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on AI in education while providing practical insights for educational institutions seeking to enhance their technological integration strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving technological landscape of education, the intersection of critical thinking and artificial intelligence presents both unprecedented opportunities and unique challenges. This relationship, particularly concerning the formulation of relevant questions when using generative artificial intelligence, has become a cornerstone of actual educational discourse. Critical thinking, understood as a systematic mental process, could help to enable the objective analysis of facts, situations, and statements, leading to logically evaluated and well-considered judgments. To use this methodical approach results then crucial in recognizing and addressing prejudices, unverified hypotheses, and fallacious arguments, especially in an era where misinformation and fake news proliferate (Paul & Elder, 2020). The art of formulating well-structured questions emerges as a fundamental skill when

individuals engage in deep cognitive exploration of a subject matter (Graesser & Person, 1994). These questions, when properly constructed, serve as powerful tools for directing inquiry and fostering deeper understanding. They act as cognitive catalysts, unveiling layers of information that might otherwise remain unexplored. The significance of this skill becomes particularly evident in the context of artificial intelligence utilization (Wegerif, 2002), where the quality of AI-generated content directly correlates with the precision and clarity of the input queries.

1. AI-DRIVEN EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPES

Research has demonstrated that relevant questions in the AI context are those that elicit accurate, creative, and meaningful responses. This assertion is supported by Gunning, Aha, and Zhu (2019), who emphasize the importance of formulating questions that not only drive engagement but also enhance the quality of interactions between humans and AI systems. In their study, the authors argue that the ability of AI to generate responses is significantly influenced by the type of questions posed. Questions that are open-ended and exploratory tend to yield more innovative and rich responses compared to closed questions. For instance, instead of asking a straightforward factual question, framing inquiries that encourage deeper thinking can stimulate an AI's creative capacities. Put it in other words: the more poorly posed a question is, the more ambiguous the answer we get will be. And this observation directs the gaze – and the research of INDIRE – towards a reflection that considers (and merge together) critical thinking, the "art of asking" and the scholastic use of Artificial Intelligence as closely related. Moreover, other researchers have echoed these sentiments, highlighting the role of context in shaping the responses generated by AI. Contextual awareness allows AI systems to provide answers that are not only factually correct but also relevant to the user's intent. And also the design of questions plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of AI in various applications, from conversational agents to educational tools. This understanding underscores the critical interplay between question formulation and AI performance, paving the way for future advancements in human-AI interaction. In the context of education, teachers can leverage AI technologies to enhance the learning environment by integrating AI tools that facilitate personalized learning experiences and foster critical thinking skills among students.

1.1 What about Integrating AI in the Classroom?

AI can evaluate each student's performance and learning preferences, enabling educators to customize their teaching. As adaptive learning systems can deliver personalized resources and evaluations using real-time information, they could also guarantee student advances at their unique speed, and it will be very helpful especially for tailored learning. This method not only boosts engagement but also aids in pinpointing areas where students might require extra assistance. By encouraging them to formulate open-ended questions, teachers can stimulate deeper inquiry and exploration. And AI systems can assist in this process, by providing real-time

feedback on the quality of questions posed, as well as guiding students to refine their way of thinking or formulating questions. This aligns with the findings of Gunning et al, which highlighted the importance of question quality in eliciting creative responses from AI.

As AI will get more integrated into educational settings, the need for explainability in AI systems will become increasingly crucial. Teachers will be asked to know and select AI tools that offer transparent insights into how decisions are made, fostering trust and understanding among students. For these reasons a more understandable and more explainable AI would help students grasp complex concepts by providing clear explanations of AI-generated responses, thereby enhancing their learning experience. Teachers can also use AI-driven platforms to create collaborative learning environments where students can engage themselves in discussions, share ideas, and work on projects together, regardless of geographical barriers. This could not only enrich the learning experience but also prepare students for a more interconnected world.

Another interesting aspect of AI is that this technology – of the 3d type, as stated by Luciano Floridi – can provide instant feedback on student work. Teachers can utilize AI tools to analyze student submissions, and this immediate feedback loop can help teachers adjust their instructional strategies. By receiving timely insights into student performance educators can, in fact, tailor their lessons to address specific challenges faced by their students, thereby fostering a more effective learning environment. Moreover, by integrating AI into their teaching practices, educators can create dynamic learning environments that not only enhance student engagement but also prepare them for a future where AI plays an increasingly significant role in various fields. This multifaceted approach to integrating AI in education not only enhances the learning experience but also equips students with the skills necessary to navigate an increasingly complex technological landscape.

2. BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking is a crucial skill for navigating the information age, allowing individuals to differentiate between genuine news and fake news, as well as to recognize their own cognitive biases. This approach is not only essential in daily life but also plays a vital role in the educational context, where teaching critical thinking prepares students to tackle complex challenges. Numerous studies have investigated critical thinking as a defense mechanism against fake news and cognitive biases, particularly focusing on its importance in fostering scientific thinking and developing informed and responsible citizens. In a world where information can travel instantly and spread easily, it is imperative for everyone to cultivate the skills necessary to critically assess what is presented as truth. Only by establishing a solid foundation of critical thinking can we hope to nurture an informed society dedicated to the pursuit of truth and the defense of democracy.

Many reflections have explored critical thinking as a tool against fake news and cognitive biases, paying particular attention to its role in education. Among these,

several authors stand out. Daniel Kahneman, in his 2011 book Thinking, Fast and Slow, provides an essential overview of the two systems of thought (fast and slow) that govern the human mind. Here, the author explains how fast thinking can lead to biases and judgment errors, emphasizing the importance of slow and critical thinking in evaluating information. Wineburg and McGrew (2017) introduced the concept of "lateral reading" as an effective strategy to assess the reliability of online sources and defend against misinformation, proposing a practical approach that can be easily integrated into school education. McIntyre (2018) explores the concept of "post-truth" and its impact on society in his study, highlighting the significance of critical thinking in the era of fake news. This book is particularly relevant for educators and students seeking to understand the challenges posed by misinformation. Paul and Elder (2013) then proposed concrete tools to develop critical thinking, emphasizing how this skill can be used to analyze and better understand news, distinguishing between real news and fake news. Hoskins and Crick (2019) explored how critical thinking education can promote intercultural understanding and defend against the polarizations often fueled by fake news. Finally, Breakstone, Smith, and Wineburg (2020) provided an analysis of students' ability to evaluate online information, offering insights on how to improve critical thinking education in schools to prepare informed and responsible citizens.

What emerges from these pages is that critical thinking is a skill that should not be underestimated or neglected, especially in an age where information can be easily distorted or manipulated. It is important to learn (or reinforce the way to) critically evaluate what we see, read, and hear because only then can we make informed and responsible decisions in our daily lives. In the educational sphere, teaching critical thinking plays a fundamental role in helping students develop the ability to critically analyze information, address complex topics, and formulate opinions based on concrete evidence. Furthermore, training in critical thinking can help counter the spread of false news and identify cognitive biases that may influence our thinking and decision-making. Research conducted on the importance of critical thinking has shown that this skill can be vital in combating misinformation and promoting a culture of truth and responsibility. In an increasingly complex world with an abundance of information, critical thinking is an ever-essential skill that should be encouraged and developed from a young age. However, critical thinking is no longer just a useful skill; it has become a necessity in the modern world. Only through critical thinking can we combat ignorance, misinformation, and prejudice, while also contributing to the creation of a society based on knowledge and truth and strengthening ourselves and our awareness.

2.1 INDIRE AI's and the need for Critical Thinking

All these above-mentioned argumentations led INDIRE to develop CATIA, a proprietary AI model. The model served as a practical tool for understanding the underlying structures of generative artificial intelligence, providing valuable insights into its operational mechanisms and thought processes. These aspects are crucial for effective human-AI interaction and has been thoroughly explored to optimize the

utilization of INDIRE's AI model.

The core focus of the applied research focusses on two fundamental aspects: nurturing self-efficacy and improving teachers' familiarity with AI tools. Through interactive sessions with INDIRE's AI model, teachers will gain hands-on experience that serves as a formative opportunity to develop confidence in implementing AI within their classrooms (Bandura, 1994; Ventura & Shute, 2013). This practical approach aligns with Zimmerman's (2000) self-regulated learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of direct experience in building competence and confidence. Recent studies have highlighted the transformative potential of AI in education, while also emphasizing the critical need for proper teacher preparation (Holmes, Bialik & Fadel, 2019). The integration of AI tools in educational settings has shown promising results in enhancing student engagement, personalizing learning experiences, and improving educational outcomes, especially in the last years. However, the successful implementation of these tools largely depends on teachers' confidence and competence in utilizing them effectively.

The rapid advancement of educational technology necessitates continuous professional development for teachers (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). This includes not only technical training but also pedagogical understanding of how AI can enhance teaching and learning processes. Research indicates that teachers who receive adequate support and training in AI implementation demonstrate higher levels of self-efficacy and are more likely to effectively integrate these tools into their teaching practices (Howard & Mozejko, 2015). This comprehensive approach to empowering teachers in the AI-driven educational landscape aims to bridge the gap between technological innovation and practical classroom implementation. By focusing on both theoretical understanding and hands-on experience, teachers can develop the confidence and competence necessary to leverage AI tools effectively in their educational practice.

2.2 What about today? An open conclusion

After the first phase of experimentation with CATIA, the PATHS research group carried out the creation of an AI explicitly dedicated to strengthening critical thinking in secondary schools (including technical and professional institutes). CATIA has thus evolved, becoming, after two years of data collection, training, validation, and implementation, a virtual assistant. Platone AI is currently being tested by 234 schools and 288 teachers. As we look to the future, the integration of AI like Plato into education raises profound questions. Will AI-driven tools become an indispensable companion for teachers, or will their role need to be carefully balanced to preserve the human aspect of education? Platone AI's ability to adapt to individual learning needs is promising, but how can we ensure such systems remain inclusive and equitable, particularly in schools with limited technological resources?

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TEACHERS' PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDES: HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF AI IN EDUCATION

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As the educational landscape continues to evolve, it is essential to understand teachers' sentiments regarding the use of generative AI in the classroom, as they are crucial to successfully promoting innovation with AIEd in schools (Timms, 2016). Researchers' investigations examined different aspects, such as ethical implications, positive/negative impact on learning, and possible applications. Still, more investigations need to be into teachers' perceptions of these technologies. This preliminary study explores the sentiments of in-training teachers regarding the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in educational contexts and their perceptions of utility, efficacy and user-friendliness. Moreover, it investigates if Generative AI, such as ChatGPT, is perceived as a technology that can potentially transform or arm education. We aim to provide insights into these professionals' sentiments on opportunities, challenges, and ethical considerations associated with integrating generative AI into teaching practices. The survey was conducted in 2024, and students self-compiled a questionnaire to answer closed-ended questions. The participants were in-training teachers at Università del Molise. The first results highlighted the participants' awareness of AI and, generally speaking, a positive attitude toward its use in education and their teaching practice. Data analysis revealed a gap between the declared knowledge and interest in AI and its actual and conscious use. The prevailing application chosen is the documentation drafting for teachers and research activities for students. Furthermore, teachers perceive AI as a tool with the potential for good information retrieval. In conclusion, the ambivalence that has emerged is also confirmed by the gap between the awareness of the need for AI-related skills and training courses to acquire them on the one hand and the perspective, which appears to be the majority of not using tools such as Chat GPT at school.

teachers' perception; AIED; inclusion;

INTRODUCTION

Although Artificial Intelligence (AI) has garnered significant public attention in the past two years, it has a history of over 60 years. The term "Artificial Intelligence", coined in 1956 (McCarthy et al., 2006), refers to the process of simplifying the complexities of the physical world into backwards-looking informational mechanisms or symbolic, computable models (Cabitza, 2021, pp. 9-10). Throughout its

evolution, AI has experienced a variety of fortunes, grappling with the challenges posed by the increasing amount of data characteristic of digital culture, which creates a need to simplify data management. In the 1990s, potential solutions leaned towards fostering more significant interaction among individuals, as seen in Lévy's (1999) perspective on collective intelligence, rather than focusing solely on algorithms.

The availability of Large Language Models for public use has recently thrust AI into the spotlight. These models allow individuals to access generative artificial intelligence capable of producing text, such as ChatGPT, and images, like those created by services like Midjourney, often at little to no cost and without requiring specialised knowledge. This accessibility has sparked considerable interest. Notably, even within the scientific community, there has been a surge of attention. Focusing on the specific application of AI in education, there have been 20,800 scholarly works published from 2023 to date (Google Scholar, November 2024), supplemented by legal interventions from institutions such as the European Community (2021).

This level of interest, if not enthusiasm, is countered by warnings about ethically concerning risks and uses, raising two important questions: Where does the current fascination with AI originate? Does AI represent a significant turning point? Could it be another transient phase in the evolution of digital technologies, similar to the initial excitement surrounding educational technologies (Ranieri, 2011)?

A fundamental consideration in addressing these questions is the overwhelming abundance of information in the digital age, marked by an exponential increase in data and the advent of big data (Floridi, 2017). In a time when methods like social tagging and folksonomy appear less effective, AI offers rapid and automated solutions that are the only practical means of managing such vast amounts of data (Manovich, 2023). However, AI's capabilities extend beyond mere classification of objects; it can recognise things, activities, and even emotions and plan and make estimates, predictions, and forecasts (Cabitza, 2021, p. 33). While AI has been interpreted primarily as a new way of acting (Floridi, 2021) and lacks the metacognitive and emotional dimensions of human intelligence, its ability to create human-like products complicates the perception of it as merely a tool and invites consideration of AI as a form of intelligence in its own right.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reasoning in educational terms (AIED, Artificial intelligence in education), it is appropriate to take up the threefold dimension of educating with AI, AI and to AI (Panciroli & Rivoltella, 2023, pp. 7-9): the predominant aspects are those related to the use of AI as a teaching tool and the need to provide the appropriate skills for understanding and using AI (Ai literacy) (Ranieri et al., 2023, p. 33). Moreover, the dimension that needs the most support and attention is promoting critical awareness in the belief that 'the development of AI should be human-controlled and centred on people' (Pedro et al., p. 4).

In this context, one of the first questions worth considering is how much and how AI

is known and perceived by those working in education. AI algorithms operate without often making their actions apparent: investigating perception can provide the appropriate insights into the level of user awareness. Attention to perceptions and expectations also offers insights into rethinking interactions and practices. For an adequate design of pathways related to AI literacy acquisition, it is essential to have a picture of the starting situation regarding knowledge and skills already acquired, as well as motivations and expectations.

Teachers' perceptions of technology have been the subject of research for some time, and continuing in this direction, studies on perceptions of AI are multiplying, examining both the different types of subjects involved in training processes – students (e.g. Chan & Lee, 2023), trainee and in-service teachers (e.g. Murgia & Bruni, 2023 and Sanusi et al., 2024) – as much as the different uses in specific subject areas, such as foreign languages (Sumakul et al., 2022), or individual tools such as ChatGPT (Syahrin & Akmal, 2024), or the misuse of AI by students (Cong-Lem et al., 2024). The cross-cutting belief in all research is the conviction that the effectiveness of AI literacy training is linked to the ability to reconnect with what is already known and practised.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN (RQ, METHODOLOGY, PARTICIPANTS)

This exploration is part of a broader quantitative research design aimed at detecting teachers' perceptions of generative AI in Education (AIED), the prospective uses they envision in the school context, and the opportunities and risks they perceive. So, the research questions are RQ1) In-service and Preservice teachers' Awareness and Sentiment toward ChatGPT and generative AI in education and RQ2) Perspective use in teaching practices.

The survey was conducted in January-February 2024; researchers provided a questionnaire organised into sections: 1) I and the technologies, 2) AI and ChatGPT awareness, and 3) Perception and prospect use of Generative AI at school. Following the CAWI methodology (Computer-Assisted Web Interview), participants self-compiled the questionnaire (Attwood et al., 2020; Sanusi et al., 2024) generated with Google Forms with 58 closed-ended questions. Collected data were analysed to obtain the primary descriptive statistical information (see results below).

The participants were 91 students attending a course to gain the certification to become supporting teachers for students with special needs ('docente di sostegno' in the Italian School System) at Università del Molise. Their ages span from 24 years to over 50; for the gender, 93.4% declared to be female, and they all graduated from a university (19.7% have a degree, while the remaining have a master's degree). Concerning their teaching experience, 14.3% declared they had not taught, 41.8% worked at school for 1 to 5 years, and the remaining for more than 5 years.

2. RESULTS: AWARENESS, EXPECTATION AND RELIABILITY, USE IN EDUCATION FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS)

2.1. Awareness

Participants see themselves as people who appreciate (62 on 91) or probably appreciate (24 on 91) technologies in general, and this was not a surprise as they are all involved in an educational context that requires constant training and updating to intercept each student's need. They feel (Fig. 1) they know what AI is (81 out of 91), but only 27 could choose the proper definition among three (two being false). They are impressed by the possible application of AI (*definitely yes* 55/91) but not so much worried about the consequences that its use could bring (52/91 a *bit anxious*). The results vary slightly when asked about ChatGPT; 39 out of 91 did not know about it, while 15 have only a general idea of it, making them more than half of the group. Interestingly, only 27 chose the correct definition of ChatGPT, and all the remaining preferred no to answer.

Fig. 1. Answers to 'Do you know what Artificial Intelligence is?'

Do you know what Artificial Intelligence is?
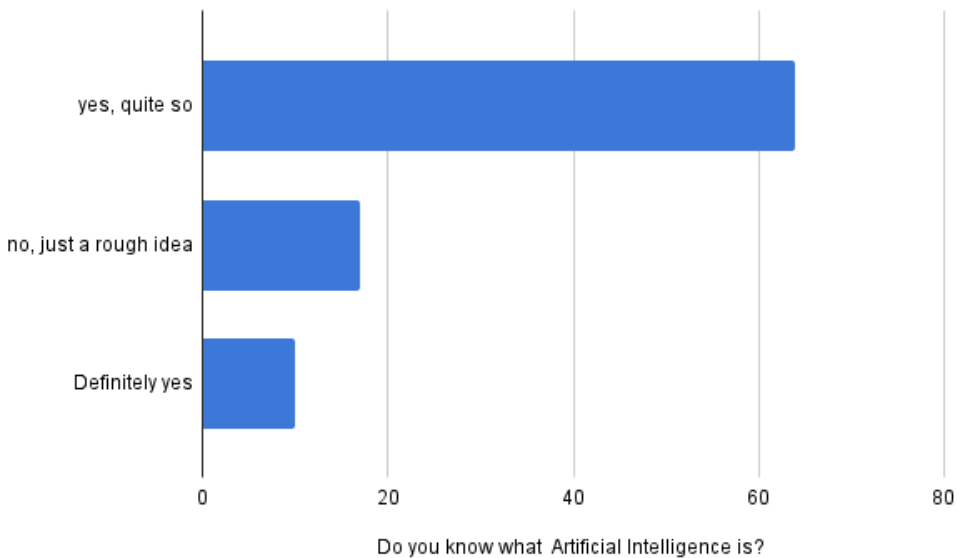
2.2. Expectation and reliability

The results of teachers' awareness were interesting, as they revealed a multifaceted scenario with some incongruence between perception and actual knowledge. The second focus of the questionnaire was teachers' expectations and the perceived reliability of ChatGPT. To the question, "On what extent has ChatGPT satisfied your expectations?" they answered based on a Likert scale where 1 means "not at all" and 4 means "yes, definitely". *Two* (= at minimum levels) had the maximum number of preferences, followed by *One (*28 and 21 out of 91, respectively). Only seven people declared complete satisfaction with the outputs (Fig. 2).

On the reliability side, surprisingly, for mostly unsatisfied people, the participants were more positive as the responses were concentrated on 'two' and 'three' (24 and

25 out of 91, respectively). There is some incongruence as the participants are unsatisfied with the AI tool experience; they still think the outputs are reliable enough.

Fig. 2. Answers: To what extent does Chat-GPT satisfy your expectations?

To what extent has Chat-GPT satisfied your expectations?
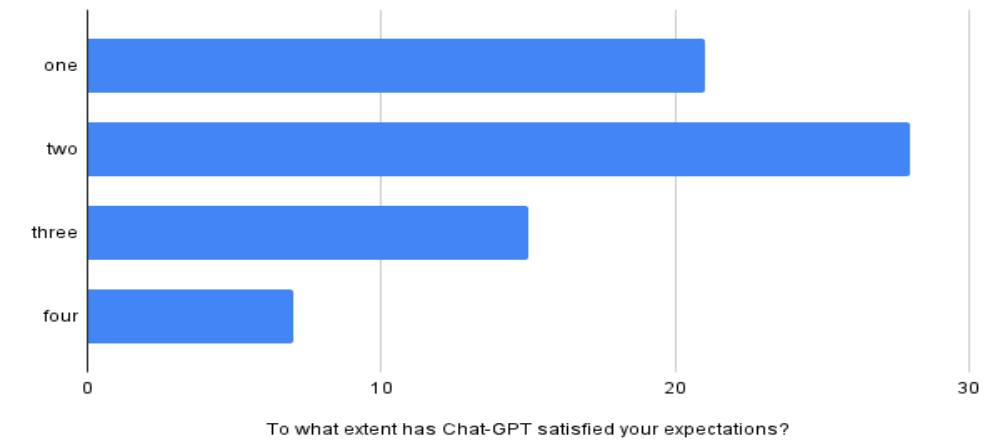
2.3. Teachers' and students' perspective of use

Are teachers prone to adopting technologies such as ChatGPT in their working activities? Are there differences when considering using back-office assignments versus students using them in the classroom? The two use scenarios appear to present a low level of discrepancies.

On a Likert scale from one to four, one being the lower level and four the maximum, participants answered the questions about the ease/difficulty and usefulness/risk of using generative AI tools such as ChatGPT in the school context; the data shows similar responses in both questions. For perceived ease of use, most teachers rated it as "two" (40 responses) or "three" (31 responses), and fewer rated it as "one" (8 responses) or "four" (4 responses). For perceived utility, we have a similar pattern, with most rating it as "two" (42 responses) or "three" (29 responses) and fewer rated it as "one" (9 responses) or "four" (3 responses). (Fig. 3)

Fig. 3. Answers to 'Do you think using AI tools like ChatGPT at school is easy/difficult and useful/harmful?'
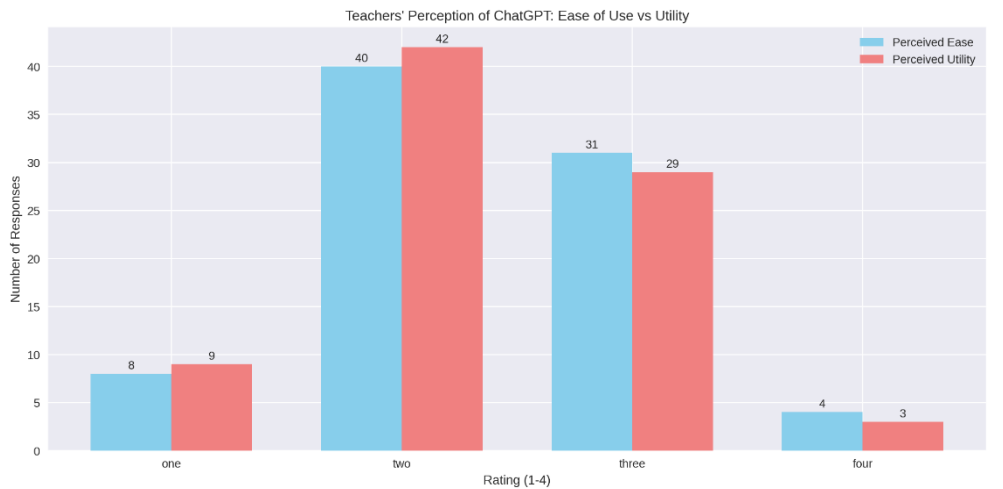
3. CONCLUSIONS

The study underscores the growing interest and potential of generative AI tools like ChatGPT in education, particularly among pre-service or in-training teachers. While participants demonstrated a generally positive attitude towards AI, the gap between their perceived and actual knowledge highlights the urgent need for targeted AI literacy programs. The ambivalence regarding ChatGPT's reliability and usefulness further emphasises the importance of equipping educators with the skills and understanding necessary to integrate such tools effectively into their teaching practices. Addressing these challenges through comprehensive training and support can pave the way for more informed and confident adoption of AI technologies in classrooms, ultimately enhancing teaching and learning experiences. Future research should expand on these findings by exploring diverse educational contexts, specific use cases, and the perspectives of other stakeholders to build a holistic understanding of AI's role in education.

4. FUTURE WORKS

Future research should expand on these findings by exploring diverse educational contexts, specific use cases, and the perspectives of other stakeholders to build a holistic understanding of the perceptions and so guide the instruction designer and the policymakers to design a proper programme to develop AI literacy among all the educational environment stakeholders.

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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF TRAINING IN AN INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

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The paper presents the results of the pre-test used for the large-scale investigation the AI4T project impact evaluation model: a counterfactual research design to explore the AI4T professional learning experience considering the constructs in the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis & al., 1989; Kemp at al., 2019). The paper includes findings on key issues that emerged from the pilot phase of the project, which involved 3 headmasters and 16 teachers, which guided the revision of the final assessment instruments. The main objective of the small-scale pilot phase was to test the entire research protocol and evaluation tools for quality assurance in large-scale applications. Each partner country was to recruit between two and eight schools. In the case of Italy, was identified 8 schools, within which there were one/two volunteer mathematics and English teachers to answer the questionnaire, in addition to the school headmaster

Artificial intelligence, experimentation, evaluation, professional development, teachers

INTRODUCTION

AI is transforming education, offering significant opportunities and challenges. Effective use of AI tools requires varying levels of digital literacy among teachers and students (UNESCO, 2024). Integrating AI revolutionizes teaching practices but demands enhanced teacher competencies. Teachers must develop AI literacy, including technical understanding, ethical evaluation, and practical integration to ensure AI enhances educational outcomes. They need to address algorithmic biases, uphold data privacy, and ensure equitable AI applications (Mikeladze et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2022). Additionally, proficiency in using AI for personalized learning, adaptive teaching, and assessments is crucial (Arvin et al., 2023). Teachers must retain agency, using AI as a supplementary tool to foster collaboration between educators and technology (Ismail et al., 2024). While frameworks like UNESCO's AI

competency principles provide a foundation, their practical application is inconsistent (Mikeladze et al., 2024). Alternatives such as DigCompEdu (Vuorikari et al., 2022) and TPACK (Koehler et al., 2014) offer guidance but need further operationalization (Zhao et al., 2022). Key barriers include lack of tailored teacher training, ethical and technical issues, and unequal access to AI tools, especially in under-resourced areas (Tarisayi, 2024). Teachers often lack confidence in their AI skills, highlighting the need for ongoing professional development (Ismail et al., 2024; Arvin et al., 2023). Solutions include hands-on workshops, mentoring, and collaborative networks to build competencies (Arvin et al., 2023; Sulaiman et al., 2024). Problem-based and human-centered training approaches are effective for sustainable upskilling (Mikeladze et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2024).

1. THE AI4T PROJECT

The AI4T Project (Artificial Intelligence for and by Teachers) was a 36-month Erasmus+ initiative (2021–2024) aligned with the Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP 2021–2027). It explored the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to integrate AI into education ethically and effectively, focusing on teacher training and pedagogical innovation. Collaborating with 17 partners from France, Slovenia, Italy, Ireland, and Luxembourg, AI4T engaged 320 secondary schools and around 1,000 teachers in English and STEM disciplines, working with students aged 15–17. The project aimed to create a validated framework for AI in teaching, enhancing teacher development and student readiness for a digital future. Its five objectives were to build AI understanding, provide AI tools for education, integrate AI into educational software, examine AI's indirect effects like adaptive learning and data bias, and address AI ethics and data privacy. AI4T offered a structured training pathway including MOOCs, webinars, and resources on machine learning, algorithms, adaptive technologies, and ethical considerations. The pedagogical framework emphasized collaborative learning, problem-solving, and project-based approaches, empowering teachers as leaders who effectively use AI tools. Additionally, the project provided co-designed educational resources and promoted critical reflection on AI's broader implications, such as data governance and GDPR compliance. AI4T significantly contributed to the European education landscape, supporting policies to enhance digital skills and competencies.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The pilot phase of the project took place during the school year 2021/2022 and was designed as a small-scale experiment, whose main objective was to test and refine the survey method and instruments before implementing the experiment on a larger scale (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001; Gudmundsdottir & Brock-Utne, 2010). Six schools were selected and 16 volunteer mathematics and English teachers (2 from each school) and 3 head teachers were involved. The evaluation protocol that was adopted during this phase was developed in a similar way to that envisaged for the large-scale experiment, thus ensuring methodological consistency between the

two phases. The teachers were divided into two distinct groups: a treatment group, which received training through materials made available within a MOOC, and a control group, which did not receive training, thus simulating the conditions of the main experiment. This approach made it possible to test the methodology with respect to the administration of evaluation tools, with a focus on their effectiveness and the management of procedures.

The MOOC was also offered to the lecturers in the pilot phase in an initial version (V1) to enable an assessment of the quality of the training offered in terms of increasing knowledge and usefulness in everyday teaching practice.

Fig. 1. Project timeline -Evaluation
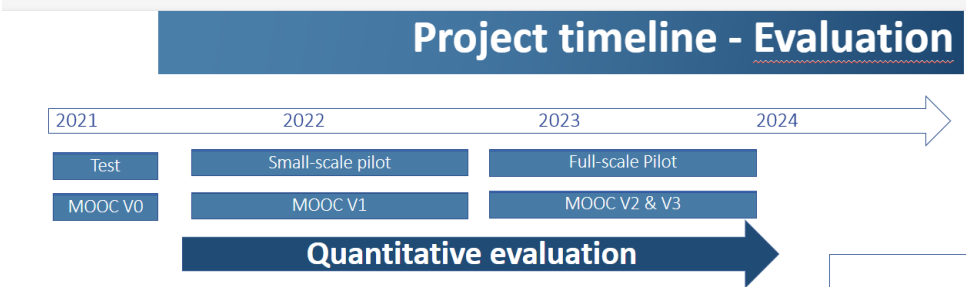
As already mentioned, the aim was not to obtain statistically significant results, but to ensure that the tools and processes were clear and appropriate for the school actors, a context in which they would later be applied to a larger number of teachers and school leaders. A crucial aspect of this phase concerned the comprehensibility of the questions in the questionnaires and additional questions that allowed feedback on their interpretation. Some items were deliberately formulated in an open-ended manner, with the intention of obtaining further information in more depth, thus providing valuable data for the optimisation of the survey instruments. This approach was also intended to fill any gaps in the literature on the subject. The pilot phase test was in fact administered at a time when AI tools were not yet widespread in schools.

The questionnaires addressed to teachers aimed to investigate a number of key aspects related to their experience, perception and use of AI in their own educational context, as well as to obtain information on the training they had received, albeit in a reduced form compared to the large scale, so as to provide useful information also for MOOC implementation. These aspects included: teachers' suggestions to improve the training programmes related to the use of artificial intelligence, teacher's perception of use and utility of AI, teacher's emotional relationship with AI, the use of AI tools for teaching

Through the questionnaire addressed to school leaders, we wanted to verify some aspects related to the implementation and perception of AI in schools with a focus on the training and professional development of teachers and the resources, infrastructures that the school can make available for the promotion of teaching experiences with AI.

3. RESULTS

The quantitative and qualitative results for each area of improvement addressed are reported. Regarding the teachers' satisfaction with the training, when asked if they were overall satisfied, they responded:

Table 1: Level of Satisfaction with the Training

Question: Do you agree with the following statement I am overall satisfied with the course	n
Agree	10
Disagree	0
NA (didn't take part in the training)	6
Total	16

All those who participated in the training declared themselves satisfied. Specifically, interviews revealed that respondents believe the MOOC to be well done, in this way the contents are always available, it's possible to use them in a personalized way, and review the various steps deepening the topics of greatest interest. Participants appreciated the work with Facebook and with the algorithms regarding the creation of fake news, both in terms of videos and images. Some statements are reported: "I started training with great curiosity, the topic of AI intrigues me a lot"; The training was a way to understand our preparation on the topic of AI, a sort of self-assessment on our understanding of the topic"; "The training was useful to see everything in a different way".

Table 2: Level of Course Applicability

Question: Do you agree with the following statement? The training had great practical value for my work.		
	n	val%
Agree (agree, strongly agree)	0	0
Generally agree	4	40%
Disagree (somewhat disagree, disagree, strongly disagree)	6	60%
NA (didn't take part in the training)	6	NA
Total	16	100

Almost half of the teachers considered that the training didn't meet their expectations (4 out of 10). This could be due to the lack of practical value brought by the training: 4 out of 10 teachers disagreed with the statement "the training had great practical value for my work".

Table 3: Level of Satisfaction Compared to Expectations

Question: Did the training meet your expectations?		
	n	val%
Yes	6	60%
No	4	40%
NA (didn't take part in the training)	6	NA
Total	16	100

Consistent with the responses to the previous question they all agree regarding the quality of the conduct of the course and the sensitivity of the trainers in responding to participants' questions; in addition, 9 out of 10 think the content was relevant to the training program.

In the interview about their expectations, the most common answer was that they wanted to learn about concrete applications and use of AI in their classroom. Teachers suggested to: broaden the proposals of activities to be carried with students to encourage active learning; provide videos in Italian to facilitate understanding of content; present the website and bibliography resources through an introductory guide; select more relevant references for classroom teaching (webliography and useful APPs); create a greater space for interaction between teachers (forum, sharing environments, etc.).

In the interviews some teachers express at the same time pleasure, curiosity, and anxiety in using AI. If for positive feelings, the positions are clear-cut, with ratings such as "fairly agree", "agree", and "strongly agree" prevailing with regard to both "I would like to lecture in class with my students using AI tools", "Using AI tools could be enjoyable", "I enjoyed using AI tools". For negative feelings, there is heterogeneity in the responses, with a good 30% (and more) of teachers expressing anxiety: "It makes me anxious to learn how to use AI tools", "It makes me anxious to learn how AI tools work", "It makes me anxious to think about lecturing in class with my students using AI tools". Related to concerns about AI or benefits brought by the tool, they generally tended to disagree with the negative statements. For example, 12 out of 16 teachers disagreed with the statement "If the use of AI in schools increases, teachers will lose autonomy" or "Relationships between teachers and students will be impoverished", and 13 disagreed that "If the use of AI in schools increases, teachers will be progressively replaced with AI". Most agreements converge on: "If the use of AI in schools increases, teaching will be tailored to student's needs" (13 out of 16) and "If the use of AI in schools increases, quality of teaching will increase" (12 out of 16).

Regarding the tools used for research in majority the teachers valued the instruments as fairly clear with easy to comprehend questions, that in some cases were perceived as a bit too general. In several cases teachers stressed that the questions helped to reflect on the training path, the strengths and the tools that they will be able to implement in the future.

The results of the interviews with the Principals regarding the training are presented in summary: one DS says that his teachers did not follow the training but only took the questionnaires. The other two say that they talked to the teachers about the training but did not encounter any difficulties. From the interviews emerged: "To the policy maker I would say that AI is an important topic that should be addressed within the school, for example in the teaching of civic education". "We must make people understand the usefulness of AI because the student, and even before the teacher, do not know the topic and its importance"; "The curricula should be revised to encourage teachers to tackle the topic (eg the issue of ethical choice and also the importance of researching the authenticity of sources which is not a central aspect but is still important for students"; "Didactics must always be accompanied by ethical debate, you cannot dissociate the two aspects (didactics and ethics). Debate, confrontation are always important".

4. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this work was to understand how effective the training, training tools and research tools were in terms of improving teachers' skills and expendability in the classroom. To do this, a pilot study was conducted with teachers and headmasters with a view to testing the AI4t project. The high level of satisfaction with the training aligns with the discussion on the necessity of AI literacy (Mikeladze et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024). The MOOC's availability and adaptability reflect effective practices in professional development (Arvin & Zahmatkesh, 2023). However, only 40% of teachers found the training practically valuable for their work: this supports findings from Zhao and Luo (2022) regarding the need for practical application-focused training programs to increase AI's usability in classrooms. The frequent use of AI for content creation underscores the role of AI as a supplemental tool, as noted by Ismail et al. (2024), but also signals the need to expand its application to areas like personalized learning and adaptive teaching (Tarisayi, 2024). Teachers expressed curiosity and enthusiasm but also anxiety regarding AI's integration; in the same direction principals emphasized the need for curriculum adjustments to integrate ethical considerations and critical AI literacy. This aligns with the introduction's discussion on the ethical dimensions of AI in education (Ismail et al., 2024; Niewint-Gori, 2023). These reflections gave rise to useful insights for the improvement of training; the research tools were useful to be used on a wider scale.

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TEACHERS ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS AND SENSE OF SELF-EFFICACY TOWARDS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Indire

INTRODUCTION

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in education is rapidly gaining prominence on both national and international levels, with growing investments in research and implementation to enhance teaching and learning processes (Pedrò et al., 2020). Generative AI, in particular, has emerged as a transformative tool with the potential to improve complex student skills, promote equity and inclusion, and address digital gaps (Lameras & Arnab, 2021). However, its adoption introduces significant challenges, particularly concerning ethical considerations, teachers' preparedness, and the implications of AI on pedagogical practices. Recent research underscores a gap in educators' understanding of AI technologies and highlights the importance of equipping them with the necessary knowledge and tools to integrate AI effectively into classrooms (Lindner et al., 2019; Felix, 2020). This panel examines these dynamics, exploring teacher attitudes, ethical implications, and training strategies for fostering AI literacy and self-efficacy, thereby addressing the critical needs for innovation and inclusivity in education.

PERCEPTIONS, TOOLS, COMPETENCE, AND ETHICS IN AI AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PATHWAYS

 The studies presented in the panel highlighted how the integration of generative AI in teaching/learning practices is offering challenges both on the educational and ethical level. The latter aspect was explored in Teachers' Perception And Attitudes To Harness The Potential Of Artificial Intelligence In Education, a survey conducted through CAWI methodology that assessed perceptions of the usefulness, effectiveness and ease of use of artificial intelligence in schools. The results revealed a gap between stated knowledge and actual use of artificial intelligence, which was mainly appreciated for inclusion and information retrieval, with common applications in documentation and research. An experiment tested in more than a thousand schools presented in Empowering Teachers in the AI-driven Educational Landscape: Fostering Self-efficacy and Familiarity with AITools aimed to strengthen teachers' self-efficacy and familiarity with artificial intelligence tools, highlighting the importance of the vital link between critical thinking and formulating relevant questions when using them with students. Artificial Intelligence Literacy in Education (AILE) concerns the skills needed by educators to understand, use and

evaluate applications of AI in education. The study Training Teachers for School Self-Evaluation: Data, Digital and Artificial Intelligence Literacy, based on an integrated model of processes and competences, mapped the training needs and self-efficacy of the members of the Internal Evaluation Team (it. NIV) through the methodology of interviews with teachers, with the aim of assessing their competences and identifying training gaps. Empowering Educators with Generative AI: The Govern-AI Program for Adult Education Governance explored GAI in the management of social and educational services. A customised chatbot improved access to educational resources, fostering inclusiveness and effectiveness in adult education and involving teachers and CPIA (Provincial Centers for Adult education) officials in decision-making. The paper Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards the Use of Artificial Intelligence: Evaluating the Impact of Training in an International Project further explored teachers' perceptions of AI, through a pilot phase of the Erasmus AI4T project, aimed at testing the project's evaluation model that used a counterfactual design based on the Technology Acceptance Model, headmasters and teachers from eight Italian schools were involved. The results made it possible to refine the evaluation tools for a broader application aimed at 100 Italian schools. AMBRA (Pervasive and Personalised Augmentative and Alternative Communication) is an innovative approach that exploits federated learning and generative AI, addresses accessibility barriers in education was presented in Using Artificial Intelligence to Boost Autonomy in a More Inclusive Society: The AMBRA Approach. AMBRA supports educators in creating flexible and customised materials for students with communication disabilities by integrating pedagogical, linguistic and ICT skills. By enabling the creation of accessible content on modern devices, it promotes inclusive and adaptive learning environments.

Together, these efforts highlight how generative artificial intelligence is not just a tool, but a transformative force in education, promoting innovation, inclusion and personalised learning. However, its success depends on addressing ethical concerns, improving transparency and equipping educators with the necessary skills to fully exploit its potential

CONCLUSIONS

The panel's contributions underscore the pivotal role of teachers in ensuring the effective integration of AI in education. Studies reveal that while generative AI holds significant potential to transform educational practices, its success depends on addressing educators' concerns, ethical considerations, and training needs. Bridging the gap between awareness and practical application is essential for fostering AI literacy and empowering teachers to navigate the evolving digital landscape (Celik et al., 2022). By leveraging models such as the Technology Acceptance Model and focusing on self-efficacy, familiarity with AI tools, and ethical awareness, the initiatives discussed in this panel offer valuable pathways for promoting equitable and effective use of AI in education. Moving forward, strategic investments in professional learning pathways and collaborative efforts are critical to ensuring that

teachers remain central to the learning process while harnessing AI's full potential for fostering innovation and inclusivity in education.

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INVISIBLE AI: INVESTIGATION OF EMOTIONAL PERCEPTION AND SELF-EFFICACY IN DYSLEXIC STUDENTS USING COMPENSATORY TOOLS POWERED BY AI

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Since the public advent of ChatGPT in November 2022, there was immediate discussion about the impact that Artificial Intelligence would have in the educational context. Most of the scenarios featured AI in the role of Tutor or actual substitute for teachers. However, little has been discussed about the gradual implementations of AI in the academic context, and how these "invisible" implementations can benefit students. Amongst these new technologies, we add *Reasy*, a study support application created by *Tech4All,* from the *University of Tuscia* in Viterbo. But how can we evaluate the impact that these new compensatory tools have on DSA students? In previous research, we focused on the immediate cognitive results, quantitatively evaluating whether the student had immediate improvements in understanding the text using the compensatory tool. We soon realized that this method of analysis was not an effective cognitive analysis framework. As such, a triangulated analysis on the constructs of "emotional perception" and "self-efficacy" of dyslexic students in a non-performative context was chosen. A sample of diagnosed S.L.D. high school and university students was used, and the survey was conducted with the GEW (Geneva Emotion Wheel): an empirically tested instrument to measure emotional reactions to objects, events, and situations.

school; education; psychology; emotion; self-efficacy; AI; S.l.d.

INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing, the research is in progress. This means that all data here presented are non-definitive, but still interesting for the sake of scientific contribution in this field. We will discuss briefly the objectives, followed by the methodologies, limitation analysis, and the data analysis with the preliminary conclusions.

Theoretical Framework and Objectives

This research is set within the theories of Maria Ranieri (2024) in her "AI alphabetization" works – on one hand the AIL (AI Literacy), and on the other the AIED, which is the instrumental use of AI in terms of supporting learning processes. For AIL, this

research is set within "Operative Dimension" that requires "employing AI effectively in a variety of contexts", and "Critical Dimension", "knowing how to communicate and cooperate effectively with AI tech, evaluating their social impact". The AIED profile, instead, considers the "Teaching Dimension", precisely in the study of systems of tutoring in which the benefits of "personalized support", "personalized adaptation of material", and "personalized material" are being empirically tested. The importance of the emotional impact of interactions between objects and humans in the everyday is not unknown to psychological, pedagogical, and neuroscientific literature. For psychology, works like Norman's Emotional Design (2003), emphasize how humans are inclined to positively interact with esthetically pleasing objects. Studies connected to this theory demonstrate how the user creates a "relationship" with the object, moved by the positive emotions that it entices. In Neuroscience, Damasio's works (1994) dismantled common belief that sees emotions as "enemies to reason". His studies showed how integral emotional expression is, to a physiological level. His studies on patients with damage to precise areas of the prefrontal ventromedial cortex (that control emotions, sensations, and decision-making processes) reveal that those affected – while apparently healthy on other profiles (cognitive, sense-motor etc.) – are not able to live complete and satisfying lives in our society. Their apathy – despite their other, untouched mental faculties – makes it difficult for them to choose, complete tasks, or "having good judgement", leading them towards a "pariah" stance in society. For educational psychology and pedagogy, the effects of emotions on memory and learning are currently under examination. Some research shows that positive emotions improve the mnemonic process (Um et al., 2012), seemingly because emotions supposedly "stick" in the brain with relevant information. Lucangeli thinks that:

> If a child learns with curiosity and joy, the lesson will be written down in their memory with the emotions of curiosity and joy. If the child learns with boredom, fear, or anxiety, the alert will disrupt that experience of learning (2019)

Other research propose that even negative emotions can positively influence memory and learning, but only in select durations and intensities (Vogel & Schwabe, 2016). Keeping in mind the emotional impact on the learner in the learning environment is fundamental, and becomes relevant in the moment we add technologies like AI into the mix. Understanding how to face this new wave of possibilities is the best way to reshape and renew educational processes that put center-stage the learner's education and their well-being during formative experiences. The general objective of our research is to investigate the emotional cargo of individual study and the impact of new AI-powered technologies on the users, measuring self-efficacy and emotional well-being. The sample chosen for this study has been taken mainly from the population of students at the University of Cagliari. The hypothesis is that the emotional impact on individual study will be perceived as lower when using AI-powered tools. We're also hypothesizing that students with low self-efficacy will be more prone to "abusing" it, since they could perceive AI as a substitute for their "lacking" operational skills.

METHODOLOGIES AND INSTRUMENTS

We will employ Denzin's Triangulation method (1978). Thus, we will be combining qualitative and quantitative data, mainly through focus groups, individual interviews, and Likert scale questionnaires. Psychological dimensions considered in the research are as follows

- Habits relative to study and reading (ad Hoc): 8 items, self-report, investigating the participants' preferences on using paper or digital support during study & reading sessions;
- Emotional Reactions to objects, events, and situations (GEW; Scherer, 2005; Scherer, Fontaine, Sacharin, & Soriano, 2013): 20 items, self-report, investigating emotional reactions of participants on text content, and experience on task completion, both paper and AI-powered;
- Self-efficacy (ad Hoc): 6 items, self-report, investigating self-efficacy perception during study & reading, with paper or digital support.

GENEVA EMORION WHEEL (GEW)

The Geneva Emotion Wheel (GEW) is an empirically tested, and validated instrument, made to investigate emotional reactions to objects or events. The instrument is organized in a wheel, divided into 20 parts for each emotional family. To the interviewee is asked to indicate – in relation to something – the emotions felt, and their intensity, on a 5-point scale. Also provided are the options for No Emotion, and Other. The instrument has yet to be translated in Italian officially, however, for this study we employed a translation adopted by the Department of Social Psychology in the University of Cagliari during their PIP experiments. For ease of fruition, the wheel was converted into a multiple question questionnaire on Google Docs.

Figura 1. GEW
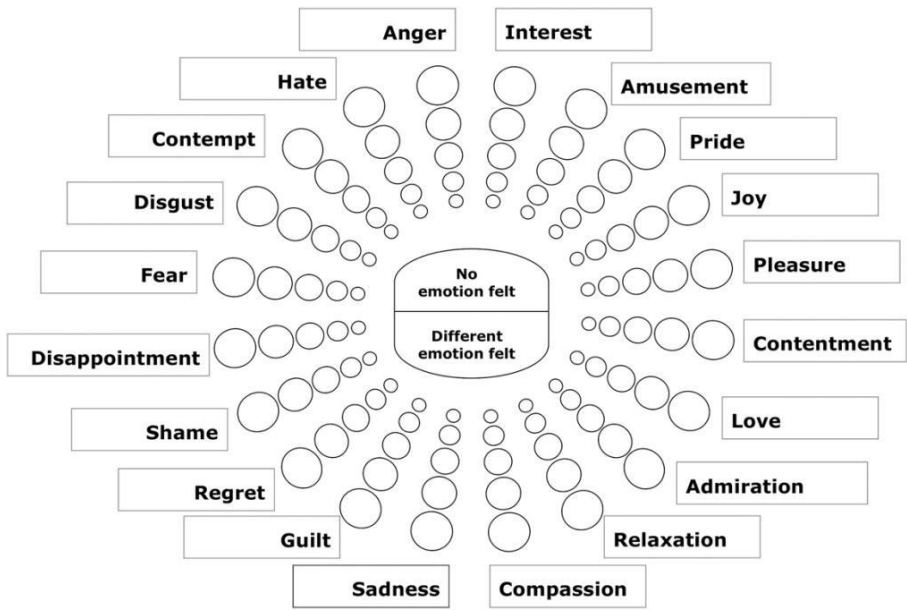
BANDURA'S SELF-EFFICACY

Self-Efficacy is defined as one's own conviction of their ability to plan and execute actions to reach a specific goal (Bandura, 1997). Research revealed that Self-efficacy is tied to school success (Ferla, Valcke e Cai, 2009; Luszczynska, Guitiérrez-Doña e Schwarzer, 2005; Richardson, Abraham e Bond, 2012; Zimmerman, Bandura e Martinez-Pons, 1992), showing that students with high self-efficacy in academia are more involved, hard-working, persistent through difficulty and higher achieving (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). These numerous studies show how students with S.D.L. have a lower self-efficacy compared to their peers. This is because of the difficulties they face in their academic pursuit, that must be compensated for with appropriate compensatory tools. A valid method to assess the value of such a tool, like Reasy, could be to evaluate how students perceive themselves during tasks done with it. Since Self-efficacy is about perceived skills, it's important that the items reflect this need. As Bandura (2006) clarifies:

> Elements should be formulated in terms of "can do", not "must do", because using "canis" about intention, while "must rests" upon their judgement of skills; the two constructs are conceptually and empirically separate.

Self-efficacy tests in academia start with an instruction like "think about yourself as a student [bachelor/high schooler], when you answer the following questions". The questionnaire is divided into items able to comprehend how much students are feeling able to complete certain tasks: they then report on a 5-point Likert scale that starts on 1 ("Not sure at all) " and goes to 5 ("Extremely sure)".

SAFETY

We followed a strict protocol, starting with a) instructions for the correct procedure on compiling the questionnaire, with respect on the Italian norm of privacy and anonymity of respondents; b) questionnaires relative to investigated dimensions; c) socio-demographical sheets for the participants.

While this research employs self-report questionnaires, their application is kept anonymous, and with respect to privacy law. Data gathered is only used in aggregated format, with scientific research purposes only, as also stated in the NDA signed with Tech4All, the proprietary society fo Reasy, on the voice "IP". Subjects involved in the sample are adults, and adhere to the research willingly, without compensation. There are no ethically sensitive themes on moral, religious, ethical, or identitarian topics. Research is conducted with full respect on the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct dell'APA (American Psychological Association), also stated in the "Codice Etico dell'AIP (Associazione Italiana Psicologia)", approved by the "Assemblea Generale dei Soci AIP" del 27.03.2015. The adopted texts and tests for reading comprehension are age appropriate and extrapolated from the "MT – 16 -19 Prove di lettura scrittura", Erikson, (2016) battery, for students of age 16 to 19; and from the "LSC-SUA", Erikson, (2020) battery, used for university students and above. Both batteries are psychological tools to evaluate S.D.L. diagnosis, deemed appropriate for this research.

Procedure format

- The student is invited to read and sign the Informed Consensus. The research is then explained.
- The student answers a questionnaire about their study & reading habits.
- The first Text (paper) is given, with the task of reading silently and answering questions of reading comprehension at the end.
- The second questionnaire is then administered, containing the GEW and Self-efficacy ad Hoc about the content of the text and the perception of this experience.
- Then the Reasy app is presented in all of its features. The student is instructed to adjust with font size, style, interline, etc.
- The second text (reasy) is then administered, with the same task as before.
- The third questionnaire is then administered, containing the GEW and Self-efficacy ad Hoc about the content of the text and the perception of the AI-powered tool experience. The questionnaire ends with some demographic questions, as a soft debrief from the whole interview.
- Lastly, researchers interview the student about the experience as a whole.

LIMITS

As stated in the introduction, this study is WIP: the identified optimal sample is of 35 students, while at the time of publishing, the data analysis can only count 6. The difficulty of finding an appropriate sample is mostly due to the nature of the sample. University students are busy and highly stressed, because of the lessons, exams, and many of them have to also travel by train or bus. Since the experiment lasts one hour usually, up to 3h if the S.D.L. symptomatology is strong, or the student has an antagonistic attitude, this amount of time proves to be difficult to fit in their lives.

DATA ANALYSIS

As of now, the sample is half-split of men and women (50%), mostly (83.3%) university students, especially age 25-30 (33.3%), and 30-40 (33.3%). 100% of sample has diagnosed comorbidity in Dyslexia and Dyscalculia, with additional Dysgraphia (66.7%), and/or Dys-orthographies (50%). Since the sample is still quite small, a G*Power compensation is needed for this preliminary analysis (Faul & all 2007-2009). This study aims to measure "the perceived emotional well-being of the experience" just experienced. This operates in the general linear model of quantitative analysis: the dependent variable is operationalized as "the total of attributed tones of emotional content", measured with the GEW, in a before-after analysis. To gather this "total tone" we sum all of the positive emotion values and subtract the aggregated sum of the negative emotions, granting us a total "tone" of the emotional experience perceived by the student. To measure the effect, we use a Paired Sample T-Student with the experience on paper text (Before – Control), and the experience with AI-powered Reasy text (After – Experimental). The result is then triangulated with the researchers' observation, and the free-form interview at the end.

Figure 2. T-Test

Statistiche Descrittive

	Percezione Emotiva del Testo Cartaceo	Percezione Emotiva Uso del Supporto Cartaceo	Percezione Emotiva Testo Reasy	Percezione Emotiva Uso Reasy
Valid	6	6	6	6
Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean	-5.500	-1.333	-2.833	10.167
Std. Deviation	6.535	11.759	7.834	9.020
Skewness	-0.142	0.415	1.290	1.175
Std. Error of Skewness	0.845	0.845	0.845	0.845
Kurtosis	-2.904	-0.915	1.375	1.446
Std. Error of Kurtosis	1.741	1.741	1.741	1.741

Paired Samples T-Test

Measure 1		Measure 2	t	df	p	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
Percezione Emotiva Uso del Supporto Cartaceo	-	Percezione Emotiva Uso Reasy	-1.549	5	0.091	-0.632	0.781

Note. For all tests, the alternative hypothesis specifies that Percezione Emotiva Uso del Supporto Cartaceo is less than Percezione Emotiva Uso Reasy.

While looking at this data, with a p-value higher than the confidence interval of 0.05, knowing how much *p* is sample-size sensitive, we will now proceed to apply a criterion correction with g*power. Now, we can calculate the effect size of the study from means and SD between measures, after determining a correlation between the two groups. Proceeding with the criterion correction:

Figure 3. G*Power criterion correction in action
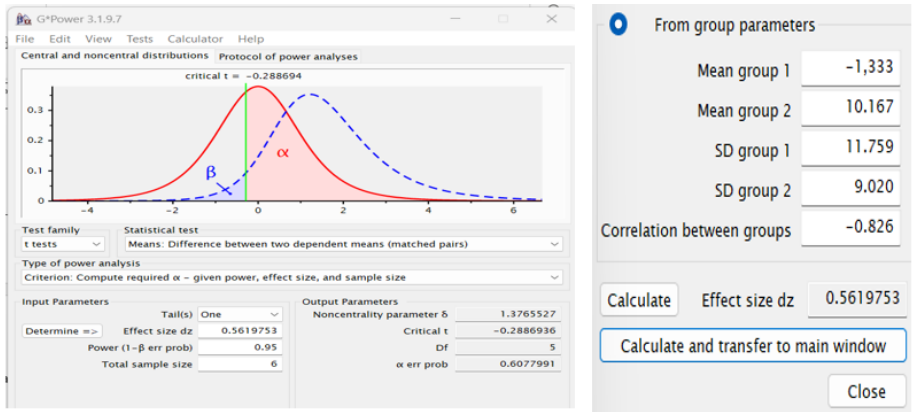
Considering the new alpha 0.61, we recontextualize the T-test values: the result is statistically significant, since p < alpha (0.091 < 0.61). We can also note that by reaching the sample size of 35, the analysis should result statistically significant to

an alpha of 0.05. While applying this data to the triangulation method, we can observe that the Reasy users all found themselves much more able to face difficulties in reading and comprehension, disproving our initial concerns. Also, looking at the Self-efficacy test results compared (with a paired T-test) we can see that we can accept these results thanks to the criterion change, while appreciating a statistical significance of mastery in reading a difficult test (p 0.038 < 0.05), facing an approaching oral test (p 0.038 < 0.05), and improving reading speed (p 0.006 < 0,01).

Figure 4. Self-efficacy T-Test

Paired Samples T-Test

Measure 1		Measure 2	t	df	p
Nella lettura su supporto cartaceo. Quanto ti sei sentito sicuro di comprendere il senso del testo?	-	Nella lettura con REASY. Quanto ti sei sentito sicuro di comprendere il senso del testo?	-1.348	5	0.118
Nella lettura su supporto cartaceo. Quanto ti sei sentito sicuro di rispondere correttamente alle domande sul testo?	-	Nella lettura con REASY. Quanto ti sei sentito sicuro di rispondere correttamente alle domande sul testo?	-1.464	5	0.102
Nella lettura su supporto cartaceo. Quanto ti senti sicuro a concludere una lettura difficile, come un saggio di letteratura, o un articolo scientifico del tuo corso di studi?	-	Nella lettura con REASY. Quanto ti senti sicuro a concludere una lettura difficile, come un saggio di letteratura, o un articolo scientifico del tuo corso di studi?	-2.236	5	0.038
Nella lettura su supporto cartaceo. Quanto ti senti sicuro di leggere velocemente un testo?	-	Nella lettura con REASY. Quanto ti senti sicuro di leggere velocemente un testo?	-3.796	5	0.006
Nello studio su supporto cartaceo. Quanto ti senti sicuro di affrontare un'interrogazione imminente?	-	Nello studio con REASY. Quanto ti senti sicuro di affrontare un'interrogazione imminente?	-2.236	5	0.038

CONCLUSIONS

The Emotional Perception of people who employed Reasy was significantly more positive than those who used paper support. In the future, we hope to see the end of these research as a start to better integration in the educational framework of such advanced "invisible AI" tools.

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DEMINING THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS. SCOPING REVIEW ON OPPORTUNITIES AND RISK FOR TEACHING PRACTICES SUPPORTED BY INTELLIGENT TUTORING SYSTEM

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AI is predicted to significantly impact education, particularly in teacher training and professionalization. This proposal examines the shift from teacher training *through* technologies to training *within* technologies, focusing on the metaverse as an AI-driven environment. It explores the teacher-learner relationship as a mediator of educational action, analysing the challenges and opportunities posed by Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS) in immersive training environments. Using the CLAS-WE approach (Efron & Ravid, 2019), a critical synthesis of systematic reviews on relationality in intelligent tutoring within immersive environments is presented. The study aims to clarify key terms and concepts linked to the teacher-student relationship and intelligent tutoring in environments like the metaverse. It addresses the research question: what characteristics does the teacher-learner relationship present in systematic reviews on ITS in immersive environments? The synthesis highlights potentials (e.g., personalized feedback) and risks (e.g., curriculum alienation) associated with these relationships. The findings contribute to the debate on teacher training in immersive contexts, emphasizing the need for pedagogical oversight to safeguard key teaching-learning elements (e.g., relationships, curriculum design). The work underscores the importance of carefully designed immersive environments to optimize educational outcomes and mitigate risks.

Intelligent Tutoring System; Artificial Intelligence.

INTRODUCTION – INTELLIGENT TUTORING SYSTEMS AND TEACHING PRACTICES

The Intelligent Tutoring System (ITS) is a set of computer-assisted instruction technologies, known as ICAI (Intelligent Computer-Assisted Instruction), that use programs capable of replicating the performance of experts in a domain. ITS mimics human expertise and aims to provide immediate and personalised instructions or feedback based on the profiles of users engaged in activities and interacting with the system. In training activities, these systems are typically structured to operate without the involvement of a human trainer (Arnau-González et al., 2023).

Research has highlighted how intelligent tutoring systems can be effective educational tools in achieving the learning objectives of training programmes. This is based on comparisons with basic computer-assisted instruction (CAI) tutoring models and human behaviour models (Fishman et al., 2013; Kulik & Fletcher, 2015). The specificity of ITS lies in the interaction among four core components, corresponding to four different 'models' (Luckin et al., 2016; Nkambou, Mizoguchi & Bourdeau, 2010):

- Domain: Refers to expert knowledge, encompassing the concepts, criteria, and problem-solving procedures grounded in specific learning theories. The domain acts as the standard for evaluating the student-user's performance and identifying errors (Nkambou, Mizoguchi, Bourdeau, 2010, p. 4).
- Student: Complementary to the domain model, this concerns the cognitive and emotional states of the student-user, which may change during the learning process as they engage in problem-solving activities (Mitrovic, Ohlsson, Barrow, 2013).
- Tutoring: Synthesises information from the domain and student models, identifies deviations by the student-user from expected problem-solving procedures, and provides timely, personalised feedback.
- User Interface: Facilitates communication and interaction among the three domains.

Fig. 1. Interaction among models in an intelligent tutoring system. Adapted from Luckin et al., 2016, p. 21.
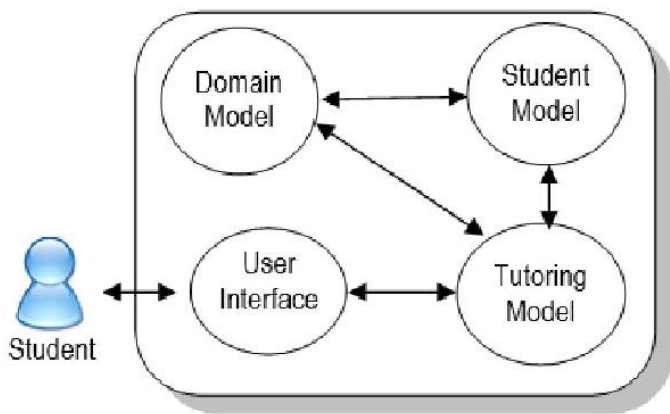
Assuming artificial intelligence as a set of highly advanced mathematical tools for constructing and using models, the model serves as the tool to make predictions or analyse alternative choices (US DE, 2023, p. 30). Specifically, AI-supported intelligent tutoring systems use more complex algorithms and neural networks to provide even more adaptive and personalised instructions based on the incoming and outgoing skills of individuals engaged in training and interacting with the system (Lin et al., 2023). AI-enhanced ITS support decision-making processes through algorithms that use vast amounts of data (Lin et al., 2023).

1. SCOPING REVIEW ON OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS FOR TEACHING PRACTICES SUPPORTED BY INTELLIGENT TUTORING SYSTEMS

AI has long been predicted to have an increasingly significant impact on people's lives (Englebart, 1962), particularly on teaching and learning processes and practices (Mulvihill et al., 2024; US DE, 2023). Since technological systems began to support teaching and learning processes, intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) have often been used experimentally, without a shared intervention model. More broadly, there remains a general misunderstanding about the actual implementation possibilities of ITS in teaching practice, leading to overly enthusiastic or overly critical perspectives on their actual functions (Tuomi, 2022; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022).

Studies focusing on defining the risks and opportunities of AI-driven ITS in school teaching practices are currently active across different sectors (Wang et al., 2023). Due to the complexity of such cross-sectoral investigations, a scoping review of the implications of AI-based ITS for teaching practices was conducted from September to November 2024 to assess the feasibility of a comprehensive systematic review.

The scoping process followed the accredited methodological framework of Arksey and O'Malley (2005, pp. 7-8; Pham et al., 2014), which includes five phases:

- Identifying the research question (s);
- Identifying relevant studies;
- Selecting studies;
- Mapping the data;
- Summarising, synthesising, and reporting results for possible wider consultation.

(RQ) What risks and opportunities for teaching practices supported by intelligent tutoring systems are identified in the literature?
In formulating the question, consideration was given potential ambiguities in the constructs of "intelligent tutoring systems" (referring to different types; see Section 1) and "teaching practices" (often associated with related concepts such as learning or teaching-learning processes; see D1). To do this, a non-selective parameter was applied, including studies on similar topics with different terminology, leading to the formulation of Research Question 3 (see D3).

Relevant documents were identified by searching primary and secondary studies in electronic databases — Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) — to access titles, abstracts, and, where available, full papers. Using the keywords "Teaching" "Practices" AND ("Intelligent Tutoring System" OR "Intelligent Tutoring"), 1,230 documents were retrieved. The search was then narrowed to journal articles and conference proceedings in English, reflecting the study's goal of wide consultation with stakeholders and international research. The query (TITLE-ABS-KEY-FULL ("Intelligent Tutoring System") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY-FULL ("Teaching Practices")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE "English") AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE, "j") OR LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE, "p"))) resulted in 539 publications. Due to time and resource constraints, studies published between 2019 and May 2024 were included, reducing the total to 78 publications.

An initial analysis revealed that the search strategy had identified a limited number of studies, despite the use of broad inclusion criteria (similar topics with different terminology). The selection was refined using internal sorting criteria: study type, population/documentation analysed, research objectives, outcome and key concepts/vocabulary. From the 78 documents, 4 studies were selected for review.

Document tracking included a "graphical representation" of the selection process (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Pham et al., 2014; see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Scoping Review Selection Process.
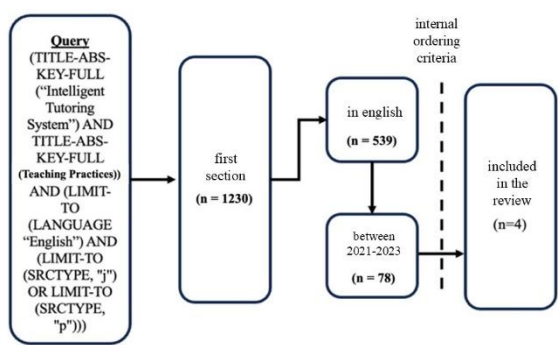
Key information from the document review was extracted using a "descriptive-analytical" method, which included brief summaries of each document and comparative analyses. The comparisons were based on internal sorting criteria—study type, population/documentation analysed, objectives, findings, and key concepts/vocabulary (see Table 1).

Tab. 1. Summary Table of the Scoping Review

Reference	Study Type	Technology Focus	Risks	Opportunities
Perrotta, Selwyn, 2019	Ethnological school-case	Machine Learning + ITS	Erroneous data Distorted algorithm usage Restricted educational models	Personalisation
Enyon, 2023*	Observation of socio-techical systems	Machine Learning + ITS	Social inequality Bias and prejudices	Access to education Personalisation Decision-making support
Lin, Huang & Owen, 2023	Literature review	AI Systems + ITS	Privacy concerns Distorted algorithm usage Limited investments	Personalisation Improved learning outcomes
Alfarra et al., 2024	School-case	AI Systems + ITS	Privacy concerns System biases	

(RQ) What are the risks and opportunities for teaching practices supported by intelligent tutoring systems identified in the literature identify?

Risks associated with the uncritical use of AI models include the inability to manage the processes underpinning intelligent support systems, the gap between the data input by computer scientists into AI models, and the system's operation. Another risk is the production of inaccurate, false, or misleading content by generative AI, which could "contaminate" educational materials. This would require laborious and time-consuming efforts by teachers to verify and correct content accuracy and potentially turn the web into a "textpocalypse" (Kirschenbaum, 2023). In particualr, Perrotta and Selwyn (2019*), as the first study to address the challenges/opportunities, highlighted the issue of algorithm misuse in relation to the lack of appropriate pedagogically grounded tutoring models.

One of the most notable risks of adopting AI in education is the reliance on large historical datasets to predict student behaviour and learning trends. Without proper pedagogical reasoning, this could lead to bias and discrimination (Eynon, 2024*; Barocas & Selbst, 2024; Chen, 2023).

Studies (Lin et al., 2023*) have identified the paradox that AI-enabled ITS can address key future challenges, such as sustainability, while at the same time creating new ones. Opportunities offered by AI-ITS include:

- Enhancing access to quality education;
- Creating personalised learning experiences tailored to different student learning styles and preferences;
- Supporting teachers' decision-making based on data about student performance, emotional states, and engagement levels.

However, challenges posed by AI-ITS include:

- Privacy and data security concerns;
- Potential biases in the use of algorithms and machine learning models;
- The need for significant investment in technology and infrastructure, which is not always guaranteed.

A particular challenge posed by AI in education is the potential change in the teacher's role (Felix, 2020; Holmes, Bialik, Fadel, 2019). Some argue that AI will not replace teachers but rather support them by saving time, reducing workload, and assisting with routine tasks (Tuomi, 2022). Others highlight that AI will require teachers to adapt their pedagogical approaches and workflows, with risks of "robotising" their role in lesson planning, material preparation, providing feedback, and assessing students (Williamson, 2023; Russell, 2023).

Some critics claim that the perceived benefits – such as simplifying teaching, personalising learning, and saving time – are outdated. They argue that mechanised teaching is not informed by an educational vision but by an industrial imagination of hyper-efficient education (Williamson, 2023; Watters, 2021; Perla, Agrati, Montone, 2024).

2. COMMENTS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The risks and opportunities associated with the widespread use of AI technologies in teaching practices and teachers' work are currently a subject of significant debate (Perrotta & Selwyn, 2019*; Chen, 2023; Cukurova et al., 2024). A synthesis of the systematic reviews conducted highlights certain opportunities (such as on-demand feedback, personalisation, and learning support) and recurring risks (such as bias and privacy breaches) regarding AI-assisted tutoring systems. This paper seeks to broaden the discussion on the potentialities and risks of using ITS in school education by illustrating how, from a diachronic perspective, a shift in scholarly attitudes can be observed (from concerns about potential social discrimination to privacy issues) can be observed alongside a constant focus on the potential for personalisation. It promotes an awareness of the structural elements of teaching and learning processes (such as personalisation and teacher decision-making) that could be undermined if pedagogical guidance is lacking in the design of technologically mediated learning environments, as Perrotta and Selwyn noted back in 2019.

Focusing solely on the teaching-learning process and teachers' work, a recent report by the United States Department of Education (US DE, 2023) highlighted that:

- Balancing human and AI decision making: Teachers might delegate certain types of tasks to intelligent systems (e.g., providing feedback on specific assignments, sending reminders to students), but not deeper pedagogical decisions, such as overall guidance and global feedback.
- the personalisation-surveillance paradox: While ITS can provide personalised support in daily tasks, they may also increase the potential for surveillance. A common example is an intelligent assistant processing indistinct, often private, input data to offer support in specific activities (e.g., voice assistance).
- adequate support for students' strengths and needs while protecting privacy: this applies both to personal data and to data generated in student-system interactions, which that are used to assist teachers personalise curricular resources and must comply with privacy laws.

Another challenge for teachers is designing and implementing teaching interventions that respond to students' strengths while safeguarding their privacy. In culturally responsive approaches (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017), teaching interventions take into account not only the needs but also the strengths of individual students. Teachers must consider whether the information about students shared with or stored in an AI-enabled system is subject to legal regulations (…), and whether interactions between students and AI systems create records that need to be protected by law, such as when a chatbot or automated tutor generates conversational or written guidance for a student (US DE, 2023, p. 62).

These challenges could also create "tensions" (Molenaar, 2022; Gay, 2018), such as the need for specific training and ongoing professional development, as well as continually finding the balance between trusting AI enough to provide assistance and trusting it too much—thus becoming subject to constant surveillance with the

risk of privacy loss. It is anticipated that teachers will require training and support to understand how and when to exercise human judgement (US DE, 2023, p. 30).

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SYNERGIES BETWEEN NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND EDUCATIONAL METHODOLOGY: EXPLORING THE NEW FRONTIERS OF LEARNING WITH AI MEDIATED TECHNOLOGIES AND DESIGN THINKING

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Design Thinking, which originated and was used in contexts far removed from the world of schooling, is now considered an innovative teaching methodology that enables students to acquire transversal skills and develop the ability to tackle complex problems creatively and by intervening on potential influencing factors and removing possible obstacles (Wrigley & Straker, 2015). This human-centred approach, focused on the individual and his or her needs, creates dynamic and personalised learning paths, allowing students to explore, experiment and actively learn (Carroll et al., 2010). The centrality of design thinking in the educational landscape is due to its ability to foster collaboration and empathy: solutions cannot be conceived without a deep understanding of the needs, expectations and perspectives of others. If Design Thinking is integrated with the potential of AI, the combination is a winning one, as demonstrated by some of the work of the 250 SFP students at the University of Bari who created inclusive digital artefacts during a didactic innovation workshop, using Design Thinking to facilitate pupils' learning.

Design Thinking; human-centred approach; technologies mediated by Artificial Intelligence

1. DESIGN THINKING AS A METHODOLOGY TO SUPPORT CREATIVE AND INNOVATIVE PROCESSES

Increasing digitisation has revolutionised approaches to education, with new multimedia technologies increasingly integrated into teaching and learning processes.

Over time, Design Thinking (DT) has become a pervasive approach to innovation that has had a major impact on the basic constructs that characterise the innovation process (Beckman and Berry, 2007; Martin, 2009; Brown, 2009; Cross, 2011; Liedtka and Ogilvie, 2011; Liedtka, 2015; Elsbach and Stigliani, 2018). Although it did not originate as a teaching methodology, it is still used in the educational field to support creative and innovation processes. Design Thinking is an active methodology capable of solving a complex problem in an innovative way, using creative

management of the tools at one's disposal. But Design Thinking is much more: it is a way of seeing the world and approaching it (Woolery, 2019). What really distinguishes the Design Thinking methodology from previous methodologies is its human-centred approach, i.e. its being built around the needs of the individual by creating dynamic and personalised learning paths, allowing students to explore, experiment and learn actively (Carroll et al., 2010). The centrality of design thinking in the educational landscape is due to its ability to foster collaboration experiential learning and prototyping of concepts that become tangible artefacts (Liedtka, 2011) and above all empathy: solutions cannot be conceived without a deep understanding of the needs, expectations and perspectives of others. This deep understanding is the core that enables students to identify and define problems, generate ideas, prototype and test solutions, enhancing their ability to navigate and solve real challenges (Wrigley & Straker, 2015). Furthermore, the collaborative approach of design thinking fosters participation, student interaction and positive relationship building by creating an inclusive and stimulating learning environment (Yang, 2018).

Moreover, design thinking not only promotes transversal skills, but also plays a crucial role in education because of its ability to encourage exploration, imagination, experimentation and critical reflection-all essential skills for meeting the challenges of the future (Tunga & Yıldırım, 2017). The teaching methodology includes the promotion of active learning and engages students in collaborative processes, stimulating their creativity. Through empathy and a deep understanding of users' needs, design thinking in education fosters the design of effective and meaningful solutions, responding to students' real needs (Yang, 2018).

In the educational context, design thinking is implemented through six main stages. These are designed to facilitate creativity and innovation while developing students' ability to analyse and solve problems effectively. The Design Thinking methodology is an interactive process within which one can move through the various phases, allowing students to revisit the choices made over and over again to better adapt the solutions found to the initial design challenge.

According to Goel (2024), the phases include empathic understanding, problem definition, ideation, prototyping, testing and reflection. These phases are repeated in a continuous cycle, alternating between moments of divergence, i.e. exploration and research, and moments of convergence, i.e. decision-making on the choices to be made. Each phase is not only fundamental to the problem-solving process, but also stimulates significant growth in students' interdisciplinary skills. The first phase, 'empathic understanding', is crucial for understanding the needs and emotions of the users, gaining a deeper insight into the problem. The second phase, 'problem definition', aims at identifying and summarising the information gathered during the empathic phase to define the problem in a clear and understandable way. The third phase, 'ideation', encourages the generation of creative and innovative ideas to solve the identified problem. The fourth phase, 'the prototyping', involves the creation of tangible prototypes that allow the proposed solutions to be tested and evaluated. During the fifth phase, 'the test', the prototypes are tested

and immersed in a process of continuous iteration. Finally, the sixth phase 'reflect' involves the verification of acquired skills and meticulous metacognitive self-assessment. These phases provide a methodological structure to the problem solving and innovation process (Carroll et al., 2010).

In particular:

- Empathic understanding is the first phase of design thinking and is crucial for gaining a deep awareness of users' needs, motivations and expectations. During this phase, student designers strive to put themselves in the users' shoes, using research tools and techniques such as interviews, focus groups, service safaris, shadowing or direct observation and experience analysis (Brancale 2021). The aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding in order to properly define the problem and develop solutions that are truly responsive to real needs.

- The problem definition phase is crucial to successful design thinking. The information gathered is processed to comprehensively understand the problem. Researchers try to identify critical points, challenges and opportunities to develop innovative solutions. The definition phase creates a shared 'point of view' among team members, guiding the creative process, supported by techniques such as storytelling. This phase requires analysis and synthesis skills to formulate a clear and well-understood problem.

- Idea generation is an essential creative moment of design thinking. During this phase, the team focuses on producing a wide range of potential solutions, using brainstorming, concept maps and other methodologies to stimulate lateral thinking and innovation. The goal is to generate as many ideas as possible, which are then evaluated and chosen through techniques such as point-based voting or the decision matrix, crucial for overcoming the limitations of preconceived ideas.

- Prototyping is key to bringing ideas to life. During this phase, physical or virtual prototypes of solutions are created, facilitating immediate feedback. The creation of prototypes stimulates practical thinking and experimentation, linking closely to the next phase, where prototypes are examined and improved thanks to the feedback received-encapsulating the essence of design thinking in the motto: 'Love it, change it, leave it' (Cautela et al., 2019).

- Testing is essential to assess the effectiveness of the solutions and to make improvements. Prototypes are presented to peers to gather feedback. Through trials and experiments, reactions and results are analysed, using a receptive approach to feedback. The aim is to identify strengths and weaknesses, thus refining the project.

- Final reflection allows for a comprehensive metacognitive evaluation of procedures, teamwork and the involvement of others. Critical reflection and self-assessment are essential to revisit the content, its development and the skills acquired.

Curriculum design based on design thinking enables teachers to structure teaching activities to meet students' needs and interests, promoting autonomy and motivation in learning. Students are encouraged to actively participate in curriculum design, contributing personal ideas and points of view. This approach fosters greater individualisation of teaching and creates a dynamic and meaningful learning environment (Altay, 2017).

Design thinking is particularly effective in tackling complex problems that require innovative solutions. In education, it provides students with the opportunity to enhance problem solving and critical thinking skills. Through this interactive and stimulating process, students improve their ability to collaborate creatively, solving real problems they encounter along the way.

The application of design thinking in education develops crucial skills, emphasising experiential and practical learning, structured around collaboration, critical reflection and continuous interaction. Students hone skills such as creativity, communication, problem solving and critical thinking, proactively adapting to change. This approach also promotes autonomy and responsibility during the learning process, ensuring learners play an active and dynamic role in their own educational journey (Goel, 2024).

The focus on empathy, understanding user needs and collaboration makes design thinking particularly effective in the educational context, essential for preparing students for future challenges and improving traditional pedagogical practices (Zhao et al., 2023). However, the implementation of design thinking in education faces resistance to change from teachers. Adopting new methodologies requires adaptation and overcoming established habits. Teachers may feel unprepared or hesitant to use design thinking effectively and prefer traditional methods. It is therefore crucial to offer support, training and resources to help teachers overcome these obstacles and adopt design thinking as an innovative methodology. The training programme must include the steps of design thinking, practical examples of educational application and spaces for teachers to compare notes. Investing in teacher training is essential to ensure effective implementation and to transform teaching practices, making them more efficient and dynamic (Carroll et al., 2010).

2. IMPLEMENTING DESIGN THINKING WITH AI: OUTCOME OF AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Design Thinking, explored within the present research activity appears to be an innovative and active strategy to be implemented during teaching practice, but with the advent of new technologies mediated by Artificial Intelligence (AIEd) that somehow redefine the way students learn, teachers teach and institutions operate, (Baker, Smith, 2019; Hinojo-Lucena, et al. 2019; Pedró et al, 2019) is certainly successful as they lead to more personalised and engaging learning, although we need to think carefully about the challenges and opportunities emerging from this educational revolution and how these technologies can integrate with new methodologies to foster and facilitate learning.

The study was conducted last academic year with 250 students in the fourth year of the single-cycle degree course in Primary Education Sciences at the 'A. Moro' University of Bari. These students, future primary school teachers, designed and created cross-media digital artefacts using the Design Thinking methodology during a teaching innovation workshop. The objective was to design and realise highly inclusive digital products with the help of AI that would facilitate the learning of the young pupils to whom they were destined during the direct training after solving a problematic situation through the Design Thinking methodology. The students, divided into groups, through the explanation of all the stages of Design Thinking, analysed the problem to be posed to the young pupils, i.e. "breaking down gender stereotypes" and created prototypes with the help of AI to create images, avatars, etc. The result was the creation, through the Bookcreator application, of interactive cross-media books, (Fig. 1) using AI to create images, avatars, audios and verifications, - based on fairy tales, fictional invented stories, art, experiments, etc. -ideal for any learning style.

Fig. 6 Some examples of crossmedia digital books

At the end of the workshop, the students, once they had completed all the digital artefacts, also filled in an online questionnaire, using a Google form, with the aim of: analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the digital methodologies and tools used, the impact of Design Thinking on their learning process and on that of the students; finally, they were asked to evaluate the digital products produced during the

workshop during the scheduled hours.

An analysis of the data shows the success of this initiative. An impressive 90% majority pointed out that the interaction between Design Thinking and AI significantly benefited their learning process. At the same time, 88% of the students observed a tangible positive impact on their pupils, attributing this benefit to the ability of the artefacts to respond in a precise and targeted manner to their learning needs. The participants emphasised several positive aspects, which can be regarded as real cornerstones of the workshop:

- Creativity (90% positive feedback): the methodology stimulated divergent thinking, encouraging the formulation of innovative solutions.
- Collaboration (88%): working in interdisciplinary groups promoted an environment rich in cultural exchange and contamination, enhancing collective learning.
- Inclusiveness (92%): the tools created were perceived as teaching resources capable of adapting to the learning needs of all pupils, regardless of their abilities or difficulties.
- Technological innovation (85%): students recognised the value of AI tools in increasing the accuracy and effectiveness of the products developed.
- Teaching effectiveness (87%): The artefacts demonstrated clear utility in facilitating pupils' understanding of complex concepts.
- Despite the general enthusiasm, some critical issues emerged, revealing areas for improvement:
- Insufficient time (45%): students emphasised the need to have a longer timeframe to deepen the artefact creation phase in order to improve its effectiveness.
- Technical difficulties with AI tools (35%): although intuitive, some tools required a subscription, representing an obstacle for a part of the students.
- Management of large groups (20%): the size of groups has, in some cases, limited the effectiveness of collaborative work.

Regarding the final evaluation of the artefacts, the quality of the digital products created was enthusiastically assessed by 95% of the participants. This high percentage confirms that the workshop achieved its main objective, i.e. the creation of didactic tools that are not only functional, but also aesthetically appealing, pedagogically and didactically relevant.

AI, in particular, played a key role in enhancing the interactive phases of Design Thinking, making the processes of brainstorming, prototyping and testing not only faster, but also more accessible and usable for heterogeneous groups. Indeed, students were able to exploit digital tools to translate abstract ideas into concrete solutions, designing artefacts that not only met the criteria of inclusiveness, but actively promoted educational equity.

CONCLUSIONS

This experience confirms that the combination of Design Thinking and Artificial Intelligence represents an effective methodological approach to address contemporary educational challenges, especially for university students, and less so for primary school pupils unaccustomed to such modes of operation. Its ability to stimulate creativity, foster collaboration and ensure inclusiveness lays the foundations for innovative and sustainable teaching. But despite its many advantages, its integration in the school context is not without its challenges or design difficulties. One of the main obstacles concerns the training of teachers, who must not only acquire new technical skills to make the best use of AI, but also adopt a new pedagogical approach, new ways of doing school. The transition from traditional teaching to one based on Design Thinking with AI requires a new habitus mentalis, where the teacher's role is no longer that of a mere transmitter of knowledge, but of a facilitator of learning. This implies the need for continuous support for teachers, through specific training programmes to help them master the logic and tools, otherwise the risk is that this new way of doing schooling will remain a theoretical innovation, without being able to translate into effective teaching practice.

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ACTIVATING PROCESSES OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND (DIGITAL) CITIZENSHIP. THE "ONLINE/ONLIFE PROJECT DIRITTI IN INTERNET"

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The article examines the processes of activating youth participation and (digital) citizenship, exploring the role of new technologies and online platforms. Youth participation, historically limited by institutional and socio-cultural barriers, has found new spaces through the use of social media and digital technologies, fostering innovative forms of political and civic involvement and participation. The article explores the dynamics that influence the activation of these processes "onlife", with a focus on digital skills, critical thinking and sociological imagination as crucial factors for the active, full and conscious participation. A project experimentation carried out in the Molise region (Italy) is reported here for this.

Participation, Onlife, Sociology, (Digital) Citizenship, Rights.

INTRODUCTION

As part of the PCTO – *Percorsi per le competenze trasversali e per l'orientamento* promoted by the Ministry of Education (in the field School-Work Alternation)[1], last school year (2022/2023), a project entitled: "*Online/Onlife – Diritti in Internet*" was experimented between EDI Onlus, as an operational partner in local education services and to develop innovative training according to the methodology of the rights approach and positive education, Unimol and Liceo F. D'Ovidio located in Larino, a town near the city of Termoli on the Adriatic Sea in the Molise Region (in the centre-south of Italy).

Fourteen three-year students were reached from November to May 2023, for 30 hours. All the activities were implemented online and via face to face "laboratories" thanks to the socio – constructivist approach where the construction of knowledge takes place within the socio-cultural context in which the individual acts and thanks to the rights approach where each participant is put at the centre of learning through cooperation, collaboration (from different points of view such as cognitive, emotional, relational), in order to increase student involvement through the civic sense,

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[1] Pathways for soft skills and guidance.

the interest in community (Laffi, 2014) and the concept of (digital) citizenship (Marshall, 1950; Vuorikari, 2022; COE, 2023) for present and for future.

So, it is crucial to stress the sociological dimensions of youth participation, examining both traditional and digital forms of civic engagement. It further investigates how digital citizenship is activated and sustained among young people, focusing on sociological theories of participation, digital culture, and youth agency.

Workshops were co-conducted with the facilitator, involving students in interactive activities through the use of technological devices, videos, specific material, slides where each of them touched upon the issue of "being citizen in a digital way".

Especially in this project was used, as crucial tool, the Convention on the Rights of the Child: the socio-relational map of the all the educational activities regarding citizenship and active participation. Among the project's goals: to promote the digital citizenship through the active socio-pedagogical approach and to strengthen the sense of responsibility of young net-users (in a positive and participative key); to reflect on the "digital skills", on the privacy and online safety through the conscious use of new digital media and social networks, on the online relationships between opportunities and risks, on the Democracy and on the social inclusion/exclusion.

In this sense, the transformative intervention of reality from a sociological integrated point of view on these issues (Mills, 1959) allowed not only to actively reflect on digital-related social phenomena between risks and opportunities, but also to make children protagonists by making them experience digital citizenship.

This experience could be one of that educational intervention focused on the social and civic participation to the "onlife" dimension (Floridi, 2015) and one of that tools capable to contain traditional, new social inequalities and social exclusions. Especially in the "inner area" such as those of Molise Region.

1. UNDERSTANDING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Youth participation has become a critical area of interest in modern sociological discussions, particularly as the digital age reshapes citizenship activation processes. The rise of technology, particularly digital (and social) media, offers new pathways for civic engagement, challenging traditional notions of political participation. Especially for young generations (see: #MetooMovement, #BlackLivesMatter or #FridayforFuture).

While digital technologies allow the direct participation (Forbrig, 2005), they themselves can produce distorting effects and, indeed, can limit participation itself in a general condition of youth participation passivisation in community issues (Svensson, 2011). Indeed, on this dualism (as two paradigms of youth participation) we speak in terms of engagement or disengagement (Bennet, 2008)

The context that must be considered, is that of the general citizenship and participation in crisis framed in the so-called "late modernity" where is a prevailing individualism and a general crisis of social ties (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1998; Bauman,

2001).

In particular, the youth participation agency refers to the capacity of young people to make independent decisions and act upon them, while structure pertains to the societal and institutional frameworks that either enable or limit their participation. According to UE, young participation is any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere (COE, Youth Partnership, 2023, p. 3)[2].

It should be emphasized that the political condition concerns all social issues in terms of not only individual but especially collective actions whose repercussions are, indeed, social.

From a sociological point of view, human agency and social structures are interdependent and all individuals can both shape and be shaped by social structures (Giddens, 1984). This approach can be applied to youth participation, as young people engage with existing societal norms while simultaneously challenging and transforming them. In fact, in (2022), 39% of young people still consider voting in local, national or European elections to be the most effective action for making their voice heard by decision maker (Ibidem)[3].

Youth participation is often seen as a form of empowerment, whereby young individuals assert their place in society and challenge the exclusionary practices of older generations. However, this empowerment is not always straightforward. According to the concept of *cultural capital,* certain forms of knowledge, behaviours, and skills are more valued in society than others (Bourdieu, 1986). Youths who possess digital literacy, political knowledge, and strong social networks may be better positioned to participate in civic life than their peers who lack these resources.

In this sense, with the advent of the digital age, the notion of citizenship has evolved, leading to the rise of what is termed *digital citizenship* a concept that refers to the ability to engage in society, politics, and government through digital means[4].

Digital (onlife) citizenship involves a wide range of activities, including online activism, participation in social media discussions, and engagement with digital tools to promote civic causes. It redefines traditional boundaries of political participation and opens new channels for engagement, especially for young people.

In our network society, power and influence are increasingly distributed through digital networks rather than traditional hierarchies (Castells, 1996). For young people, this shift provides new opportunities to engage in civic life, bypassing gatekeepers such as political parties or mainstream media. In fact, digital platforms like offer

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[2] In Young people's participation and digitalisation: opening up space for new forms of political participation?, COE, available at https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/195343639/Digitalisation+and+participation+study.pdf/bbe86526-a21c-0220-2737-e39c75fda843?t=1708703509463.

[3] See: Eurobarometer (2022), Youth and democracy in the European Year of Youth, European Union, available at https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2282.

[4] See also: https://rm.coe.int/digital-citizenship-education-working-conference-empowering-digital-ci/1680745545 and https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262631/Youth-Political-participation_Lit+review_BRIEF_FINAL.pdf/1ff0bb91-a77b-f52e-25b4-5c8bd45a0c36

spaces for youths to express their political opinions, mobilize for social causes, and connect with like-minded individuals across the globe. These platforms enable forms of participation that are more accessible, immediate and flexible than traditional forms of political engagement.

Moreover, the digital environment fosters what is refers to as "participatory culture" where individuals are not just passive consumers of media but active producers and participants in cultural production (Jenkins, 2006). For younger, this means that they can create and disseminate content that reflects their political and social views, contributing to a broader discourse on citizenship and democracy. This is the so-called "digital activism" (often referred to as "clicktivism" or "slacktivism") that has become a common form of youth participation in civic matters. While some critics argue that digital activism lacks the depth and commitment of traditional forms of political engagement, others see it as a legitimate and powerful form of participation: digital platforms enable new forms of protest that are more decentralized, fluid, and responsive to contemporary political realities (Tufekci, 2017).

In this framework, youth (onlife) participation is not merely a personal act but a relational process shaped by the social structures and networks in which young people are embedded. Engaging in civic activities allows young people to build social capital, which can later translate into economic or cultural capital.

2. THE "ONLINE/ONLIFE DIRITTI IN INTERNET". A PROJECT BETWEEN CITIZENSHIP AND DIGITAL COMPETENCE, SOCIAL BONDING, AND PARTICIPATION

2.1 The projectuality

As recalled by the EU in the section on stakeholder involvement in Digital Citizenship Education, especially students must be educated to protect themselves; that must organize genuine participation and they have to develop empowerment in terms of competences (COE, 2017, p. 15)[1] along with the global educational community (such as Schools, Universities, Private Sectors), especially parents and teachers.

The *Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e per l'Orientamento* (PCTO)[2], introduced in the Italian school system as an evolution of the school work alternation system, represent one of the most relevant innovations in the field of secondary education, in coherence with the European and the global context.

In order to providing students with practical skills, PCTOs play a fundamental role in the construction of social ties, fostering integration between school, territory and the world of work[3].

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[1] See: https://rm.coe.int/digital-citizenship-education-working-conference-empowering-digital-ci/1680745545
[2] See: https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/1306025/Linee+guida+PCTO+con+al-legati.pdf
[3] See: Italian Law 30 Dec. 2018, n. 145, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2018/12/31/18G00172/sg

The pathways fit into the broader context of the key competences for lifelong learning, defined at European level, which include skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and digital competences (EU, 2018).

These are, in particular, training pathways that enable students to develop transversal skills – such as the ability to communicate, work in a team, solve problems and manage time – and to orient themselves in the world of work through practical experience in social contexts.

One of the aspects that I personally consider among the most interesting about PCTOs is their ability to act as social bond-builders. By involving students, teachers, companies, public bodies and non-profit organisations, the courses create a dense network of relationships that extends beyond the school walls. The collaboration between school and territory, in fact, helps to strengthen the social fabric, promoting a sense of belonging and shared responsibility.

In this sense, and on the basis of the previous project experience in the Molise Region on the topics of social relations and digital citizenship, the *Istituto Omnicomprensivo Magliano di Larino* in the province of Campobasso – in particular the third classes of the Liceo Scientifico e Classico 'F. D'Ovidio' – in the school year 2022/2023 (November 2022-June 2023), has launched a coherent PCTO.

Specifically, 14 students were involved (8 from class 3B and 6 from class 3A) who were supervised by two school tutors, co-promoters of the project, Prof. Maria Grazia Armento and Prof. Lucia Iantomasi.

20 hours of 'training' were carried out with the undersigned in the role of Researcher in General Sociology at the Department of Economics of the University of Molise and thematic expert for the social cooperative EDI Onlus (*Educazione ai diritti dell'Infanzia e dell'Adolescenza – Education to the Rights of Childhood and Adolescence*)[4] partner of the PCTO with whom an ad hoc agreement was signed.

Among the aims of the project: the promotion of digital citizenship through a rights-oriented approach (in the framework of the CRC – *Convention on the Rights of the Child*) and the strengthening of the sense of responsibility of young citizens/network users (in a positive and participative key); the deepening of 'digital skills' (socio-constructivist approach) together with the theme of privacy and online safety through the conscious use of new digital devices and Social Networks/Media as well as onlife relationships (between positivity and risks).

2.2 The role of Schools, Universities and Third Sector for the promotion of youth (digital) participation

Schools play a crucial role in activating youth citizenship, particularly through civic education programs that aim to teach young people about democratic values, political systems, and the importance of civic engagement.

Also is important the role of the University and the Third Sector as 'places' where discover opportunities to acquire specific skills in socially relevant areas, putting

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[4] Link: https://www.edionlus.it/.

into practice concepts of active citizenship and solidarity, enabling students to develop greater civic awareness and relational skills, was also explored.

Through this project work, students worked with the territory realities (local and national), involved in projects related to the third sector and to the enhancement of critical thinking; in fact, they not only acquired professional skills, but also actively participated in the improvement of the community in which they live (real and virtual). This kind of participation generates a sense of reciprocity and active citizenship as essential elements for social cohesion as the capacity of a society to maintain strong and stable ties between its members, promoting integration and collective well-being (Durkheim, 1893). Moreover, confronting different realities helps to reduce cultural and social distances, promoting integration between young people from different backgrounds that strengthens the sense of community, bringing out common values such as solidarity and collaboration.

Another decisive aspect of the PCTOs, and of this one in particular, is their ability to facilitate intergenerational dialogue because it was thanks to the encounter between students and adult professionals (school, university and cooperative teachers) that an exchange of experiences and knowledge was created – at least in my opinion – that fostered the transfer of skills and, above all, values. A dialogue between generations that allowed young people to learn from the more 'experienced', but at the same time offered adults an opportunity to understand the new trends and perspectives brought by adolescents. This reciprocal influence represents a great potential to strengthen the social bond and ensure a certain continuity between past, present and future also in terms of rights.

2.3. The theory approach and the methodology: a co-creation socio-education

The working methodology was co-designed with the students and always flexible to their curiosity and needs. While having an already defined guiding program. In particular, in the active workshops where digital technologies were used, the theoretical approach was based on the concept of sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) (in connection with the critical thinking).

This concept provides a key to interpreting the relationship between personal experience and broader social change, allowing individuals to connect their private events to the historical and structural dynamics of society. In fact, to fully understand social transformation, it is necessary to overcome the individualistic view of problems and recognize the influence of structural and historical factors: the ability to move from the individual to the social level, to understand how personal biographies are intertwined with history and how personal events are connected to social (and digital integrated) structures. In a world where personal choices seem to be increasingly determined by decisions made elsewhere, the sociological imagination becomes an essential tool for understanding and addressing these changes especially for younger. Only by connecting their individual experiences – pragmatic and digital – to collective dynamics and consequences is possible to recover a form

of agency (as a capacity for action) and actively positive participate in the transformation of society.

CONCLUSION

The experience briefly recounted here, and PCTOs in general, are not only an educational tool, but also a powerful means of building and strengthening social ties, (digital) consciousness, and rights responsibilities within the all community. This can make PCTOs a key component not only for the students education, but also for the development of a more equitable and inclusive society.

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TEACHING INNOVATION AND THE SKILLS GAP IN CONNECTED LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS. A STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHERS FROM FOUR EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES

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The digitalization of educational processes has raised a number of critical issues and nodes around which the Higher Education system has always questioned itself. The raising of teaching quality standards focused on the assimilation of student-centred pedagogical practices. Secondly, the importance of providing training for Higher Education Teachers, centred on the acquisition of technical and interpersonal skills, which are increasingly in demand within connected learning environments. The ADVICE (Erasmus+)/Advancing digital competence in Higher Education project is a scientific enterprise involving a network of four European Universities: University of Rome Sapienza; Collegium Civitas Polnska; University of Northampton; Agricultural University of Athens. The project raised reflection around methodological innovation implemented in the learning digital environments through a qualitative analysis of the innovative teaching strategies and practices of the European universities involved, launched in the 2021-2022 period. The technical and socio-relational skills gap, complained by the teachers interviewed, was assessed against a set of questions that reconstructed the context in which the learning had been delivered. This represents an interesting result from which evaluative guidelines and recommendations to be provided to stakeholders and decision makers involved in the European Higher Education system.

 teaching innovation; soft skills; digital learning environments; academics; international comparative research

INTRODUCTION. DIGITAL COMPETENCES: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CONCEPT IN DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Several expressions are used in the literature to describe the complexity of the emergent socialisation environments (*distance learning* – DL – *blended learning* – BL).

The main international patterns to contextualise the operational definition of digital competence (dimensions, indicators, descriptors, etc.) are:

1. DIGCOMP: is the European conceptual and operational framework for digital citizenship competences (*literacy of representation*);

2. *e*-CF (European competence framework) provides an e-skills map, focusing on orientation, e-learning and professional communication (*tool literacy*).

The Department of Communication and Social Research (CORIS) of the Sapienza University of Rome (within the framework of the Osservatorio Mediamonitor Attività Minori) has drawn up a proposal to revise the DIGCOMP model, on the basis of which to design evaluation rubrics for the self-assessment of the level of digital skills acquired by teachers in the new learning connected environments (Tab. 1.).

Tab. 1. DIGCOMP model and dimensions of digital competences. Review by Sapienza University of Rome. Source: Digital Literacy and social capital. A specific methodology for competences assessment (Cortoni, Lo Presti, 2018)

DIGCOMP		Model of digital competences
Areas	Micro-competences	Dimensions
Information and data literacy	Browsing and searching for data, information and contents	Critical competences
	Evaluation of data, information and digital contents	
	Management of data, information and digital contents	
Communication and collaboration	Interaction with different digital competences	Citizenship competence
	Sharing through digital technologies	
	Engagement in citizenship through digital technologies	
	Collaboration through digital technologies	
	Netiquette	
	Digital identity management	
Creating of digital media contents	Development of digital contents	Competences of creative production
	Integration and reprocessing of digital contents	
	Copyrights and licences	
	Programming	
Security	Protection of devices	Competences of awareness
	Protection of personal data and privacy	
	Protection, health and well-being	

	Environmental protection	
Problem solving	Solving technical problems	
	Identification of needs and technological solutions	
	Creative use of digital technologies	
	Identification of gaps in digital competences	

Authentic (or alternative) evaluation, as underlined by McClelland (1973; 1994), Gardner (1992), Glaser and Resnick (1989), aims at experimenting with non-static, multidimensional evaluation methods and tools capable of overcoming the rigidity that testing assessment can sometimes present. In this case, the role of evaluation – through the design/implementation of flexible and adaptable tools such as rubrics – is to provide information on the processes that generate learning and on how the acquired knowledge is transformed into effective behaviour, into personal competences that can be used both inside and outside training contexts.

Authentic evaluation allows for the collection of information regarding the ability to "critical thinking, problem solving, metacognition, test performance, teamwork, reasoning and lifelong learning" (Arter & Bond, 1996, p. 1).

The evaluation activities and tools represent constituent elements of the design of any teaching/learning pathway. In order to guarantee this change of perspective, which moves from the dimension of the *Evaluation of Learning* to that of *Evaluation for Learning* (Grion & Serbati, 2017), it is necessary for teachers to acquire a good knowledge of the planning for competences and therefore with the evaluation of competences and the use of devices that support it, such as the evaluation rubric. The rubric constitutes a method that can be used in training contexts to make explicit and define the articulation of the complex construct of competence, articulating it in its dimensions, indicating the assessment criteria, and translating these elements into operational tools such as performance indicators and descriptors (Grion, Aquario & Restiglian, 2017).

1. OBJECTIVES AND ROAD MAP OF THE RESEARCH

Starting from the premises made explicit in the previous paragraph, in the context of WP. 4 "Recommendations for Stakeholders", the research teams involved in the Advice/Erasmus+ project launched a survey aimed at investigating experiences, opinions and attitudes towards digital education, involving Higher Education Teachers and Digital Education Managers from each university. In detail, 32 interviews were conducted, broken down as follows: 11 with Deputy Chancellors; 21 with Higher Education Teachers.

The interview outline explored the following dimensions of inquiry:

- The context of distance/blended learning, from the perspective of digital infrastructures (digital applications, connectivity) and the specificity of the

courses delivered by individual universities.

- The digital skills of higher education teachers and the teaching methodologies adopted in digital environments.
- The relational dimension, referring to the relationship with other colleagues and students. With respect to students, special attention was given to the dimension of social-emotional needs.
- The role of technologies for the future of the university.

The interviews were submitted to a thematic analysis that allowed for a cross context analysis from the comparison of the different dimensions included in the interview outline. The results of the interviews formed the basis for the formulation of the evaluative recounts addressed to three types of stakeholders, namely: to the Deputy Chancellors; the Higher Education Teachers; and the Students – each of whom is involved in various ways in digital learning environments.

2. THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS

For the reconstruction of the pedagogical practices adopted to organize the lessons in digital environments – whether DL or BL – the availability of digital skills seems to be a central aspect, which recurs in all the interviewed teachers' interviews. The educational style, together with the type of teaching (theoretical or technical), influence the structure of the digital environment.

On the one hand, the approach to the use of digital can be defined as conservative/traditional, especially for structured teachers (full professors) who teach theoretical disciplines, addressing a large audience of students (over 200).

On the other hand, a more dynamic approach to digital seems to leverage of the previous skills, mainly technical, of teachers who are advocating the need for change and innovation in the digital teaching environment. These are teachers, both structured and unstructured who are teaching technical disciplines, moving on large and small numbers of students and who declare to have made a revision of the course materials, inserting in the presentations elements able to encourage more curiosity and attention of the students, increasing the opportunities for dialogue, discussion and interaction. Some elements of the classroom setting highlight the spirit of collaboration between teacher and student and in classroom and distance students.

All the teachers interviewed agree that the transition from DL (2020) to BL (2021) has involved an adaptation and an overall reduction in the technical problems (audio, video) inherent the accessing digital environments. The opportunity to take part in training courses aimed at encouraging the use of digital applications and the experimentation of innovative pedagogical techniques, such as the flipped classroom, is appreciated and valorised by all the stakeholders. The elements of participation and interaction with students in virtual classroom, in a blended style, seem to be more recurrent in digital environments requiring a high level of technical skills (e.g. using data analysis software; following the procedure illustrated by the teacher and replicate it).

During the pandemic, the gap between younger and older teachers was felt a lot. In fact, it was the younger teachers who became immediately familiar with digital technologies. The contribution that courses centred on educational innovation can make is very relevant, not only in fostering the enhancement of digital skills in docents, but also in facilitating interaction and dialogue with students, making group activities more stimulating.

3. SOCIALITY AND RELATIONALITY IN DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

With reference to the relationship between teachers and students, socialisation in digital environments could represent a channel which allowed for a strengthening of the pact of trust with regard to the duties and tasks of the educational pathway. In that the opportunities for meeting and confrontation with the students increased. On the other hand, it ended up increasing a whole series of critical issues related to the moment of evaluation of learning.

The connection to digital environments, in some cases, has helped to fill the relational gap created in times of pandemic. Other positive effects of digital technology are reflected in the management of study time. To facilitate interaction and dialogue with students it was necessary to co-create and co-design the learning environment. When students were directly involved in organising distance learning activities they showed active and proactive participation, making group activities truly stimulating.

For all teachers, the socio-emotional needs linked to the lack of relationality and the social isolation experienced in times of pandemic are a very difficult issue from which to redesign the contents and ideas transmitted in their teaching courses. Proximity to students is also reflected in the personalised organisation of work, aimed at reducing distances in order to initiate an open and continuous dialogue with students (individual and group online meetings; constant interaction on work through different platforms, such as the Classroom and Moodle). The moment of the evaluation of learning was managed in different ways according to the more general approach of the student to the examination.

In relation to constraining aspects, interviews underline how the relationship between teachers and students is reduced. During the pandemic, the use of blended learning impeded the dialogue and interaction between faculty and students, especially with reference to courses with a high number of students. Digital technologies should be integrated within learning environments, they cannot replace the frontal lecture because the risk of continuous delivery of digital education is to make students less active.

4. THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR BLENDED LEARNING

The integration of digital applications within learning environments represents a strength for improving the skills of higher education teachers by enhancing teacher-student interaction. In this sense, the tools of artificial intelligence and augmented reality represent an opportunity for the academic community. Through the help of

digital platforms and devices, learning environments provide an opportunity for the strengthening of group work.

In pandemic times, digital platforms have accelerated the training of faculty in the use of digital applications, improving the quality of study and access to higher education.

The participation of teachers in the training offer, organised to cope with the new teaching methods, has enabled a more aware approach to digital devices. Although there were difficulties in managing the new teaching methods, the teachers interviewed agreed in attributing to digitalisation the function of a driving force and agent for change in the university organisational system.

The adaptation to the new learning connected environments has allowed, and will allow, a number of facilitations:

- Increasing the technical skills of teachers, who have to approach high-tech equipment and environments.
- Enhancing transversal competences, linked to creative production, i.e. the ability to enrich teaching material with digital cues and contributions that can be easily used by students and increase their level of participation and interaction (citizenship competences).

Reflection on the importance of the acquisition of digital and transversal skills emerged both during the interview flow and in the subsequent compilation of the evaluation rubric. Indeed, it is designed to facilitate a critical assessment and analysis of the level of skills acquired on a number of dimensions, or problem areas, of digital and transversal competences. Generally speaking, most of the teachers agree in attributing a medium/high level to their own: Basic knowledge and skills; Knowledge of critical analysis. The need to consolidate one's creative production and cognitive skills related to the aware use of digital applications and the strengthening of citizenship skills is widely felt.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

The purpose of this section is to define evaluative recommendations to be addressed to the different types of stakeholders, variously involved in the organization of digital learning environments. The Recommendations are aimed at improving conditions for inclusiveness and sustainability of digital learning environments.

5.1. Decision Makers

Enhance the technological set-up of the Classrooms and Spaces of the University/Department and improve the connectivity of the Classrooms, in order to guarantee, also under frontal teaching conditions, the best usability of the contents of the lessons (the support from the governance of the Universities is strategic).

Increasing the promotion and implementation of didactic innovation projects on the use of innovative teaching methodologies (the didactic innovation projects must reflect objectives consistent with the European Commission's indications –

Digicomp EDU). In general, teachers' training should focus on didactic techniques and strategies to strengthen students' learning, also through the use of virtual and augmented reality systems.

Strengthen the link with the world of ICT training businesses, in order to increase the opportunities for training internships for students, facilitating their insertion in high-tech professional activities.

5.2. Higher Education Teachers

Increasing the use of innovative teaching methodologies (flipped classroom, debate approach; peer instruction; peer evaluation) in order to make possible the conditions for a dialogic didactics, which allows, through digital technology, to fight social inequalities and educational poverty. Improving the learning of students, especially the most fragile ones, with Special Educational Needs (SEN) who benefit greatly from digital. Guaranteeing student-workers and, in general, students who are not able to attend, all the study materials used during face-to-face classes.

Strengthen the use of learning mediators and student learning monitoring tools to support the student learning process and improve teacher-student interaction.

Strengthen the sustainability of courses by organizing laboratory activities conducted in collaboration with other universities, at a distance.

5.3. Students

Increase the demand for tutoring activities in the use of digital technologies.

Support teachers in activities related to the organization of digital learning environments.

Make more frequent dialogue with those responsible for digital teaching, delivering instances and needs aimed at reducing the distance between teacher and student in digital learning environments.

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INEQUALITIES AND PSYCHO-SOCIAL WELL-BEING IN ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES: WHAT HAS CHANGED AFTER THE PANDEMIC?

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How has the life of young university students changed after the digital revolution brought about by the pandemic? The data collected through a quantitative study (over 23,000 students involved in 2021-22) have identified emerging clusters of differentiated students, considering them in relation to their value and psychological and structural well-being. The identified trajectories require differentiated responses from the university system and political decision-makers. Differences in services and subsidies entail inequalities in studies that need to be reconsidered, while data recorded about psychosocial wellbeing require new interventions that can help them overcome the discomfort experienced in recent years.

inequalities, wellbeing, university, digitalization

INTRODUCTION

To navigate through the new galaxy of university student life, it is necessary to consider, first and foremost, the student's perspective after the recent events of the COVID-19 pandemic. This critical challenge has been taken up by a group of researchers from various Italian universities who have embarked on two national quantitative surveys to investigate multiple specific aspects of student life in universities. As emerged in recent scientific works (Arenghi et al., 2020; Garcia Morales et al., 2021; Aristovnik et al., 2021), the forced use of digital teaching during strong lockdown conditions has indeed caused numerous problems for students, not only in terms of knowledge and learning but also in terms of psychological and social health. The COVID-19 pandemic has effectively fragmented and deconstructed university learning environments, turning them into multi-centric spaces compared to the classroom. This sudden dematerialisation of the university and personal relationships, along with the need to quickly adapt to the use of technologies necessary for distance learning, has negatively impacted some students' motivation to study and influenced their emotional states and satisfaction. The reduced possibility of physical interaction between students and teachers, and among students themselves, has also marked a negative point in relational terms for those who habitually attended universities.

To investigate the complexity of the changes that have occurred in this dynamic

period, two quantitative studies have been conducted (the first in 2020 involved over 24,000 students, the second in 2021-22 involved over 23,000), and a third is ongoing, all carried out in collaboration with the National Council of University Students, using a CAWI methodology, leveraging various internal and external networks for sample recruitment, involving students distributed throughout the entire Italian territory. The questionnaires investigated university life's structural aspects, teaching evaluations, social capital, networks, well-being, values, and life priorities. They allowed participants to recount their degree path amidst obstacles, transformations, and possibilities (Monteduro, 2020; Monteduro, Nanetti, 2022).

1. STRUCTURAL DIMENSION: THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

As far as well-being in terms of equity is concerned, students can be observed first of all as belonging to three categories: on-site (those who live in the city or in the very first vicinity of the University in which they are enrolled), commuters (those who attend the university but not the city where the University is located, usually residing in the place where their family was born or lives) and off-site (those who, moving from their place of origin, they move to the city where the University of enrolment is located).

Focusing on the results of our research, it can be seen that, in the total sample of study participants, 15% of students benefit from a scholarship for income (among these, 1,908 out of a total of 10,556 are off-site students), while access to the internet through a fixed network (92%) and the use of PCs or tablets for participation in lessons or study activities (96%) seem not to be a problem for most respondents. The aspect that seems most critical in the exercise of the right to study, on the other hand, seems to be that relating to inhabiting a space suitable for carrying out study activities (digital lessons, interviews with teachers, group work), a crucial element in distance learning that has characterised the pandemic period. Only 32% of the interviewees report boasting an entirely adequate space, 36% fairly adequate, 20% only partially adequate, and 11% not at all or inappropriate, while almost half of the off-site students (4,541) report the condition of the inadequacy of the accommodation (see Table 1). Although the primary purpose of the study was not to evaluate the exercise of the right to education concerning all the parameters that define it, it seemed worthwhile to point out some initial aspects, both economic and in terms of the availability of means closely related to new forms of teaching, which like other factors contribute to the well-being of university students.

Table 1. Some structural dimensions of wellbeing (N. 23.372)

Income Scholarships	%
Yes	15,5
No	84,5
Space for carrying out study activities	%
Not at all or inadequate	11,1
Partly adequate, partly not	20,5
Quite adequate	36,3

Fully adequate	32,0
Use of exclusive PCs/tablets	%
Yes	95,6
No	4,4
Use of exclusive PCs/tablets	%
Yes	91,9
No	8,1

1. PSYCHO-SOCIAL WELL-BEING OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PANDEMIC YEARS

Psycho-social well-being and the different dimensions that compose it represent, for young people, rather critical growth objectives to be achieved, so much so that we speak of a psychosocial moratorium, that period that is recognised to them to grow through training experiences (including study), including those of an affective and relational type, aimed at achieving a new status of well-being. In relation to the university context, we specifically talk about the social well-being of students as the degree to which they feel a sense of belonging and inclusion in their social and academic contexts (Kern et al., 2015). University and the moment of study represent a sort of period of transition that aims to reach new levels of balance, maturity, and social generativity. This phase is particularly delicate, especially for the so-called Generation Z, which in recent years has experienced many changes in the direction of an increase in social complexity, also concerning access to the world of work, so much so that new entrepreneurial tendencies are always evident in young people, to build new professional paths capable of ensuring the levels of security of previous generations. The university changes that have occurred since the beginning of the pandemic have certainly impacted these dimensions, putting a strain on the sustainability of university life. The COVID-19 pandemic has fragmented and destructured university learning environments, which have become a multi-centric space concerning the classroom, i.e. distributed in all formal and informal environments of student life. This sudden dematerialisation of the university and personal relationships, with the need to adapt quickly to the use of technologies, with a use in substance different from that to which digital natives were socialised as they are now shaped and adapted to meet the needs of distance learning, have had a negative impact on the motivation to study for many, as well as influencing their emotional state and life satisfaction. The context of uncertainty has impacted the generative dimension of well-being, which in some cases for young adults has turned into a state of *languishing* between generalized apathy and anxiety, on the one hand creating the conditions for a greater demand for psychological support, on the other highlighting the scarce possibility of being able to use it through the help of the universities – except some that already in previous years were experimenting with counselling and support (Rossi, Bonfà, 2020). The pandemic has changed the *modus vivendi of* the population, affecting the behaviors and routines of each of us, and young adults have significantly increased the time spent in the "company" of

the Internet, judging their quality of life, as a result, lower than in the pre-pandemic period (Dondi, 2021). A recent study showed that, due to the health emergency, almost all students (83.70%) also experienced direct adverse effects on the study (Loscalzo, Ramazzotti, Giannini, 2021). Analysing students' difficulty, bewilderment and loneliness prompts reflection on the interventions and services that should help them get out of the situations of discomfort experienced in recent years (Bozzetti, Luigi, 2021). However, it should be remembered that, conversely, during the lockdowns, some other research detected more frequent experiences of positive emotions than negative ones despite the peaks of fear, highlighting how the most challenging phases of the pandemic also enabled optimism and solidarity when students had to face a prolonged condition of isolation, away from relationships and social activities (Facchinelli, 2021).

1.2 Data on satisfaction, emotions and social generativity of students

Analysing the data collected by our research, we note how the pandemic has had diversified impacts on different dimensions of psycho-social well-being. Life satisfaction seems to have been the most affected, with only a sufficient value of 6.2 (on a scale of 1 to 10), together with trust in others, with an average value of 5.6 (on a scale of 1 to 10), while concerning performative confidence in the future (dimension linked to social generativity/*flourishing*) it is possible to detect a decidedly more optimistic view, which stands at 7.8 average points (on a scale of 1 to 10), showing how optimism has been an important resource for overcoming difficulties. As for affect, which represents an indicator of the emotional state of well-being and records its negative/positive polarity, our data show that positive moods did not prevail, with average scores of 2.8 (on a scale of 1 to 5).

Table 2. Dimensions of psycho-social well-being by gender, nationality and subject area.

Socio-demo		Life satisfaction N = 23.372	Openness to the future N = 23.372	Emotional wellbeing N = 23.372	Trust in others N = 23.372
Males	Mean (DS)	6,4 (2,0)	8,0 (1,8)	2,9 (0,9)	5,8 (2,0)
	%	35,2	35,2	35,2	35,2
Females	Mean (DS)	6,1 (2,0)	7,8 (1,7)	2,8 (1,0)	5,5 (2,0)
	%	64,5	64,5	64,5	64,5
Italian	Mean (DS)	6,2 (2,0)	7,8 (1,7)	2,8 (0,8)	5,6
	%	96,9	96,9	96,9	96,9
Other nationalities	Mean (DS)	6,0 (2,2)	7,8 (2,0)	2,9 (1,1)	5,3 (2,2)
	%	3,1	3,1	3,1	3,1
Scientific and technological area	Mean (DS)	6,2 (2,0)	7,9 (1,7)	2,8 (1,0)	5,6 (2,0)
	%	51,3	51,3	51,3	51,3
Medical health area	Mean (DS)	6,2 (2,0)	8,1 (1,7)	2,9 (1,0)	5,6 (2,0)
	%	16,4	16,4	16,4	16,4
Social humanities area	Mean	6,2 (2,0)	7,6 (1,8)	2,9 (1,0)	5,6 (2,0)
	%	32,2	32,2	32,2	32,2

Focusing on some structural variables that describe the study sample, it emerges that life satisfaction, trust in others, and the thought of being able to influence one's future and mood seem to score slightly lower in female students (6.1 vs 6.4 for males for satisfaction; 5.5 vs. 5.8 for trust in others; 7.8 vs. 8 for orientation towards the future; 2.8 vs. 2.9 for mood), highlighting a trend that confirms the gender impact of the pandemic that has already emerged in the literature, albeit in different generations and contexts (Lagomarsino et al., 2020; Ueda et al., 2020). Regarding satisfaction with life and trust in others, students of other nationalities have slightly lower values (6.0 and 5.3 respectively) than Italian students (6.2 and 5.6 respectively), except mood and emotional well-being. As far as the dimension of satisfaction is concerned, the lowest data, lower than the average score of 6, are recorded in the South, in Campania and Basilicata, while those above 6.5 in Valle d'Aosta and Trentino Alto Adige, confirming a multiplier effect of inequalities, where areas of our country, already in difficulty, have probably suffered more from problems related to teaching, affecting their well-being. Campania, Umbria and Puglia are the regions where lower values are also recorded with respect to an emotional state. In the Centre-South, on the other hand, for example in Lazio, Puglia and Calabria, there is a more positive orientation towards the future than in other regions of Italy, settling average values above 8, probably denoting the desire to get out of the emergency and a planning impetus as "heroic" attitudes, already highlighted in the literature following emergency events such as earthquakes and natural disasters (Table 2). (Rusch, 2022). As regards the differences in the dimensions of psycho-social well-being about the subject area of the respondents, it emerges that students belonging to the humanities-social sector have slightly lower proactivity towards the future (7.6) than those belonging to the medical-health and scientific-technological areas, who instead seem to have greater optimism (8.1 and 7.9 respectively, total sample 7.8). Concerning *affect*, the three disciplinary areas are aligned with the overall average value (scientific and technological area 2.8; medical, health and social humanities area 2.9; total sample 2.8), and there are no particular differences within them, as well as for life satisfaction (scientific technological area, medical health and social humanities area 6.2), which remains perfectly in line with the average value of the overall sample (6.2); the same is actual for generalized confidence (5.6) (Table 2).

CONCLUSION

Differences in services and subsidies entail inequalities in studies that need to be reconsidered, given that some students would like to attend in-person classes but do not have the material possibility and needed services. For this reason, some local committees have called for the full continuation of distance learning (in its various forms), considering especially commuters and off-site students. The picture concerning students' quality of life shows lights and shadows on the conditions of well-being, satisfaction, confidence and optimism: the context of uncertainty has impacted the openness to socialization, the positive vision of the future and a weak sense of trust in others. Overall, despite the difficulties related to the peculiar

historical period, there is still an important predisposition in the ability to look to the future, albeit accompanied by discreet levels of positivity. The strengthening of psychological support in almost all Italian universities and the psychological bonus are some immediate responses to these feelings. The sense of loss among students requires new interventions to help them overcome the discomfort experienced in recent years.

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CHALLENGING THE CRISIS: THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION BETWEEN CATASTROPHISM AND HOPE

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Over the past four years, there have been significant and unexpected changes in educational institutions and policies due to various global crises, including climate-related, pandemics, and wars. These crises have deeply affected society and have raised questions about values and the symbolic sphere. This paper explores recent studies on how this scenario has influenced education, focusing on the concepts of relational sociology, morphogenetic approach, and critical theory. It emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in understanding the future of education beyond these crises. The future of socio-educational relations relies on the collective effort to shape new forms of relationships and to encourage individuals to pursue their goals from a relational and reflexive perspective. Additionally, the paper addresses social justice and education issues, which are key concerns in global policies. However, these issues are challenged by the changing social, economic, and political landscape. The paper argues that achieving social justice in educational policies involves not only ensuring equal access to resources and information, but also restoring the role of social and cultural action in shaping meaning for individuals, moving beyond the paradigm of optimization and perfection.

Education; relational sociology; critical theory; normative reciprocity

INTRODUCTION

The last four years have been marked by significant and unexpected changes in educational institutions and policies various global crises, including climate-related disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and conflicts. These crises have deeply affected society, individuals' mental well-being, institutional policies, and societal values. There has been a noticeable increase in social and psychological issues, with anxiety and depression becoming widespread among many young students, particularly in secondary schools and universities. Young people, including adolescents and those transitioning into adulthood (*emergent adulthood*: Arnett, 2000), have felt a sense of oppression and constraint. This has led to a deconstruction of the symbolic sphere, resulting in a loss of meaning in both individual and collective lives, which aligns with the long-term effects of a globalized society (Maccarini, 2019). The reliance on digital devices and media has become the norm, shaping social interactions and educational experiences. While digitalization has allowed

educational institutions to stay connected during the immediate pandemic, it has also raised concerns about its long-term impact on traditional education. The concepts of the future, social justice, and education have been deeply affected by these changes.

1. THE FRAME OF THE CRISIS: FUTURE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, EDUCATION

"The nexus between social and education indicates the problematic relation between society and the State (…) Social justice as a construct is an attempt to answer the following question: how can we contribute to a more equitable, respectful, and just society for everyone?" (Zeida et al., 2006). To delve into this fundamental question and to better address the crisis caused by various factors, I aim to explore the main issue of this contribution by examining three theoretical and heuristic dimensions: the concept of the future, the issue of social justice, and the idea of education. This approach allows us to view the main issue as a cultural analysis of ongoing social transformation, defining culture as the "conducts of life" (as defined by Weber and Foucault) that characterize everyday life.

After conducting an empirical survey (both quantitative and qualitative) in 2020 and 2021, a group of Italian scholars investigated and evaluated the effects of the pandemic (as the crisis that prevented people from experiencing a "normal" life) on the lives of academic students (Monteduro, 2021; Nanetti and Monteduro, 2022). In this research (which involved over 20,000 respondents in the second survey), we focused on the relationship between education and the teaching sphere, as well as on inequalities and social injustice, social relations, well-being, and the (new) way of life.

The social and cultural concept of the future is currently being challenged. The various crises we have experienced in the last 4 years (pandemic, war, global inflation, migratory crisis, climatic catastrophism) have led to a growing sense of distrust in the possibility of a better society. Rahel Jaeggi's recent book, *Fortschritt und Regression* ("Progress and Regression"), emphasizes the idea that our society has lost faith in the future and progress. Jaeggi argues that this loss of faith has led to a regressive process, a new form of barbarism that undermines civilization (Jaeggi, 2023). Similar pessimistic views on the future and progress can also be found in the works of Nandy (2012) and Allen (2019). Zygmunt Bauman introduced the concept of *Retropia* (2016), which aligns with pessimistic perspective on globalized society. Ulrich Beck, in his recent work *The Metamorphosis of the World: How Climate Change is Transforming Our Concept of the World* (2016), also emphasizes the idea that modernity, civilization, and scientific-technological progress do not necessarily go hand in hand. Eisenstadt argued many years ago that modernity has never fully eliminated barbarism: "It is the main argument that the potential for barbarism is deeply rooted in the extensive transformation of modernity, driven by utopian visions prominent in European civilizations, as seen in the Enlightenment and the major revolutions" (Eisenstadt, 1996: 31; on this topic see Maccarini, 2024). Nevertheless, many scholars are basically persuaded that the coupling progress and

emancipation is fundamental for still nurturing the idea of social justice, defending the rational idea of future, through education beyond any pessimistic view or resistance (Forst, 2023; Maccarini, 2023).

When planning educational programs, it is crucial to consider the future and ask: how do we envision future society? What are our expectations? According to Hartmut Rosa (Rosa, 2013), in the context of an accelerated society, the social dimensions of time have been restructured and reshaped. This involves the individual perception of time as well as the social and cultural experience of time. The past and future dimensions converge into an eternal present. Rosa argues that "the individual's reaction to social acceleration in late modernity seems to result in a new, situational form of identity, in which the dynamism of classical modernity, characterized by a strong sense of direction (perceived as progress), is replaced by a sense of directionless, frantic motion that is in fact a form of inertia" (Rosa, 2009: 101). This means that meaning horizons disappear in individual, cultural, and institutional life. In this frame, individuals perceive that all is urgent and there is no time enough. This implies that meaning horizons disappear in individual, cultural, and institutional life. In this context, individuals feel that everything is urgent and there is never enough time. This leads to some paradoxical aspects typical of (late) modernity, as we have entered the era of the "society of information" (Maccarini, 2019), where we must manage an excess of information, synchronize with technological time, and strive for a balance (personalization of life) and a sense of complete self-fulfillment (see the Figure 1).

Fig. 1. The difference between the society of knowledge and the society of information

Society of knowledge	Society of Information
Lack of information	Excess of information
Time of/for life	Time of technology
Need for personality	Request of personalization
Collectivity oriented	Self-fulfillment

In today's highly mechanized and standardized world, both students and teachers in the field of education often feel a significant overlap between the concepts of competence and competitiveness. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines competence and competitiveness as different concepts that have a significant meaning for our purposes. On the one hand the *competence* basically may express: 1) "The ability to exercise control over one's life, to deal effectively with specific problems and to make changes in one's behavior and environment, as opposed to merely adapting to circumstances. 2) The repertoire of skills developed by a person, especially when applied to a task or set of tasks. 3) In linguistics and psycholinguistics, it is the unconscious knowledge of the basic rules of a language that enables individuals to speak and understand it" (APA, 2018a). In this regard competence can be considered as a *rationalist* concept that permits us to control and dominate a particular field. On the other hand, *competitiveness* stays for "a willingness to seek out objective competitive situations and to compare one's own

performance with a standard or with another person of equal ability" (APA, 2018b).

In the special issue of *Ardeth* review (2022), the editorial board released a precise idea of the difference between *competence* and competition which is very challenging for our purposes:

> Two key areas of tension arise from this categorization: the first comes from the distinction between a competence understood as a subjective character (and therefore related with the spectrum of cognitions, intentions, and values) and an objective availability of competence (which may be the object of accumulation, access, transmission as a resource or even trade as a good). In this regard, we see the pedagogical problem of the training of a subject as opposed by the technological problem of the production of the resources of competence. The second area of tension stems from the different ways a competence policy can be understood: as the virtuous effect of cooperative and inclusive actions, founded on criteria of expansion and hybridization (cooperation), or as the result of competitive and selection processes based on criteria of innovation and the identification of excellence (competition). (Ardeth, 2022: 13)

The first aspect is subjective and deals with the formation of the subject, while the second aspect is objective and functional to the production of competence resources. This objective aspect is twofold, depending on the combination of two axes: competition/cooperation and training/production. I have been trying to summarize and schematize this idea, which is what Ardeth's authors mean, in the following figure:

Fig. 2. Schema of Competence/Competency according to Ardeth, 2022.ù

Production

to define and to develop competence resources – tools, methods, archives – in terms of efficacy, scientific consistency, and *innovation*

hypotheses that prioritize the sharing and recognition of shared contexts and cultural and social capital resources that can generate a collective advantage through dissemination, asset promotion, and open access processes

Competition

Cooperation

the recognition and promotion of individual competence in terms of efficacy, through training and the selection of *excellence*

the efforts to clarify and collectively strengthen the competence of individuals through socializing and *maieutic* inter-subject interaction

Training

2. RESTORING EDUCATION THROUGH SOCIAL JUSTICE

Hartmut Rosa has explored the concept of "resonance" (Rosa, 2018) to address the issue of alienation within our globalized society. He argues that social acceleration has led to new forms of alienation (Rosa, 2013)[5], which manifest in five distinct ways: with regard to space, things, time, agency, and other individuals. Rosa proposes that the antidote to alienation is the practice of resonance, which involves a different way of relating to others and the world. Rosa has been stressing the idea that the counterbalance of alienation is the practice of resonance: it is properly a different way of being related to others and to the world. It is a different idea of conceiving "social relations". It basically articulates in four aspects: a) *Af-fect* ("Af-fektion"), that is the fact – or the possibility – of being "touched" by experience, persons, and any event in the world; b) *e-motion* ("E-motion"), that is the fact of express our feelings or impressions and share them with others; c) *Unavailability* ("Unverfügbarkeit"), that means that there is something in our individual/social lives and experiences that cannot be "available" to be treated as a thing, that is treated as a "commodity"; d) *Transformation* ("Anverwandlung"), that is the capacity of being transformed and changed by social relations. This last aspect is particularly meaningful for our purposes because it finds a fertile application in the educational field. Rosa believes that fostering resonance within educational institutions is crucial for achieving social justice and addressing the pathologies caused by our accelerated society. He suggests that a "pedagogy of resonance" can create a framework for potential transformation, allowing teachers and students to experience educational relationships as opportunities for personal growth and change. Rosa emphasizes the importance of defusing competition within educational relationships to prevent social pathologies such as anxiety, humiliation, marginalization, and repulsion. He advocates for a culture that embraces learning from mistakes and provides feedback without excessive fear or anxiety, in order to cultivate resonant relationships that promote a good life. In principle, it has the power to transform us (Rosa-Endres, 2016). By eliminating any form of "competition" within the socio-educational relationship, which is often influenced by the fast-paced nature of society (for more on this, see King et al., 2019), it is possible to prevent social pathologies or relational evils. The effects of "optimization" and "self-optimisation" (King *et. al*, 2024) paradigm of our society produces psychological and social pathologies caused by the distortion of self-image and self-project of life. On the one hand, the increasing enhancement in individual self and body, in relationships and into work projects and workplace is perfectly compatible with a kind of "anthropotechnics" (Sloterdijk) instead of educational design (in the meaning of *Bildug*; *Ausbildungsprojekt*) where we can still recognize a meaning (or a model) of humankind. This is testified by the crisis of the socio-educational institutions – and we can easily find feedback in the social life of schools, universities or families. On

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[5] Rosa defines alienation as a state or condition in which individuals pursue goals and behave in ways that they feel no external pressure to conform to, but at the same time, they do not truly want or support (Rosa, 2010).

the other hand, international institutions and organizations (particularly OECD) admitted giving more space to the so-called "socio-emotional skills", which could be considered, in this regard, as a counterbalance to the excessive "rationalization" within the frame of the optimisation paradigm. Vera King recently tackled the issue of "mistrust" which is a central question in social relations and basically linked with the aforementioned frame. Particularly, she explored (King, 2022) how anxiety, fear, and mistrust have taken on particular forms in the context of the coronavirus pandemic and how we are coping with it – both collectively and individually. Jonathan Haidt (2024) recently demonstrated that the increasing factor of anxiety due to the massive use of technological devices among young people shows us a caesura between the years 2010-2015 (that means much more before the pandemic). It seems that anxiety is a widespread social emotion given by the acceleration/optimisation mechanism of our society: the more you expect by yourself in terms of "performative" identity – due to the pressure given by external (socioeconomic) forces, the more you can grasp your identity. The paradoxical effects of this paradigm are evident in your studies, besides the idea of a "quantification of our social lives". In this regard, trust (and mistrust) seems to be accountable for forms of rational calculation of benefits and disadvantages given by the interaction with others.

Maccarini – who largely engaged the question of acceleration, social (and cultural) pressure, and the symbolic saturation of social space (Maccarini, 2019) – has been working on the idea of the "crystal of competence" (Maccarini, 2021: 59), which should basically emerge from the intersection of the axes "education" and "socialization" (as in Figure 3), which are tied four kernel aspects of socio-educational relation.

Figure 3. Re-elaboration of Maccarini's scheme.

Personal affective and aesthetic Elaboration

Acquisition of cognitive skills and practical skills

EDUCATION

SOCIALIZATION

Internalization of social norms and values (role expectations)

Ethical and symbolic elaboration (human-oriented)
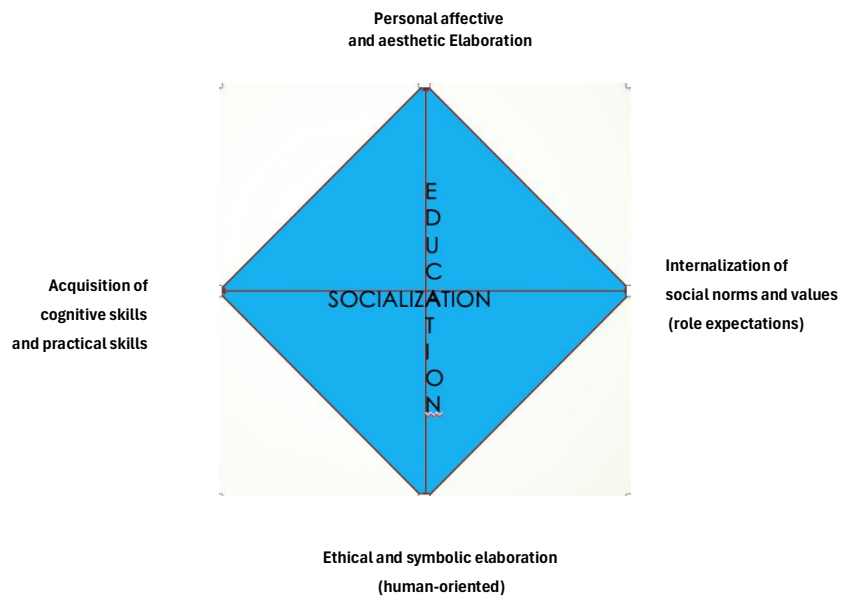
3. RESONANCE, GOOD LIFE, AND "NORMATIVE RECIPROCITY": CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Rosa emphasizes a relevant issue in Critical Theory inspired by some of Adorno's insights in Minima Moralia. Adorno pondered on how to define a "good life" and metaphorically compared it to feeling secure at home when the wind blows outside. However, he never fully conceptualized or explored this idea further. This intuition is widely shared among recent thinkers of the Frankfurt School, particularly Honneth, Jaeggi, and Rosa. They all emphasize the significance of addressing social injustice stemming from poor social relations that fail to uphold the dignity of individuals. Drawing on Honneth's concept of "recognition" (Honneth, 1992), this debate was further enriched by the discussion between Taylor and Habermas (Taylor et al., 1994). Subsequent sociological studies, influenced by Critical Theory and the notion of recognition, have delved into the realms of reflexivity, social relations, equity, and justice. I refer to this frame – enlarging the relational sociology inquiry – with the formula "Normative reciprocity" (Ruggieri, 2023). Normativity and reciprocity are the key concepts that underpin our final conclusions. Normativity and reciprocity should be understood in a relational sociological context. While normativity is typically a concern of ethical debates, reciprocity is the fundamental nature of social relations within social ontology. By intertwining these two concepts, normativity should be seen as the intrinsic aim to foster good social relations and a good social life (Ruggieri, 2023: 305). A social relationship can thrive or flourish only if social actors (individuals) adhere to the conditions of a "good life". This concept can be broken down into four main factors (the "roots" of normative reciprocity): autonomy, self-determination, liberty, and happiness. A social relationship may acquire a normative character by ensuring the reciprocal recognition of all involved actors, providing them with the four-rooted essence of a genuinely "good life". In exploring the development of social relationships based on reciprocal norms within the context of relating to others and achieving the concept of social freedom and "Eudaimonia" (happiness as a relational good), Elżbieta Hałas presents a thought-provoking idea related to altruism. She suggests: "[…] Our aim is to discover the path leading to the articulation of altruism as a relational phenomenon: relational care […] While sociology is not yet openly transformed into a normative science, it is to regain its moral dimension through studies on good" (Halas 2021: 78; 79).

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Stream J
SPACE AND ART IN EDUCATION

ART EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: NEW WAYS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY

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Art education can promote active citizenship and democratic participation inside and outside school (McDonnell, 2014) since it is meaningful in a cultural context and at the same time it has the potential to engage everyone in transformative practices.

 In the intentions of the artistic education of the XVII century Art Education curricula can form the mindful habit of an informed citizenry. This in turn fashions an art of living by constructively re-imagining new possibilities of democratic community and empathetic understanding (Siegesmund, 2013). In particular many research (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018) underline that when supported through education, creativity can instigate social change.

Art education is a multifaceted concept and its contents can be developed in cross-cutting ways by supporting and integrating with different disciplines.

The merge of artistic and other different disciplines allows students to focus their attention on complex issues concerning art and creativity power related to perception, expression, freedom, privilege and power (Houser, 2012).

Art is never neutral, since it has specific purposes that is bearer of specific messages and points of view on reality. All the artworks highlight the aspects of the social reality in which they were conceived and made.

Participation in, knowledge of, appreciation of and creation of the arts do not automatically make a person a more active member of their society and 'more active 'does not necessarily mean a better person (Sacco et al., 2012, p. 26). Educational, experiential and meta-reflexive approaches related to art education can support the processes of education for democratic and active citizenship.

According to Andri Savva (2021), Art is based on making and viewing processes, through which we explore meanings and in doing so we create connections with ourselves (who I am) and the others (who we are). Specially she identifies three concepts that can foster citizenship in Art and Art Education by identifying three enduring ideas: Identities and Communities, Spaces and Places and the Power of Image.

- Identity & Communities label shifts the focus from the Artist to the

audience, from object to process and from production to reception (Kwon, 2004, p. 106).

Art becomes a community educational activity, accessible to all. Learning to create is based on practices that can easily transform classes and schools in collaborative environments.

- Space – Place. Art is happening in a specific place and space but also everywhere, in spaces not designed to accommodate artistic paths. Recognizing that students are makers who create human culture, suggests a more active role for educational institutions, teachers, and children. It also suggests a connection with everyday experiences. Through art, the spaces of daily life become communicative and valuable mediators. In this way it is possible to give up an idea of artistic education in limited spaces (music room, theatre, art room) and rethink it in a systemic perspective.
- Finally, the Imagelabel calls on educational systems to develop formative proposals aimed at supporting a critical sense towards forms of propaganda that use images, and artistic forms in general.

This short paper is an introduction to explore some examples of educational proposal that can be declined in different settings and school levels.

In the field of theatre, we can observe the projects implemented by schools within the last three years of the Arts Plan (Legislative Decree 60/2017). The project concerns 260 training courses all over Italy, and involved more than 56,700 students at all school levels. More than two thirds of these interventions are explicitly aimed at training skills related to citizenship and democracy development processes: particularly group work (66%) and communication skills (68%). In the *Teatro e fantasia* (*Theatre and Fantasy*) project of a first cycle (6-14 years old) of education school (I.C. Giardini – Messina, Sicily), the primary objective is to sensitise the new generations, through theatrical play, to confrontation and dialogue, so that they can learn to be active and aware citizens and can participate in the social and cultural life of the country, appreciating its value, in full respect of the rules of coexistence and legality.

Overall, we can highlight two ways of connecting theatre education and democratic participation. One focus on content and works on a text that poses questions concerning the rules on which are based societies, or ethical dilemmas, stimulating students' reflection and their re-elaboration in an artistic form. On the other hand, theatre, by its very nature, involves in its work the elements of civil coexistence and responsibility. And theatre training, being configured as 'an individual pathway in a group work' (Oliva, 2016), is based on and draws sap from the constant confrontation with rules, negotiation, listening to oneself and to the other. In fact, in *Viaggio nel mondo del teatro tra storia e leggenda* (*Journey into the world of theatre between history and legend*, I.C. Don Bosco – Macerata, Marche) the theatre workshop is intended as a group space, in which the individual finds a way and a possibility of free and serene expression of his or her creativity. Theatre allows children to discover and share universal values with their peers and with adults of reference, but at the

same time it fosters collaboration and encourages group work, also in the direction of multicultural dialogue.

In addition to these two ways, there is a third one: bringing the theatrical performance conceived and realised by the students into the spaces of the city. One example is the project of the Liceo Garibaldi (higher education school – Palermo, Sicily), which brought *The Bacchae* to the stage of 'Santa Maria dello Spasimo', a deconsecrated church used as a cultural and theatrical space in the old Kalsa district. Thus the ancient theatre performed by the students go outside of school to meet the city as a whole: it is placed alongside and on a par with the professional theatre companies and musical groups that perform on the 'Spasimo' stage. The school, therefore, acts as an agency that sets up and offers cultural events for all: art education thus finds its place as a cultural activity of the entire community.

In contemporary music education technology has emerged as a powerful tool for democratizing artistic expression In contemporary music education. Digital resources are transforming the way we learn and create music, fostering inclusive and participatory musical experiences.

Building on the pioneering work of researchers like Carlo Delfrati (2008) and David Elliott (1985; 2012), extensive research has explored how digital technologies can break down traditional barriers in music learning, through the promotion of the concept of music for everyone.

The focus is on the transformation of learning environments through digital tools that facilitate personalization, creativity, and collaboration. Technology is more than just an instrument; it is a mediator of democratic educational processes, capable of supporting a constructivist pedagogical model that places the student at the centre of the learning process.

Among the many examples available, we intend to bring to light the Indire 'A Band in a Cloud,': a project focused on a cloud-based Digital Audio Workstation that allows students to compose music collaboratively, overcoming traditional boundaries of music instruction. Students can add their own tracks asynchronously, generating collective compositions that enhance individual autonomy and cooperative learning.

This approach embodies an educational paradigm based on the principles of collaboration, autonomy and active engagement. Technology becomes a resource to develop not only musical skills but also citizenship competencies, promoting a democratic and inclusive artistic experience.

The objective is to demonstrate how the intersection of technology, pedagogy and creativity can generate new forms of social justice through art, breaking down access barriers and promoting democratic and equitable musical participation.

Similar experiences can be sought in other artistic fields such as painting, sculpture and dance, all of which share the logic described in the introduction.

Similarly, creative reworking proposals aimed at pre-school children can also support processes of socialisation, sharing and democracy.

The role of art education in the processes of civic and democratic education depends on the ability to design long-term educational pathways, involving multiple disciplines, in which each student can experience processes of active citizenship, grasping what the art of the past has influenced today and what it can do in the future.

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EMPATHY AND CINEMATIC SOUND – AN EDUCATIONAL PROPOSAL FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL

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This study explores how the auditory component of films can be used to foster a sense of empathic sharing, laying the foundation for community building in primary school classrooms. Drawing from the theories of Stein, Walther, Merleau-Ponty, and others, the study examines how sound in cinema, through embodied cognition and haptic experiences, enhances empathy and creates shared emotional spaces, facilitating a collective sense of belonging among viewers.

primary school, empathy, cinematic sound, film.

INTRODUCTION

In the course of my professional career, I have increasingly experienced that both during screenings and after, when some motor activities are carried out, the sound of the film which I had proposed in class becomes crucial in determining an atmosphere of 'collective vibration,' of mutual resonance. More specifically, I have become interested in how the element of sound contributes to a qualitatively different expansion of space outside the screen that helps construct a particular audiovisual scene. Chion calls this "superfield", i.e., the visual space that acquires its own aesthetic autonomy thanks to sound and the acoustic high technology distributed outside the boundaries of the screen. In this sense, the symbolic and emotional effects of sound transcend their representational status and acquire a 'quasi-autonomy' compared to the visual field, on which they may not necessarily depend (Chion, 1990/2001). Practice and observation during the film workshops led me to rethink what the priorities in my teaching should be: learning cannot avoid sorting out what idea of person and of world is implied in it (Biesta, 2017). Learning, grasping, making 'something' one's own posits the cognitive act as a form of "domination" because it implies that the world is there for us and is available to us. Considering knowledge instead as a relational act – which is the assumption of this thesis – implies an opposite approach appealing to the assumption that our identity is forged from 'outside,' that is, from the relationship with the world in which we are addressed by another being (Biesta, 2017). Our lawmakers referred to the same line of thinking when they defined civic education as a discipline across the board, whose

guidelines – revolving around the notions of "inclusivity" and "equality between subjects" – assume a systemic approach to educational discourse that places at its centre the "network" of relationships (Mortari, 2018). Our existence in this perspective of interdependence takes on certain practical aspects that require a series of important educational, and therefore political, choices.

1. WHAT KIND OF EMPATHY?

Looking at the origins of the term, "empathy" comes from the Greek word *empatheia*, which occurred frequently in antiquity but never attained the status of a technical term. In its modern meaning of "identifying with another's feelings, thoughts, etc., as if they were one's own", it never occurs in Aristotle, not even in paragraph 7 of *Problems*, which discusses sharing the grief of others by observing their pain, such as when they are tortured or burned (Pinotti, 2011). We should rather look to the German word *Einfühlung*, found for the first time in 18th-century Germany, and to Herder, the first to use the verbal form *hinein fühlen* (to feel inside) to invite us to grasp the analogue structure of all created nature, the universal resonance between peers. However, it was the art historian Vischer who, in 1873, first employed the term *Einfühlung*, which translated as *empathy* in the 20th century. Empathy, therefore, in its earliest occurrence, is for the capacity to transpose our feelings and sentimental experiences onto an object, particularly an aesthetic one. In her doctoral dissertation, Stein (1917/2012) discussed a specific type of empathy, namely a form of sharing and affective participation involving multiple subjects. This is the form of empathy on which I will now focus. This occurs when the emotions of the individuals involved are interdependent, such that they experience said emotions as if they were their own ("our"). Stein provides an example departing from a newspaper special edition that supposedly reports that a fortress (presumably, of the enemy in a war) has finally been conquered. Those who read the news are enraptured by the same joy. We thus witness the birth of a plurality, a 'we' made up of an 'I' and a 'you.' The most interesting assumption here is not so much the possibility of individuals sharing the same type of emotion, but that shared emotions imply the first-person plural – something that configures the experience of sharing as an "augmented" experience compared to an emotion felt only individually. Zahavi and Salice (2016) extended their research on the creation of a "shared emotional plurality" with reference to the writings of phenomenologist Walther. In *Zur Ontologie der sozialen Gemeinschaften* (1921), she discussed precisely experiential sharing: when an experience is shared, the other's perspective is an integral part of our perspective, and is therefore important to me. "This is why, in the case of, say, shared joy, the joy is no longer simply experienced by me as yours and/or mine, but as ours." (Zahavi & Salice, 2016, p. 519).

2. SOUND AND IMAGE IN FILM

Since its early days, cinema has emphasized its emotional component as if it were consubstantial with the image itself. The key question, for the purposes of this

study, is how sound and music determine the viewer's engagement relative to visual information in emotional contexts.

Moving on to the realm of neuroscience in dialogue with film, Gallese and Guerra (2017) mentioned an "abstract" property of mirror neurons, considering that they can already be activated by acoustic stimuli in a pre-linguistic animal species such as rhesus monkeys. In fact, Kohler et al. (2002) proved that by just breaking a peanut shell the mirror neurons became active in monkeys. Ricciardi et al. (2009) pointed out that vision is not a prerequisite for the development of the human mirror system, which can grow without it. Cremonini and Cano (1995) state that contact with sound is less selective than visual contact, which leads to consider that it is harder for the spectator to avoid acoustic and musical stimuli than visual ones, as the former can reach those who are distracted as well. I thought I should shift the focus of my research and move beyond what we might call the 'eye-centric' approach – biassed towards the gaze, i.e., sight – both to acknowledge others' affectivity and, paradoxically, to simply gain access to the films. With an eye-centric approach, we tend to focus on a certain kind of (central rather than peripheral) gaze that separates the sense of sight from the other senses, hierarchizing and then removing them. I thought I should find an approach to the cinematic experience that was more phenomenological, calling out the spectator in all their corporeal physicality, including their 'sensuousness' and 'carnality.' In Sobchack (2004/2017), film theory intersects with a reflection on sensory perception and cognitive meaning-making in terms of primarily sensuous forms of sensitivity: in this context, Sobchack refers to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2003) for the inner reversibility between the expressive activity of film and the perceptual activity of the viewer.

3. THE BODY OF SOUND IN FILM

Touch extends all over the body. The resonance of touch mediated by film also has much to do with the presence of sound, eliciting a sensory and emotional engagement of the whole body. Owing to the multi-track system of recent technologies (Dolby Atmos, for example), sound contributes to a surround effect and awareness that draws the audience into a parallel world in "a more concrete and sensorially more convincing" manner (Rondolino & Tommasi, 1995). Sound now creates a presence effect that seems to have acquired a marked and distinctive expressiveness in relation to the image: the film experience becomes powerfully immersive, activating a tactile experience so physical that it occupies the whole space around the spectators. We have two ears indeed, but we also have many other channels for hearing, such as the bones of our skull, the tips of our fingers, and the soles of our feet. Sound is mapped all over our body. It does not converge in a single cone-shaped entrance organ as is the case with vision. According to Iannotta (2017), this has to do with the fact that film has created its own "code of truth" which tells us "what rings true" and not "what is true". Instead, our body derives its modes of perception of the world of everyday reality from pre-existing models of perception, which can be either individual or collective. Let's see which patterns aural

perception specifically activates, and how its technologization simultaneously mobilizes each sensory apparatus, the whole body, giving a film a peculiar potential for transformation.

4. EMBODIED MUSIC COGNITION

According to Leman's theory of Embodied Music Cognition (2008), the contact with music involves individuals in an experience of corporeal resonance thanks to the physical energy of sound. People are mesmerized, "moved, and [...] absorbed by the acoustic experience, thereby attaining a particular feeling of unification with reality" (Leman, 2008, p. 4). The body, through its motor activity, serves as the natural mediator that accomplishes "the development of mental representations of the physical environment". Consequently, "the mental world is not something to which individuals suddenly gain access, whereas it is the result of an evolutionary process" (Leman, 2008, p. 13). From this perspective, perception and action are not discrete stages in a linear process; rather, they are joined in a continuous process in which perception is a function of action. Perception is not subordinated to a vision of some objective reality, as it is structured for action, which motivates and prepares it. The generative core of this process is an intentionally goal-directed, action-oriented body. Consequently, according to Leman, the "sensorimotor basis" of some unknown music from Africa can readily be understood in the Western world as well, as its corporeal gesture, beyond "the cultural meanings of the gestures", can be experienced and felt (Leman, 2008, p. 21). The spontaneous motor movements that occur when listening to music are closely linked with the anticipation of a surge of energy during the flow of music, and in particular during the pulse of rhythmic patterns. Music expressing joy is replicated through the motor-mimetic movements of the arms, head, and legs. Some neurophysiological studies (Decety & Grezes, 2006; Pessoa, 2008) lend support to the idea that the perception of strength and acceleration through bodily articulation activates the emotional system with the consequence that said emotions are actually experienced; others point out that the gestural content of certain sounds can contribute to the triggering of networking and social bonding (Leman, 2008, as quoted in Gregory, 1997; Freeman, 2000).

5. FILM AND CHILDREN

From an affective point of view, the movie theatre has the greatest impact on the child's emotional state: the darkness, the rhythmical motion of the sequences, the luminosity of the visual stimulus, and the acoustic surround effect collectively shape the creation of a sui generis perceptual consciousness that is remarkably close to what the child experiences in dreams. The emotional reactions, "unbound" by the physical darkness and "enhanced by the dimming of critical powers", allow the power of emotionality to be fully expressed (in Italy, see the studies of Fulchignoni, 1948/1949). As posited by Zahavi and Rochat (2015), at approximately six years of age the child reaches the tertiary level of intersubjectivity. The child then

becomes capable of sharing group experiences of the 'we' in a context of collaboration on a wider scale, transitioning towards that which Tomasello (2014) defined as "joint intentionality". Hanich (2018) discusses the way in which group identity is reinforced through the collective sharing of the movie-going experience in his "Audience Studies", addressing a significant gap in film literature. We are thinking specifically of an audience of children laughing, crying, flinching, and jumping on their seats, moving their bodies in unison and entering into mutual resonance. After all, the darkness, the seated posture, and the unidirectional position hinder the 'view' of the other spectators. In contrast, the hearing is alert and engaged: it has the capacity to initiate anticipatory, if not triggering, reactions of collective emotional engagement. It would be reasonable to concur with Hanisch's assertion that showing a cheerful or sad demeanour, even if it is merely on a basic level, opens to a positive relationship with others. This holds true until the inverse is demonstrated, namely that joy, instead, can act as a barrier to engagement with the reality around us.

6. USING CINEMA FOR WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION?

In the light of the aforementioned points, the role of the teacher consists of facilitating the growth of those talents and potentials that are responsible for fostering dialogue, suspension of judgment, and experiencing what one feels when one is faced with otherness in the world; those abilities that enable individuals to navigate moments where "being for and with oneself" is interrupted. The goal of the activities that I am going to propose is not primarily focused on the attainment of specific learning goals or the acquisition of abilities and knowledge. Such activities, instead, are centred on an idea of identity construction: in other words, we construct ourselves in the relationship with the world "which is there and addresses us" (Biesta, 2017, p. 9). In regard to the motor activities planned for the pupils following the screening of a film departing from sound, it must be made clear that each pupil can freely express themselves through their movements based on their own feeling, as the presence of 'the other' will provide the coordinates of the possible movements. Furthermore, the 'moving-with' will be a novel movement, emerging from the encounter of the individuals who partake in it. It will acquire a relational meaning about which nothing can be known in advance of its occurrence. The freedom that can be born out of this interaction appears like an interruption of the individual's being-alone-with-oneself. It offers an opportunity to disengage from oneself and, through one's body, to realize that the engagement with art, with others, and the external world is the original reality of the space in which we live.

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AESTHETIC EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: VISUAL ANALYSIS OF PAPER CUT FROM "IL PICCOLO TEATRO DI REBECCA" AND "TI ASPETTO" BOOK BY RÉBECCA DAUTREMER

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This paper explores the aesthetic and performative dimensions of children's literature, focusing on the works of Rebecca Dautremer, whose books exemplify a seamless fusion of narrative, visual art, and interactive materiality. Recent trends in illustrated books highlight the increasing importance of their physicality and three-dimensionality, with "book-objects" like die-cut and theater books transcending traditional storytelling to become immersive artistic experiences. These books engage readers by integrating layered illustrations, cutouts, and dynamic visual spaces, encouraging active exploration and interaction. Central to Dautremer's approach is the use of paper-cut techniques and innovative designs that foster an emotional and physical journey through her works. Il piccolo teatro di Rebecca and Ti aspetto. Jacominus Gainsborough exemplify how these techniques cultivate aesthetic competence in young readers. Through intricate cutouts and richly layered illustrations, Dautremer blends visual storytelling with poetic narratives, creating a dialogic relationship between text, image, and materiality. This study highlights the transformative potential of Dautremer's creations, where readers become co-creators of meaning in an interplay of beauty, curiosity, and playfulness.

Rebecca Dautremer; paper cut; aesthetic education

INTRODUCTION

Aesthetic competence identifies in humans a complex capacity, in which perception, emotion, attention, a self-reflective component, and a comparison with an "otherness" (the aesthetic object, so to speak) come into play, according to a polar dynamic of activity and passivity. It is a dense and layered human trait, on the threshold between biological predispositions and cultural acquisitions. Research in psychological and neuroscientific fields has highlighted the potential of beauty and the experience of beauty in influencing individual well-being. Beauty in this sense is considered a holistic and all-encompassing experience involving emotions, cognitive abilities, reflective capacities, and socio-relational skills. As Weitz argues, "aesthetic education concerns the child as a developing total human being

...it is an implication about the whole child-that his body, including his senses as well as his physical movements, is as important as his mind" (Morris Weitz, 1972). Educating aesthetic sense in children means creating conditions for them to enrich their imagination and engage in artistic creation, while simultaneously developing their sensitivity and aesthetic preferences. Children's books and their iconic narration offer precious opportunities to enrich young readers' perspectives by cultivating an aesthetic gaze. The book is both an art form (Marciano, 2023) and a medium that employs diverse narrative techniques, devices, and stylistic elements reflecting aesthetic behavior (Macé & Cavarretta, 2017). In children's literature, in recent decades, there have been converging lines of experimentation leading to a greater performative dimension of the book. This has led to increased attention to materiality, interactive or three-dimensional nature, the relevance of design, and the use of different languages, as well as strategies that seek to provide the reader with an artistically significant experience. Among the various examples of experimentation, we find "object books" (Ramos, 2017) such as cut-out books, which allow young readers to cultivate imagination and nurture aesthetic sense through the experience of exploring "emptiness". These works, through their cutouts, offer readers openings in their pages, spaces that allow exploration and discovery. In some cases, these openings traverse the entire book, fostering textual play between the pages. Gaps that allow for a better understanding of characters provide information, and multiply their functionalities, giving these works a markedly engaging character for the reader. The contribution focuses on the relationship between "object books" and the experience of beauty education, analyzing two works by the artist Rebecca Dautremer: "Il piccolo Teatro di Rebecca" and Ti aspetto". These "die-cut books", akin to theater books or dioramas, offer a physical and emotional journey through Dautremer's creative universe.

1. THE PERFORMATIVE DIMENSION OF ILLUSTRATED BOOKS: MATERIALITY, DEPTH, AND INTERACTION

Over recent decades, illustrated books have increasingly embraced a performative dimension, emphasizing materiality, three-dimensionality, and innovative visual and narrative techniques. This has resulted in "book-objects", which surpass the simple transmission of content to become aesthetic and interactive experiences (Ramos, 2017; Tabernero, 2019; Mociño, 2019). Illustrated books thus integrate text and images to create a unified narrative experience. Techniques like paper cutting, layering, and material manipulation enable these books to transcend the flat page, crafting immersive and interactive visual narratives.

A central feature of these works is the perception of depth, achieved through the principle of overlap, where closer objects obscure those behind them. This is particularly evident in die-cut books, which employ intricate paper cutting to construct layered, three-dimensional visual spaces that engage readers in an exploratory journey. Paper cutting, with its origins in the Han dynasty of China, has evolved globally into diverse forms, including layered cutting, which creates depth by stacking

paper silhouettes (Gildersleeve, 2014).

In children's literature, layered cutting divides the page into foreground, middle ground, and background, forming a sequence explored page by page. This transforms the book into a dynamic medium, where the paper's materiality enriches the story. Turning each page reveals hidden details, mimicking a cinematic sequence (Hanán, 2007). Additionally, peep-through books use perforations and openings to invite readers to uncover new elements, fostering continuous discovery and interaction (Gonzales, 2020). These playful and tactile books engage the body and mind, combining manipulation with surprise to create immersive reading experiences.

Die-cut books exemplify this aesthetic innovation. By cutting and shaping paper, they transcend traditional page design, creating voids, silhouettes, and windows that reveal hidden content or alter the reader's interaction with the text. Initially developed in China for decorative purposes, die-cutting evolved into a core technique for movable books, including pop-ups and flaps, which transform books into objects of play and discovery (Roldán, 2015). The tactile quality of thick paper and specialized materials enhances the sensory dimension of reading, allowing readers to actively engage with and uncover hidden elements.

Some die-cut books even adopt a theatrical quality, as seen in theater books and dioramas. These creations turn pages into three-dimensional stages, offering multiple viewing angles. Such books transcend their traditional communicative role, becoming performative objects where visual and physical elements shape reader comprehension and experience (Serrano, 2018).

Ultimately, die-cut books and paper-cutting techniques offer children a means to explore books as aesthetic, interactive, and playful objects. By engaging with layers, overlaps, and materiality, young readers develop imagination and cognitive skills. The materiality of books holds conceptual significance, transforming them into tools for both knowledge and play, enriching the reading experience beyond text and images.

2. REBECCA DAUTREMER[1]

Rebecca Dautremer, born in Gap, France, in 1971, is widely recognized as one of the most innovative and esteemed illustrators in the contemporary artistic landscape. Raised amidst the Alpine valleys and along the banks of the Drôme River, she developed a profound passion for drawing from an early age, which led her to study Decorative Arts in Paris at École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs. Her professional career began in 1995 with *Le garçon espion* by Alphonse Daudet, but it was her collaboration with the publisher Gautier-Languereau that marked her definitive emergence in the world of illustration.

The uniqueness of Dautremer's visual language lies in her extraordinary ability to

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[1]The content of this paragraph is based on a direct analysis of the works of the author and illustrator Rébecca Dautremer and her statements, as drawn from the interview: DAUTREMER, Rébecca. Rébecca Dautremer: uma ilustradora excepcional. Revista Emília Online, October 2011, https://emilia.org.br/rebecca-dautremer-2/.

create distinctive atmospheres, enriched by a masterful use of light, color, and composition. Her artistic training, combined with an innate passion for photography, is evident in all her works, transforming illustrations into photographic compositions where perspective and angles play a central role in constructing intricate and captivating visual worlds. Dautremer approaches her images as though they were photographic snapshots, employing contrasts and shadows to lend her works a distinctive cinematic quality. Each scene is carefully crafted to elicit profound emotions and stimulate the imagination, going far beyond merely complementing the written text.

Her artistic production sits at the intersection of the poetic, dreamlike, and fairy-tale realms, an imaginative universe expressed through a warm and enveloping style that delves into the psychological complexity of her characters. Each figure illustrated by Dautremer is the result of a meticulous creative process that blends technical precision with artistic intuition. Her expert use of color transcends mere decoration, becoming a vehicle for conveying emotions and defining the atmosphere. Gouache, her medium of choice, allows her to leverage its opacity and luminosity to create nuanced plays of light and shadow that envelop the viewer in a sense of warmth and intimacy.

Dautremer's ability to depict landscapes and settings as true works of art is a hallmark of her visual poetics. Each illustration is a microcosm, often framed from unusual perspectives that capture the dynamism of the entire scene. Her landscapes, influenced by the Flemish painting tradition of masters such as Vermeer and Brueghel, are characterized by meticulous attention to light, an element that imbues her compositions with depth and vitality. This "fantastic hyperrealism" does not merely replicate reality but enriches it with symbolic meanings, transforming each image into a portal to another world.

Another central aspect of Dautremer's work is her focus on the internal characteristics of her characters, juxtaposed with their external representation in a play of visual contrasts. The physical and emotional differences between the characters, far from being smoothed out, are accentuated and elevated through an artistic elaboration that invites the viewer to reflect on profound themes related to identity and beauty. This approach enables the artist to craft a visual narrative that not only complements but also expands the text, often challenging the audience's expectations with innovative stylistic choices.

Dautremer does not address her work exclusively to children; her books are equally appreciated by adults, who discover in her illustrations a profound aesthetic exploration and a universal emotional dimension. As the artist herself emphasizes, discussions with young readers provide an opportunity to revisit and reflect upon her work, illustrating a continuous dialogue between creation and reception.

3. *IL PICCOLO TEATRO DI REBECCA*

Rebecca Dautremer's eccentric *Il piccolo teatro di Rebecca* is marvel of paper engineering, representing a new form of storytelling that blends visual art, literature,

and theater, requiring the reader to engage interactively with both text and image. In this work, characters and minor figures from her books are presented page by page, like actors on a constantly changing, intricately laser-cut stage. Each character is assigned a phrase about love, culminating in a precarious closing image that requires no words (Negri, 2019). As Dautremer herself writes, "They were not supposed to come together, but here they are, for the first time, in a single book. Come and discover them".

Il piccolo teatro di Rebecca is described as "a die-cut book-object, akin to miniature theater or diorama books, offering a physical and emotional journey through Dautremer's creative universe, guided by ninety of her characters, now brought together on a peculiar 'stage'" (Mociño-González, 2020, p. 25). Designed as a paper theater with perforated windows, the book represents a fusion of literary and theatrical art, where each page functions as a three-dimensional scene inviting interaction. Characters from Dautremer's previous works appear and disappear through these windows, creating a performative and visual experience.

As Mociño-González argues, the book exemplifies an inter-artistic dialogue within Dautremer's oeuvre, highlighting how the author integrates elements of theater and photography into her illustrative art, creating an immersive experience for readers. The book serves as a window into Dautremer's imaginary world, transforming the reader into a spectator-actor who actively participates in the creation of meaning.

The characters—from Cyrano to Baba Yaga, from Tom Thumb to Alice, totaling 90—blend together, creating a poetic and melancholic effect. The author selects characters to bring to life the words she wishes to convey, and in this hybrid journey, each character lives again, delivering a message to the reader. Like a mosaic, the story requires the reader's imagination to assemble it. By inviting the reader to immerse themselves in the interplay of words and portraits, cutouts and apertures, Dautremer encourages them to co-create a narrative that culminates in the portrait of Romina—a princess, a stranger, a gypsy, an acrobat. With her unicycle, in perfect balance, she gracefully walks along electric wires, suspended above an amber-hued sky that seems to sustain her.

The reader moves through this paper theater, scene by scene, phrase by phrase, asking questions that remain unanswered. In the end, however, they may come to understand that true love lies in the freedom of the heart.

4. *TI ASPETTO*. JACOMINUS GAINSBOROUGH

Rebecca Dautremer's *Ti aspetto. Jacominus Gainsborough* is a work of children's literature distinguished by the stylistic realism of its illustrations and the innovative paper-cut technique. As the second book in the series dedicated to the character Jacominus, this volume presents an imaginative and deeply visual narrative. The story, a modern fable, recounts the encounter between Jacominus Gainsborough and his love, Douce. Narrated from the first-person perspective of Jacominus, a male rabbit, the story is filled with symbolic depth. However, the reader is invited to assume the role of Douce, a female rabbit embarking on a journey to reunite with

Jacominus.

The landscape and the illustrations are rendered from Douce's perspective as she travels, with the images designed in a highly detailed, realistic style that aligns with the narrative's tone. The use of vibrant, high-value colors enhances the reader's experience, allowing them to appreciate both the visual and emotional layers of the story. Each page contains meticulously crafted paper-cut illustrations, filling approximately 80% of the space, while the remaining 20% serves as a supportive frame. The vividness of colors, such as blues and browns, in combination with the detailed realism of the illustrations, creates a classic autumnal setting in a serene, small town.

The book's cover, designed like a frame, immediately highlights the paper-cut illustrations within. The cover contains the title, author's name, and publisher, and is machine-cut for a unique aesthetic appeal. The book, originally published in French, measures 22.2 x 3.5 x 31.5 cm and contains 202 pages of color illustrations.

As noted by scholars Andelina and Aurellia (2023), the primary appeal of *Ti Aspetto* lies in its groundbreaking use of realistic paper-cut landscapes and anthropomorphic characters. The visual element is so powerful that it transforms the reading experience into something personal, inviting the reader to engage with the story by paying close attention to the intricate details on each page.

The passage of time is subtly conveyed through various visual cues. For example, the changing position of a clock and the gradual opening of Douce's front door to reveal the outside world illustrate the progression of time. Additionally, Jacominus provides a rhythmic structure to the narrative by periodically mentioning the exact time. The depiction of space is equally intricate, with detailed descriptions of gates, flowers, the bustling streets, and the marketplace.

Movement is another prominent feature of the book. The paper-cut figures are arranged in a way that creates the illusion of motion. For instance, cutouts of market stalls overlap with those of Douce's friends, giving the impression that they are dancing in the marketplace. Pedestrians, also depicted with paper cuts, overlap one another, reinforcing the sense of a crowded street. In the final scene, Douce arrives at a seemingly empty port, wearing her red coat, awaiting her encounter with Jacominus.

CONCLUSION

In these two masterpieces, the images, colors, and techniques of cut-paper illustration are purposefully applied to support the concept, atmosphere, and aesthetics of the fairytale book. This approach creates a seamless continuity between the narrative and the illustrations, enabling the reader to fully enjoy and appreciate the story's meaning and intent.

The primary goal of these works is to cultivate competent readers engaged through the materiality of the text, captivated by the intricate cutouts, and immersed in a world that intertwines poetry and fairy tale, capable of enriching the narrative, this

seamless integration of poetic imagery and fairy-tale motifs invites readers to not only interpret but co-create the narrative, enriching their imaginative and artistic faculties. Through its intricate cutouts and three-dimensional forms, the book transforms reading into a multisensory interaction, fostering a deeper emotional and intellectual connection. The pages serve as a continuous stimulus, calling upon the young reader's creativity and nurturing their aesthetic sense.

This dynamic interplay reaches its full expression in Rébecca Dautremer's work, which demonstrates an extraordinary ability to converge various forms of human communication. To this, she adds what Perrot (1999, p. 119) identifies as "manipulation as a key element for the development of the reader", alongside the curiosity and playfulness that should underpin the act of reading from early childhood.

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(RE)DISCOVERING THE ART OF NARRATION AS INCLUSIVE OPPORTUNITY: A UNIVERSITY LABORATORY OF INTERMEDIA AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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In contemporary society, navigating the complexity of ever-changing dynamics requires deep engagement with experiences, fostering what Csíkszentmihályi (2013) describes as the "state of grace", where imagination thrives, and personal ideas take form. This process represents both freedom and democratic liberation, positioning education as a vital force for promoting equity and social justice. However, post-modern capitalist ideals often drive unsustainable ambitions, leaving individuals disconnected from collective narratives and belonging (Rosales, Frangioni & Marroccoli, 2019). To address this challenge, Nussbaum's (1997) concept of *narrative imagination* offers a transformative perspective, enabling individuals to reinterpret stories, empathize with others, and envision better futures. In line with these principles, the Intermedia Autobiography Lab was developed in 2023 and integrated into the Inclusive Didactics course at the University of Padua, involving Master's students in Pedagogy. Through six workshops, students explored diverse narrative techniques uncovering the generative power of personal and collective narratives. Hence, this paper describes a project that shifts the focus of higher education from academic performance to self-fulfilment and interpersonal creativity (Volstad et al., 2020). It aimed at fostering inclusive expressions while empowering students to connect with themselves and others, cultivating flourishing communities and redefining the role of education in society.

autobiography; university; artistic laboratory; flourishing

1. UNIVERSITY ECOSYSTEM: IN SEARCH OF FLOURISHING NARRATIVES

The concept of an ecosystem integrates two fundamental ideas: on one hand, the notion of habitation (*oikos*); on the other, that of a living organization (*sýstima*). From an ecological perspective, an ecosystem is not merely a spatial or physical construct, but a dynamic network characterized by interdependence, adaptability, and co-evolution among its components (Capra, 1996). When applied to human relationships, particularly in education, this concept highlights the importance of fostering interconnectedness and collaboration as essential components of communities. Acting eco-systemically in educational contexts, therefore, means supporting practices and policies that create open and equitable opportunities where

individuals can flourish while contributing to connective well-being (Sterling, 2001; Nussbaum, 1997).

However, in contemporary Western frameworks, this holistic vision of education is increasingly challenged by socio-economic forces. Particularly in higher education, institutions are increasingly driven to operate within entrepreneurial schema, as universities face escalating pressure to conform to the relentless demands of capitalist transformation, prioritizing market-driven objectives over sustainable and accessible opportunities. This shift embodies what Ball (2012) describes as the "neo-liberalization of education" wherein institutions increasingly adopt a performative culture centered on efficiency, competition, and accountability. Although such metrics may address immediate economic imperatives, they frequently undermine the pedagogical nuances of learning for societal freedom (Dewey, 1938). As a result, a paradoxical tension arises between academic achievement and personal fulfilment: while both dimensions are inherently tied to human growth, they often appear to be in conflict, with the pursuit of one seemingly hindering the realization of the other.

This tension also manifests in a multifaceted dichotomy between ambition and aspiration within educational trajectories. Ambition provides structure and drive, but it risks narrowing focus and perpetuating conformity, whereas aspiration fosters innovation and transformation but requires spaces of freedom and possibility to flourish. Aspiration, in this sense, challenges learners not only to reflect on who they are but to imagine who they might become, cultivating a sense of agency that transcends immediate constraints (Appadurai, 2004; Archer, 2007).

Addressing this tension requires a reimagining of educational pathways where the interplay between these dimensions is not inherently oppositional; rather, it is dialectical, capable of generating synergies when balanced thoughtfully. This requires moving beyond the standardizing liquidity of contemporary systems toward a vision of fluidity, intended as the dynamic relationship between surface-level fluctuation and deep immersion in processes of inner development. This duality—engaging both explicit perspectives and implicit reflections—evokes a utopia in the etymological sense of *no place*: a vision of the unimaginable, not yet within the realm of experience but made conceivable through intentional construction.

Such a vision resonates with Nussbaum's (1997) conception of capabilities in education, emphasizing the need to balance technical expertise with the cultivation of empathy, critical thinking, and self-reflection. By reframing education as a process of both inward exploration and outward engagement, this approach aspires to cultivate individuals capable of navigating complexity while contributing meaningfully to collective flourishing, intended as the development of personal potential and engagement in meaningful relationships and activities within an enabling context (Duraiappah et al., 2022).

In particular, one pathway to this democratic re-exploration is offered by narrative imagination (Nussbaum, 2008), understood as the ability to interpret one's own story, empathize with the stories and experiences of others, and envision better life

scenarios for all. Thus, proposing educational pathways rooted in narration as a channel for human flourishing offers students the chance to envision themselves as wayfarers (Ingold, 2000) and co-creators of life stories. From this perspective, learning is rediscovered as a living process, woven into the ecology of relationships and attuned to the rhythms of life's unfolding flow. The process of learning, therefore, does not longer follow a linear paradigm of space and time; rather, it emerges as fluid and transversal construct (Benade, 2021), intersecting and adapting to the different realities of learners.

These considerations have recently been embraced by UNESCO in its initiative called *Reimagining Education: The International Science and Evidence-based Education Assessment* (2022), a working paper whose title reflects its multi- and inter-disciplinary essence. By engaging with critical reflections on post-modern educational contexts and the evaluation of education systems, the document aims to articulate and promote a new global mission: mobilizing education to support human flourishing—a thriving life for everyone. Central to this process is the integration of contemplative methods that engage deeply with the self, not only inquiring *about* but also acting *for* and *with* the self (Ergas, 2017). In this context, autobiographical narration emerges as a powerful artistic method, serving as a means of nurturing and caring for personal identity. Through it, students engage with their memories, connect with the essences of their experiences, and imagine new possibilities of development. Therefore, the idea of *self* is not separate but co-created in the exchange with others, reflecting a shared humanity and shifting from a point of isolation to one of connection.

However, a growing body of international scholarship emphasizes the urgent need for innovation as a creative and systemic transformation of education (Robinson, 2017) to address the complexities of the 21st century and envision the future of learning.

Ultimately, these premises give rise to a fundamental question, which also serves as the starting point of our project: how can university educational practices be designed to bridge narration and flourishing?

2. THE LABORATORY AS A LOCUS OF INTERMEDIALITY

The recognized need for a paradigm shift in higher education (Volstad et al., 2020), combined with the recognition of autobiography as a key factor in addressing diversity and inclusion (Demetrio, 1996; 2012; Clandinin & Caine, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), underscores the opportunity to create a pedagogical *locus* focused on the communal sharing of personal narratives. The use of the term *locus* is supported by its original meaning, suggesting not just a physical space but also a conceptual, literary, and even imaginary place—one that is dynamic, relational, and can be constructed, deconstructed, and transformed. Its significance is tied to subjective realities, unlike the idea of *space*, often treated as an a priori condition, universal and physical, existing independently of individuals yet enveloping them.

This conceptualization of the *locus* as a site capable of embracing human

complexities while reflecting the principles of human flourishing provides a foundation for the design of the laboratory. Its phenomenological approach departs from the objectivist stance of logical reasoning, embracing instead the personal meaningfulness of social relationships (Dallari, 2021). The laboratory method thus presents diverse opportunities for research and innovation, involving both individuals and communities, creating a meta-experience—a practical-aesthetic experience. It is practical because it fosters an authentic continuity between the self and the educational environment; aesthetic because it represents "an extension of the experience itself" (Dewey, 2004), evoking concepts, images, emotions, and works of art—each imbued with intrinsic value that transcends the immediate context and resonates throughout one's entire existence.

In the construction of the laboratory, we deliberately aimed to avoid the limitations of a stereotypical didactic, instead focusing on enhancing the various expressive functionings of students. To achieve this, we expanded the traditional role of language—both written and oral—as the ultimate formative technology for individual development (Capobianco, 2022), integrating intermediality. This approach serves not only as a connection between different media formats but also as a strategic way to building an associative environment, within which interaction is cultivated as a "creative exercise" (Cecchi, 2016).

As a result, the idea of *autobiography* in our laboratory was reconceptualized. Moving beyond the conventional understanding of "writing a life story", we adopted the flexible and multifaceted structure of *self-narration*, challenging the dominance of written forms and opens the door for diverse modes of storytelling. In addition, it shifts the gaze from merely recounting life events to exploring personal representations, allowing for a freer and more expansive narrative structure.

Through intermediality, we intentionally blended various forms of expression, fostering narrative directions that were neither predetermined nor predictable. This approach led to an experience marked by the intersection of multiple lived experiences, the heterogeneity of tools, and the complexity of meta-reflective dynamics that underscore the inclusive potential of narration.

The "Laboratory of Intermedia Autobiography" was developed in collaboration with Elisabetta Ghedin, Associate Professor in Didactics and Inclusive Education. This project was proposed to first-year students in the Master's program in Pedagogy at the University of Padua. Participation was voluntary and free, with an average of 40 participants. The laboratory spanned 15 hours from April to June 2023 and has been reconfirmed for the following academic year.

At this point, we will delve into the proposed activities and their respective tools.

3. BETWEEN ART, POETRY, OBJECTS, MELODIES, AND NEOLOGISMS: A JOURNEY THROUGH CREATIVE REALMS

Diàlogos and Kairós: giving voice to students involves carefully considering these two inclusive and existential axioms. Diàlogos represents an intentional crossing of discourses, a movement towards words that demonstrates the universal possibility

of conveying a message and creating bridges of meaning with others (Ferrero, 2021). On the other hand, the concept of Kairós embodies the personification of the opportune moment, as opposed to chronological time, representing a qualitatively precious instant in which conditions are favorable for action or seizing an opportunity.

Building on these crucial dimensions, we structured our laboratory into six distinct dialogic sessions, each designed to foster affiliation, understood as human connection and mutual recognition, which form the foundation for opportunities for well-being in educational settings (Nussbaum, 2011). Each session pursued a specific goal, with one or more pre-determined narrative channels to achieve it. Despite this planning, the proposals remained sensitive to contextual needs and adaptable to any changes suggested collaboratively with the students. The following table (Tab. 1.) presents a schematic overview of the six sessions, including their respective titles, a brief description of the activity, the goals pursued, and the resources used.

Tab. 1. Overview of the Six Laboratory Sessions.

Title	Description	Objective	Resources and tools
Tela scrivo	Representation of the self on a blank canvas, which is then named and displayed in the classroom, creating an autobiographical museum.	Identify oneself in a blank space to be filled, imagining and recognizing oneself as both an artist and a work of art.	Various artistic materials.
La mia storia attraversa/o un oggetto	Autobiographical exercise starting from a meaningful object in one's life. Write a story where the object is the protagonist. The story is crumpled and thrown in the classroom for others to read. Then, repeat the exercise with a classmate's object.	Understand that each of us has a unique and irreplaceable story, always connected to others, as if there were a single, overarching thread in human storytelling.	Personal objects, paper writing.
Versi (amo) l'inclusione	Creation of a collective poetic composition in small groups, starting from a mix of words written by others and randomly	Build a collective poetic project that reflects a personally co-constructed meaning with others.	Digital writing via the platform https://padlet.com/

	drawn from the inclusive wordsmith.		
Introspezione musicale	Listening to ten musical tracks and impulsively writing down the meanings each evokes. Later, in small groups, create a radio program presenting a common single track and explaining its choice.	Stimulate the spontaneous emergence of memories through music and build new communal meanings from a shared track.	Smartphones, tablets, laptops, headphones, web/cloud platforms for music, paper or digital narration.
Le tracce dell'ambiente	A walk outside the classroom, recording sounds, noting images or details. A short story is created, narrated from the perspective of the environment. In small groups, words and parts of the story are cut out and recombined into a shared narrative.	Demonstrate that the environment has its own autobiography—a flow of life, made up of images, sounds, and natural signals, shaped by each person's presence.	Outdoor resources and paper or digital narration.
Parole baule[1]	Creation of word trunks, neologisms formed by combining two words into one new word. The following prompt can be used: I am (word), but I am also (word), I am (neologism). Finally, a free artistic representation of the neologism.	Reflect on the existence of multiple narrating selves, not only outside but also within ourselves.	Various artistic materials and paper or digital narration.

At the end of the course, students shared their reflections in a dedicated space on Google Forms, designed to collect and preserve their sensations and opinions on the experience. This feedback was crucial for assessing the internal coherence of the laboratory in relation to its epistemological premises.

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[1] The activity is adapted from the manual *Parole disarmate* by A.C. Scardicchio and A. Prandin (Eds.) (2017).

4. TOWARDS NEW NARRATIVE HORIZONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The laboratory, which integrated self-narration with creative expression through various media, emphasized that education must extend beyond traditional performance metrics. It sought to offer students the opportunity to inquire their identities, reflect on their personal histories, and reimagine their futures in ways that are not confined to rigid academic frameworks. Such alternative didactic paths symbolize new horizons of meaning towards the aspiration of ecosystemic development.

Therefore, through this project we enhance a vision of higher education that places narrative—and its capacity to foster empathy, self-reflection, and community building—at the heart of the learning experience. As we look to the future, it is essential to continue exploring how educational contexts can be reimagined as living, breathing ecosystems of dialogue, storytelling, and creative engagement. These contexts not only allow students to thrive as individuals but also enable them to become co-creators of a more just, empathetic, and flourishing society.

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ON THE THREAD OF STORIES: ART, NATURE AND NARRATION

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How can art and, in particular, textile art, be able to promote self-narration and, at the same time, consolidate the bond with others and with the surrounding environment? The existence of every human being is made up of stories and the studies concerning the biographical - narrative field tell us that the narration of such stories allows on the one hand to attribute meaning to one's life paths and on the other to imagine and construct new ones (Demetrio, 1996; 2012; Smorti, 2007, Mancino, 2020). As St. Claire (2019) explains, there is a strong link between writing and weaving. This link shows how it is possible to leave a trace of oneself and one's history both on a sheet of paper and on fabric (Mancino, 2020). This contribution therefore intends to promote a reflection on the use, in the pedagogical and training field, of the intertwining of textile art, autobiographical writing and ecological thought. In particular, we will talk about the participatory art workshop "Tree Man", conceived and promoted by the fiber artist Giovanna Del Grande and by Daniele Delfino, both members of the "Trame educative" research group of the University of Milan-Bicocca, directed by Emanuela Mancino.

 textile metaphor; autobiography; ecological thought

INTRODUCTION

Man, says Aristotle, is a social animal and, as such, is indissolubly bound to others: it is through exchange and dialogue with others, as well as interaction with both the physical and social environment, that individuals grow and evolve. It is through interaction and exchange with others that individuals exercise their potential as *Homo Narrans*, creating a series of narratives that are personal, social, and cultural in nature.

In addition to being a *social animal*, man can also be defined as both a narrating and narrated being, made, to paraphrase a phrase by William Shakespeare, of the same substance as stories themselves (Smorti, 2007).

These narratives are closely tied to the sociocultural context to which one belongs, inherited from birth in the form of patterns of thought and behavior passed down from generation to generation (Riva, 2004), which in turn lead individuals to create and transmit further narratives.

These narratives are delicate threads that connect us to others and shape the way

we inhabit the world (Mancino, 2021a; 2021b).

Studies in the biographical-narrative field show that self-narration allows individuals, on one hand, to make sense of their life paths and, on the other, to imagine and construct new ones (Demetrio 1996, 2012; Smorti, 2007; Mancino, 2020).

Art plays a fundamental role in promoting self-narration and, at the same time, consolidating the bond with others. In fact, it constitutes a privileged space for highlighting representations of the world of which the individual is not fully aware and which therefore cannot find immediate expression in the verbal channel, but can be narrated through symbolic-creative language.

Art can also prove to be a privileged tool for fostering connection and reconnection with the natural and social environment of which the individual is an integral part, and with which there exists an interrelation such that what affects one inevitably influences the other (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bateson, 1993; Piaget, 1971).

The work presented here therefore wishes to propose a reflection on the intertwining of autobiography, textile art and ecological thought, starting from the link between writing and weaving, which for years has been at the centre of a series of studies on the textile metaphor carried out by the "Trame Educative" Group, founded and coordinated by Emanuela Mancino, professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Milan-Bicocca: studies that show how there has always been an intertwining between fabric and the written word and how this intertwining allows to leave a trace of oneself and one's history both on a sheet of paper and on a fabric, as underlined by Emanuela Mancino (2020; 2021).

In particular, we will talk about participatory art workshop "Tree Man", conceived and promoted by the fiber artist Giovanna Del Grande and by Daniele Delfino, an artist who has been engaged for years in research focused on prehistoric art and "Mother Earth", both members of the "Trame Educative" research group. The main purpose of this laboratory, which has also repeatedly involved students from the Bicocca University of Milan, consists of enhancing self-narration in adults, as well as promoting contact and dialogue with their natural environment.

1. A DIFFERENT WAY OF NARRATING

Duccio Demetrio (1996) defines autobiographical thinking as the need to tell oneself in a different way than usual, to tell in a different way what one has been and what one has done in life. It is, as the author underlines, an individual need that is transformed into sharing one's being in the world; of a story that becomes a gift and which, through narration, takes on new forms and broadens horizons.

Art plays a fundamental role in allowing individuals to narrate themselves in a different way and, at the same time, to give new shape to their experiences.

Textile art, in particular, refers to ancient gestures, which have accompanied the individual since the birth of humanity.

Giovanna Del Grande underlines how cutting and sewing clothes is an integral part of the most remote history of humanity and also of the family history of each of us (Del Grande in Mancino, 2021).

There is also an invisible thread that binds a needle and a pen, an important link between writing and weaving, both languages destined to leave a trace (Mancino, 2020; 2021). It is an intertwining of cloth and the written word that has been evident since ancient times, from the times when, as St. Claire (2019) recounts, paper was created from old rags and texts were covered with fabrics, in order to preserve them and increase their value at the same time.

The intertwining of fabric and written word is the main protagonist of the participatory art workshop presented here: an experience that allows you to trace a thread of stories shared and narrated in a new way, putting yourself in dialogue with others an with the surrounding world and making clear the connection between autobiography, textile art and ecological thought.

2. THE "TREE MAN" WORKSHOP

2.1. Methodology and phases of the proposal

The "Tree Man" participatory art workshop proposed several times to the students of the University of Milan-Bicocca, originates, as has been said, from the talent and research of Giovanna Del Grande and Daniele Delfino, with the aim to promote self-narration in adults, also encouraging contact and dialogue with their natural environment. The experience reported here concerns, in particular, the meeting that took place last June 24, 2022, at Bicocca University, during the transversal skills course BBetween 2022 Writing "Sewing the invisible. Thoughts and emotions made by hand", edited by Emanuela Mancino.

This meeting saw the author of this article involved in the organization and in an introductory presentation of the "Trame Educative" Group and the two artist-presenters.

Each phase of the workshop was analysed by me through participant observation with an active participation role (Spradley, 1980), with the aim of evaluating, together with colleagues, the students' responses and reactions to this type of proposal, focused on nature and on the connections between weaving and autobiography, also in view of the opportunity to repeat the experience in educational-training areas.

Significant, in this regard, was the contribution of the diarist of the training course Francesca Capotorto, who kept track of what emerged in a diary which we subsequently examined, in order to:

- Understand what type of emotions and experiences could be promoted by this proposal.
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of the proposal.
- Draw useful ideas for the creation of subsequent participatory art experiences.

The great protagonist of the experience was, as mentioned, the Tree Man, a sculpture that Daniele Delfino created with plant material, inspired by the rock graffiti of the Late Neolithic and which, in 2018, was awarded the UNESCO Partnership.

It is a figure with human features that represents the natural world of which the individual is an integral part, but with which, faced with a modern society dominated by technology and speed (Bauman, 2009), he seems to have lost contact.

The Tree Man therefore takes on, during the experience, the role of intermediary between man and nature and of guardian of narratives, as he is covered with fabrics and words until he becomes a textile and narrating sculpture.

The action of cutting and sewing on fabrics initially destined for waste and the use of writing as a tool to give meaning to emotions and experiences are intertwined in this experience of participatory art.

The first phase saw the students involved in the creation of strips of fabric obtained from textile waste through the gesture of tearing and sewing with improvised stitches as a means of leaving a trace and giving a new shape.

In this regard, we report some testimonies from people who, after these first moments, wrote and shared thoughts inspired by the experience:

- Cut everything that is useless, sew the relationships and glue.
- Mending the invisible in a liberating way and concluding with a door and a key thinking about going further.
- Sewing has allowed us to create a meditative bubble with which we allow ourselves to escape, for a few moments, from the everyday life that often traps us.
- My thoughts while I was sewing: synchronicity… While sewing I thought that the biography road we travel leads us to meet ourselves. Let's allow ourselves to become who we are.
- Embroidering like when you write straight away, without thinking about what you are doing… Letting your hand and thoughts go, freeing yourself from any constraints.

The second phase of the work involved the participants in writing on fabric: the strips of fabric were transformed into narratives pieces on which everyone wrote a thought to entrust to nature and share with the group.

Here are some of these thoughts:

- Continue your search for meaning.
- Work on your soul piece by piece with lightness.
- Make space within yourself, be life.
- Now look at yourself, love yourself and thank yourself. I saw you.
- Stop on the thresholds.

Lastly, the third and final phase finally involved the students in uniting, through the gesture of sewing, all the pieces of fabric and words, until they become a single large narrative dress for the Tree Man: a dress that represented, as Francesca Capotorto wrote in the diary of the meeting, "a soul that brings with it life and rich

words, welcoming what we carry inside our hearts".

2.2. The results

The experience described above highlights how the intertwining of art, writing and nature can prove to be an important pedagogical tool for giving space and value to the stories that each individual carries, sometimes unaware, opening the way to new narratives. Acting symbolically on fabrics initially destined for waste, through two languages destined to leave a trace, creates generative and transformative learning, which opens the gaze to the concept of new opportunities. This is what emerged from the writings of those present, which highlight the link between the strong gesture of cutting and the elimination from one's life of everything that is considered "useless" and between sewing on fabric and mending relationships with others.

The testimonies of the participants in the experience also confirm the connection between writing and weaving, gestures with a strong autobiographical value, found through a knowledge of hands (Mancino, 2020) capable of narrating and narrating themselves both through needle and thread and through a pen. The promotion of contact and bond with oneself and with one's physical and social environment of reference was also important: sewing fabrics and words together to create a single large garment to dress the Tree Man shows how the individual is part of a much larger whole and needs others and nature to create, but also to grow and evolve.

The artistic experience was perceived as a protected space, in which to engage in dialogue with oneself and with others, through contact with nature: a space considered a sort of parenthesis from everyday life and the frenetic life that characterizes today's society, and which allows you to be yourself by acting with a lightness which, as Italo Calvino underlines, is far from being superficiality.

In this way, we can confirm Riccardo Massa's thought, according to which art can generate a sort of potential space within which the individual is put in a position not only to bring to light his own representations of world, but also to act on them by transforming them (Antonacci and Cappa, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

The Latin term *ars artis* includes, among its meanings, *ways of acting*, which refers to the active role that the artistic experience has in the formation of the people involved in the experience. This role consists in encouraging, as mentioned above, the staging and transformation of representations of the world, within relational exchanges and through an action that symbolically represents moments of daily life: the gesture of tearing and sewing they refer to human relationships, to the concepts of union and separation from others. The research of the "Trame Educative" Group of the Bicocca University highlights how the clothes we wear talk about us and our being in the world (Mancino, 20321a; 2021b). Each item of clothing is the bearer of narratives connected to the socio-cultural context to which it belongs and is configured as a symbol that unites the individual with his history (Belisario in Mancino,

2021).

The studies of Giovanna Del Grande and Daniele Delfino, in particular, highlight how the action of textile art becomes precious in encouraging self-narration in adult subjects, thanks also to the link between writing and weaving and their being two languages able to leave a trace (Mancino, 2020; 2021; Belisario, 2023) and, at the same time, allows us to promote and rediscover contact with both a physical and social environment. Since the Tree Man represents nature with which to rediscover contact, covering it with fabrics and words sewn together and in groups, until it becomes a textile and narrative sculpture at the same time, favours dialogue both with the other and with the environment.

Starting from the awareness of how giving voice to fabric can be generative, Giovanna Del Grande came to give life to the "Pelle 2" Project, which consists in the creation of a tunic that can be customized with decorations, images and words that make it a true textile autobiography. This tunic, whose purpose is to narrate and give value to one's experiences, but also to mend and rewrite one's history, changing one's skin, can be created by following the instructions in the book "Trame sottili", edited by Emanuela Mancino. However, Giovanna Del Grande also plans to experiment with its implementation in socio-educational contexts, with people who need to "mend their future".

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"THE (IM)POSSIBLE FORMS OF SOUND": RESEARCH AND SOUND EXPLORATIONS IN THE PARK

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In the face of contemporary complexity, pedagogy must guide new generations toward sustainable lifestyles, emphasizing relationships and ecological perspectives (Mortari, 2020; Böhme et al., 2022). The workshop "The (Im)possible Forms of Sound", part of the Scintillae project by Fondazione Reggio Children and The LEGO Foundation, focused on deep listening to enhance environmental awareness. Through four phases—park exploration, sound recording, graphic reinterpretation, and group sharing—participants discovered hidden sounds, deepened their connection with the environment, and reworked these experiences through graphic-pictorial language. This contribution examines the collected materials and processes, highlighting their potential to cultivate ecological sensitivity, broaden perceptions, and enrich learning from an acoustemological perspective (Feld, 2015; 2019).

sustainable lifestyles; pedagogy of listening; sound; art; digital technologies

INTRODUCTION

This contribution presents the results of the experimentation "The (Im)possible Forms of Sound. Research and Sound Explorations in the Park", organized in its first edition in October 2023 on the occasion of the European Researchers' Night at the Loris Malaguzzi International Center[1] in Reggio Emilia. This experience is part of the Scintillae[2] project, a space designed for exploring and researching play and learning in the digital age. The project was created through a collaboration between Fondazione Reggio Children[3] and the LEGO Foundation[4]. The designing process of the workshop involved one atelierista, one project manager, two PhD students in "Reggio Childhood Studies"[5] specialized in the artistic and pedagogical field.

The premise of this project refers to the need to build an "ecological wisdom", as

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[1] https://www.reggiochildren.it/centro-internazionale-loris-malaguzzi/.
[2] https://scintillae.org/progetto/.
[3] https://www.frchildren.org/it.
[4] https://learningthroughplay.com/.
[5] The PhD course is promoted by Università degli studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia and Fondazione Reggio Children. It is an industrial, international and interdisciplinary program. https://www.phdreggiochildhoodstudies.unimore.it/en/homepage-english/.

Luigina Mortari argues, which allows the human being to better interpret the project of being there, to inhabit the earth in a measured way, keeping in mind our being inserted, as human beings within the fabric of nature, which is *living matter* permeated by thought (Mortari, 2020). Education has the responsibility to rethink its role and methodologies: how can we foster new generations' development of ecological awareness and more sustainable lifestyles?

First, the concept of sustainability must therefore be considered in a broader sense, bringing attention to relationships in the search for new balances, ways of thinking and acting (Böhme et al., 2022). From the perspective of the Pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2017), listening to relationships means connecting with oneself and being available to welcome the other, to run the risk of crisis and instability, recognizing the value of difference as a possibility of enrichment and development. Rinaldi states: Listening represents the foundation for every learning relationship (*Ibidem,* p. 171).

Listening therefore does not mean limiting oneself to the auditory dimension alone. At the same time, coming into contact with what surrounds us, relating to the environment and the elements that are part of it through the senses and the body, is a fundamental prerequisite for developing an ecological perspective on the world (Mortari, 2020). Luigina Mortari proposes a charter for ecological education in which she emphasizes the need to:

- organize contexts that facilitate the learning of ecological knowledge;
- enhance sensory and bodily experience in contact with the elements of the natural world;
- develop the ability to pay attention to phenomena as a precondition for making rigorous analytical descriptions;
- promote awareness of the importance of not only finding answers, but also generating questions.

In contemporary Western societies, visual aspects still dominate over auditory ones: changing the perspective of observing and listening to the world can allow us to delve into and connect with different aspects of life and reality (Edwards et al., 2017; Chieli et al., 2022), expanding our imaginations and possibilities for knowledge according to an acoustemological perspective (Feld, 2019; 2015). Born from the union of the words "acoustics" and "epistemology", acoustemology asserts sound as a tool of knowledge, considering it in its dimensions of listening, production, and reproduction, in relation not only to humans but to all inhabitants of the world. Nina Baratti in the introduction to the Italian edition of the Acoustemology Manifesto states: Listening to histories of listening, means considering listening as a relational act, a way of experiencing sound and thus knowing reality in constant interaction with the voices of what surrounds us and their memory over time (Feld, 2019, p. 5). Knowing through relationships means not simply "acquiring" knowledge, but knowing through a continuous, cumulative, and interactive process of participation and reflection.

Based on these prompts, we have developed a workshop proposal that integrates

active listening with subsequent graphic elaborations to observe, discover, and imagine the workings of the environment and the (third) landscape we inhabit.

1. DESIGN OF THE WORKSHOP

The decision to structure this project as a workshop draws direct inspiration from the concept of the *atelier*, conceived by the Reggio Emilia Approach not merely as a space for expressive languages but as a cognitive strategy, a way to organize learning. Knowledge, awareness and reflective thinking come to life starting from something that lies and remains behind them, namely experience (Dewey, 2020). The interplay of multiple languages fosters exploration and activates meaningful learning processes, emphasizing the aesthetic experience as a process of inquiry—an opportunity to develop new forms of perception, challenge normative standards, and reconsider inherited conventions (Malaguzzi, 1988). The atelier promotes the idea that children communicate and learn through diverse languages, recognizing the value and legitimacy of various forms of expression. Children shape and make sense of their world by developing complex visual, verbal, and embodied symbolic systems. In this project, the integration of sound, digital-technological, and graphic-pictorial languages supports their explorations and learning processes.

The workshop unfolded in 4 steps:

1. Exploration of the park: searching for and recording sounds using technological tools

- Participants explored the natural environment with a focus on sound rather than visual observation. This shift in perspective invited them to consider what sounds reveal about the context, offering insights that might go unnoticed when relying exclusively on sight. Each pair of participants (an adult and a child) received a kit containing:
- 1 iPad, 1 iRig (audio interface)
- 1 contact microphone
- 1 pair of headphones
- 1 notebook
- 1 pencil
- A map of the park
- Basic instructions for using a sound recording and editing app on the iPad

2. Listening and analyzing the collected material
This phase aimed to deepen participants' awareness of the environment by amplifying and focusing on its soundscape through technological tools. It encouraged a practice of deep listening, focusing on the recorded sounds.

3. Reprocessing the material using graphic-pictorial tools
In this phase, participants shifted from sound to a more familiar mode of expression: graphic-pictorial language. This transition enabled them to reprocess, interpret, and give tangible form to the intangible qualities of sound, a process of

translating sounds into visual signs.

4. Sharing research and findings

In the final phase of the workshop, each pair or small group presented their experiences and hypotheses to the rest of the group. This included:

- playing the collected sounds;
- describing the processes they used to record and analyze the sounds;
- displaying visual artifacts and discussing hypotheses and questions they generated;
- explaining how they created their graphic representations.

To facilitate group reflection, participants were guided by open-ended questions, the so-called "good questions" (Martini et al., 2015), designed to encourage deeper thinking and invite further reflections and experimentations.

2. OUTCOMES

The data we collected, including meaningful phrases, audio recordings, notebooks, graphics, photographs, etc., are organized within a pedagogical documentation, upon which we conducted a qualitative analysis. This allowed us to identify three particularly significant areas of results.

Listening to sounds promoted the activation of different kinds of processes.

- *Relational and reflective processes*: by focusing on listening, participants connected with themselves, the others, and the environment, perceiving life even where it seemed that nothing was happening. Their words highlight how, through deep and attentive listening, the participants' attention was strongly drawn to the relationships that define the context and all its elements, emphasizing the processual, continuous, cumulative, and interactive nature of knowledge when it arises not from a mere transmission of content, but from immersion in concrete experiences, where direct sensory perception, and reflection upon them, play a fundamental role. (Feld, 2019).

   C: "I think the grass has a sound...I'm going to listen"
   C: "The moss makes 'sss', the trunk 'crrr', the leaf 'pssss'. 'I also heard my hand...it's the same as the moss, they have the same sound."
   C: "Do you know that the senses can help you discover the truth?...and also the untruth!"
   A: "Really?"
   C: "Eh for example if you see these two materials they seem equal to you with your sight, but then, if you touch them and close your eyes they seem different".
   C: "I will make many sounds because in reality all nature can say many things. I tried to listen to many sounds, including the last one, the wind, which fascinated me because it sounded like super light bells. So I looked for a fabric that looked a bit like the wind and I started to draw like notes...".
   A: "The little bells? So, you gave shape to the little bells".

C: "Yes."
A: "And there are some above and some below…".
C: "Yes it's a bit of a rascal. Some together, some separate… to give life to the wind."

Questions and hypotheses about sound were formulated, perceiving its dimension of complexity, as a living being in constant becoming, through time and space (Leipp, 2010; Pustijanac, 2020), always interconnected with the other elements of the environment.

C: "Because the longer you stay there, the longer it is. If you stay there for like a minute, you don't hear it very well and you don't understand it at all. Instead, if you stay there a little longer, you understand a little better."
C: "Maybe because the leaves are so thin and small that they don't hold enough sound compared to the whole tree. Because I think the sound is in all the points, but the bark is the central point so there is more sound and instead in the points like the little leaves that are there they have less sound. So only by rubbing you hear a bit of the sound…".

Reflecting and focusing on the characteristics of sounds, the participants describe them by drawing on words and images from other fields of experience, through the use of associations and metaphors.

C: "(The sound of) the dry leaf is pungent, like a potato chip"
C: "If I put the microphone in this tube I hear the sea in a storm"
C: "That sound is porous like a mushroom."

- *Narrative processes*: starting from the sounds they heard, children constructed stories that represented and interpreted their perceptions. This approach highlights how narration is not merely a way to describe the world but a fundamental tool for making sense of it and establishing meaningful connections with it. We live in a "sea of stories" (Dallari, 2005) and only by learning to engage with them—listening, reading, creating, and recounting them— we can represent and share our experiences and worldviews. Narratives thus become essential for giving meaning to life, fostering self-awareness, and making sense of one's experiences. Bruner (1992) emphasizes that individuals construct reality through narration, organizing experience and memory into narrative forms. This discursive practice, which begins in early childhood, deeply influences the development of personal and social identity, as the narrative model shapes how we think, communicate, and interact.

This dynamic was vividly expressed in the workshop:

A: "You heard many things inside this sound".
C: "Yes. I imagined that first there is the wind. Then the fog starts to arrive, the cloud gets angry and begins to send lightning and rain, and finally, the sun comes and calms it all down."
A: "So you made a visual story…"
C: "I also made a sound story."

A: "This is really a performance."

This dialogue illustrates how listening is a complex creative process, where the children intertwine sound and visual elements into a multisensory narrative. Through the art of narration, they give form and meaning to their perceptions, expressing their imagination and strengthening their ability to interpret and communicate their understanding of the world.

- Graphic-pictorial language: describing sounds in words is not easy. Graphic-pictorial language can support the participants by further potentiating the processes activated in the previous phases of the experience, feeding a virtuous and recursive circle of sensitive experience, research, reflection, reprocessing and creative expression. In choosing the materials, the participants seek the material characteristics that they attribute to the sounds. Listening, through technological tools, is a possibility for understanding, imagining and making hypotheses about the workings of nature. The graphic sign, thus, becomes a complementary way of representing what we hear and ''see'' with our ears. Drawing, as Munari writes, is an expression of global sensations and not just visual ones [...] a cat can also be represented with a cloud of soft fur but with claws (Munari, 1977, p. 163). Drawing, in fact, means designare: indicating, naming, delimiting, showing, representing, marking, indicating exactly, designing, imagining, pretending in thought. The use of multiple languages thus allows us to amplify the experience, detail it and understand it more deeply.

C: "I thought more about the image. I think it's a drummer because it goes *tum ch tum ch*. That plays on the grass...".
A: "You don't have to draw the shape of the drummer by force... take the sound you heard, what do you think it looks like? Take a sheet of paper and try...".
C: "What paper do I take? What paper can I take?"
A: "All the ones on the table, you can choose."
C: "Mom, I can't find the words (to describe the sound)!"

CONCLUSIONS

The knowledge of nature emerges from an in-depth understanding of the world we inhabit and of which we are part of. Understanding its workings enables us to regulate, interpret, and anticipate natural phenomena, while simultaneously cultivating a profound awareness of our identity and relation within it. This understanding lays the foundation for envisioning future scenarios upon which to construct environmental policies and adopt lifestyles that align with the principles and laws of nature (Dallari & Moriggi, 2016).

With this workshop, we tried to build a small multi-sensory observatory of the natural environment, stimulating reflections and new visions in the children, who gave shape to the sounds of nature, listening to them carefully and letting themselves be carried away by their complexity. The experience of "The (Im)possible Forms of Sound" has shown how listening, especially when combined with other artistic

languages such as graphic-pictorial and technological languages, can be a powerful tool for exploring and understanding the world around us. Through listening, we can discover new aspects of reality that would otherwise remain hidden. We can also use listening to develop our imagination and creativity, and to create new forms of expression.

The experimentation is currently ongoing: after the first edition, we have extended this research to other contexts. We have further developed the proposal, working on the flexibility of its technical and design aspects, with the aim of making it not a model to be applied indiscriminately, but rather a suggestion to serve as a starting point for designing research that aligns with the characteristics and intentions of the contexts in which it is applied. We are keeping on reflecting on the role that languages and the arts play in promoting more sustainable lifestyles and quality education for everyone.

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FASHION, ART AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN TRAINING PROGRAMS

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This paper will explore the most recent trends in ethical and sustainable fashion and focus on art and fashion as a space of inclusivity and social justice. These are crucial areas where identities are shaped and where opportunities for innovation that positively influence learning processes are created. In other words, art can become a resource for the exercise of power and human rights, as well as fashion a symbol of belonging to a social group and a space in which to articulate practices of resistance and social protest. Fashion, in particular, in recent years has incorporated some trends of contemporary visual and performing art – i.e. the works of Vanessa Beecroft, Christian Boltanski and Michelangelo Pistoletto – and has decided to play its public role as agency by addressing the categories of social values.

fashion; art; sustainability; social values; training programs.

INTRODUCTION

Can fashion be a resource to address the challenges of the contemporary societies and support participatory pedagogies? This contribution aims to explore sustainability in the relationship of fashion and the arts and to show how fashion, like the arts, is able not only to create economic value, but also to intervene in the creation, strengthening and dissemination of social, cultural, ethical and political values. The focus is on the performative nature of dressed bodies (Barthes, 1967) and on how "art comes into action "in educational settings (Tota, De Feo, 2022; Mathieu, Visanich, 2022). The theoretical framework is based on the recognition of the social nature of fashion (Barthes, 1967), because fashion is a crucial area where identities are shaped (Crane, 2000; Crane, Bovone, 2006) and where opportunities for innovation that positively influence learning processes are created (Fletcher, Williams, 2013; Gam, Banning, 2020).

1. FASHION AND/AS ART

Fashion, like art, can become a resource for the exercise of power and human rights as well as a symbol of belonging to a social group and a space in which to articulate practices of resistance and social protest (Hebdige, 1979; Doerr, 2016). In

particular, in recent years fashion has been moving towards areas that previously seemed to be exclusive domain of artistic codes. In a chapter of the book "Moda e arte" (2012), with Anna Lisa Tota we wondered how to classify the fashion system. With this aim, Anna Lisa Tota has reworked the Nelson Goodman's Autographic-Allographic Distinction (1968). Rather than a dichotomous distinction, the functioning of the fashion system has appeared to us as a mixed case whereby fashion has been reconsidered as a variable on a continuum, at the two poles of which the cases of pure autography and pure allography are placed as limit modes. Indeed, a dress is as falsifiable as a Picasso: a fake Hermes bag is the outcome of a counterfeiting process that originates in the production history of that object. In this sense, fashion functions in an autographic way. But fashion, when it inscribes values and social innovation into public discourse, proceeds in an allographic way. A dress, in fact, is more like a musical score than a Picasso painting. A dress needs a performance, a bodily performance that 'performs' it, that is, that gives it life (Luchetti, Tota, 2012). In the perspective that concerns us, it is important to wonder about crucial dimensions, such as:

1. consumption interdependence, because our consumption choices affect the survival of others;
2. consumption pollution, which from the material level also extends to the area of the symbolic, as pollution of brands, lifestyles and imagery (Tota, 2008);
3. sustainability, a concept that comes from environmental reflection and that asks us to consider all the actual costs involved in what we produce and consume.

Attention to the conditions of environmental sustainability and sensitivity to social and ethical issues are now often declining in the clothing sector, which in recent years, like the contemporary art system, is proving to be able to combine business market and the world of values. This contribution therefore aims to offer a reflection on fashion's capacity to become a vehicle of cultural influence and to create values that are inscribed in the public discourse. Fashion indeed is a powerful device, which can also produce pollution that is both environmental and visual (Tota, 2024) and urgently requires a change in the direction of "responsible sustainability" (Tota, 2024, 134).

2. SUSTAINABILITY

2.1. The sustainable development

In the field of sociology, there are perspectives that can contribute to shape an emancipatory discourse on education. In this direction, the concept of sustainability works as a powerful epistemological tool to produce changes in the educational context and in the public discourse. Sustainability has to be considered in a broader sense, not only related to physical environmental conditions, but also reconfigured as symbolic sustainability concerning our ways of thinking and communicating. Sustainability in ecological terms refers to the general idea of saving the Earth and

caring for the environment. The UN Brundland report (1987) implicitly reconciled economic development with was now called 'sustainable development'.

> Indeed, sustainability is somewhat limited as a concept if it is not combined with responsibility (...). "Responsible sustainability" may therefore become the concept we refer to: sustainability has to be thought about, articulated, practised and taught (Tota, 2024, 134).

2.2. What about sustainability in fashion?

Related to fashion, we can turn to one of the first articles on sustainability. As Hazel Clark remarked, Speaking of fashion in the context of sustainable practices is a challenge (Clark, 2008, 428). Sustainability is considered a slithery term in the context of fashion.

> In the case of fashion refers primarily to the ability to maintain economic growth (constant production of new types of attire) without depletion of resources or damage to the environment (Maynard, 2013, 542)

Henninger et al. (2017) explore the possibilities for sustainable fashion from cradle-to-cradle principles to upcycling, a process that involves not only the recovery of waste but also its repair and transformation. Mora et al. (2014) believe that technological innovation can help sustainability and that design can function as a factor of social change. They put the emphasis on the cultural dimension of a sustainable future and of the imaginary as a vehicle for change.

The fashion industry is based on fast fashion, a fashion business model characterized by rapid changes in style, ever faster cycles of global production and consumption, and ever cheaper products (Cachon, Swinney, 2011; Maynard, 2013; Press, 2016). The fashion industry is the second most polluting industry in the world after the oil industry and also has unsustainable human costs, from too low remuneration for textile workers to exhausting working hours and lack of safety. This system, as underlined by international policies (The Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action, 2018; The EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles, 2022), implies "unsustainable" human costs and is among the major causes of global pollution, both in terms of water exploitation, the release of microplastics into the environment and carbon emissions, and the production of textile waste linked to the shortening of product life cycles and overproduction.

24 April 2013 is remembered for the Rana Plaza disaster, which took place in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where an eight-storey building housing five different textile factories producing clothes for international brands collapsed, in which 1,132 people lost their lives and more than 2,500 were injured. The factory collapse is remembered as the tragedy of overproduction. Out of that dramatic episode came a number of initiatives to raise awareness for ethical fashion, which guarantees the psychological and physical well-being of the workers employed in the industry. This is how 'Fashion Revolution' was founded, a global movement formed by activists who believe in a different fashion industry, capable of protecting human and

environmental rights at all stages of the production cycle. Since then, it has grown to become the world's largest fashion activism movement, mobilizing citizens, brands and policymakers through research, education, and advocacy. With this intention, the '#WhoMadeMyClothes' campaign was also born, aimed at asking where the clothes we buy come from and under what economic conditions they were made.

This is why the EU Strategy mentioned above identified textiles as a priority sector that will help the EU shift towards a climate-neutral circular economy where products are designed to be more durable, reusable, repairable, recyclable, and energy-efficient. The photographs of the Atacama Desert in Chile, with the dunes created by tonnes of discarded clothes, are "eco-visions" (Tota, De Feo, Luchetti, 2023) capable of powerfully questioning us. Of course, sustainability in the fashion world is difficult goal due to the complexity of the textile supply chain, but it must be achieved both in the production of material goods and in the communication of the symbolic content of fashion brands. Ultimately, the focus on sustainability, both environmental and symbolic, and the sensitivity to social and ethical issues document fashion's ability to become a vehicle of cultural influence and to put forward ethical-moral issues that are inscribed in the public discourse.

3. THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINABILITY IN FASHION TRAINING PROGRAMS

The impact of the fashion industry is intertwined with the analysis of human resources education. The fashion training programs within corporate contexts in relation to sustainability and social responsibility is fundamental. Introducing sustainability practices in various fashion and design courses has been explored in a number of studies (Fletcher, Williams, 2013; Kennedy, Terpstra, 2013).

Fashion education within a framework of sustainability involves different topics:

- the research and the use of new organic materials, by making products with fibres derived from food waste (i.e., fibers from orange waste, wine waste, apple skin, etc.);
- the application of traditional techniques and expertise to enhance the value of certain products;
- the creative reuse of fabrics and products, as in the case of recycling and upcycling;
- the importance of ethical sourcing and zero-waste production;
- learning strategies for building a sustainable fashion business, such as sourcing sustainable materials and partnering with ethical suppliers and manufacturers.

Integrating sustainability into the fashion curriculum, a field of study preoccupied with the bottom line, has created different models of learning and teaching compared with conventional education pedagogy (Gam, Banning, 2020). Fashion education oriented towards process, action and creative participation in all aspects of the transition to sustainability (social, environmental and economic) in contrast to conventional educational models that concentrate on product or outcome and the

preparation of students for economic life. Disciplines such as fashion must develop learning projects to prepare students for the challenges of sustainability in a context still centred on economic development and consumerism.

4. Arting fashion: Art and Fashion as A Space of Inclusivity and Social Justice[1]

This contribution explores the most recent trends in ethical and sustainable fashion (Mora 2010; Mora et al., 2014; Clark, 2008; Black, 2012; Gardetti, Larios-France, 2023) and focus on art and fashion as a space of inclusivity and social justice (Tota, De Feo, Luchetti, 2023), as documented by the artworks we will discuss below.

4.1. Vanessa Beecroft, "VB South Sudan" (2006)

Vanessa Beecroft, a Genoese-born artist who lives and works in New York, has consolidated throughout her career a privileged relationship with fashion, thanks to her performance art works and her *tableau vivants* often used by fashion designers to present their collections, from Helmut Lang to Miuccia Prada, from Valentino to Moncler. Vanessa Beecroft's performances put the female body at the centre of the counter-narrative, through compositions that overturn the traditional concept of fashion photography and propose opportunities for "eco-visions" (Tota, De Feo, Luchetti, 2023). In particular, in the photographic project "VB South Sudan" (2006), she portrayed herself in the gesture of breastfeeding two black twins to denounce the dramatic conditions of children living in orphanages in Sudan. The artist shows herself as a pleasant and angelic Madonna, in a Martin Margiela dress whose hemline is visibly burnt, and questions us on the relationship that we as Westerners have with the South of the world.

4.2. Christian Boltanski, "No Man's Land" (2010)

In the vision of Christian Boltanski, clothes are like bodies. The art installation titled "No Man's Land" (2010) and located at Park Avenue Armory in New York was a 40-foot-tall mound of clothing, flanked by an industrial crane. Every article of clothing symbolized one person, so the piece represents an estimated 6,000 people. The crane was the metaphoric hand of God and deposited each piece of clothing on top of the mountain pile, symbolically carrying the "souls" of those who inhabited the clothes to a "higher place".

4.3. Michelangelo Pistoletto, "Venus of the rags" (2024)

The "Venus of the rags" is a work by Michelangelo Pistoletto dating from 1967. The work invites us to reflect on the consumerism of producing, buying, using and throwing in a continuous loop. In June 2023, the work was placed in Piazza Municipio, one of Naples symbolic squares, and was destroyed by fire on the following 12th July.

Following the fire, a crowdfunding campaign "Let's rebuild it!" was promoted by the

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[1] The title is a tribute to Arting Education. Reinventing Citizens of the Future, special guest editors Anna Lisa Tota and Antonietta De Feo, *Scuola democratica. Learning for Democracy* 2/2022.

municipality and an activist association, and the sculpture was re-installed on 1st March 2024. Pistoletto decided to donate the sculpture to the city and finance the intervention at his own cost, so that the funds raised could be donated to social associations active in the area, such as the Cooperativa Sociale Lazzarelle, which deals with the reintegration of women prisoners into the world of work. The new Venus, however, is supported by the wreckage that survived the fire of 12th July and, like a phoenix risen from its own ashes, has become a symbol of resistance and rebirth, confirming the value and effectiveness of art as a social binding agent and educational tool, especially in the most fragile contexts.

In conclusion, fashion, even by incorporating some trends of contemporary visual and performing art has decided to play its public role as agency by addressing the categories of social values.

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NARRATIVES FOR INTERSPECIES EDUCATION

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Interspecies education requires considering non-human animals from an inclusive perspective that acknowledges them as significant subjects, valuing their individual worth beyond stereotypical species characterizations. This prompts a rethinking of species relationships from an ecological perspective that moves away from discontinuity-based approaches to humans' interactions with other animals. Recognizing our proximity to and shared traits with other animals allows us to shield our relationships with them from reification processes that result in practices and systems harmful to well-being and the dignity of non-human individuals. Relationships founded on care, responsibility, and solidarity – which embrace the inherent relationality of human beings and what they share with other living beings – offer moral, political, and educational alternatives to those grounded in power, instrumentalization, oppression, and hierarchical social constructs. In this context, alternative representations of alterity, particularly those provided by literary works, can serve as a reflexive exercise, laying the groundwork for reimagining interspecies relationships.

interspecies education; critical animal studies; animal question; narrative

INTRODUCTION

This contribution aims to provide some points for reflection by addressing environmental sustainability from both an ecological (Micklin, 1984; Ingold, 2016; Tota, 2023; 2024) and animal-based perspective, focusing on the so-called "animal question" (Cavalieri, 2001; Nussbaum, 2006; Kalof 2017). The animal question shares several affinities with the environmental question in terms of content, framing, and communication methods (Freeman & Jervis, 2013). The environmental question concerns humans' relationship with the environment and its reconfiguration, particularly in light of the harm historically caused by conceiving this interaction as one of dominance and control. Similarly, it is necessary to rethink humans' connection with other animals to transform the nature of this bond, starting with a redefinition of the cultural categories that legitimize it as a relationship of domination and power (Mahlke, 2014; Taylor & Twine, 2014; Almiron et al., 2016). The environmental question refers to issues that affect, uniting them, the living conditions of both human and non-human animals. These discussions problematize the positioning of the human species in relation to other species and the ecosystem, thus opening up the possibility of rethinking the relationship of the human species with

the natural environment and with other animals in terms of responsibility and care (Nussbaum, 2006; Pulcini, 2009).

The animal question – defined by the recognition of non-human animals as bearers of rights (Regan, 1983) and as subjects, agents, and ends (Nussbaum, 2006) – can be summarized, according to Kalof (2017), as follows: How can humans rethink and reconfigure their relationships with other animals? This question can be answered in many ways, corresponding to different modes of political and cultural action and various forms of activism.

The animal turn has engaged the humanities and social sciences (Colombino & Bruckner, 2023), primarily through a critical perspective on cultural paradigms and social practices that reify, oppress, and harm other species, and, on the other hand, by promoting proposals for alternative paradigms. My reference to interspecies education fits within this point of view. I will focus especially on the implications of interspecies education at the communicative level, highlighting the role of narratives and literary works in promoting alternative cultural paradigms.

1. AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Firstly, what do we mean by interspecies education? The scientific literature provides various definitions, meanings, and approaches (Andrzejewski et al., 2009; Russell & Spannring, 2019; Pedersen, 2023; Horsthemke, 2023). Russell and Spannring (2019) refer to interspecies education as education to live and interact within multispecies communities according to principles of ethics and sustainability. They define interspecies education as a process that enables us to flourish in a shared community co-populated and co-produced with the more-than-human (*ibid.*).

At present, the forms of animal exploitation and oppression in production processes, industrial farming, biomedical research, and other human activities require that interspecies education take on a critical dimension. In this sense, it functions as an anti-oppressive and anti-speciesist education that shares many assumptions with anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-ableist education (Nocella et al., 2017; Horsthemke, 2023). In fact, speciesism shares its cultural roots with these other oppressive ideologies. In the genesis of these ideologies, the rational-capitalistic paradigm plays a specific role. Strategic-instrumental rationality, conceived as a human prerogative, legitimizes the subjugation of the natural world, other animals, and those human categories to which power structures assign an instrumental or subordinate function.

Nussbaum observes that this form of subordination and political marginalization is legitimized by a paradigm that, as in the contractarian tradition, is based on reciprocity between individuals who share a specifically human kind of rationality (Nussbaum, 2006). This approach implies a strong discontinuity in considering the relationship between humans and other animals (Borkfelt, 2011; Nimmo, 2016; Horsthemke 2023), as it draws a clear boundary between species, not by recognizing specificities and differences, but using them to legitimize the instrumental

oppression of non-human species.

We need to rethink relationships between species from a different perspective, one that values species differences in their respect and their potential for relational enrichment. From an educational point of view, Horsthemke (2023, 4) observes that

> animals' qualities that they share with human beings and that differ from humans' are important factors in children's development of a concept of self and of the 'other', and of the ability to empathize, sympathize, and care.

We need, in other words, to rethink our relationships with other species from an ecological perspective – one that recognizes and values human proximity to other species. It's about looking at other animals with a different gaze: The gaze is essentially political, as it defines and structures power (Tota, 2024, 87). So, changing our gaze means promoting a different cultural paradigm that primarily impacts the conception and representation of what it means to be human, starting with the recognition of the constitutive relationality of human beings, which arises from their vulnerability (Pulcini, 2009; Freeman, 2016; Tota, 2023; Nussbaum, 2023). Recognizing these traits, which we share with other animals, allows us to replace instrumental relationships rooted in domination and oppression with forms of interaction based on care, responsibility, and solidarity.

2. THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES

The legitimization of non-human animals oppression, like the oppression of human groups, occurs through social consensus – rooted in common sense – regarding their categorization and treatment. This consensus is expressed, produced, and reproduced in discourses and representations. Therefore, alternative representations and narratives can play a critical, delegitimizing, and educational role. First, by representing and expressing the complexity of animal alterity. The processes of animal reification tend to simplify animal complexity, often by reducing individuals and their behaviours and thoughts to the characteristics of the species they belong to or by minimizing species differences within the category of "animal" as the total "other" compared to humans (Malknecht 2021). In this regard, narratives have significant imaginative potential. Nussbaum (2006) refers to the concept of sympathetic imagination as a faculty that can be activated with the support of appropriate narrative forms, and which proves functional to the capabilities approach in perceiving and recognizing non-human animals as subjects of justice.

Narratives that can foster an empathetic relationship with individuals of other species can be adopted as counter-narratives (Hall, 1997; Somers, 2008; Bamberg, 2011) to the oppressive representations and narratives in public discourse, which express and, at the same time, legitimize oppressive relationships and practices in various aspects.

The first aspect concerns the objectification of animals through naming and categorizations that represent certain animals, their bodies, or parts of their bodies in instrumental terms: in terms of food (as seen in gastronomic terminology) or as

elements of production systems (Malknecht, 2021). In relation to these aspects, narratives can facilitate the transition from the representation of the animal-as-object to that of the animal-as-subject through alternative naming and by representing the living body in the functions where non-human animals' capabilities are expressed: for example, in affectionate relationships, in expressive and emotional richness (love, happiness, pain, fear, sadness) – as well as in the representation of death, often concealed in the process of commercializing bodies.

A second aspect, also related to these dynamics, concerns the naturalization of oppressive practices such as those within consumption and production systems, particularly those promoted by the food industry, and the oppressive factors rooted in common sense, traditions, and daily practices. In relation to these aspects, narratives can serve as a reflective exercise, providing critical distance from habitual behaviours and acting as a preliminary step toward ethical behaviour (Ricoeur, 1985; 1990). In narrative form, representations of alternative lifestyles and relationships with other animals can be conveyed. The conditions of life and death (killing or slaughter) can be narrated from the animal's perspective, fostering empathy and emotional engagement with these events. These types of alternative narratives can thus serve as counter-narratives, playing a delegitimizing role against animal oppression, due to the very narrative qualities and the role that literary narratives play in shaping moral subjectivity in its relationship with alterity and otherness (Malknecht, 2018). In narrative theories, this ethical dimension appears in authors from various cultural backgrounds. For philosopher Cora Diamond (1988), engaging with literary narratives involves establishing a relationship with difference that stimulates moral life, as it extends experience into realms (forms of life, conceptual and linguistic worlds) beyond one's own horizon. The moral outcome of such an experience results from adopting a conceptual framework accessed through literary narratives as spaces for experiences and the activation of capacities that allow us to accept that coming to understand a conceptual life other than our own involves exercise of concepts belonging to that life (ivi, 276). Edgar Morin (1999), still within the human realm, highlights the novel's ability to expand the scope of what can be said, capturing the infinite complexity of our subjective life.

Empathy and the effort to adopt the perspective of the other, recognizing the emotional and cognitive complexity of non-human individuals, are fundamental aspects of interspecies education. Bradley Rowe (2009, 162) has observed that

> Having the intellectual courage to expand the moral community, […] will enrich human experience, invigorate philosophical and educational dialogue, cultivate imaginative and sympathetic faculties, and promote conscious thinking and deliberate action in our everyday lives.

On the other hand, from an educational perspective, we can also argue that by cultivating imaginative and sympathetic faculties – something that can be achieved through literature as well as other arts – the extension of the moral community is promoted, even beyond species boundaries. This extension implies a sense of responsibility from humans and a deep reflection on their position within the

environment, capable of inducing change by activating processes of recognizing alterity, and in our case, animal alterity. The potential of narrative to restore complexity through its structure – via analogies, intersections of meaning, and references – enables the representation, and thus imaginative experience, of animal alterity as a complex form of otherness. From an educational perspective, this involves promoting moral, political, and educational alternatives (alternative imaginaries, representations, and discourses). In this regard, interspecies education aims to foster relationships based on solidarity, care, respect, and justice towards other animals; furthermore, expanding knowledge and experience of other animals can support the moral development of humans by nurturing feelings and attitudes that have both ethical and political significance.

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MUHOLI'S VISUAL ACTIVISM AS A PUBLIC AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

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This paper explores the role of art in critical education through the work of visual activist Muholi (they/them). Combining photography, video, and installations, Muholi's works explore documentation and representation as tools for providing a different narrative of the Black queer community in South Africa. By weaving aesthetics and social reflection, their works can be interpreted as useful sources for unlearning and relearning through differences. Drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews conducted during *Muholi. A Visual Activist*, their solo exhibition in Italy at Mudec (2023), this study argues that Muholi's art functions as a form of public and critical pedagogy. Through visual strategies that invite recognition of marginalised identities, the exhibition created a dialogical engagement with the audience, fostering intersectional awareness and reshaping societal imaginaries around equity, diversity, and inclusion. Muholi's work demonstrates how art can challenge oppressive structures, offering transformative learning experiences that contribute to a more just and sustainable future.

Muholi; visual activism; social justice

INTRODUCTION

Artistic languages have been increasingly recognised in recent years for their potential to catalyse transformative processes towards a more sustainable present, and their crucial role in fostering imagination and enhancing a broader understanding of social (in)justice and its consequences, also in connection with activism and pedagogy (Tota & De Feo, 2022; Desai & Hamlin, 2017; Bell & Desai, 2011). This paper explores artistic practice as a medium for public and critical pedagogical practice (Zorrilla, 2014), focusing on the potential learning outcomes for those engaging with art in public spaces. Centring on Muholi's visual activism – which creates alternative forms of visuality, new ways of being seen, and new ways of seeing (Mirzoeff, 2015) – this paper posits that artistic activism represents a site of pedagogical possibility (Desai & Hamlin, 2017). It further argues that Muholi's aesthetic sensibility and artistic commitment to making visible stories, voices, and experiences of people rendered invisible by structures of domination serve as a vehicle for public critical pedagogy. Drawing from ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews with over 60 visitors to Muholi. A Visual Activist, held at the Museum of Cultures in Milan in spring 2023, the study argues that Muholi's artwork prompts viewers to

engage with societal issues and facilitates transformative learning experiences through the establishment of a reflexive dialogue, with visual exposure devised as a means of unlearning and relearning about Other's identities and cultures, thus crucial in raising critical consciousness towards social justice (Zorrilla, 2014).

1. THE PEDAGOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF MUHOLI'S VISUAL ACTIVISM

Muholi (they/them) is a renowned non-binary South African visual activist whose oeuvre encompasses a diverse range of photographic works, from intimate portraits to metaphorical self-portraits, documenting the lives and amplifying the voices of marginalised Black and queer communities in their country. For Muholi, art is a medium for articulating and exposing social and cultural identities (hooks, 1998). Moreover, it transcends artistic boundaries, illuminating the pervasive realities of gender-based, sexual, and racial violence while critically examining the complex intersections of discrimination. In creating spaces of public appearance and recognition for gendered and racialised bodies historically ostracised, their visual activism is about "pushing a political agenda, […] reaching out beyond the normal way to reach out, touching people's hearts in different ways, and engaging deeply" (Whitney, 2017). In this way, their art is also closely related to educating audiences about these histories, their engagement in the experience of the Other through their own lived experiences, and the challenging of dominant representations through the scrutiny of power dynamics and the avoidance of binaristic and classification-based approaches. As Tyali (2014) argues, their art serves as a "crucial lubricant that assists in creating a healthy balanced society".

Visual art has long been a site of aesthetic intervention and socio-political critique, engendering an emancipatory potential in altering perceptions of the self and the Other. I concur with Peters (2016) in emphasising the educative nature of representations while asserting the pedagogical and directive power of visual culture – a socially constructed field – as a premise for understanding how art is a socially pedagogical process that is central to public critique. As Desai (2020) underscores, visual representation shapes how we learn to see in racialised ways that maintain the status quo, but art can challenge hierarchical power relations; acting as a distinctive form of critical public pedagogy (Sandlin et al., 2013), art encourages audiences to examine oppression and privilege.

Accordingly, the public dimension is paramount for Muholi. Making their work visible serves to expand the space of vision and, consequently, the space of transformation. By highlighting marginalized narratives that are frequently disregarded, they challenge the cultural hierarchies that pervade museum settings. They also subvert conventional modes of display and classification of exhibited objects while simultaneously creating a space for those faces and stories that are often submerged in a culture of silence, with this public site becoming a meaningful space for political intervention, where individuals can learn to read the world critically.

Furthermore, it is possible to envisage Muholi as a public intellectual figure, one that would help people re-envision what is and what is possible, as Achebe asserted

in his renowned discourse in 1964 referring to writers, but also artists, as persons who bear a responsibility to engage in the process of re-education and regeneration. Artistic activists, whether they be dreamers, tricksters, infiltrators, or coalition builders, understand that their role as cultural producers is inherently pedagogical (Desai & Hamlin, 2017). In this case, Muholi fulfil this role by engaging the public in a process of ethical reflection and civic engagement, by bridging embodied individual experiences with broader societal issues historically contextualised, thereby mediating and illuminating both personal traumas and systemic discrimination. Their unapologetic visual representations of Black and queer bodies and their alternative archive of narratives and identities can contrast toxic imaginaries that sustain discrimination but also trace the contours of alternative paradigms of signification: a process of unlearning and relearning of the Other through difference and disjuncture. In this manner, Muholi's work encourages multicultural education and sensitivity to cultural differences, empowering citizens to become attuned to the politics of representation concerning race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other cultural differences through dialogue and critical examination.

2. AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING THROUGH MUHOLI'S EXHIBITION AT MUDEC

The exhibition at Mudec – the artist's first solo show in an Italian institutional venue – featured a selection of over 60 self-portraits from the series *Somnyama Ngonyama (*2014-ongoing). By playing with the conventions of classical painting, fashion photography and familiar tropes of ethnographic imagery, Muholi re-articulate a visual politics of contemporary identity. While the previous series *Faces and Phases* brought the reality of South African LGBTQIA lives to the fore, challenging the hegemonic frame of visibility, *Somnyama Ngonyama* focuses on a symbolic visual landscape drawn from their own experience and imagination. In each portrait, Muholi raise questions about social injustice, human rights, and contested representations of the Black body. Muholi use and twist everyday items – such as plastic bags, rubber tyres, latex gloves – manipulating them "to transform the self-portraits into portraits with a global agenda, protesting racial intolerance; the oppression caused by privileging gender norms; the exploitation of marginalised communities, and threats to the environment" (Hellman, 2018).

The poetics and politics of the exhibition fostered personal meaning-making through a curatorial design perceived as non-constrictive. Indeed, the exhibition space saw the audience engaged in prolonged silent contemplation of the works of art on display. The artist's voice was conveyed in a variety of ways, including through video, hashtags, and panels, which collectively promoted the creation of a zone of contact. This encouraged a personal dialogue with the works of art, which some described as 'a knife in the heart,' 'a punch in the gut,' and 'sending shivers down the spine.' Muholi's art stood out for its anti-iconic, non-canonical subjectivation and its unique performative originality: an effect attributed by visitors to a deft and unconventional combination of their body and the choreography of the objects used,

which manifests in strategic refigurations (Farber, 2020). Visitors indicated that they were initially 'caught by the gaze' before engaging with the accompanying texts or theoretical elements, underscoring the aesthetic encounter as a precursor to interaction. Irrespective of their cultural background and despite their diverse demographics, the viewers in general perceived the exhibition as transcending the boundaries of form, evoking a range of emotions that oscillated between fascination and discomfort. The enigmatic and penetrating gaze of Muholi served as a device for fostering interaction, communication, and self-reflection. This act of gazing back (Poulain, 2019) initiated a pedagogical practice that underscores a reciprocal relationship, necessitating ethical responses and intellectual engagement. Indeed, viewers were unable to avoid the pervasive gaze emanating from the photographs, which compelled them to reflect on their positionality as spectators in the context of violence and in a society that legitimizes discrimination. This reflection revealed the (in)visible operations of power and privilege and expanded beyond the immediate context of South Africa to Italy, a country still grappling with multiculturalism and equality.

Muholi's images revealed the enduring legacies of the apartheid system in contemporary South Africa, educating audiences on the systemic subjugation of Black people in a world that remains trapped in hatred, prompting the need to recognise the discrepancy between formal and substantial equality. The participants found themselves questioning the historical and social mechanisms of racialisation that operate globally, including in Italy, which perpetuate material inequities but also lead to forms of concealment, invisibility, or other forms of trivialisation of the Other. It became evident for them that ethnicity could not be addressed in isolation; rather, it must be examined in conjunction with gender and sexual identities within exclusionary, diminishing, and devaluing societal frameworks. Furthermore, the exhibition also illuminated for participants the construction of the female subject and dissent from heteronormativity, uncovering the diverse yet persistent forms of phobias and oppressive violence inflicted on those bodies.

This multifaceted discourse on identity and self-determination facilitated a more profound comprehension of how identity markers become the foundations for exclusionary practices, driven by the perpetuation of stereotypical notions associated with Black, female, and queer bodies, as well as the constraints imposed by the everyday fictions that shape the boundaries of expression for those perceived as outsiders. By employing an intimate yet collective lens, Muholi's work prompted a reflection on the 'politics of seeing and knowing' (Desai, 2020), challenging in the spectators' minds the mystification or erasure of Black female and gender non-conforming bodies through art history to mediated cultural iconography. Additionally, the public has been prompted to consider alternative perspectives on victimization, as well as forms of material and epistemic violence, leading to a heightened awareness of the right to represent themselves, and how its absence hinders the construction and access to a pluralistic and inclusive imaginary. Although critical knowledge may not be directly translated into an impetus for action, many visitors

have indicated a desire to engage more actively in combating racism and sexism. However, by facilitating horizontal encounters with unfamiliar experiences, Muholi's works enabled participants to embrace a dimension of universality and that cultural shiftprefigured by cumulative change in consciousness and behavior that leads to social action and change (Desai, 2020, 15).

3. CONCLUSIONS

The exhibition fostered an audience identification of art as a means of critically narrating the present and facilitating an encounter with the Other and engagement with diverse perspectives, as a form of learning that might begin also from initial disorientation, "from being uncomfortable", as proposed by Giblin et al. (2019). However, this disorientation has been transformed into a pursuit for mutual exchange. Muholi's exploration of identity prompted reflection on phobias and biases that challenge these identities and enabled the audience to engage with a different narrative, serving as a precursor to reflection on the social dimension. Empirical data highlight the impact of Muholi's visual activism in transcending conventional artistic boundaries and embodying a form of public pedagogy, creating a space for critical engagement, with the educational impact coming from the artwork itself, connecting them with the viewer's thoughts.

As discussed, Muholi's works act as a catalyst for informal yet transformative learning, as they challenge forms of cultural representation that actively shape knowledge about people, communities and the world. Rather than merely transmitting knowledge, their art seeks to transform learning in a continuous struggle for social justice and a sustainable, equal, and inclusive present. If providing people with the skills and knowledge to question deep-seated assumptions and myths is essential for fostering a more just society and pushing people to take responsibility for intervening in the world they inhabit, Muholi's visual activism achieves this by expanding the critical ethical imagination of viewers and inspiring them to take responsibility for social change.

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ENHANCING CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH EXTENDED REALITY AND 3D PRINTING: TOWARDS INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE EXPERIENCES

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The contribution outlines the creation of a virtual environment called the "Inclusive Virtual Museum", which harnesses the potential of Extended Reality (XR) technologies and 3D printing to promote inclusive and sustainable museum experiences. The project involves the establishment of a virtual museum hosting digital assets of archaeological artifacts acquired through 3D scanning in museums across the Campania region. The digital assets of these archaeological artifacts have been further replicated using biodegradable material through 3D printing, allowing students to manipulate artworks and providing additional sensory information, particularly for visually impaired students, to fully grasp the history and significance of museum pieces. Moreover, the virtual environment enables detailed study and analysis of artifacts without safety or fragility concerns, offering a meaningful experience for students with disabilities to actively engage without real-world risks. Consequently, the combined use of the virtual museum and 3D printing of archaeological artifacts serves as an effective tool to promote student self-determination by enabling independent and meaningful exploration and knowledge creation. These innovative technologies support a pedagogical vision of community-based education, where schools and local areas interact, creating alternative educational spaces enriched by museum experiences for visitors and students alike. Additionally, the environmental implications of these technologies are considered, identifying opportunities to reduce environmental impact through resource optimization and the use of biodegradable materials in 3D printing archaeological artifacts. Therefore, this paper examines the challenges and future opportunities in the adoption of these technologies, highlighting their potential to revolutionize the museum sector and promote greater accessibility and sustainability in cultural heritage preservation.

Introduction

Cultural heritage preservation has been a longstanding challenge, with traditional methods often falling short in capturing the dynamism and intangibility of cultural

practices and artifacts (Khan & Byl, 2014). However, the emergence of extended reality technologies, including augmented reality and mixed reality, as well as advancements in 3D printing, offer promising avenues to address these limitations and enhance the way we experience, interact with, and preserve cultural heritage (Khan & Byl, 2014) (Stylianidis et al., 2022). The ICOM—International Council of Museums, held in Prague in August 2022, has redefined the importance and significance of museums nowadays in terms of accessibility, inclusiveness, sustainability and ethics. New ways of participation and diverse experiences allow the creation of a new perspective on museums, which highly emphasises their role as cultural hubs. Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), and Mixed Reality (MR) applications have shown significant potential in improving the quality of cultural heritage experiences. These immersive technologies stimulate users' senses more naturally and vividly, resulting in enhanced engagement and educational outcomes (Innocente et al., 2023). For instance, head-mounted display (HMD) devices allow visitors to digitally augment information about cultural artifacts digitally, creating a more immersive and emotionally engaging experience (Innocente et al., 2023). Similarly, 3D scanning and printing technologies enable the creation of detailed digital models and physical replicas of cultural heritage objects, which can be used for research, restoration, and exhibition purposes. Particularly 3D printing and scanning plays a crucial role in enhancing the sustainability of virtual museums. When physical replicas are required for educational or tactile purposes, It allows for on-demand production, reducing the need for storage space and transportation of physical objects, thus minimizing the carbon footprint (Keaveney et al., 2016). 3D scanning and printing can create accurate copies of delicate artifacts, allowing visitors to interact with them virtually without risking damage to the originals, and 3D printed replicas can be made available in local communities or educational institutions, reducing the need for individuals to travel long distances to experience cultural heritage. This reduces travel-related emissions and makes cultural experiences more accessible to wider audiences (Samaroudi & Echavarria, 2019). Furthermore 3D printing allows for the creation of objects with minimal material waste compared to traditional manufacturing processes. This can inspire visitors to adopt more environmentally conscious practices in their own lives. (Keaveney et al., 2016)

This contribution delves into the multifaceted ways in which technology and artificial intelligence are changing everyday life, examining both the transformative potential and the critical need for responsible and more sustainable development and implementation. Inclusion, accessibility, and sustainability have become key priorities as we strive to create inclusive spaces, both physical and virtual, that meet the diverse needs of all individuals. Our hypothesis is that AI, AR, and VR technologies in non-formal learning contexts, particularly in inclusive virtual museums, can promote prosocial attitudes through the Flipped Inclusion model (Corona and De Giuseppe, 2020).

NON-FORMAL LEARNING CONTEXTS: INCLUSIVE VIRTUAL MUSEUMS

Although it is an elusive object, difficult to define, identify, and circumscribe, according to Tramma (2009,36) it is possible to state that informal education can be identified in those relational and communicative experiences, concerning collective or individual subjects, in which learning occurs without there being institutions or organisations manifestly in charge of the purpose and without there being a pedagogical intentionality, i.e. an intentionality that consciously thinks education as such. As Badger suggests, non-formal learning can provide students with authentic contexts that increase intrinsic motivation by making abstract concepts more tangible and relevant to their real-life experiences (Badger, 2021). Furthermore, these environments support diversified learning paces, allow for more spontaneous pedagogical approaches and promote cognitive, affective, and social development by encouraging active participation, collaboration, and interdisciplinary thinking (Badger, 2021; Delello et al., 2015; Johnson et al.., 2022). Our research develops in a non-formal learning context such as the inclusive virtual museum.

"A virtual museum is a logically related collection of digital objects composed in a variety of mediums, and, due to its ability to provide connectivity and various access points, lends itself to transcending traditional methods of communication and interaction with visitors, being flexible with respect to their purposes and interests; it has no real place or space, its objects and related information can be disseminated all over the world" (Falk and Dierking, 1992, p. 90). This definition underlines how designing and building inclusive virtual museums presents significant opportunities to promote prosocial behaviors among visitors. By creating personalized, immersive experiences, these digital platforms can encourage empathy and understanding of different cultures and histories. Moving on from the impact of virtual museums on community engagement, it is essential to explore how these platforms can influence individual behaviors and attitudes towards prosociality, encouraging positive actions within the community and individual learning needs (Aldosari, 2020). Existing literature highlights the importance of recognizing and embracing the diverse experiences experienced by museum visitors (Isselhardt & Cross, 2020). Falk's research on visitor identity highlights that museum visits are *deeply personal and strongly linked to each individual's sense of identity* (Isselhardt & Cross, 2020). As a result, museums must embrace a variety of visitor needs, including education, entertainment, socialization, and economic empowerment, all highly dependent on the specific identities and backgrounds of those who interact with the institution (Isselhardt & Cross, 2020). This "educational turn" (Fattinger, 2016) in museum curation has given rise to the concept of the inclusive museum, which aims to offer open representations that recognize the varied lived experiences and identities of visitors (Isselhardt and Cross, 2020).

SCANITALY

Our working hypothesis takes as a starting point the creation of an inclusive virtual museum based on a combined approach of virtual and augmented reality. The

project, born within ScanItaly, was developed at the Teaching Learning Center for Education and Inclusive Technologies Laboratory Elisa Frauenfelder of the Department of Human, Philosophical and Educational Sciences of the University of Salerno. Scanitaly aims to provide an accessible and meaningful educational experience by exploiting the potential of immersive technologies, such as virtual reality and augmented reality (Di Tore, Di Tore, Todino, Schiavo, Iannaccone & Sibilio, 2023). Specifically, our scientific questions are: How can an inclusive virtual museum promote inclusion and accessibility? Is it possible to apply the flipped inclusion model to the inclusive virtual museum to promote inclusion?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Flipped Inclusion model (De Giuseppe, Corona, 2016) born as part of the pilot study experimented on at the University of Salerno, combines the concept of inclusion and the value of flipped logic in educational actions through existential (Dewey, 1961) design models (Margiotta, 2014) with a logic of reversal (Bergmann, Sams, 2012) of the investigation process, for qualitative well-being of life (Lawton, Simon, 1968). The goal of Flipped Inclusion is to promote prosocial personalities and inclusive communities through a student-centered approach that encourages empathy and collaboration (De Giuseppe, et al., 2020). Exploring, ideating, designing, and experimenting (EIPS) inclusive models is the objective of the paths, structured in phases, of the Flipped Inclusion design model, which is inspired by the vision of systemic ecological development (Bronfenbrenner, 2002) of macro, eso, meso, and microsystem. The Flipped Inclusion model, combining formal, informal, and non-formal languages and learning, promotes forms of cooperation, learning communities, circle learning, and multicultural integration (Calvani, 2001). From an ecological-relational point of view, the pedagogical investment is based on human capital and sustainable innovation through different phases of management and study:1) theoretical and exploratory, 2) empirical and ideational observation, 3) operational planning, and 4) responsible experiment. This happens in formal, non-formal, and informal spaces, through the mediation of knowledge (Sibilio, 2015), enhancing technological-inclusive laboratory methodologies. The flipped Inclusion model starts from problem recognition, identifying specific problems within a broader context, through Goffman group framework micro, meso, and macro (Goffman, 1974). After that, the model goes deep into Data acquisition using structured methods and procedures. Then Investigation phase starts, exploring how artificial intelligence can promote prosocial behavior in education through the creation of an inclusive virtual museum. Follows the analysis, examination of the impact of artificial intelligence on student interactions and learning outcomes, and finally evaluating of the effectiveness of AI-based prosocial interventions. Our investigation, currently in an early stage, will be conducted by observing the use of the virtual museum by students, using mixed methods to evaluate the impact of the use of augmented, virtual, and extended reality in the educational context on the target population in terms of performance, perception of the experience, and inclusion.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the combination of XR technologies and 3D printing offers a powerful toolkit for creating inclusive and sustainable cultural heritage experiences. These technologies not only provide new ways to preserve and present cultural artifacts but also enable personalized, interactive, and memorable experiences for diverse audiences. As the field continues to evolve, future research could explore AI-adaptive experiences, remote collaboration, and digital creativity models to further enhance the potential of these technologies in cultural heritage preservation and dissemination (Innocente et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024).

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DRAWING ON ARTISTIC LANGUAGES TO APPROACH TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE. TOWARDS SHARED KNOWLEDGE BUILDING

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Terms such as sustainability, social justice, collaborative knowledge construction, and a new vision of cultural heritage are now required reference points for those with a role in education and participation surrounding cultural and landscape heritage in both formal and informal contexts. This paper examines the initial outcomes of the doctoral program in Intangible Heritage in Sociocultural Innovation, offered by the University of Milan–Bicocca. Since its inception, a key feature of this PhD program – which was initially developed in collaboration with the Universities of Perugia and Basilicata, leveraging the investment programme provided for under the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) – has been active and meaningful engagement with local organizations, especially museums, local authorities, and cultural heritage sites. This has fostered ideas for new research endeavours based on inclusion, sustainability, heritage promotion, active participation, and the right to interpretation. The doctoral program has also been characterized by a strong emphasis on artistic languages and interdisciplinary resources. This has been accompanied by inquiry into the practical workings of these languages and how they may be applied to document and conduct research.

intangible heritage; tangible heritage; PhD; PNRR; artistic languages

INTRODUCTION

The PhD program in Intangible Heritage in Socio-Cultural Innovation (IHSCI) was launched in the 2022/23 academic year at the University of Milan-Bicocca, in partnership with the Universities of Perugia and Basilicata. From the outset, the participating academic staff, institutions, and PhD students have engaged in in-depth reflection, focused primarily on concepts related to tangible and intangible heritage and cultural heritage assets. They have examined research perspectives, epistemological foundations, theoretical frameworks, and diverse methods of applied research, all grounded in their own specific disciplines. Indeed, the PhD program itself stemmed from an inter-university, inter-departmental, and interdisciplinary partnership involving a wide range of disciplines, including education, anthropology, economics, statistics, systems science, communication, law, psychology,

sociology, history, computer science, art, and literature. The rich and profound exchange of ideas among these areas has drawn on many years of research in the domain of cultural heritage; the aim has been to foster mutual learning through the exchange of perspectives and the clarification of terms and concepts intrinsic to each discipline's peculiar terminology and research practices. Another notable aspect of this doctoral program has been its integration with national and international institutions. As required for PhD programs funded through the PNRR, formal agreements with partner institutions have been mandatory from the outset. These agreements span the identification of a research topic and arrangements for a doctoral student to spend between six and nine months at a partner institution in Italy. Additionally, the student is required to spend another six months abroad at an institution conducting similar research. The program was originally drawn up with the involvement of a range of stakeholders, including provincial capitals, public museums, foundations, town councils, and the ICPI (Central Institute for Intangible Heritage – Ministry of Culture, Rome). This fulfilled the requirements for PNRR funding, which mandate research, consultation, and the identification of cultural bodies and institutions across the country that deal with tangible and intangible heritage from diverse disciplinary and organizational-public administration perspectives. culminating in joint research agreements with the university. A further distinctive aspect of this doctoral program, evident from its inception, has been the integration of artistic languages as tools for various purposes including: conducting research, engaging local populations and communities, and implementing and documenting the project work.

1. FROM TANGIBLE CULTURAL ASSETS TO THE ADVENT OF THE INTANGIBLE

To better understand the approach and objectives of this PhD program, it is essential to briefly revisit the profound paradigm shift that has taken place in study, research, and practices surrounding cultural heritage in recent decades (Bortolotto, 2008; Lattanzi, 2021). This transformation has entailed a major change in perspective, a key aspect of which has been aptly described by Alessandra Mottola Molfino, director of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum from 1973 to 1998, as "[...] museology's shift in focus from objects to be preserved to communities of users" (Mottola Molfino, 2004, p. 19).

Thus, while audience engagement has become a central objective, another crucial development has been the evolving functions of museums themselves. This shift is encapsulated in the latest definition of museums, approved by the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM in Prague on 24 August 2022.

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.

Terms such as accessibility, inclusion, and sustainability have become integral to the objectives of museums. Alongside traditional goals such as research, conservation, collection, and exhibition, museums have embraced interpretation and explicitly acknowledged heritage as encompassing not only material but also intangible aspects. This evolution of the concept of cultural heritage (Campelo and al., 2019; Gasparini, 2014; Muñoz-Viñas, 2023) represents another significant change, particularly within the European context. It has emerged through engagement with diverse cultural frameworks and values from various regions of the world, including Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific. These interactions have highlighted that the broader concept of heritage encompasses other parameters that cannot be reduced to the traditional categories of monumentality, uniqueness, authenticity, and exceptionality that have long defined Western heritage. Thanks to the 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* approved by UNESCO (2022), a new cultural horizon has emerged, emphasizing an anthropological perspective (Iuso, 2011) and the history of cultures. This shift has redefined the fields of art history and cultural heritage, introducing a more relativistic and pluralistic vision of culture (Bortolotto, 2011, p. 23).

As noted, the concept of cultural heritage has changed considerably, influenced in part by the debates sparked by the 2003 UNESCO Convention. This convention expanded the scope of safeguarding efforts beyond monuments and collections to include customs and expressions such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe, as well as the skills and expertise required to produce traditional crafts (Bortolotto and Skounti, 2024). This validation of the intangible has never sought to "freeze" practices by transmitting them unaltered. Rather, it has emphasized living out and experiencing these practices as representations of both the past and contemporary variations (Giancristofaro and Lapiccirella Zingari, 2020). Another fundamental aspect has been a commitment to inclusivity, fostering connections among different kinds of heritage as reflections of shared identity and cohesion, while respecting differences. An essential aspect of this transformation is the recognition of the importance of communities and the adoption of community-based approaches.

Intangible cultural heritage can only be heritage when it is recognized as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it – without their recognition, nobody else can decide for them that a given expression or practice is their heritage. (https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003)

To illustrate the themes related to the material and intangible heritage addressed in this doctoral program, the titles of the research projects initiated in the academic year 2023–24 are as follows: "Workers' memories, urban regeneration, and intangible cultural heritage on the outskirts of Aosta" – Aosta City Council; supervisor: Valentina Porcellana. "Cultures of the sea: gender imaginaries and female

knowledge in traditional Adriatic seafaring" – Cattolica City Council; supervisor: Laura Menin. "The educational process as an artistic practice" – Museo MA*GA, Fondazione Galleria D'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea Silvio Zanella, Gallarate. "Intangible heritage: research, restitution, participation, exhibition" – Museo "Ettore Guatelli" Foundation, supervisor: Mario Turci. "MuBiG | A distributed, contemporary, participatory museum" – ABCittà Società Cooperativa Sociale – Milan; supervisor: Cristian Zanelli. "Projects for the protection and promotion of intangible cultural heritage" – Central Institute for Intangible Heritage, Ministry of Culture, Rome; supervisor: Leandro Ventura.

2. ARTISTIC LANGUAGES AS RESEARCH TOOLS

The PhD program's focus on intangible heritage, which represents the core element of each individual research project, has driven the quest for diverse documentation methods that extensively incorporate artistic languages. As Sullivan (2010) reminds us, in a world marked by uncertainty and complexity, particularly when engaging with diverse kinds of heritage, one of the most effective ways to truly interact with this complexity is to draw on artistic practices as research methods.

The inclusion of artistic languages – ranging from drawings, photographs, and videos to the use of the body – has been both a defining and essential aspect of the research process (Cerutti, Cottini, and Menzardi, 2021). Such artistic approaches are particularly well-suited to engaging with both material and intangible heritage. Not only have the PhD students deployed artistic languages in their inquiry, but participants from the community have also actively engaged in artistic practices. This has fostered a participatory process of knowledge building and dissemination.

Artistic language and heritage itself play a key part in each project: 1. as tangible and intangible data to be studied and referred to; 2. as integral to broader reflection on the part of the community; 3. as a source of documentation and production; 4. as research tools within the art-based research paradigm (Barone, and Eisner, 2012; Cahanmann-Taylor, and Siegesmund, 2008; Sullivan, 2010); 5. as activators of community interpretation; 6. as cultural heritage and mindfully transformable futures.

CONCLUSIONS

In many contemporary research projects focusing on tangible and intangible heritage – particularly within PNRR-funded PhD programs dedicated to cultural heritage – a defining feature has been the intentional and competent use of artistic languages to gather data, engage communities, and document their participation, thereby initiating pathways of shared collaboration.

In addition to maintaining traditional forms of quantitative and qualitative research, the needed integration of artistic practices has proven to be both valuable and enriching. Artistic approaches have offered unexpected insights, benefiting both institutional and community stakeholders as well as the PhD students themselves.

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EXISTING SCHOOL NETWORK AND TEACHERS' SENSE OF AGENCY AS STEPPING-STONES TO ENHANCE THE SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL ECOSYSTEM

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Small and Rural Schools (SRS) are a key component of the Italian school system, not only for their number but also for their vital role in fostering social cohesion. The study focuses on primary and lower secondary schools and investigates the connections, established in the post-pandemic period, between each school and social services, educational and cultural associations, municipalities, and private citizens. A desk research based on the institute official reports and projects creates a preliminary vision of the socio-educational ecosystem. Using an interactive participatory approach, school staff and the researchers build each school specific mesogram (diagram displaying relations between school and other institutions) and the one that encompasses the whole institution. The researchers investigated whether differences in each school's understanding of relations, as they emerged during the fieldwork, could be traced in specific teachers' sense of agency, captured through a survey. Confirmation of this hypothesis could orient the school inclusive pedagogical leadership

Education Outside the Classroom; participatory research; socio-educational ecosystem; agency; mesogram.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Small and Rural Schools (SRS) are a key component of the Italian school system as they are 33,1% of all pre-, primary and lower secondary schools (Bartolini et al., 2023). Schools in remote and marginalised territories have a strong effect on social cohesion and depopulation. SRS usually have tighter connections with their communities, both because they need support to provide quality service and because the small size allows for personal connections built through multiple venues of encounter (Mangione et al., 2021). SRS can explore the concepts of Education Outside the Classroom (EOtC) and Open School at a deeper and more immediate level (Mygind et al., 2019). The smaller size implies proximity between inside and outside. In SRS standard curriculum is often naturally enriched by the local curriculum, creating great opportunities for meaningful learning based on authentic tasks, socio-emotional connections and familiar learning situations. These schools often move from research carried out by the school on its surroundings, to research co-conducted by the school and communities, to community involvement as co-

responsible in the educational process. (Chipa et al., 2022). The process can change both school and community.

Relationships among students, teachers, principals and different actors have a strategic importance in developing school projects and creating an educational community. The concept of socio-educational ecosystem can guide us in identifying current and future networks at school disposal (Esteban-Guitart & Iglesias Vidal, 2022).

This research analyses the socio-educational network surrounding the Istituto Comprensivo (IC) of Casina and Carpineti, located in the mountain area of Reggio Emilia province. The IC encompasses 4 pre-primary and 2 primary schools with multi-age classrooms, that respect Indire's Small School definition (Bartolini et al., 2023); 2 middle-sized primary schools and 2 low secondary schools.

The dimension of agency has been considered and explored in relation to the design of teaching and learning activities (Leijen et al., 2024). Teacher agency refers to the capacity to act by integrating personal abilities with contextual factors. It is a dynamic process influenced by cultural, structural, and material conditions, affecting decision-making within professional settings; these decisions are informed by accumulated expertise and directed by future-oriented purposes. In this study, teacher agency is examined through an ecological model, providing a comprehensive view of the educational ecosystem under consideration.

1. RESEARCH DESIGN

This research examined how primary and lower secondary schools have developed connections with agents in their territory in the post-pandemic period, guided by the following question and subquestions:

- What system of relations is built with other local actors around an IC located in a sparsely populated area?
  - How are these connections described in official documents, in the mesogram (visual display of connections) and in the narratives of the staff?
  - How can a sense of agency be transformed by the quality of relations within the ecosystem?

Researchers analysed institutional reports and school project documentation (Three-Year Educational Offer Plan – PTOF 2022-2025; Self-Evaluation Report – RAV 2022-2025; Improvement Plan 2023-2024; Civic Education Curriculum), gaining an overview of the social and educational networks supporting the schools.

The educational mesogram (Coll i Salvador et al., 2020) was used to investigate the relations of each school and the IC with the territory. During 3 workshops, school staff and researchers collaboratively developed a customized mesogram for their group. The researchers, in agreement with the principal, decided to group the primary schools based on their respective municipalities (Paullo and Casina; Carpineti and Valestra), while the two secondary schools participated together because of their similar planning and common objectives. Details on workshop

organization and reflective tools employed can be found in previous work (Biagini & Landi, in press). Through an interactive, participatory approach (Mortari & Ghirotto, 2019), during each session the staff together with researchers reflected on the type and quality of the connections with the territories. The process allowed to focus connections that could be strengthened or further explored to orient school future choices. The comparison between different schools' mesogram and field notes collected during the workshops, shade light on the different socio-educational ecosystem and support collective improvements and developments.

A possible explanation for these differences could also be traced in specific teachers' sense of agency (Leijen et al., 2024) captured through a survey. The survey, administered to all IC teachers, included three areas: biographical and professional details, agency scale, teaching activity. The second part, designed to explore the sense of agency, consisted of 24 items on a 7-point self-anchored scale. Teachers were asked to reflect on the influences that guide their professional decisions. 3 dimensions oriented the analysis, as defined by the ecological model: Iterational (professional and personal competences), Projective (short/long term goals), Practical-evuualuative (the working environment with its potential and constraints) (ibidem).

Based on the data from the teachers' survey, the authors looked for common characteristics in teachers working in the same school that could explain why they displayed a higher number of quality links with external agents. The hypothesis was that teachers with a higher agency worked in better connected schools. The researchers considered which dimension of agency influenced more teachers' actions and whether any specific dimensions could be traced back to teachers' workplace.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1. Relations according to the mesogram and the schools' documents

During the 2023-24 school year the IC presents itself as a place rich in connections: 41 local agents involved in school activities, 128 outings and 54 experts coming to class. This richness is not random and disorganized but linked to precise choices that put pupils' growth at the center. As the principal claims "The IC supports all types of relationships that are beneficial to the development of students' well-being and learning"[1]. The principal has the systemic vision of the socio-educational ecosystem and puts time and effort to support this complex system bureaucratically and financially.

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[1] Interview to the principal, Sara Signorelli, as the researchers presented her the mesogram.

Fig. 1: The complete mesogram of IC Carpineti-Casina.
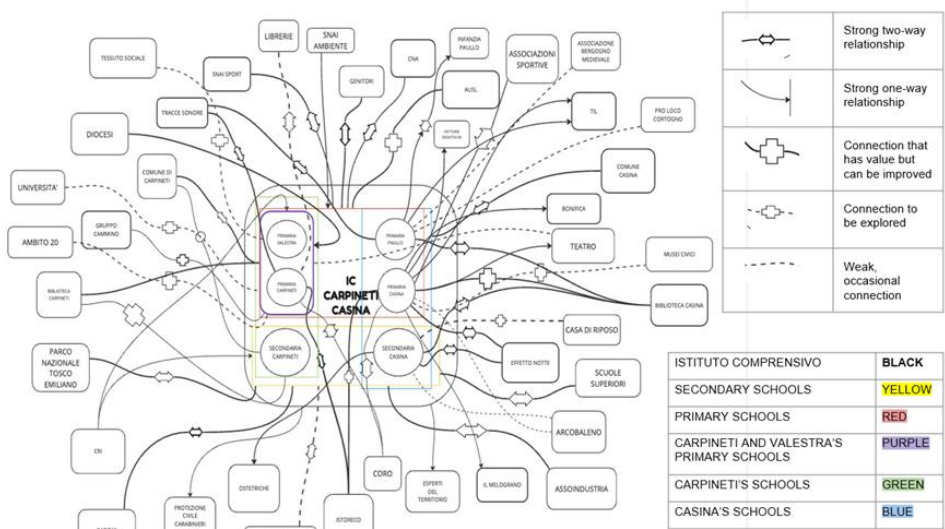
This systemic vision is confirmed by the strong correspondence between references to external stakeholders in the official documents and the connections outlined by teachers in the mesogram. Teachers identify 41 connections, only 12 of which are not mentioned by the documents. On the other hand, of the 33 entities that are named in the documents only 3 are not made explicit by the teachers. These connections include institutions (municipality, police force, the ministry, the national park, social services), non-for-profit associations (Red Cross, cultural and local heritage associations, walking groups), businesses, families and local experts. The documents offer a bureaucratic description and do not detail the quality and intensity of connections that emerge from teachers' narratives. Teachers recognize different agents separately, with their own identity, even when they all collaborate on one specific project (e.g. safety).

Tab. 1. Number of connections declared by each teacher group.

School building	Number of connections
Primary Carpineti	20
Primary Valestra	17
Secondary Carpineti	11
Secondary Casina	14
Primary Casina	21
Primary Paullo	15

Tab. 1 indicates the number of connections identified during each workshop. For primary schools 6 of these relationships are common to all, while 2 are shared among schools in the same municipality. 5 relationships are exclusive to Casina, 3 to Paullo and 3 Carpineti. Most teachers, Paullo and to a lesser degree Carpineti,

being exceptions, even when acknowledging the importance of strengthening certain relationships, place the burden of changing on external agents.

Paullo teachers describe relationships clearly, discriminating the provision of services, from the construction of reciprocal relationships based on joint planning. They declare fewer connections than the other schools, yet demonstrate awareness of these relations as resources, and as co-designers and co-conductors of school activities year after year. The thrive by IC leadership to homogenize activities and proposals, made necessary for an administrative rationalization and to give uniformity to the educational proposals, is seen negatively as it makes it more difficult to relate to the territory, build ties and take children's ideas into account. The Paullo teachers are the only ones who analyse their own relationship with the other schools in the IC, identifying some connections as stronger and more bilateral (Paullo preschool and Casina), others as growing (Valestra) and the rest as inexistent. Other schools refuse to qualify connections with parents or other schools claiming that they are not external.

In Casina teachers initially state that external agents should be grouped by types, they discriminated only when requested to consider the quality of relationships. Relationships are valued (positive/negative) based on efficiency, ease of contact and communication; and organizational ability to accommodate school requests. Therefore, they consider as strong and bilateral the relationships with associations that offer standardized educational experiences from a catalog in a timely manner. Co-designing and goal sharing do not increase strength. In Casina no relationship is identified as needing to be strengthened: either teachers are satisfied, or the relationship is abandoned.

An exemplary case of the different perspective on connections between Paullo and Casina is the relationship with the Casina library. For Paullo it is a positive, strong, two-way connection, despite some difficulties and slowness in communication, while for Casina is unsatisfactory, and cannot be improved, because the library has shown inefficiencies in the past.

Teachers in Paullo and Carpineti can discriminate better between connection types, can point to changes that have occurred over the years in the quality of connections, and can identify the ones that can and should be improved. For Carpineti there are relationships that are at an early stage, but worth exploring such as the one with the nearby Conservatory and Theater. Only Carpineti school considers relationships with entities that deliver teacher training. All others focus on projects for students.

Teachers from Valestra, the other multi-age classrooms school, tend to confirm connections identified by Carpineti. School surroundings are not considered a resource. Even if they recognise strong community ties and a rich relational fabric in the village, they state that the school is neither a part of it, nor want it to be. One teacher states: "we would have a lot of ideas, but we don't have funds for transportation". Basically, learning opportunities are far away and there is nothing we can do to make it happen. This attitude is evidence of low relational awareness and lack

of agency.

The 2 secondary schools have similar networks. Of the 14 relationships declared by Casina secondary and the 11 declared by Carpineti secondary, 6 are in common. These are connections established on common issues: environment, sexual education and students' life projects. Secondary school teachers link relations to specific projects and qualify them as "for learning" when the disciplinary target is clear. In contrast, they struggle to see the learning aspects of relationships built around soft skills, such as the one with the Red Cross.

2.2. Teachers' agency and school connections

Of the 90 teachers in the IC, 61 (56 females) replied to the survey. 57% of respondents are primary school, 31% lower secondary school, 11% preschool teachers. 16% are special needs education teachers, equally distributed in primary and secondary school. They are well-educated and experienced teachers. 34% have been teaching 7 to 18 years, 33% 19 to 30 years: according to Huberman (1989) those are the most productive professional years. 64% have a college degree, either bachelor's or master's program.

Their professional and life experiences are the strongest motivators for their actions (mean=33), as can be seen in fig.2, while future goals connected to their professional development (mean=25) have the lowest impact. They do not perceive the environment, both at classroom and school level, as having strong effects on their agency (mean=29).

Fig. 2. Elements promoting agency by components (max level of the scale 42)
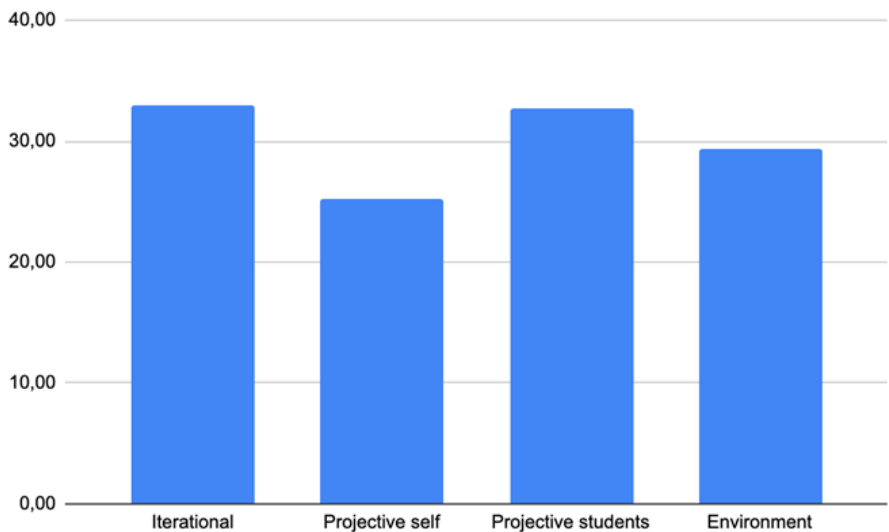
Statistically we could not find correlations between teachers' role, the school they thought in and their age or degree with specific teaching profiles or with agency profile. Moreover, teachers' ideas on teaching and learning and agency profile also do not seem to be connected.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Each school in the IC interprets relations in its own way. Most teachers have a more IC-based and instrumentally oriented idea of connections. Some teachers, especially in secondary school, demonstrate a lack of awareness of how territorial agents could help develop transversal skills and lifelong/lifewide learning in students. Thus, they are often unaware of how to foster relationships actively. They seem to expect the IC management or the external agents to take care and invest in the relations while they collect the benefits. Paullo teachers have a stronger identity and consider their school separately from the others in the IC: They focus on their own few, deep and rich connections, and can project how to improve them. The mesogram workshop allows these differences to emerge and to identify relationships that could be further explored. Yet, this global awareness arises not within the teachers, but with the principals who used the research to isolate relations that need strengthening and planning further actions.

The lack of agency of some teachers emerges from their narrative, but given the small number of teachers in certain schools it is hard to capture building related causes with the survey. This effect of territorial connections on agency should be further explored. The implementation of EOtC experiences could produce shifts on the environmental and projective-on-self-development components of the agency. This could be an interesting area for further research.

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SMALL AND RURAL SCHOOLS AS LEARNING HUBS. INVENTIVE METHODS FOR IDENTIFYING THE GRAMMAR OF EDUCATIONAL FUTURES

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How will the future of schools look like? By drawing on the current interest about 'the future' in sociology (Levitas 2013; Poli 2017) INDIRE and IRPPS-CNR started in 2023 a research study to identify in the context of Italian Small and Rural schools the characterizations of the learning hub proposed by the OECD that can be applied also at the context of standard schools. A research-intervention process based on multiple case study has been set up. The research protocol included an exploratory phase with the sending of the questionnaire to all school registered (560) with the Small Schools Network promoted by IN-DIRE. Inventive methods and specific identified tools (focus groups, interviews, video storytelling) were chosen with the purpose of: (1) identifying the definitions of school as learning hub; (3) mapping the educational activities and experiences that connect school and territory; (2) promote among the actors of the educational community the generation of ideas on the image and characteristics of the school of the future.

learning hub; small and rural schools; inventive methods; educational futures; imagination laboratories.

INTRODUCTION AND FRAMEWORK. HOW WILL THE FUTURE OF SCHOOLS LOOK LIKE?

The OECD (2020) identified the "learning hub" as one of the possible future scenarios for schools. This vision aligns with UNESCO's call to frame education as a common good (2022, p. VII), emphasizing schools as dynamic institutions deeply embedded within their communities. Within the Italian context, INDIRE, through the National Movement of Small and Rural Schools, has highlighted how small schools exemplify open schooling practices by offering educational and community services through formalized alliances, such as community educational pacts (Mangione & Cannella, 2021; Chipa et al., 2022).

The "learning hub" scenario envisions schools characterized by openness to the community, organizational flexibility, and the integration of local resources into the curriculum. This concept builds upon established pedagogical approaches, such

as open schooling, community-based learning, and place-based learning. Framing education as a common good reinforces the role of schools not merely as service providers, but as centers of social innovation, democratic participation, and territorial development. However, realizing this scenario in practice requires implementing collaborative governance practices, such as community and territorial educational pacts. These pacts foster alliances between schools, families, local authorities, and third-sector organizations, creating a governance framework that positions the school as a common good. This approach holds particular relevance in the Italian context, where schools often serve as strategic hubs in networks of local collaboration and proximity.

Building on the current sociological interest in the concept of "the future" (Levitas, 2013; Poli, 2017), INDIRE and IRPPS-CNR launched a research project[2] in 2021 to explore how the "learning hub" scenario might emerge within Italian small and rural schools. The study seeks to understand whether anticipatory practices are present in these contexts and to identify elements of the learning hub model that could inform broader educational practices, including those in standard school contexts.

Small and rural schools represent an ideal context for exploring the "learning hub" model for several reasons:

1. *Organizational Flexibility*: These schools have a demonstrated capacity to adapt swiftly to changing circumstances, making them agile environments for innovation.
2. *Community Anchors*: In marginalized or disadvantaged areas, these schools are often seen as cultural and service hubs, playing a vital role in the survival of their communities.
3. *Existing Practices:* INDIRE has documented examples of small schools operating as civic libraries or cultural hubs in communities lacking municipal libraries or bookstores, showcasing their potential as multifunctional institutions.

The study integrates the concept of "imaginative practices" and the role of concrete utopias in designing the future (Levitas, 2013) with futures literacy as a means of anticipating scenarios (Poli, 2017). This combined framework supports the development of sustainable and context-driven educational scenarios while identifying the key dimensions of a new "school grammar"—a reimagined structure and function of educational institutions in response to future challenges.

The following research questions guided the inquiry:

- RQ1: Are there examples of small and rural schools in Italy that can already be considered learning hubs?
- RQ2: How can the experiences of small and rural schools help understand and reimagine the future of schools, contributing to the emergence of a new grammar of schooling?

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[2] Progetto di Ricerca Competitiva – Fondo Azioni di ricerca per l'istruzione e la Formazione (PNR)– Ministero Università e Ricerca – Azione di ricerca 3 Ricerca collaborativa con OCSE, UNESCO e CNR/IRPPS sui modelli di learning hub basati su forme di reconciliation territoriale. CUP B55F21008020001.

This research seeks to comprehend how small schools might embody anticipatory practices and act as laboratories for educational transformation, providing insights into scalable and contextually relevant innovations for broader educational systems.

1. METHODOLOGY

A research-intervention process based on multiple case study has been set up. The research protocol included an exploratory phase with the sending of the questionnaire to all school registered (560) with the Small Schools Network promoted by INDIRE. The aim of the exploratory phase was to gather a broad understanding of current practices and identify experiences that align with the principles of schools as Learning Hub. The questionnaire also provided a preliminary mapping of existing collaborations between schools and their local communities, offering insights into areas requiring deeper investigation. The cases were identified by selecting educational experiences focused on three aspects:

1. educational activities carried out outside the school building, educational activities connected with the construct of Place Based Education (Sobel, 2017) with reference to Outdoor education and Service-Learning paths involving the use of an outdoor context as content and learning environment.
2. community services the school offers in response to local needs: the opening of the school building during extracurricular hours for activities involving the population or access to services such as the library or sports activities.
3. the presence of the educational pacts: formal agreements between schools and various actors in the area (families, local authorities, companies, associations) to improve the educational offer and strengthen social cohesion.

This process ensured the inclusion of different educational approaches, considering the geographic and socio-economic diversity of the Italian territory and the specificity of small schools. The aim was to represent a range of practices that could inform broader educational transformations in connection with the characteristics of the vision of schools as Learning HUB (OECD, 2020).

The three identified cases (North, Centre, and South of Italy) were thoroughly analysed by applying a multidimensional framework inspired by the OECD's reflections on the evolving nature of educational systems and Learning Hub scenarios. This framework encompasses six interconnected dimensions:

1. *Open learning environments:* physical and virtual spaces within the Learning Hubs are designed to foster inclusivity, collaboration, and adaptability. It includes an analysis of how these environments support both formal and informal learning, as well as the extent to which they integrate technology and foster creativity.
2. *Multiagency partnership*; this dimension thrives on collaboration between various stakeholders, including schools, local governments, businesses, non-profit organizations, and families. This dimension evaluates the

strength and scope of these partnerships, identifying the roles and contributions of different actors.

3. *Emerging curriculum*; it reflects the need for a flexible and adaptive approach to teaching and learning. This dimension explores how the Learning Hubs embrace interdisciplinary methods, integrate real-world problem-solving, and respond to the needs of students and their communities.

4. *Professional development for teachers*; this dimension investigates the opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills, adopt new pedagogical approaches, and engage in collaborative practices.

5. *Community services*; LHs extend their role beyond education to provide critical community services, such as counselling, extracurricular activities, and support for marginalized groups. This dimension assesses how effectively these services are integrated into the hubs, with a focus on addressing local challenges and fostering social cohesion

6. *Tools and levels of governance: g*overnance is a pivotal factor in the success of Learning Hubs, influencing their capacity to innovate and respond to community needs. This dimension evaluates the tools, policies, and levels of decision-making.

The research protocol is based on inventive methods (Lury, Wakeford, 2023; Giorgi et al., 2021) and on imagination laboratories with school leaders, teachers, students, families, local authorities and stakeholders.

Inventive methods and specific identified tools (focus groups, interviews, video storytelling) were chosen with the purpose of: (1) identifying the definitions of school as learning hub; (3) mapping the educational activities and experiences that connect school and territory; (2) promote among the actors of the educational community the generation of ideas on the image and characteristics of the school of the future.

2. SAMPLE SELECTION TOOL

To map the experiences of schools functioning as learning hubs within the National Network of Small Schools, a structured questionnaire consisting of 20 items (19 closed-ended and 1 open-ended) was developed, organized into four sections:

- Section A: Definition.
- Section B: The School for the Community.
- Section C: The School in the Community.
- Section D: Perspectives.

In the first section, two definitions of a school open to the community were presented, asking respondents to choose between a characterization closer to the concept of a learning hub and one related to a school that engages with its territory but does not provide services for the community or include a vision oriented toward a social contract for education in its school project.

Section B, *The School in the Community*, aims to investigate the types of educational activities that the school carries out to meet the needs of the community

and/or involve members of the educational community. Aspects such as teaching methodologies, the spaces used, the timing, the relationship between these activities and the curriculum, and the involvement of experts working in teams with teachers were examined.

The third section, *The Community for the School*, focuses on identifying the types of services (healthcare, school reinforcement, reading, sports activities, before and after-school programs, etc.) that the school provides to the community to address potential territorial needs. Here too, dimensions such as time, spaces used, and the needs these activities aim to meet were explored.

In both cases, respondents were asked whether the educational and service activities are carried out as part of a structured alliance and which entities have signed the agreement.

Finally, the last section, titled *Perspectives*, was designed as an open field to provide a concise yet meaningful description of the school/territory collaboration experience that the school considers the most significant among all those conducted.

The questionnaire was sent to all schools registered in the National Network of Small Schools (560 in total). A total of 54 schools responded.

3. RESULTS AND SAMPLE SELECTION

From the data collected through the questionnaire, three schools were selected that showed the presence of the dimensions characterising the definition of a school as LH.

The three cases identified represent a possible declination of the LH concept in the Italian context, in relation to the survey dimensions. The mapping of the experiences related to the framework highlighted some common points. The presence of a structured collaboration with local actors (local administration, companies, associations) is positioned as a distinctive element especially for schools in marginal contexts. The selected schools also present experiences that take place continuously in contexts outside the school, referring to the construct of place-based education.

The regional distribution showed an interesting variety among the responding schools (Fig. 1)

FIG.1 Distribution of educational institutions by region
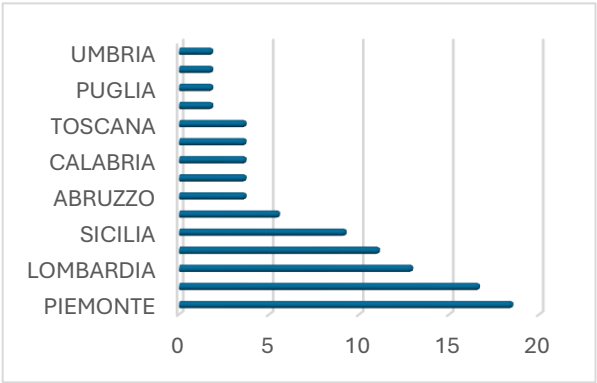
From the analyzed responses, it emerges that schools primarily perceive their role as a *reference point for the community,* with 70% of responses acknowledging this aspect. To a lesser extent (30%), schools identify themselves as learning hubs for both the school community and the surrounding area. The analysis of data collected through the questionnaire administered to educational institutions also revealed a variety of needs that schools aim to address through their activities in collaboration with the local community. This section focuses on identifying the main themes emerging from the declared needs, categorized into three levels: *Need 1, Need 2,* and *Need 3*. Additionally, open-ended responses related to the comments were analyzed using T-Lab software (www.tlab.it) to explore the motivations and objectives underlying the activities.

The types of activities implemented reflect a focus on innovative practices, with a prevalence of outdoor education courses (39 activities declared), followed by service learning courses (20 activities). At the same time, the educational institutions identify, in the 'Other' category, activities focusing on issues such as social and cultural inclusion, through reception paths, environmental education and inclusion workshops; the enhancement of the territory, through collaboration projects with local authorities and paths of knowledge of the cultural and natural context; and the broadening of the educational offer, including transversal initiatives such as PCTO, film education and art or sports projects.

In relation to formalised alliances, the questionnaire revealed a total of 48 agreements. Of these, conventions accounted for 37.5% of the total, followed by memoranda of understanding (25%) and co-responsibility pacts (14.58%). To a lesser extent, community educational pacts (12.5%), territorial pacts (8.33%) and zonal educational pacts (2.08%) were declared. This data highlights a preference for consolidated regulatory instruments regulating collaborations between schools and the territory. The activities are mainly oriented towards responding to needs such as knowledge and appreciation of the territory, support for families and the creation of spaces for socialising, as evidenced by the frequencies of key terms recurring in the answers (fig. 2)

Fig. 2. Primary perceived needs of schools
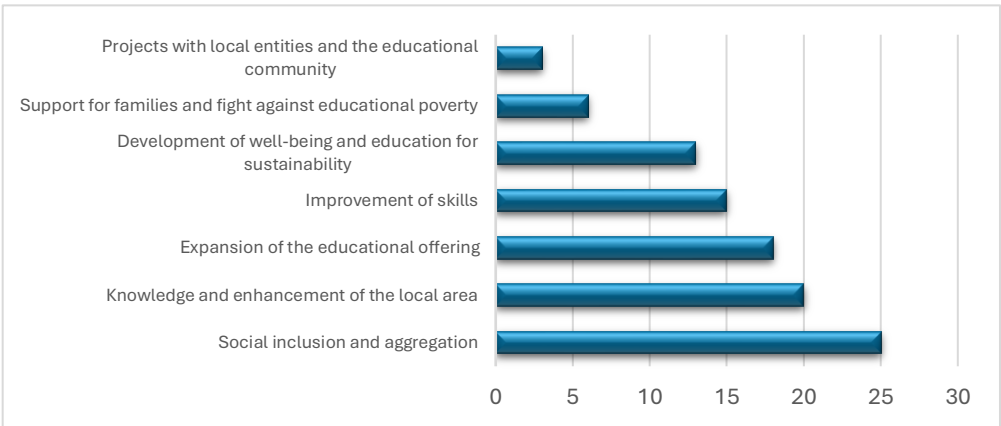
Finally, definitions of schools as "learning hubs" emphasize a dual function of the school: on the one hand as a real and symbolic space for interaction with the local area and, on the other hand, as a digital environment for the development of relational, communicative and cognitive skills. Some school leaders highlight the school's role in building an educational community, valuing both the cultural and natural environments.

From this analysis, No. 3 educational institutions were identified that are characterized by the following aspects:

- *Teaching Innovation*: The schools demonstrate a strong interest in implementing innovative teaching methodologies. E.g. GEIC83500L School showed a structured approach to digitization, with a high level of adoption of technological tools. In fact, responses indicate that faculty have participated in several digital skills training initiatives and that students have access to labs equipped for STEM and robotics.
- *Community Involvement*: Most responses highlight a desire to strengthen relationships with the local area and community. The school's responses in fact CNIC82300G emphasize a strong commitment to inclusion and diversity. Key elements include Targeted Programs for students with special educational needs (BES) and Collaborations with local associations for psychological and social support. The SAIC8BQ007 School stands out for its integrated approach to sustainability. Indeed, the responses highlight participation in active environmental education and recycling projects; Direct involvement of students in the management of activities such as the school garden.

The three selected schools exhibit distinctive characteristics that make them ideal models of learning hubs. Their ability to:

- Foster inclusion and reduce inequality;
- Promote innovative learning activities and territorial collaborations;
- Implement an integrated vision of the educational and social role of schools.

These results indicate a strong connection between schools and the socio-territorial context, as well as a growing focus on participatory educational models centered on students' direct experience.

4. DISCUSSION AND PERSPECTIVES

The research identified educational practices in small and rural Italian schools that reflect, in their essence, the characteristics of the "learning hub" model proposed by the OECD. Through a structured survey tool based on key dimensions, it was possible to map significant experiences embodying this vision.

Three case studies, representative of Northern, Central, and Southern Italy, were selected to understand how schools serve as cultural and social anchors, responding to community needs through innovative practices. The findings show that many small schools already operate as multifunctional centers, offering cultural, educational, and social services that extend their role far beyond traditional teaching. These schools represent a fundamental starting point for exploring anticipatory practices of schools as learning hubs.

To support the transition toward schools operating as learning hubs, a series of *imagination laboratories* (Giorgi et al, 2021) will be designed to involve teachers, students, families, local stakeholders, and administrators. These laboratories aim to stimulate collective reflection on the future potential of schools and to co-create sustainable and context-sensitive educational scenarios. The technique of video-narration will be central to this process, providing a powerful tool to explore and communicate imagined futures.

The *imagination laboratories* will focus on:

- *Exploration of existing experiences*: Identifying and analyzing school practices that closely align with the concept of a learning hub, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement.
- *Future exercises*: Encouraging participants to imagine educational scenarios that expand the role of schools as hubs of learning, integrating territorial resources and addressing the emerging needs of communities.
- *Anticipatory practices*: Rethinking existing experiences to transform them into innovative models that anticipate future challenges, operationalizing the idea of the school as a learning hub.

Video-narration will enable participants to visually narrate and represent the imagined futures, creating a space for critical reflection and collective construction of new perspectives.

The work in the imagination laboratories will go beyond mere speculative exploration, aiming to generate an operational understanding of the learning hub model. The reflections generated will contribute to defining shared *grammar of the school* as a learning hub, providing guidelines for the implementation and scalability of these practices. Furthermore, the results will inform educational policies that recognize the role of small and rural schools as laboratories of social and territorial innovation.

This combination of empirical analysis, collective imagination, and critical reflection offers a promising pathway to rethink the future of education in Italy, building a bridge between local needs and global visions of *schools as community* and *school for community*.

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LEVELING UP: THE INFLUENCE OF GAME DESIGN ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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The relationship between games, education, and social transformation demands increasingly nuanced consideration as we progress deeper into what some have termed the Ludic Century.Stenros and Kultima (2018) describe an explosive expansion of the ludosphere, one that manifests not only in the increasing pervasiveness of digital games and gamified experiences but also in the growing cultural significance of play across diverse societal domains. Yet this early stage of development and rapid expansion presents opportunities and challenges: while games' influence grows, our epistemological frameworks and understanding often struggle to keep pace with this rapidly evolving phenomenon.

The third edition of the Scuola Democratica International Conference emerged at this critical juncture, positioning education and social justice at the forefront of contemporary challenges. Never before has the theme of social justice been so crucial, as we face economic instability, international conflicts, climate crisis, migration challenges, and widespread social movements. Within this context, Panel J.05 explored how games can meaningfully contribute to addressing systemic inequalities and fostering inclusive education while remaining mindful that we can no longer afford to merely idealize games' potential. Instead, a thorough understanding of these powerful tools – their capabilities, limitations, and contexts of application – must precede and inform their deployment for social change.

The contributions presented in this section demonstrate this necessary balance between immediate practical applications and deeper theoretical understanding while showcasing the diverse ways in which games can serve as tools for social transformation. In examining the cultural role of game creators within social change, Antognozzi, Crociata, and Giovanucci explore how games function as cultural experiences capable of inducing behavioural changes at individual, community, and societal levels. Their work provides crucial theoretical groundwork for understanding the broader societal implications of game design choices, positioning game designers as cultural agents whose work carries significant social responsibility.

The practical application of games in educational contexts finds expression through several innovative approaches. Caviglia and Zamboni's development of the tabletop role-playing game Planétes demonstrates how carefully designed game mechanics can create protected contexts for language learning while promoting peer interaction. Their iterative design process and focus on reducing barriers to

participation exemplify how thoughtful game design can address specific educational challenges while maintaining engaging gameplay.

The intersection of games and social justice is powerfully illustrated in De Robertis, Agnella, and Blengino's edu-LARP I Soliti Sospetti, which enables participants to experience and critically examine inequalities within the criminal justice system. Their work demonstrates how immersive game experiences can foster understanding of complex social issues and challenge prevailing narratives about justice and equality.

The application of games in professional development contexts is explored through Fadda, Brembilla, and Pensavalle's research on leadership development in correctional settings. Their work shows how game-based approaches can address occupational stress while promoting organizational health and inclusive practices in challenging institutional environments. This application demonstrates the versatility of games as tools for professional transformation and institutional change.

Gardoni et al.'s examination of transformative game design in addressing social media risks demonstrates the necessity of critical engagement with contemporary challenges. Their work emphasizes how games can promote digital wellness while acknowledging the complexities of technological engagement—a particularly relevant consideration as digital platforms increasingly influence social interaction and learning.

The methodological foundations for implementing games in educational settings are thoroughly explored in Ligabue's work on Ludo Teaching. His research emphasizes the importance of careful planning and implementation in game-based learning initiatives, providing crucial guidance for educators seeking to integrate games into their pedagogical practice.

The multi-faceted examination of the Next Generation of Change Makerboard game by Mian, Morselli, Schumacher, and colleagues offers valuable insights into how games can promote entrepreneurial thinking and participatory practices in formal educational contexts. Their series of studies demonstrates the importance of comprehensive evaluation approaches in understanding games' educational impact.

These diverse contributions collectively point toward a more sophisticated understanding of games' role in society—one that acknowledges both their transformative potential and the responsibility that comes with wielding such powerful tools for social change. As the ludosphere continues to expand, game designers, educators, and researchers must work together to develop frameworks that can effectively harness games' potential while remaining mindful of their limitations.

Looking ahead, the challenge lies not only in developing more sophisticated applications of games in educational and social justice contexts but also in fostering the kind of critical awareness and theoretical understanding necessary to guide these developments. The papers in this section demonstrate that success in leveraging games for social transformation requires maintaining simultaneous awareness of both specific disciplinary developments and broader societal implications while remaining grounded in practical applications and empirical evidence.

The contributions collected in this panel reveal a crucial methodological insight: as we work to harness games and play for education and social justice, we must simultaneously operate along two axes. On the vertical axis, we face specific disciplinary challenges – how to effectively deploy games in language learning, legal education, correctional settings, or entrepreneurship training. Each of these domains demands deep understanding of both the specific context and the game design principles that can best serve it. The papers presented here demonstrate various approaches to achieving this depth, from Caviglia and Zamboni's iterative design process for language learning to De Robertis et al.'s careful structuring of experiential learning in legal education.

Yet these vertical investigations cannot stand alone. The horizontal axis demands we engage with broader questions of how games and play can advocate for and advance social justice across different contexts. This is evident in how our contributors consistently tied their specific implementations to larger social justice concerns – whether examining power structures in legal systems, addressing inequalities in correctional settings, or promoting inclusive participation in entrepreneurship education. This horizontal perspective helps ensure that game-based interventions don't just solve immediate pedagogical challenges but contribute to broader social transformation.

This dual focus – maintaining simultaneous attention to vertical specialization and horizontal social justice implications – emerged as a key lesson from our panel's exploration of games in education. It responds directly to the conference's call for examining education's role in addressing social justice, suggesting that game-based approaches must be both technically sophisticated in their specific applications and critically aware of their broader societal impact. Such balanced attention may offer a path forward as we continue to explore how games can meaningfully contribute to both educational excellence and social transformation.

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THE GAME DESIGNER IS PRESENT. REVEALING THE CULTURAL ROLE OF GAME CREATORS WITHIN SOCIAL CHANGE

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This paper examines the evolving relationship between creative accountability and systemic influence in game design, using Marina Abramović's "The Artist Is Present" as a conceptual lens to interrogate how game creators shape social experiences through networks of rules, mechanics and dynamics. As games expand beyond entertainment into diverse social domains, traditional artistic presence, and creative attribution frameworks prove insufficient for understanding their cultural impact. Through analysis of historical cases and theoretical frameworks, we explore how game systems function as powerful mediators of behavior while their creators often remain obscured behind institutional mediation. Drawing from Manzini's concept of "design experts" and Sacco's analysis of evolving cultural regimes, we propose a reconceptualization of game designers as facilitators of collective creativity rather than isolated auteurs, suggesting paths toward critical ludic literacy that can help ensure game systems serve broader social flourishing.

game design, creative accountability, ludic literacy, cultural production, social change

1. INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2010, artist Marina Abramović performed "The Artist Is Present" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. For over 700 hours, she sat silently at a table, making herself present for individual encounters with visitors. The table served a dual function that Hannah Arendt (1958) might have recognized, namely that of simultaneously separating artists from the audience while enabling their connection through the system of language. Through this deceptively simple setup, Abramović created a complex layer of accountability: her physical presence enabled criticism of her performance, of the institution hosting it, and the social context surrounding it. The performance crystallized fundamental questions about artistic presence, institutional mediation, and the relationship between creator and audience in contemporary cultural production.

This systematic nature of Abramović's performance offers a compelling entry point for examining how games function as rule-based systems of cultural production

and social influence. As Jesper Juul (2005) argues, games generate varied experiences through participant engagement within defined constraints. Yet unlike Abramović's physically embodied system, game designers create more diffuse frameworks whose meaning-making potential operates across multiple contexts and dynamics. The "table" between designer and player becomes virtual, systemic – composed of mechanics, rules, and interactions that enable and limit possible experiences. This transition from physical to systemic presence fundamentally transforms the nature of creative accountability.

Such questions of presence and accountability take on particular urgency given what Stenros and Kultima (2018) term the "expanding ludosphere" - the growing realm of games and their influence in contemporary society. This expansion manifests not only in the increasing pervasiveness of ludic artifacts and gamified experiences but also in the growing cultural significance of play across diverse societal domains. As they note, practices, attitudes, patterns, tools, language, and concepts relating to games are becoming ubiquitous in spheres ranging from business to education, from art to social services.

This expansion presents both opportunities and challenges: while games' influence grows, our epistemological frameworks and understanding often struggle to keep pace with this rapidly evolving phenomenon. As an example, the relationship between game design presence and systemic influence can be rather stratified and hard to address without proper hermeneutical tools. Where Abramović's table created a clear line of artistic accountability through physical presence, game designers shape experience through diffused networks of rules, mechanics, and systems. This systemic mediation fundamentally transforms the nature of creative responsibility. As Sicart (2009) argues, games function as "ethical technologies" - designed spaces that shape behavior and understanding through their very structure. This dialectic between system design and ethical implications compels us to reimagine game creators not merely as rule-makers but as architects of possibility spaces whose creative choices profoundly shape player behavior and meaning-making through carefully structured affordances and limitations. This systemic mediation operates through carefully structured affordances and limitations (McGonigal 2006) that establish the boundaries of possible actions while enabling meaningful player agency within those constraints.

2. GAMES & SYSTEMS

The systemic nature of games distinguishes them from other forms of cultural production in ways that fundamentally shape their social impact. As Bogost (2007) argues through his concept of "procedural rhetoric", games persuade and create meaning primarily through their rule-based representations and interactions. Unlike traditional media that rely on explicit content or messaging, games generate understanding through the very same procedures and operations they embody in their systems. When players engage with these systems, they don't simply consume content; they internalize operational logic and systematic strategies of

understanding.

This fundamental characteristic of games underlies their unique potential for social influence. The power of procedural systems to shape understanding manifests most clearly in how players internalize game logic, becoming part of players' cognitive assimilation, and influencing how they understand similar systems beyond the actual game context. Such cognitive transfer potentially raises questions about designer responsibility, as these systemic influences may persist long after direct game engagement ends.

Contemporary game development practices amplify these systemic effects through increasingly sophisticated feedback loops and behavior-shaping mechanisms. Social games demonstrate how procedural systems can structure patterns of interaction and relationship formation. The mechanics of social obligation – daily rewards, team challenges, collaborative goals – create what Sicart (2015) terms "ethical gameplay spaces" where players navigate moral choices through systemic constraints. These choices embed specific values and assumptions about social behavior that reflect their designers' intentions.

This psychological engagement interacts powerfully with what Deci and Ryan (2000) identify in Self-Determination Theory as core human needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Game designers, whether intentionally or not, create systems that tap into these basic human motivations, potentially amplifying their social impact. As players enter what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identifies as "flow states" – a psychological state of deep focus and immersion that occur when a stimulus presents a challenge perceived as simultaneously demanding and achievable – their critical distance may diminish, making them more susceptible to the implicit values embedded in-game systems.

When game mechanics migrate into non-gaming contexts, they may exhibit properties analogous to adaptive fitness in genetic transfer, where certain elements prove more suitable for integration than others. This potential for adaptation could extend beyond the mechanics to the experiential patterns they generate. Much like how biological elements can adapt and express themselves differently in new environments, these experiential frameworks appear capable of meaningful expression across contexts. Game designers might thus be participating in a broader adaptive network where both mechanical and experiential elements could contribute to emerging social and cultural patterns.

3. GAME DESIGN: PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

Tensions between games' growing cultural influence and the attribution of their creation reveal complex dynamics of labor, recognition, and power in creative production. Consider how Lizzie Magie's "The Landlord's Game" (1904) was designed as a demonstration of problematic wealth accumulation systems. The game embodied progressive, anti-monopolistic principles through its mechanics, offering two rulesets: one where all players benefited from wealth creation, another demonstrating monopolies' destructive nature. When Charles Darrow appropriated the

game and Parker Brothers commercialized it as "Monopoly" in 1935, this social critique was fundamentally inverted and the educational stance was canceled.

The erasure of both Magie's authorship and critical intentions exemplifies systematic patterns in how game creation intersects with capital and institutional power. Similarly, Leslie Scott's development of Jenga emerged from complex family and cultural dynamics in East Africa, yet its path to market success required navigation through publishing structures which often lacked mechanisms to fully acknowledge cultural histories. A pivotal moment in this struggle came in 1961 with Alex Randolph's court case against 3M regarding his game "Twixt". When 3M attempted to claim ownership of game mechanics he had developed, Randolph's legal battle established that while mechanics themselves could not be copyrighted, designers deserved recognition and fair compensation.

The Randolph-TwixT case marked only the beginning of a longer struggle. A watershed moment came on February 4, 1988, during the so-called "Perlhuhn-Abend" [Coaster Proclamation] at the Nuremberg Toy Fair, when thirteen prominent game designers, including Randolph himself, enacted a powerful, yet unusual symbolic protest after one of their colleagues had to let down a deal with a publisher who did not want to include the author's name on the game box. As they were in a pub, they used a beer coaster to sign a mutual agreement to never again sell a game to a publisher under those circumstances. The coaster is today preserved at the Nuremberg Games Archive / Toy Museum.

The eventual formation of the first game designer syndicate (SAZ, Spiele-Autoren-Zunft) and its negotiation of standard contracts with tabletop game manufacturers illustrate how symbolic protests can crystallize into lasting institutional transformation. Yet on the other side, it must also be taken into account how an overemphasis on individualism within a romantic, idealistic notion of authorship may obscure games' production inherently collaborative nature.

As Howard Becker (1982) shows in "Art Worlds", all creative works emerge from complex networks of collaboration and support. Games exemplify this dynamic particularly well, as they require coordination across multiple specialized domains and practices. Like cinema, games can be defined as multimodal media (Kress 2003, 2010), as their fruition encompasses intersecting creative practices, including system design and mechanics, but also visual art, narrative writing, sound design, and physical or digital craftsmanship. Each of these domains brings its traditions, constraints, and forms of expertise to the collaborative process. Alongside creative education, craftsmanship, game criticism, and the institutions promoting them, they all are elements that contribute to the final product. Going back to game systems specifically, their mechanical functions emerge through what Salen and Zimmerman (2004) term "iterative design" - a process of continuous refinement through playtesting and player feedback.

These dynamics reveal deeper tensions in attribution. As Consalvo (2009) notes, courts have historically struggled to determine whether game rules constitute protected expression or unprotectable abstract systems. Game mechanics indeed

cannot protected by copyright, as they are considered ideas, methods, or systems, which fall into categories explicitly excluded from copyright protection. This principle has been reiterated in several legal cases. One of the most relevant is DaVinci Editore S.R.L. v. Ziko Games, LLC (2016), in which the Texas court ruled that the mechanics of the card game "Bang!" were not covered by copyright. Even though the games involved ("Bang!" and "Legend of the Three Kingdoms") had almost identical rules and structures, the court concluded that these elements do not fall under copyright protection, because they consist of game rules and procedures, which do not they are protected creative expressions.

4. CONCLUSION

The examples provided call for more nuanced frameworks in understanding creative accountability for system design. Rather than simply celebrating individual auteurs or dissolving all attribution into a collective process, we might understand game designers as what Ezio Manzini (2015) terms "design experts": professionals who operate within broader ecologies of design activity. Their expertise lies not in sole authorship but in their capacity to recognize, amplify, and channel the creative potential already present in communities and social systems.

This reconceptualization of the creative professional as a facilitator resonates powerfully with evolving paradigms of cultural production. Reflecting on his "Venus of the Rags", Michelangelo Pistoletto stated that "The artist has an essential function, his mastery remains indispensable. However, this mastery will no longer be limited to great famous artists, it will belong to all those who know how to try their hand not only at producing a work but at integrating creation into social coexistence".[3] This vision aligns with what Sacco et al. (2018) identify as the transition from Culture 1.0's emphasis on individual genius as engendered by aristocratic models of patronage toward Culture 3.0's distributed creativity – a shift requiring a fundamental reconceptualization of how cultural producers understand their role and accountability.

The path forward requires developing critical ludic literacy – the collective capacity to understand, engage with, and transform game systems as social technologies. At the same time, the game industries can't provide models of sustainable cultural production without a negotiating push from game authors and involved professionals, given how complex the networks of actors involved can become within systems creation. The question is no longer simply who creates these influential systems, but how we can collectively ensure they serve broader social and cultural flourishing. This is especially crucial as games and game design are increasingly promoted as tools for fostering collective growth and flourishing.

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TTRPG AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: FROM GAME DESIGN TO CLASSROOM PLAY

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This paper aims to explore the use of role-playing games (ttrpgs) in foreign language teaching, specifically in relation to the practice of playing in the target language to stimulate spontaneous oral production and ease anxiety related to foreign language use. Starting from Jonathon Reinhardt's writings on games and language teaching, we will reflect on the process of creating games that are specifically designed with a learning goal (in our case, language learning), discussing the skills necessary to design a playful teaching activity, test its effectiveness, and facilitate it in the classroom. Within the category that Reinhardt names "Game-based L2 Teaching and Learning", or games explicitly designed for educational purposes, we will present the tabletop role-playing game Planétes, which we designed, as a case study. Planétes is multi-table, map-drawing, and city-exploring tabletop roleplaying game aimed at fostering L2 proficiency among language learners. It encourages players to think creatively about topics that often figure in elementary and intermediate L2 courses, such as urban life, traveling, migratory processes, and interacting with new cultures and places. Designed to be played by the whole class with a single facilitator and to reduce the difficulty of playing in a foreign language thanks to visual supports and map-drawing activities, Planétes provides a clear distinction between moments of conversation in the mother tongue and moments of interaction in the target language. The game encourages peer interaction and promotes scaffolded independence from support tools as the game progresses, allowing players more agency to practice the target language in a protected context. In our presentation, we will delve into the different phases of game creation, with particular focus on the choice of design objectives compatible with the specific teaching context, the major sources of inspiration, and the playtest experiences that highlighted different areas of improvement – a pivotal part of our iterative process. We will conclude by discussing some future developments for the project, which include the creation of a set of language support tools designed to facilitate role-playing in a foreign language.

ttrpg; game design; language learning; games; educational games

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, the role of ludic frameworks in education has been extensively discussed as gamified activities have been proven effective for a wide variety of disciplines. Their popularity has been particularly relevant in the language learning

field. While the number of linguistic resources exploiting gamified interfaces has constantly been growing over the years, the parallel trend of playing video and analog games during class has sparked a productive dialogue between those who are studying the effect of using vernacular games in class and those who are more inclined to introduce game elements to discipline-related materials. This distinction has been explored by Reinhardt and Sykes, who define as *game enhanced L2LT* (second and foreign language teaching and learning) the practice of adapting for language learning games that were designed for the entertainment industry and as *game-informed L2LT*, or *gamification*, the idea of embedding gamified elements into L2 materials and practices. This classification includes a third approach, the *game-based L2LT*, which involves the implementation of games specifically designed with language learning in the foreground.

The latter approach, although theoretically preferable, brings its own set of inherent difficulties, related to the technical challenge of designing educational games that are appealing to the target students while dealing them with the limited resources (both in terms of funds and time) traditionally granted to educators.

1. ROLL FOR LEARNING

In response to the need for accessible, game-based educational resources, the edited collection *Roll for Learning* was published in the fall of 2024. The main goal of the collection was to provide teachers and educators with a set of ready to use activities for their classes and it focused, in particular, on the micro-TTRPG (table-top roleplaying games) media.

In the role-playing game community, the term "micro-rpg" is used to define those TTRPGs whose rules are contained in no more than a few pages of written text (they can go down to one-page games, but generally include games up to 4-5 pages).

According to the open call for the collection, Micro-TTRPGs have been identified as effective in educational settings due to their concise format and ease of implementation. Moreover, TTRPGs provide large space for customization, since most of these games do not require expensive materials and can be easily modified by teachers and operators with limited effort.

2. PLANÉTES

2.1. The game

Designed as a submission for *Roll for Learning*, *Planétes*, was conceived during the summer of 2023 and developed through winter and spring 2024 to its alpha version currently published in the collection.

As described in its summary sheet, the game is a:

> [...] multi-table, map-drawing, and city-exploring tabletop roleplaying game aimed at fostering L2 proficiency among language learners. It encourages players to think creatively about topics that often figure in elementary and intermediate L2 courses, such as urban life, traveling, migratory processes, and interacting with

new cultures and places.

The main content areas covered by the game are language learning, arts and humanities and social-emotional learning and the target audience is limited to adult or young adult (over14) second/foreign language learners with a A2/advanced novice proficiency level or higher. The minimum number of players is fixed to nine; there is no theoretic limit to the number of players that can accommodate, but we suggest to adjust the number of facilitators according to the dimension of the group to make sure that every table can reach out to an experienced speaker of the target language if needed.

2.2. Rules and gameplay

Planétes is structured in a series of acts, explained step by step in the rule document in a way that allows target students to play the game as they read. While the rule explanation, the safety tools' introduction and the game debrief are supposed to be conducted in the students' native language, the core of the game is designed to be played in the target language. The game can accommodate a whole class of students with just one facilitator.

To start a game, students gather around tables in groups of 3-4 players and grab pens/pencils and a big sheet of paper. Once every student has selected a value for themselves and their character (based on their proficiency level in the target language it can be something very grounded as "family" up to something very abstract like "diversity"), every group starts creating a city going around the table answering in turn to the same set of given questions. These questions prompt every player to create a landscape landmark, a building and a social group based on their value and to describe them in the target language while drawing symbols and sketches on the map. After three creation rounds are completed, every player creates a character for themselves, belonging to the social group they introduced in the last round. When this phase is completed, every group select one of the characters to become a "wanderer", someone who will leave the city, while all the other characters will be defined from that moment on as "city dwellers".

When wanderers and dwellers are selected, the second phase of the game starts. Every wanderer leaves their table and joins another group, occupying the space left empty by the wanderer that left that table. Every group has now a newcomer, who doesn't know anything about the city they are visiting and a group of city dwellers, who know the city but don't know anything about the wanderer. Always using the target language as a main way to communicate, wanderers get to ask questions about the city and city dwellers about the wanderer. They start with yes/no questions and then proceed to more open questions, using the map as a reference to show things already drawn, but without drawing new elements. This exchange leads to wanderers forming opinions on the city they are visiting and city dwellers on the wanderers. When they are ready (or when the time is up), every wanderer assigns a new value to the city they have visited and the city dwellers choose a new trait to describe the wanderer. When this phase is completed the third phase starts and all

the wanderers get back to their original table and talk about the visited city to those who stayed, while the city dwellers tell them about who came. Based on what they experienced and heard, every player decides for their character whether to remain in their original city or to move to another one. When all the players have made a decision and have moved to the city their character wants to live in, the game ends and the facilitator can lead the game debriefing, using the questions provided or their own.

2.3 Design Notes

Even if it can be played for leisure, *Planétes* is primarily designed to be run in a second language course and comes with a range of corollary materials to help educators bring it to class.

As a didactic activity, its design goals have been directly impacted by the ambition of accommodating specific needs tied to this particular environment. One of the most obvious arrangements to this end was to ensure that one facilitator was sufficient to manage the entire playgroup so that the activity could be led by the teacher without the need for additional instructors. Another issue taken into account is the length of the game. A complete game of *Planétes* takes between 60 and 90 minutes, including rule explanation and debriefing. Every phase is timed, with the possibility of splitting the game into multiple sessions according to the duration of different classes.

From a linguistic point of view, one of the primary objectives was to encourage students to use grammatical structures and vocabulary typically covered in textbooks up to the advanced novice (ACTFL) or A2 (CEFR) proficiency level, incorporating themes such as travelling, identity, the city and including interrogative clauses, descriptions based on the five senses, and the use of the past tense in reporting what happened during the exploration phase.

The structure is intentionally conceived to support students through a series of progressively more difficult tasks: in the beginning, they are collaboratively brainstorming and building a vocabulary based on the elements they are adding to the city; they are likely to use the map as a support to overcome communication difficulties and can rely on visual representation of the elements they can't name. Afterwards, when wanderers move to other tables, the social dynamics change and interrogative clauses are introduced, first with easy yes/no questions and then with more complex structures; two distinct groups now have two different fields of expertise (the city dwellers know about the city, the wanderers know about themselves) and other perspectives are brought to the table. The map can still be used as a visual aid, but can't be modified.

In the third phase, the past tense can be introduced as the wanderers and the city dwellers report what they explored. The map is of no use anymore and the player can rely on the oral production in the target language only.

The idea of moving from table to table to explore new places is inherently tied to the intention of using linguistic barriers not only as a theme, but also as game

mechanic. Wanderers don't share with the city dwellers the established facts about the city, and the lack of linguistic fluency helps conveying a sense of confusion and struggle during the exploration phase; as if they were foreigners in a place, they do not know anything about, wanderers are confronted with a map they are not familiar with and they need to mediate their understanding of it through the use of a language they are still learning. At the same time, city dwellers struggle to communicate with a newcomer they don't know, making efforts to explain their own creation while forming their own opinion about them.

Tackling themes like prejudice, xenophobia and immigration, the game comes with a set of debriefing questions meant to reflect on the struggle of communicating while impaired by language and cultural barriers. While the standard version of the game is meant to keep these themes in the background, the corollary materials introduce some suggestions to raise the stakes and focus more on them, including the possibility of selecting the player who's leaving based on specific criteria such as how their character is perceived by the community or even their proficiency level in the target language compared to the others. In any case, the game is supposed to be played with a robust use of *safety tools*.

3. FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Planétes has undergone a process of peer-review and peer-playtest and its alpha version has been published in a playable and complete version, that includes guidelines for classroom implementation and insights about potential ideas for customization. However, some areas of the project are still being expanded and developed, with the intention an updated release in the future.

The game, which is not tied to a specific target language, is currently available in English and Italian, but we are reaching out for translations in other languages, as well as collaborations with institutions or scholars willing to work on its accessibility.

We are currently testing the game with different groups of players, refining our target audience and designing solutions for specific needs that deviate from it, such as the absence of a common vehicular language between the facilitator and the class, and the impossibility of explaining the rules in the native language of the players (rather common situations in teaching students from migratory backgrounds), as well as culturally specific issues and expansion rules for more advanced players. We are also collecting feedback from *blind playtests* (i.e. sessions conducted without the presence of the designers/developers, often used to test the clarity of the rules) to provide those who will be running the game as facilitator with as many resources as possible.

In addition to the existing ones, we are working on a completely new set of *safety tools*, with the aim of building a safer space not only from the point of view of the themes brought by the game, but also for specific linguistic needs like asking for a sentence to be repeated or clarified without interrupting, conveying a specific register or asking another person to speak slower.

CONCLUSION

As a game-design project, *Planétes* seeks to establish a structured framework based on language acquisition theory, while ensuring accessibility and adaptability for teachers. Although the alpha version is complete and freely downloadable and early playtests have shown promising results, the game is still under development and will be further expanded. The role of the educational community is crucial in this process: teachers and facilitators are an inestimable source of critical feedback and creativity, as their input can help discover areas for refinement, propose new adaptations and expand the game's usability for different learning contexts.

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HOW EDU-LARP CAN PROMOTE SOCIAL JUSTICE IN LEGAL EDUCATION: THE CASE OF "I SOLITI SOSPETTI"

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The contribution focuses on the potential of educational live action role-playing (edu-larp) for promoting social justice. After a brief overview of the theories and uses of larp, we will introduce the edu-larp *I Soliti Sospetti*, created by the authors. The characteristics of this larp are oriented towards understanding inequalities in the field of criminal justice. Finally, we will make considerations based on the point of view of the students who played, analysing some of the data collected.

legal education; role playing; edu-larp; game-based education; social justice

INTRODUCTION

In the field of legal education, playful teaching can be very useful. Game-based education in legal training achieves the goal of combining the objectives of pedagogical pragmatism (Dewey, 1916) with a theoretical approach from the perspective of law in action (Frank, 1933; Kruse, 2012).

Educational live action role-playing (edu-larp) (Gussoni, 2020; Castellani, 2020) can facilitate understanding of the functioning of law as a social practice (Viola, 1990), the complexity of social reality and the relationships among the different actors in the legal field (Bourdieu, 1986).

The edu-larp I *Soliti Sospetti* (Blengino et al., 2021) was specifically designed by the authors to improve critical thinking and a shared knowledge among participants that fosters the overcoming of stereotypes and prejudices (Pennazio, 2020) about criminal justice. It also aims to foster in people who are not legal experts a deep understanding of inequalities in the criminal justice system in order to promote social justice.

The edu-larp has been tested in university, school and active and inclusive citizenship education contexts, constituting a valid methodology for teaching law from the perspective of interactive competence-based teaching (Blengino and Sarzotti, 2021).

Through a simulated but realistic experience, *I Soliti Sospetti* projects students

inside a courtroom, causing them to identify with the condition of defendants or in the role of lawyers within the context of a morning of criminal hearings. The game cards contain the personal stories of the larp characters as well as the legal and social elements of the legal cases discussed. Participants make decisions and choices that stimulate socio-legal reflections with respect to the issues of law interpretation, selectivity of criminalization processes (Hester and Eglin, 1992), deviance and social marginality. Reflections (Schön, 1993) of those who have participated in the editions of the game, collected through specially developed reflective practice sheets (Gibbs, 1988), dwell on the potential of this edu-larp in promoting the understanding both of the law and the role of emotions in legal education (Blengino, 2023).

1. UNDERSTANDING INEQUALITIES IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE THROUGH EDU-LARP

I Soliti Sospetti simulates a morning of hearings before a criminal judge in the Italian penal system. The game features twenty characters: sixteen defendants and four lawyers. It takes place in two courtrooms; in each of them there are two characters that are part of the staff: the judge, who decides whether the defendants are responsible for committing a crime, and the prosecutor, who initiates and sustains the prosecution in the trial. In each of the two courtrooms, eight hearings take place for approximately one and a half hours. The lawyers each assist four defendants and move from one courtroom to the other according to the hearing schedule.

Many defendants are in a condition of situated vulnerability (Pastore, 2018): there are migrants, people who are homeless, people with psychological conditions and drug addiction issues. Through the game, it is understood that socio-economic conditions are decisive in the criminalisation process[1] because formal social control agencies tend to focus more on crimes committed by people with few resources[2]. Players reflect on these issues by stepping into the shoes of characters where class, often in intersection (Crenshaw, 1989) with gender and racialisation, produces a structural oppression that reverberates in the criminal justice process. The game also addresses the criminalisation of social movements (Chiaramonte, 2019) and the issue of *white-collar crime* (Sutherland, 1940).

The selectivity of the criminalisation process emerges in many other aspects. The lawyers have different characteristics: some are experienced, others are professionally younger. The more experienced ones have mainly cases as private lawyers, i.e. lawyers chosen by the defendant. Many are the cases followed by a court-appointed lawyer who tends to exercise a milder defence, as the relationship of trust between lawyer and defendant is not established (Sarzotti, 2022).

The lawyers receive some information on their cases a few days before the game session: the material on cases as a private lawyer contains more information, while

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[1] This expression designates the selective process through which certain actions are labelled as criminal, by criminal law and by crime control agencies (Baratta, 2019).

[2] See Cottino and Fischer (1995); Sarzotti (1995).

the material for the others contains little. The only time available for case preparation is the half-hour before the beginning of the hearings, in which the staff gives the lawyers some time to meet with all their clients.

Private lawyers are allowed to choose between the ordinary trial, which provides for the application of all procedural guarantees, and an abridged trial, which provides for a penalty discount, but also an unbalancing of the proceedings in favour of the prosecution: in this abridged trial the judge acquires the prosecutor's file that contains all the information that the prosecutor possesses. In fact, socio-legal research has shown how lawyers who follow defendants with scarce economic-social resources, knowing that the defendant will most likely be convicted, tend to choose a quicker procedure that allows for a sentence reduction rather than a lengthy trial that involves a great deal of time and energy for all (Sarzotti, 1995). Conversely, the relationship of trust that exists between defendant and private lawyer positively influences the defence, which is much more oriented towards doing everything possible to avoid conviction. The time reserved for the trial also contributes to this reflection: hearings with a private lawyer last fifteen minutes, while those with a court-appointed one, only ten. Court offices frequently allocate more time to hearings in which the defendant is accused of having committed a crime such as business or professional offences: it is believed that the evidence to be acquired, as well as the legal issues addressed, are more complex; also, the technical defence is highly qualified, the defendants have considerable financial resources. In trials involving petty crimes the hearing time is short: usually no particularly complex evidence is acquired, the technical defence is less attentive, the defendants have few economic resources (Cottino and Fisher, 1995; Sarzotti, 1995).

2. THE POWER OF EDU-LARP: SOME CONSIDERATIONS BASED ON THE STUDENTS' POINT OF VIEW

I Soliti Sospetti was played mainly in educational contexts with students in the last two years of high school and students of the Legal Clinic "Carcere, diritti fondamentali e vulnerabilità sociale" of the University of Turin, that are mostly law students and a few psychology and social work students.

After playing the game, a debriefing, that is aimed at rationalizing the game experience from an educational and emotional perspective, always takes place. Besides that, after the game session, in the two years 2023 and 2024, we administered 151 questionnaires[3] to high school students and, from 2021 to 2024, we collected 68 worksheets, based on the reflective cycle model proposed by Gibbs (1988)[4], filled in by legal clinic students. Here we will analyse some of the data collected and we

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[3] The questionnaire aims to investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the edu-larp as a teaching method.

[4] The worksheet includes several questions which help students to reflect systematically by describing the game experience and the feelings they felt, evaluating the activity, analysing the situation and what they learnt, also formulating an action plan for future experiences (Gibbs, 1988; Schön, 1983).

will make some considerations based on the students' point of view.

Starting with the high school students' answers, 72% of them declared to have studied law at school and 24% of them to have had the chance to study it through role-playing before. Almost everybody, 94%, stated that they prefer game-based learning instead of frontal lectures. They motivated that choice by saying that game-based learning is funnier, it helps to understand and memorize the concepts better and promotes working as a team, confirming some of the edu-larp's strong points highlighted in literature, such as cooperative learning (Kagan, 1994).

Some of the students found the game experience very realistic because it gave them the feeling of really being in a courtroom. Several students who played the defendants reported experiencing anxiety in front of the judge and struggling to face the prosecutor's charges as well as a sense of powerlessness due to their not being fully aware of the laws. To have experienced such emotions is proof of how the edu-larp allows participants to experience the law in action (Pound, 1910).

The majority stated that their knowledge of the criminal justice system was mainly based on tv series, media, social media and residually on law classes. 95% of the students claimed to have learnt something new about criminal justice thanks to *I Soliti Sospetti*. This data confirms that edu-larp promotes the consolidation of previous knowledge and transmits new learning, especially if the larp includes a preliminary phase of preparation and study by the players (Giliberti, 2020, 66).

To give examples of acquiring new knowledge, two students wrote: "I learnt how many variables influence a judgement and how it significantly affects the defendant's life"; "I learnt that depending on which lawyer defends you, you can have different judgements".

Therefore, it seems that *I Soliti Sospetti* contributed to modifying the legal consciousness[5] of criminal justice because it let the players adopt a socio-legal perspective useful in understanding how criminal justice works. Some students wrote: "I think I have learnt that in the end, in court, very often the truth does not win, but whoever has the best chance of being defended"; "Being a foreigner, I noticed that the chances of speaking were minimal".

These thoughts allow us to state that *I Soliti Sospetti* fosters, in people who are not legal experts, an understanding of inequalities produced by the criminal justice system and seeks to make people reflect on social justice.

This larp also led players "to look at people differently and be less prejudiced", as a student stated, confirming the transformative and prejudice-breaking capacity of edu-larp (Daniau, 2016; Pennazio, 2020).

Similar considerations can also be made when analysing the words of legal clinic students contained in the reflective practice sheets.

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[5] Legal consciousness is a concept developed in the socio-legal research in the 1980s-1990s that refers to how people experience the law and justice in everyday life (Ewick and Silbey, 1998).

Legal clinic students study law in books but still the edu-larp improved their critical thinking and allowed them to grasp the differences between law in books and law in action (Pound, 1910), as the following paragraph proves:

> In some ways it might be appropriate to rethink the State's intervention through criminal law, to make it more effective and less costly. These experiences increased my interest in alternative measures for sentencing. Thus, I found a difference between theory and practice, an impression that theory does not adhere to the needs of reality [...] My character would have needed help from the State, but that could not come through the process.

The game experience, because of its realism, allowed the students to reflect on the entire penal and prison system by questioning it and trying to find alternative and better solutions. Some students focused on the disadvantaged conditions that have favoured, in their own game character, the commission of the crime. This larp thus proved to be an opportunity to reflect on the complexity of social problems, the inadequacy of the criminalizing response and the need to consider other interventions from the State other than the criminal legal field, such as the welfare field (Sarzotti, 2022).

It is also interesting to note what another student wrote on the power of the edu-larp to transmit concepts and theories of sociology, proving it to be an effective teaching methodology for this discipline.

> What excited me most about this activity was the reflection it provoked from a socio-legal point of view. I was struck by: the criminalization of the defendants, the differences in the quality of defense work between cases in which there was a private lawyer versus those in which there was a court-appointed one; [...] All of this caused me to ask several questions about the justice system and how it is fundamental and yet difficult to have harmony between the concept of legality and the concept of justice.

Developing the awareness that legality and justice are not the same thing also leads students to think about the principle of equality: "Despite the fact that the principle of equality is enshrined in the Constitution and is therefore a fundamental right, there is still a long way to go in affirming this principle". According to this student, equality is only on paper because it can only be truly achieved through the promotion of social justice.

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GAME-BASED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR OCCUPATIONAL STRESS REDUCTION IN CORRECTIONAL SETTINGS: A SOCIAL CHANGE APPROACH

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In correctional settings, organisational stressors such as excessive workloads, poor leadership, and shift work have a greater impact on staff health than operational stressors like altercations or emergencies. Correctional officers experience higher rates of PTSD, depression, and anxiety than the general population and face stigma around seeking mental health support. Emotional suppression is often viewed as weakness, hindering a supportive workplace culture. This paper promotes an innovative stress management programme using game-based activities to enhance leadership and emotional self-regulation skills among correctional staff. It aims to prevent chronic stress, improve coping strategies, resilience, and emotional intelligence, and create a bias-free learning environment.

Game Design; Social Change; Organizational Stress; Leadership

INTRODUCTION

The European Commission launched a comprehensive approach to mental health, prioritising the prevention of mental health challenges and supporting individuals in the workplace (EU-OSHA, 2024). Correctional settings are prone to workplace mental health risks, with staff frequently facing high levels of organisational stress. Issues such as excessive workloads, poor leadership, and unsociable shift patterns often outweigh operational stressors like emergencies. Research reveals that correctional officers are disproportionately affected by conditions such as PTSD, major depressive disorder, and generalised anxiety disorder compared to the general population (Carleton at al., 2020). Compounding these challenges is a pervasive stigma around mental health in correctional workplaces, where expressing vulnerability or seeking help is often seen as a weakness. To address these challenges, this paper introduces an innovative stress management programme grounded in game-based learning. The programme is designed to enhance leadership skills and emotional self-regulation among correctional staff,

aiming to prevent chronic stress, reduce health risks, and foster resilience and emotional intelligence. Participants engage in immersive, game-based scenarios reflecting the real-life complexities of correctional work. These scenarios promote the development of coping strategies, decision-making skills, and stronger interpersonal relationships in a controlled, risk-free setting. Active learning is encouraged, allowing staff to practise emotional regulation and problem-solving in a practical, engaging way. The programme's effectiveness is evaluated through pre- and post-intervention assessments, qualitative feedback, and longitudinal studies tracking metrics such as absenteeism, staff turnover, and the quality of inmate-staff interactions. By addressing root causes of stress and fostering a culture of mutual support, the programme seeks to improve staff well-being and create a more positive correctional environment for everyone.

1.THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS IN CORRECTIONAL SETTINGS

Leadership in correctional settings transcends conventional administrative respon-sibilities, encompassing operational efficiency, staff well-being, and the rehabilita-tive goals of the institution. This form of leadership is inherently multidimensional, shaped by the high-stress nature of the environment, the complexities of human behaviour, and the diversity of interpersonal dynamics (Bressington et al., 2011). Navigating these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the key facets of effective leadership in such demanding contexts. Self-regulation plays a pivotal role in leadership within correctional environments. It involves employing cognitive, attentional, emotional, and behavioural strategies to manage or adapt thoughts, emotions, and behaviours arising from personal experiences (Urien, 2023). In the workplace, self-regulation enhances motivation by supporting goal setting, alignment, and achievement. Grounded in the self-regulation versus exter-nal-regulation behaviour theory (de la Fuente at al., 2022), which draws on social cognitive theory and self-determination theory, this approach underscores the in-terplay between individual agency, autonomy, and the broader social context in shaping behaviour. These theories emphasise self-efficacy and the balance of in-trinsic and extrinsic motivation, offering a framework for understanding how indi-viduals regulate their actions. In organisational terms, self-regulation reflects an employee's ability to align their behaviours, thoughts, and emotions with personal and organisational goals, fostering a sense of control and purpose. External regula-tion, in contrast, pertains to the impact of external factors such as organisational policies, feedback, and incentives on employee behaviour. Leadership in this con-text involves establishing clear frameworks and providing consistent feedback that ensures employees remain aligned with organisational expectations while main-taining performance and well-being. For correctional settings to thrive amidst chal-lenges, effective leadership must harmonise self-regulation and external regula-tion. Resilience in such organisations is cultivated when external regulations and organisational goals are aligned with employees' values, fostering intrinsic motiva-tion. Leadership must also support employees' self-regulation processes by

offering structured guidance, clear policies, and actionable feedback that enable personal and professional growth. Autonomy and control must coexist, ensuring employees have the freedom to self-regulate while receiving the external support necessary for their roles. When these elements are integrated effectively, leadership in correctional settings enhances both individual and organisational resilience. This balance supports a culture where staff can navigate the challenges of their work environment with emotional intelligence, motivation, and alignment with institutional goals, creating a healthier, more effective workplace for all. Work resilience is the capacity of employees to leverage their own resources and those of their work environment to adapt to adverse conditions and achieve continuous improvement (Haglund et al., 2007). At the organisational level, resilience reflects the ability to manage crises and adapt to environmental uncertainties. This resilience depends on measurable antecedents at three levels: organisational, work unit, and individual. Organisational resilience is rooted in a cooperative and learning-oriented culture, positive leadership, effective risk prevention, and the ongoing redefinition of roles and tasks, known as "job crafting" (Urien, 2023). Organisations that value collaboration foster innovation and attract resilient employees by prioritising shared learning and interdepartmental connections. Within correctional institutions, these values are particularly relevant. Building collaborative teams that emphasise a sense of community responsibility is crucial for addressing the unique complexities of prison work, from daily operations to crisis management. A sense of community responsibility (SOC-R), as defined by Nowell and Boyd (2014), embodies personal responsibility for collective well-being without expecting personal gain, making it central to fostering resilience. At the work unit level, managing interpersonal dynamics is critical. Strengthening trust, emotional intelligence, and motivation among team members prevents conflicts and builds cohesion (Urien, 2023). On an individual level, resilience is enhanced through self-regulation, stress management, and alignment of personal and organisational goals, supported by leadership that balances structure with autonomy. These interconnected elements create a robust framework for correctional organisations to adapt, thrive, and support both their staff and institutional objectives.

2. THE ROLE OF BOARDGAMES IN SELF-REGULATED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Leadership and emotional self-regulation in prison settings demand a nuanced balance of authority, empathy, and adaptability, often under intense pressure. Traditional leadership training methods, such as lectures and workshops, while valuable, often fall short in addressing the unique complexities of correctional environments. Effective workplace mental health policies require organisational interventions that address psychosocial risks through participatory approaches. Game-based learning offers a dynamic and participatory solution to the challenges of occupational stress and leadership development in prison settings (Lambert et al., 2018). This approach employs structured gameplay to replicate real-world leadership scenarios, creating an engaging and reflective learning experience. Boardgames, often regarded as microcosms of life, provide a safe and controlled

environment for participants to explore decision-making, collaboration, and strategy. Cooperative games like *Pandemic* reflect the pressures of teamwork and resource management, essential for correctional staff managing crises. Similarly, social deduction games like *The Resistance* simulate trust-building and conflict resolution, crucial for fostering positive relationships in high-stress prison workplaces. These interactive tools encourage correctional staff to develop critical leadership and emotional regulation skills in an impactful and experiential way. The experiential nature of board games aligns closely with John Dewey's theory of learning by doing (Williams, 2017), making them an effective tool for leadership development. Unlike passive learning methods, board games actively engage participants and provide immediate feedback on their decisions, allowing correctional officers to practice high-stakes situations in a risk-free environment. This approach is particularly valuable in correctional settings, where mistakes in the real world can have significant consequences. Game-based learning introduces the concept of "safe failure" (Gentry, 2021), providing a space where participants can fail without repercussions, enabling them to build resilience and adaptability—key traits for effective leadership. In practice, game-based learning integrates tailored boardgames into structured training modules designed to reflect the unique challenges of correctional environments. Games such as *Pandemic* or *Dead of Winter* simulate scenarios requiring strategic decision-making, collaboration, and ethical problem-solving, mirroring real-world leadership challenges. During these sessions, participants work in teams, fostering mutual support and collaboration. Facilitators lead debriefings after each session, encouraging participants to reflect on strategies used, obstacles encountered, and lessons learned. This reflections tie the game experience to actionable leadership behaviours, bridging the gap between training and application. To evaluate the impact of this approach, a multimodal framework combines qualitative and quantitative tools to measure outcomes. For leadership development, the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) assesses changes in leadership skills. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) gauges reductions in occupational stress, while the Teamwork Quality Questionnaire (TWQ) and Sense of Community Responsibility (SOC-R) measure improvements in collaboration and team dynamics. These tools are applied at various stages of the training, including baseline assessments before the intervention, post-intervention evaluations, and follow-ups at three, six, and twelve months to monitor the sustainability of outcomes. Insights from these assessments guide the iterative development of the program. For instance, if teamwork scores show limited improvement, additional team-focused activities may be introduced. The immersive nature of game-based learning ensures that participants are not only engaged but also experience scenarios that mirror the pressures and demands of correctional work. Imagine a typical day in the program: correctional officers gather around a game like *Pandemic*, where they take on roles with distinct responsibilities, such as scientists and doctors working to prevent a global epidemic. The game challenges them to strategize, delegate, and communicate effectively as tension mounts with escalating crises. Alternatively, a game like *Dead of Winter* forces participants to manage stress and make

ethical decisions under survival conditions. After the game, the facilitators lead a discussion on what worked, where communication broke down, and how these lessons translate to their roles in correctional settings. Despite its benefits, game-based learning in correctional settings faces challenges. Time constraints, cultural resistance to unconventional training methods, and the need for skilled facilitators are common barriers. Addressing these issues requires thoughtful design and clear communication of program goals. For example, hybrid models combining boardgames with workshops or case studies can offer a balanced approach, while facilitators training ensures quality and consistency in delivery. Overcoming these obstacles can unlock the potential of this innovative method. The impact of game-based learning extends beyond skill development. It promotes institutional transformation by fostering connections and breaking down hierarchical barriers. Through play, correctional staff at all levels can interact as equals, building trust and collaboration. Leaders trained through this approach are better equipped to support their teams, mediate conflicts, and create environments conducive to rehabilitation (LeadCor Project 2022). In this way, game-based learning aligns with broader goals of social change, reshaping correctional facilities into more collaborative and effective institutions.

3. CONCLUSION

The integration of boardgames into mental health and psychosocial risk prevention programmes represents a significant shift in how correctional institutions should approach the cultivation of self-regulated leadership. Traditional leadership training methods often fall short in equipping staff to navigate the complex and multifaceted challenges of their roles. Game-based learning addresses this gap by offering an innovative, engaging, and impactful approach to fostering self-regulated and positive leadership, aiming to reduce absenteeism and turnover, and to improve the quality of interactions with inmates. The transformative effects of this approach are far-reaching. Enhancing staff well-being positively influences institutional culture and supports rehabilitation goals, creating a virtuous cycle where progress in one area reinforces improvement in others. By promoting collaboration, emotional intelligence, and resilience, game-based learning helps establish healthier and more effective correctional environments. However, the adoption of such methodology requires thoughtful programme design and strategic integration with traditional training approaches. Clear communication about the benefits and practical applications of game-based learning is essential to overcome cultural resistance and operational barriers.

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TRANSFORMATIVE GAME DESIGN PEDA-GOGY: FIGHTING SOCIAL MEDIA RISKS AND DRIVING SOCIAL CHANGE

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Daily use of the Internet and social media as essential tools for both leisure and work can entail various dysfunctional aspects and potential dangers to our social and psychological well-being. Various schools of thought on Media Education have developed paradigms that focus on essential skills needed to navigate the digital world consciously and protect us from its pitfalls. These constructs highlight skills such as cognitive, affective, and technical abilities, in conjunction with critical thinking, analytical skills and so on. Surprisingly, none of them emphasizes the importance of spending time in equally productive real-world activities. There also are other dysfunctional sociopsychological elements that lead to detrimental effects on mental health, increased feelings of isolation, heightened anxiety or depression, aggressive conduct, and a potential decline in overall well-being. Given this framework, the field of game design and Ludo-literacy offer a unique avenue for instigating social change, cultivating a democratic and socially conscious educational environment, and seeking to nurture positive societal transformation. By recognizing that being exposed, especially at a young age, to aptly designed gaming activities is a way to address the pervasive issue of social media excessive use and instil awareness as well as prevent and reduce the risks mentioned.

Media Education, Game Design, Ludo-literacy, Social change, Excessive Use

INTRODUCTION

One of the renowned outcomes of the IT expansion is social media or social networking sites (SNSs). They constitute and build unique communities constantly interconnected through which it is possible to know what is happening in every part of the world through the flow of content and information. These unprecedented circumstances may generate habits related to excessive use which are in turn related to negative physical and mental health. Or problems related to contents (fake news, disinformation), forms of behaviours such as cyberbullying, online grooming, online hate speech, and so on (Bozzola et al., 2022; Dutt, 2023; Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021). However, studies often focus on the nature of individual aspects of social media, with the consequent loss of a more complete reading.

This work aims to analyse social media in the form of structures with typical

characteristics of a (complex) gaming system with precise mechanics that favour and contribute to the development and perpetual maintenance of the media flow and, consequently, to the risk of excessive and prolonged use. It is advocated for a transformative educational intervention aimed at enabling adolescents and young adults to develop literacy in this context, thereby contributing to social change. We propose Media Education and Game Literacy as potential strategies to achieve this goal.

1. EXCESSIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Among the pitfalls related to SM use, it is complex to trace a clear between personal and collective dynamics, given that the personalization in the use and enjoyment of SNSs is substantially individual and uniquely customizable (Negri, 2015). No one is immune from the dynamics inherent in them. SNSs are a composite architecture of strong advertising, interface, persuasive, rewarding and interactive dynamics. As Dow Schull (2014) confirms, this issue of persuasion and addictiveness is not an individual fact or problem but rather a collective and social one, from which it is difficult to escape. On average, a person interacts with the phone 150 times daily, touch it 2,600 time and is the last things used before the sleep (Williams, 2018).

It is the objective of the so-called attention economy to keep users hooked to social media, which is the most influential form of this type of Business (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021). It is assumed that the mechanics with which the interface structures and the ways of use are part of the operant conditioning deliberately put in place by developers and producers. These are the evolution of some game mechanics. In essence, the mechanics borrowed and transposed into social media are the cause of reinforcements, stimuli and rewards that hook the user. These directly contribute to excessive and addictive use (Guan & Chen, 2023; Purohit et al., 2020). However, there is a lack of investigation into how these mechanisms may influence a solitary and excessive use of social media, as well as well-being, and their relevance to the pedagogical field. Therefore, to realise educational interventions aimed at social change, it is essential to consider these logics.

2. PEDAGOGICAL GAPS

On the pedagogical side, an interpretation of Media Education as an educational activity and purpose interested in these topics and in general with the well-being of young people (Pathak-Shelat, 2014) is not addressed. There is a generalized concern with outlining training paths regarding technical, problem-solving, cognitive, socio-emotional, analytical or interpretative skills of power and ideologies. Dewey believed the connection between democracy and education to be fundamental, arguing that the latter must intervene and regain the predominant role in the growth process of the individual in all its aspects, allowing the emergence of authentically democratic values (Pezzano, 2017). But the current socioeconomic system, with its strong capitalist matrix, puts pressure on and directs, on the one hand, educational systems to prepare individuals ready for the task it requires and on the other, to

create consumers who satisfy them and guarantee their maintenance (Pezzano, 2017; Sims, 2017).

The Critical Media Literacy construct, which bases its theoretical and practical framework also on these aspects, is considered incomplete for the supported theses. It refers to Freire and focuses on the logic of power and ideologies that the media convey or conceal (Kellner & Share, 2007). This educational intentionality translates into a macrostructural reading of the problems mentioned, as it aims to examine the reasons, production, language, values, shortcomings, biases and so on, of media productions. However, the approach does not pay attention to the problems related to the amount of time spent, excessive or addicted use and how, for example, these platforms hook users. A systemic approach to reading the means with which power puts into effect what it wants to achieve, is missing: essentially, a fundamental analysis of the "micro-mechanisms" with which goals are set (Foucault, 1982) and a more comprehensive and transdisciplinary reading of the different (complex) elements that interconnect each other in education at the time of post-modernity (Morin, 2001). In this case, the economic power "reaches our bodies" through these digital mechanics borrowed by game design and gambling.

3. LUDO-LITERACY AND GAME DESIGN FOR ME

Ludo-literacy offers crucial analytical frameworks for understanding how social media platforms shape user behaviour and engagement. The main reason lies in the explicit use of game mechanics within the on-gaming context. As digital spaces increasingly adopt game-like elements, the ability to recognize and critically examine these mechanics becomes essential for meaningful media education in the contemporary landscape.

Game mechanics are most comprehensively understood as "methods invoked by agents for interacting with the game state" (Sicart, 2008). However, for our analysis of social media platforms, we can extend this to encompass what Järvinen (2008) describes as how the system guides and structures user behaviour through rules, feedback loops, and reward patterns. These mechanics represent the fundamental building blocks of systematic engagement – the operations through which platforms shape interaction and experience.

The pervasive integration of game mechanics into social media platforms has created engagement patterns that mirror core game design principles (Deterding et al., 2011). These mechanics operate not as superficial elements but as fundamental architectural components that shape user experience and behaviour. As Scheibe & Zimmer (2019) demonstrate in their analysis of live streaming platforms, understanding these mechanics through game literacy provides critical tools for analysing how platforms guide and manipulate user engagement.

Three fundamental game mechanics emerge as particularly relevant for understanding social media's capacity for creating addictive engagement patterns. First, platforms employ what game designers call "variable ratio rewards"- the unpredictable timing of likes, responses, and algorithmic reach that mirror the psychological

hooks of slot machines (Järvinen, 2009). This uncertainty creates powerful anticipation loops, with Lu et al. (2018) documenting how even seemingly simple mechanics like digital gifting become compelling engagement drivers through their unpredictable nature.

Second, social media transforms interpersonal connections into quantifiable progression systems through follower counts, engagement metrics, and status indicators (Haziri et al., 2019). Unlike traditional games that offer clear win states or completion points, these social progression mechanics create endless achievement ladders that drive continuous engagement without resolution. The absence of clear endpoints distinguishes these systems from conventional game design while maintaining their compelling psychological draw.

Third, platforms implement sophisticated temporal mechanics through features like story expiration, "active now" indicators, and time-limited content. These create what game designers define as "appointment mechanics" (Deterding, 2019), generating a sense of urgency and fear of missing out that propels users toward constant platform presence. Research indicates these temporal hooks are particularly effective at fostering compulsive checking behaviours (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011).

Understanding these mechanics through game design literacy enables users to recognize manipulative patterns in platform architecture and develop more conscious engagement strategies. Rather than merely consuming social media unconsciously, users equipped with game design literacy can make informed choices about their platform engagement while maintaining healthier boundaries through understanding of these engagement hooks.

By incorporating game design literacy into media education, we can facilitate a shift from unconscious platform engagement to critical awareness and intentional use. As Zimmerman (2013) argues, the goal is not to eliminate platform use but to empower users with analytical tools for understanding how platforms shape behaviour through game-like systems. Gaming literacy provides unique insights into social media addiction by exposing the deliberately embedded mechanical structures that drive engagement – an understanding that traditional content-focused media literacy approaches often miss.

4. CONCLUSION

In this study we emphasize the need for a shift from reactive to proactive strategies in combating the pervasive influence of social media on mental health and well-being. The strategic use of psychological principles fosters excessive use and can lead to significant mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation. Existing media education frameworks fail to address the behavioural manipulation inherent in social media's architecture. These frameworks are primarily content-focused and overlook the systemic design elements that perpetuate addiction. Introducing Ludo-literacy into media education offers a pathway to empower users. By understanding game mechanics, users can critically analyse and

consciously engage with social media platforms, mitigating their addictive potential. The integration of game design literacy within educational curricula represents a preventive approach to social media problematic use. Such pedagogy not only fosters critical awareness but also aligns with democratic values, aiming for broader societal transformation. A call to action is made for collaboration between educators, game designers, to promote educational policies in this direction. This synergy can create innovative solutions that not only address social media excessive use but also prepare individuals to navigate the digital world responsibly. Preventive educational measures, rather than solely therapeutic ones, are essential for tackling the social and psychological risks posed by prolonged use of SNSs. Empowering users through awareness and skills can help reshape their interaction with digital platforms.

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THE NEXT GENERATION OF CHANGE MAKERS. DEVELOPING AN ENTREPRENEURSHIP COMPETENCE IN VET STUDENTS THROUGH A BOARD GAME FROM THE EDUSPACE LERNWERKSTATT

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In Europe entrepreneurship is understood as key competence for lifelong learning. In compulsory education, this competence can be developed through student centred pedagogies such as gaming. This article presents a study with 86 VET South Tirolean students in accounting who in February 2024 played a board game called "The Next Generation of Change Maker". The explorative research question inquires on the entrepreneurship competence students developed. At the end of the game students answered an online questionnaire with open ended questions. The thematic analysis reveals that most learners developed teamwork skills, while many also learned to generate new ideas and to think in an entrepreneurial way. These learning outcomes connect very well with the European EntreComp framework and the TRIO model.

entrepreneurship competence; gamification; Vocational Education and Training (VET); EntreComp framework; TRIO model

INTRODUCTION

In the educational sciences, scholars and educators debate on how the key European competence of entrepreneurship should be developed in compulsory educational settings, especially in Vocational Education and Training (Cedefop, 2024). Gaming is a possible student centred pedagogy for developing competences that integrates the pedagogical principles of playful environments to improve the learners' well-being and engagement (Panigua & Istance, 2018). This article presents a table game named *The Next Generation of Change Maker* that was deployed with 86 learners from a German speaking upper secondary school in accounting located in the province of Bolzano (Italy). The RQ is: "What did the students learn during the game?". The students' answers gathered through an online survey are analysed through a qualitative thematic analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), and later discussed in the light of the EntreComp framework (Bacigalupo et al., 2016) and the TRIO model for entrepreneurship education (Lindner, 2018).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Europe, entrepreneurship is understood as one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2019) useful in many life contexts beyond business creation. The EntreComp Framework developed by the European Commission (Bacigalupo et al., 2016) defines entrepreneurship as a transversal competence essential for personal and societal development. It represents a shared understanding of entrepreneurship as a key competence that is necessary for navigating contemporary challenges in various contexts. EntreComp consists of three interrelated areas: 1) Ideas and Opportunities; 2) Resources, and 3) Into Action. Each area encompasses five specific competences, totalling 15 competences that individuals can develop to transform ideas into actionable outcomes, and to pursue financial, cultural, and social value.

Students in compulsory education should experiment with entrepreneurship as key competencies, and this would be particularly important in VET, where working life is more closely aligned, and acting in an entrepreneurial way could prove essential to seize opportunities (CEDEFOP, 2024). Beyond EntreComp, the TRIO Model (Lindner, 2018) presents itself as a comprehensive framework for entrepreneurship education in formal education environments. In line with the definition of the European Commission (2018), the TRIO Model defines entrepreneurship education as "the development of independent ideas and the acquisition of the respective skills and abilities that are necessary to implement these ideas" (p. 6). Further, the model emphasizes the interconnection of various competences for entrepreneurship education such as core competences, culture, and civic education. Core competences foster both professional and personal independence, and focus on a sense of initiative. An entrepreneurial culture, instead, focuses on a learning environment that cultivates independence, open-mindedness, empathy and sustainability. Eventually, an entrepreneurial civic education concentrates on personal empowerment, autonomy and commitment.

In formal education settings, these competences should be nurtured according to the school grade of students (Lindner, 2018): in primary schools, pupils can learn entrepreneurship for civic education, while in secondary school students can develop an entrepreneurial culture. Eventually, the most advanced level for university college students are core competences to develop their own ideas and solve both professional and personal challenges. Consistent with EntreComp (Bacigalupo et al., 2016) and the European Commission (2018), the TRIO model pragmatically proposes different aims for entrepreneurship education. This is because while not all people will become entrepreneurs, all need to become entrepreneurial to master the challenges of our continuously changing world. Co-entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs for example, are not self-employed and yet they are active within their companies (Lindner, 2018); similarly, also change makers and social entrepreneurs pursue positive change in society without the aim to create financial value for themselves.

In formal education environments, entrepreneurship competences should be

cultivated through student-cantered pedagogies. In an OECD study, Panigua and Istance (2018) identify six clusters of student-centred pedagogies: blended learning, gamification, computational thinking, experiential learning, embodied learning, multiliteracies and discussion-based teaching. Among these pedagogies, gamification can be considered an effective teaching method to develop an entrepreneurship competence in learners through learning by doing (Isabelle, 2020). Already in childhood, play has a key role for learning, as it promotes intellectual, emotional and social well-being. Later in school settings, play can also represent an effective learning experience, provided it is guided by self-motivation and interest (Panigua & Instance, 2018). Bado (2019) reviews the instructional strategies teachers deploy when implementing game-based learning as pedagogy. Before the game, instructors can provide lectures, handouts and instructions to facilitate the game. During the game, teachers use strategies related to classroom management, scaffolding and providing technical support upon request. Eventually, at the end of the game, teachers debrief by soliciting discussions and reflections in learners. Furthermore, one of the challenges of gaming as teaching method is how to integrate this pedagogy into regular teaching and transfer learning occurred during the game (Panigua & Instance, 2018).

2. METHODOLOGY

Based on the TRIO Model (Linder, 2018), the table game *The Next Generation of Change Makers* is designed to nurture an entrepreneurial mindset and is rooted in the principles of changemaking and environmental sustainability. It is made of four phases with cards and instructions in German and English (Picture 1). To provide an immersive experience, the table game can be matched with a smartphone app.

Figure1. Outline of the game *The Next Generation of Change Maker (*source: game instructions).
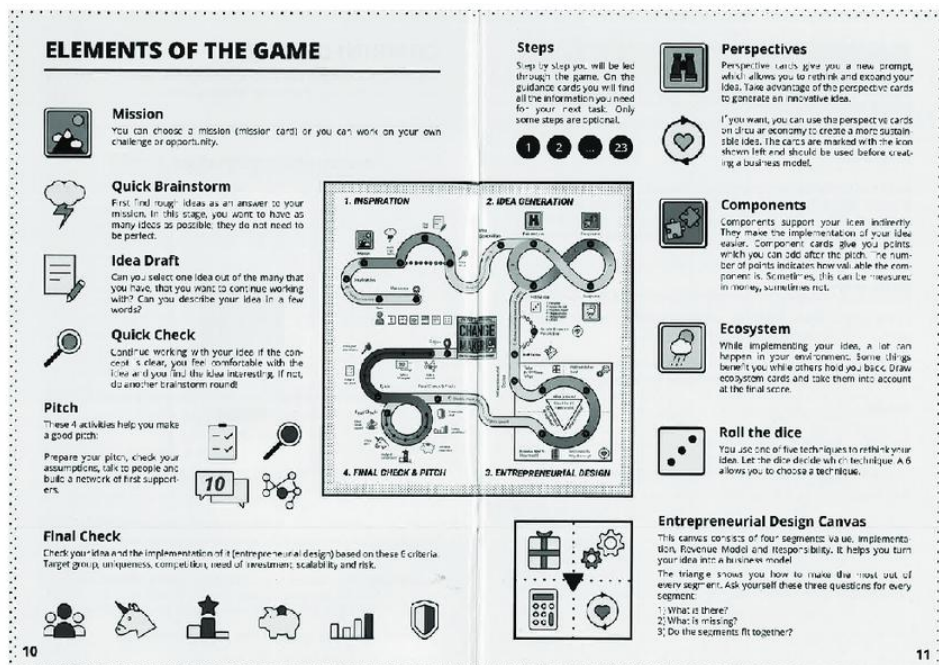
At the beginning (Phase 1, Inspiration) learners form groups of 4-5 components. To promote active participation, each player takes on a different role such as: Chief Executive Officer, Chief Time Officer, Chief Process Officer, Chief Documentation Officer, Chief Happiness Officer. The group subsequently choose their mission by fishing a card and brainstorm. By fishing cards with specific questions, in Phase 2 (Idea Generation) the team components enrich their idea by considering diverse perspectives, including the environmental sustainability of their project. During Entrepreneurial Design (Phase 3), teams start sketching a business model for their idea by using an abridged version of the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder, 2010) suitable for upper secondary students. In Phase 4 (Final Check and Pitch) the groups design the pitch and rehearse it. Eventually, the teams pitch their idea to the rest of the class, and Q&A opportunities follow.

This study deploys the case study methodology, with a in depth study of a small unit contextualised in time and space (Yin, 2009). The EduSpace Lernwerkstatt at the Faculty of Education of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano provides games and activities to develop specific contents as well as key competences. As a part of a larger study, at the beginning of February 2024, 86 German speaking learners of five Fourth Grade classes from a technical institute in accounting located in South Tirol played *The Next Generation of Change Maker* in their mother tongue for around 4 hours. In each class, together with the curricular teacher of economics, a researcher was present. While the teachers saw the game for the first time, the researchers had previously played the game. As recommended by Bado (2019), in the pregame phase researchers introduced the game through a presentation, and during the game they were available to assist students by answering their questions. After the final pitch, the students filled in an online survey with diverse open-ended and self-reflective questions. These related to: (1) what they liked about the game, (2) what they would change if they played again, (3) what they thought about their role, and (4) what they think they had learnt.

This contribution concentrates on the analysis of the last open-ended question. The thematic analysis was recursive and intersubjective in line with rigour and trustworthiness of inquiry (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The authors first read individually the students' answers (in German) and formed categories. They subsequently met to compare they categories and find an agreement on common categories. For each category, the researchers counted the number of answers. One answer could sometimes fit well into two different categories and was hence counted twice.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 represents the answers with 8 emerging themes, with almost 90% of the 86 answers being categorised (of which 6 were empty). The themes are ranked and translated from German into English starting from the most numerous in the top. The most important theme was to work in teams (32% of the answers), which aligns with research on entrepreneurship education. When the students undertake entrepreneurship programs and work in groups, they often contend that groupwork is the

first and most important learning outcome they developed (see Morselli & Orzes, 2023). Further, groupwork is a learning outcome in the EntreComp framework (Bacigalupo et al., 2016). In the area *Into Action,* the competence *working with others* is defined at an initial stage as "learners work in a team to create value" (p. 19). The second most important emerging theme (15 %) was to develop new ideas, which also aligns with EntreComp, particularly with the area *Ideas and Opportunities* and its sub competence *creativity*, where at an initial stage "learners can develop multiple ideas that create value for others" (p. 19). Further, the EntreComp competence *creativity* also embeds Theme 7 "to be creative" (5 %).

Tab. 1 Thematic analysis of the question: "What did you learn during of the game?" (Source: authors).

What did you learn today? (N=85)	Frequency	Percentage
Classified answers	76	89%
1. Teamwork	27	32%
2. To develop new ideas	13	15%
3. To think entrepreneurial (residual)	10	12%
4. Not easy to develop new idea in short time	6	7%
5. A lot	6	7%
6. Nothing	6	7%
7. To be creative	4	5%
8. To work fast	4	5%

Theme 3 (12 %) is residual, and answers relate to *think in an entrepreneurial way*. This can be connected transversally to both EntreComp and TRIO Model, since through the structured approach of these frameworks in defining and cultivating an entrepreneurship competence, learners can learn how to think in an entrepreneurial way. Given its importance for this study, this theme (number 3 in Table 1) is further inspected: the first subcategory (N=5) deals with the start-up process, one example being written by students is "The many steps of a starting-up". While start-up is a specific skill connected to business creation, hence it is useful only in specific contexts, EntreComp sees it as an outcome at an advanced stage. A descriptor for the competence *financial literacy* within the area *Resources* at the advanced stage is "I can choose the most appropriate sources of funding to start-up or expand a value creating activity" (Bacigalupo et al., 2016, p. 30). A second subcategory (N=2) of Theme 3 deals with the definition of entrepreneurship, one example from the students was "Turning imagination/ideas into reality" thus mirroring well the definition of the European Commission (2019, p. 13): "the capacity to act upon opportunities and ideas". The third subcategory of Theme 3 was residual (N=3) and contained answers such as "How to create a business plan relatively easily these days"; "Sustainable forms of development and corresponding opportunities in the economy"; "Better entrepreneurial thinking".

Returning to Table1, Theme 4 (7%) underlines the difficulty diverse learners had when having to devise a viable idea in the short time span of the game, and it is specific to Theme 8 (5 %) where students contended that they learned to work fast. In

the last Themes 5 and 6 (7 % each of the answers) the students simply said that they learnt either a lot or nothing.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study made use of a board game to develop an entrepreneurship competence in Grade Four VET students. The research question inspects the student's learning during the gaming experience. The analysis of Table 1evidenced 8 themes that can be further grouped into 6 (Theme 8 goes with 4, and Theme 7 with 2), two of which can be discarded as not interpretable (I learned a lot – Theme 5, and I learned nothing, Theme 6). One of the remaining four themes evidenced a certain time urgency during the game (12% of the answers in total), while the last three (and most important for number of answers) suggest that learners developed groupwork (32%), new ideas (and to be creative, in total 20%), and to think entrepreneurially (17%), which are all connected to the EntreComp framework (Bacigalupo et al., 2016). Further, the fact that Table 1 reports answers related to EntreComp, with the students just being asked what they learnt, further supports the argument tath students developed an entrepreneurship competence. It can be, hence, concluded in line with Lindner's (2018) TRIO model that *The Next Generation of Change Maker* represents a first step to develop an entrepreneurial culture in secondary schools.

The fact that learners could play the game in their mother tongue without having to translate the instructions, gave them the chance to enjoy the game. In another research (Morselli & Magagnoli, 2024), the younger Grade 2 mother tongue Italian learners had to translate the instructions, and this made it difficult to learn the game rules. In turn, such hurdles made most of the learners not to be willing to play the game a second time. Improvements in the way the boarding game was played in this study would be, nevertheless, possible. In line with Bado (2019), a possible pregame strategy could be that teachers play the game, which, together with a postgame debriefing phase, would be key to have learners reflect on the experience and better connect the contents devised during the game with the curricular subjects. Besides, future studies could use the levels of EntreComp to appraise the extent learners developed their entrepreneurship competence. Future studies could also explore the different roles in groupwork and their possible impact on the learners' learning outcomes and participation. For students, eventually, experiencing entrepreneurship in formal education settings means to teach them to become the miniature entrepreneurs themselves, which is essential to navigate today's fast changing world.

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IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AN OPENING AND A FREEDOM FROM THE SCHOLAR FORM?

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In France, the inclusive schooling is still achieved with practices established over time, in a school form (Vincent, 2008) translated into classroom arrangements, pedagogical practices (Perrenoud, 2017), and the disciplinarisation of students' bodies (Foucault, 2003). At the heart of teaching practices, one element remains behind pedagogical concerns: the schoolboy's body. What is the place given to the student's body, as support of his singularity (Dizerbo, 2016)? Has the normative dimension of the school form been exceeded to take into account the physical needs of students (Macherey, Pirone, Ottavi, 2020)? In class, what is the place given to listening to the needs and desires of schoolchildren, as well as to their bodily needs (need to move, rest, drink, talk with a comrade, etc.)? Our research takes place in a primary school hosting a ULIS device (a class reserved for students belonging to the category of disability). The results show that the physical manifestations of schoolchildren remain mostly negatively perceived by teachers, as hindering learning. Faced with this observation of a normative pedagogical functioning, constrained by a school form difficult to question, what way could we find to question this rigid school organization?

School form, inclusivity, bodily needs

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2005 law (11.02.2005), in the vein of the Salamanca declaration, the French school must welcome all students in the ordinary school environment. The exclusion of certain students by segregated guidance processes is intended to be replaced by schooling in the ordinary environment that becomes the reference for schooling for all. Mainstream schools have had a duty to welcome all students, even those most reactive to the school environment, who previously weren't necessarily enrolled in mainstream schools. My first question is: has the school changed its pedagogical approach to the inclusive paradigm? To address this question, I chose the pupil's body as an indicator. Hence, my second question: has the school form been modified, in a less disciplinary sense, to take account of pupils' bodily needs? Since special educational needs are at the heart of the inclusive approach, are the bodily needs of all students also taken into account? How can special needs be met if basic bodily needs are not taken into account?

The students' body is a topic that can be found in different fields and different discourses depending on the era: JB de La Salle's "Frères des écoles chrétiennes" (Brothers of the Christian Schools) (1740), where every move, gesture and utterance is codified, and where everyone has to keep a close eye on his or her body and exert a great deal of control over it. It's also the body of the Guizot's law (1833), caught up in a school organization that is standardizing and normalizing itself, and which is going to codify students' movements and bodily postures just as much. More contemporary, in medical discourse, the body is normalized by diagnoses and categories. (Morel, 2014). Finally, the body is caught in the neo-liberal economy, at once idealized, maintained and modelled to correspond to the standards of the healthy body, but also an almost virtualized and disembodied body (Clément, 2011).

After presenting the theoretical issues related to the school form and how students' bodily needs are taken into account, we'll see how this research was conducted methodologically. We'll present some results, and we'll mention a project that could be seen as an alternative to the classical school form. In both cases, the challenge is about the inclusive process.

1. HOW BODILY NEEDS ARE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT AT SCHOOL?

Inclusive education needs to be respectful: Charles Gardou (2012) defines the inclusive process using six main points. According to Gardou, an inclusive school should be respectful toward pupils: the first point, is the sense of belonging, no pupil should be left out or excluded from what's going on in the classroom. The second point, moving beyond standardization: teachers should be more open to differences between pupils, without trying to categorize them. The third point, each pupil should be respected and be able to be heard by the teacher, whether he is disabled or not, it means pupils should define their own needs, instead of adults defining their needs for them, as is currently the case. The fourth point, is to be included means living a full life: the wishes of the pupils should be considered, and not only their needs, especially when these needs are defined by adults. The fifth point, an inclusive society should treat everyone with the same humanity. And the last point inclusion must no longer be linked to competition and profitability: our societies are very competitive, an inclusive society should get rid of the dominant role of competition between people, accepting that quality education costs money.

In this research, the pupil's body was the common thread, precisely, the pupil's bodily needs, like the usual needs one can have during an ordinary day: need to drink, to move, to rest, to go to the restroom, etc. Bodily needs allowed to question several topics, like the school form, the understanding teachers have about the physical needs of the pupils, and how they take pupil's needs into account in general.

Let's define how we understand "body" in this research. Even if the meaning of the word *body* is clear, the analysis of the issues linked to the body is specific to each disciplinary field. Let's spell out the directions in which we explore this in the

research. There is a dichotomy between having a body and being a body. On one side, the soul or spirit and on the other side, the body, a dichotomy found in Descartes (Marmion, 2010), where the two entities, soul and body, are different in nature, even if they are related to each other.

At school, this dichotomy was combined with the vision of the child's body as the fruit of sin in the Catholic religion, through the importance of schooling in small schools run by religious, then in establishments run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools of JB de La Salle, where the question of body control was very important. If we see the body as an object, "having a body" leads to have actions on that body for disciplinary purposes for example.

> [...] the body is in a way "subtracted" from the pupil, who cannot dispose of it as he or she pleases. The school institution, heir to representations of Cartesian dualism, appropriates and disciplines the body, seen as dissociated from the mind and forced to be forgotten. (Dizerbo, 2016, p. 36).

On the other side, if the body is seen as part of a whole, the subject is embodied in its corporeal materiality. As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

> I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather I am my body. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 175).

For David Lebreton, man is indistinguishable from his flesh which is not a circumstantial possession; it embodies his being in the world, without which he would not be. (Lebreton, 1999). A subject's body is the result of his immersion in social interactions and in language; everything proper to man is the result of social and cultural construction.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research field consists mainly of a 13-class elementary school with a Ulis (local unit for educational inclusion), this class is a unit for children with special educational needs. The methodology was mainly qualitative, and ethnographically inspired, to set it up was a challenge. I wanted to avoid making an *ad hominem* analysis of the teachers in my research field, which raised an ethical problem, i.e. analyzing someone's professional practices without it being their initial request, while my objective was precisely not to personalize the analysis to invoke discourse and practices of the school with a capital S. In this, reading Bernard Lahire was useful, in the spirit of the following quote:

> It is from these refracted forms of the social [in each individual] that every sociologist studies the social and not the other way around. (Lahire, 2019, p 99).

Indeed, I wanted to approach teachers' sayings not as a personal production but insofar as they are caught up in a discourse common to the school, and according to Michel Foucault:

> The author (of discourse is), not understood, of course, as the speaking individual who has pronouncéd or written a text, but the author as the grouping principle of discourse, as the unity and origin of their meanings, as the focus of their coherence. (Foucault, 1971, p 12).

There were two types of investigative methods: those using observation, whether it be participant observation, in which I shared every moment of school life and whose elements were recorded in a field notebook, formal or informal moments, or classroom observations made with an observation grid, to maintain as much objectivity as possible in data collection. For the observations, I went into each classroom and observed what was going on with an observation grid, I especially payed attention to the school form, the way furniture is arranged in the classroom, and how teachers dealt with pupil's physical needs. And methods based on teacher discourse: the questionnaire, of which there were two, one for the school and one for the district. The focus group was carried out in response to an institutional request concerning the link between the school project and the inclusive approach, this enabled me not to be the focal point of the teachers' discourse, but rather to be among the teachers, each of who was interviewed.

3. THE GOALS OF THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOL ARE STILL BLURRY FOR MOST TEACHERS

In this research, we saw how teachers seem confused by the legal request for school inclusion, only 20% of teachers think the goal of the inclusive process is clear. For example, one teacher said about it: So what is the aim of inclusion? [...] So I don't know whether the objectives of inclusion are very clear or whether I'm the one who's not very clear about it?.

In addition, the arrangement of the classroom is still very traditional. Desks are arranged in a row, one behind another, there were no special adaptations during the time I spent in observation, so all the pupils did the same thing at the same time. The class was run by the teacher in a very controlling way: no chatting, no movement while seated or around the classroom. Pupils were expected to be still, silent, and focused on individual schoolwork. Concerning the school form, we just saw that it remains very traditional, as the classroom could have been run a century ago. The school form is not questioned.

The goals of the inclusive school are still blurry for most teachers. In the school where I made my research, inclusivity had only one meaning: it was how to deal with the schedule of the pupils of the ILUS (the special educational needs unit). And it was difficult for teachers to find their way around the inclusive approach, they were torn between several options: does inclusivity mean learning or socialization? Do they need to focus on the pupil or the class group? How can they set up fair assessments? Should the schoolwork be individualized or the same for all the pupils with no accommodation?

Thanks to the interviews, we could learn more about the teacher's opinions about pupils' physical needs. These opinions were ranked from the least to the

most hostile reflections toward pupils' bodily needs: the most common view is that "Physical needs have a negative impact" on school performance, and in the second place "Physical needs are a problem". On the other side, very few thought that "Pupils need to express their needs to learn". The more the pupil's body manifests, the more it could affect their learning, physical needs are seen as having a negative impact on school performance.

The results of the observations in the classroom showed that no movement is allowed around the classroom: pupils are not allowed to step outside the classroom, even to fill their water bottles, they are allowed to drink from their bottles but if they are empty, they usually are not allowed to leave the classroom to refill them. And a surprising result: pupils can talk to each other, they can even have small chats if they are not too noisy, and teachers allow them to help each other during the individual schoolwork. However, these discussions are generally tolerated rather than encouraged. The main result of the observation is that pupils cannot move freely around the classroom, nor walk outside, even to get some water or fill their water bottles. Teachers tolerate pupils talking to each other, but they keep asking for silence anyway.

To sum up the findings of this research, we can see that the inclusive paradigm has not successfully challenged the traditional school form, which is still rather rigid. An interesting result is that teachers are aware of the child's physical needs, but this does not lead to an approach that takes these needs into account. It seems that running the class as a group of pupils remains the main goal rather than meeting individual needs.

4. TO CONCLUDE: AN ARTISTIC PROJECT MADE TO STEP OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL.

We saw that the traditional school form is still predominant in the classrooms. This comes in pairs with a very strong presence of the medical discourse, and like Magdalena Kohout-Diaz we can ask why we are labelling pupils before trying to help them (Kohout-Diaz, 2017). And like Florence Savournin (2016), we can wonder how teachers could integrate these medical categories and medical recommendations, into their way of teaching, and are these categories helpful for them?

One can wonder how to make this traditional school form to change. Here is an experience that was tried in a primary school. It's a project born out of thoughts expressed by teachers who wanted to change outdated practices in the school regarding "Pupils with special needs", who wanted to get out of the school, facilitate access to culture, and allow pupils to express themselves and encourage them to use their initiative. This project was mainly about visiting places outside the school, as a way to escape the confines of the classroom, and the traditional form of schooling that teachers no longer wanted.

And, in the end, the school form was reshaped during the project and as a result of this artistic experience.

This project was run by an artist and a cultural outreach association. The artist came

into residence in one school and worked with the pupils and the teachers. Most of the project took place outside the school. This experience led pupils and teachers to walk outside the classroom and even outside the school, and all the activities they did during this project, also had a huge impact on the school form, and the way teachers were more mindful of children's needs. The artist gave some brief instructions, and they held demonstrations in the streets, visited a school at night, and the students also put up posters in the street that they had created. In this project, with its atmosphere of creativity, pupils had time to think about what they wanted to create, to test it and to see if it worked which was new because they are rarely asked what they think of something that teachers have put in place for them. In general, they are asked to follow instructions and remain calm and concentrate. At the end of the project, feedback from the teachers was good, the project made them reach their goal and even more. It has also changed their way of teaching: they said they are more open to trying new things in the classroom, they have set up literary projects and interdisciplinary projects, and they have also seen a change in the pupils, they found them more independent and more motivated. As for the pupils, their feedback was interesting: they realized that they were free to write what they wanted, and they discovered that others could be supportive when they lacked self-confidence. This project is a good example of an inclusive achievement. Inclusivity was not one of the original aims of the project, but we can see, from the pupils' feedback, that the project was inclusive. The teachers are more open to a new way of teaching and willing to go outside of the school. They noticed that pupils are more motivated now. And for the pupils, we see that they felt that they were perceived as people able to create things, and not only to follow instructions silently in the classroom. We could see how the school form is reshaped during this project.

In France, we have a concept named "la pédagogie du detour" (Bonnery, Renard, 2013), that we could translate as "diversion pedagogy". It means, if you want someone to learn something, you need sometimes to not rush into things and do a diversion. This leads the pupils to acquire knowledge more personally. It's what seems to happen in this project, we can see how this diversion outside the school drove teachers to another way of teaching, pupils are more active, and it seems they have flourished, and found a place at school, which is the ultimate goal of an inclusive school.

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"MOVEMENT IN BETWEEN" AS A GENDER-INCLUSIVE MOVEMENT PROGRAM IN EVERYDAY SCHOOL LIFE

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Attitudes to the body and exercise play an integral part in identity formation among children and young people, as well as in maintaining their physical and mental health. During puberty in particular, female pupils tend to engage in less physical activity outside of physical education (PE) lessons at school. PE is often guided by the principle of competition and therefore also by assessment. The "Movement in Between" concept offers an exercise program in the classroom that enables spontaneous and non-competitive movement during breaks. The concept offers potential as a gender-inclusive exercise program in everyday school life from an intersectional-feminist perspective.

school architecture; gender-inclusive planning; space for movement; Movement in Between

INTRODUCTION

Historically, physical education in schools was strongly influenced by the military. It had the aim of disciplining the male body and promoting its resilience, while girls were prepared for their role as housewives and mothers without participating in so-called "physical exercises" (Hoffarth, 2024, 131). This historical legacy can still be felt today, with girls reporting in interviews that they tend to pursue less strenuous activities in physical education (PE) lessons (such as gymnastics, playing tag, etc.), sometimes in the smaller gym, while the boys play more demanding team games such as soccer, handball and basketball in the larger gym. Sporting activities in everyday school life still mainly take place as part of PE lessons and are usually based on the principle of competition, in which personal performance is assessed annually with school grades. Unsurprisingly, some children may lose the motivation to exercise in the process.

If everyday school life is to be as inclusive as possible based on all the needs of its users, the question therefore arises of how to create school-based gender-inclusive exercise program that supports girls in their natural inclination to exercise. The present study seeks to question and break down historically manifested norms and stereotypes using an intersectional-feminist approach.

To this end, 35 pupils of compulsory school age were asked about their movement

preferences, among other things, in 18 group interviews. Their interview transcripts were analyzed using Mayring's summarizing qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2012). The results of the interviews made it clear that girls have a need for more movement in their everyday school life, but that they often lack the opportunity. As desirable movement units in the breaks, they mention small-scale play opportunities such as hula hoop, ball and jumping games, but also space-consuming games such as tag, hide and seek, etc., for which there is often a lack of available space. This is despite the fact that the "Charter for the Design of 21st Century Educational Facilities" and many other guidelines state that:

> In the interests of the motor and cognitive development of children and young people, educational facilities should be designed as stimulating areas for movement in their indoor and outdoor spaces. (ÖIS, 2021, 4)

1. THE RELEVANCE OF MOVEMENT

Exercise is incredibly important for children's mental and physical health as well as the cognitive performance expected of them in class (Ostermann, 2009), especially when pupils spend almost the entire day in the school building as part of all-day schooling. One student from a middle school in Vienna summarizes this as follows:

> We sit all day. For eight hours. And I want to be able to get up and move around. (...) We like to play catch and hide and seek. We sometimes play that in the hallway. But we're not actually allowed to play there because it's too loud. (Interview 17, girl, 14 years old)

The quote makes clear that the pupil feels the need to move around more and that she enjoys movement, and that this is also a prerequisite for her to be able to sit still and concentrate again afterwards. On the other hand, this movement is forbidden in the corridor in front of the class, which is the only recreation room in this 1970s school building apart from the classroom during the break.

2. (GENDER-) SPECIFIC MOVEMENT BEHAVIOR OF PUPILS

Attitudes to the body and exercise are crucial determining factors for children and young people establishing their identity. As people position themselves in space with their bodies, how they deal with their own bodies is crucial for their personal experience and appropriation of space (Löw, 2013). Hoffarth states that the "body has always been the subject of pedagogy. Pedagogical action addressed it as an object of pedagogical access, as a medium of pedagogical objectives and as a nature to be disciplined or promoted" (Hoffarth, 2024, 129). Gender and the body stand in constant relation to each other, which in turn means that gender is intimately related to movement in everyday school life.

While the gender ratio is still balanced in terms of enjoyment of physical activity at primary school age, it changes from the onset of puberty: children whose body perception is associated with more shame say that they enjoy exercise and sport less – this mainly affects girls and TIN* people (trans, inter- and non-binary). In addition,

displacement processes can occur in communal areas, where dominant children claim the space for themselves. Studies confirm that "without structuring the spaces for girls and boys (...) it can always be assumed that girls are at a disadvantage" (Derecik, 2015, 59). These two issues, shame and displacement, can lead to the displaced persons withdrawing spatially in order to follow their natural inclination to move unobserved. One girl reports the following about her activities in the school toilet:

> We talk, gossip, get silly and try out new trends. Sometimes we also make TikTok videos. (...) And if you sit there all the time, at some point you've had enough. It's far too long. And if I get hyperactive or start talking to others, I have to write off the whole house rules as punishment. We always have to sit still and be quiet. (Interview 16, girl, 14 years old)

The school toilet is not only used by the girls as a meeting and communication space, but also as an exercise area, where they can do gymnastics and dance without being watched (Schwaderer, 2025). It is also clear from the quote that the girls find it difficult to sit still for as long as they are expected to. The pupils' urge to move is apparently incomprehensible to the teachers and can even be punished in some cases. If children and young people are not allowed to move around and let off steam either in the classroom or in the corridor, they look for hidden places to do so secretly. One boy also confirms this when he reports:

> Once I saw a girl in the toilet at the elementary school. And I saw her doing a cartwheel there. (Interview 6, boy, 11 years old)

3. INTERSECTIONALITY

When looking at the interaction between gender, body and movement, it is most useful to do so from an intersectional perspective. The term intersectionality was coined by US lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s. She points out that several categories of discrimination (such as gender, social origin, ethnic origin, religion, physical and/or mental disability, language, etc.) can interact in one person and new mechanisms of discrimination may arise from this (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, a girl who wears a headscarf faces completely different challenges in PE lessons than her non-Muslim female classmates or her Muslim male classmates. Gender-inclusive planning of school space therefore means planning for a very diverse group of needs, which in turn requires the most diverse range of uses and therefore also the most diverse range of exercise options.

4. MOVEMENT IN BETWEEN AS GENDER-INCLUSIVE EXERCISE FACILITATION

> I would like to have a room in the school where there are toys and activities. We could then take the toys during the break and play with friends. For example, badminton or tennis. (Interview 3, girl, 13 years old)

In the interview excerpt, one girl describes how she imagines the ideal break room. She mentions neither retreat nor communication opportunities, but only the opportunity to exercise and let off steam during breaks.

One solution that addresses this need is the "Movement in Between" concept developed in Denmark, which focuses on informal and unvalued movement "in between". Activating elements in the classroom offer pupils in different settings the opportunity to move in a non-competitive and playful way (Friis & Moltke n.d.). These can be jumping and racing games simply painted on the floor, elaborately designed climbing elements on the walls, slides instead of or in addition to stairs and many other creative ideas that encourage playful movement in everyday life.

> Based on the belief that every child is unique, the movement trail will encourage children to be offbeat, crazy, wild or quiet, and above all bring out the originality of each child and young person. The trail creates space for each child to challenge their senses, while its various components are designed for sustainability, aesthetics and longevity. (Friis & Moltke n.d.).

Ideas from gender-specific design of open spaces in outdoor school areas (Studer, 2002; ÖISS, 2004) are adapted for the interior of the school building. Movement in Between is also an easy concept for existing schools to implement, as it does not require a lot of space and the non-combustible play elements can also be used in corridor zones. In this way, children can approach and develop movement and body awareness according to their own nature and physical and psychological development, they can test out the movement possibilities unobserved, at their own pace and without judgment, and develop the self-confidence necessary for active appropriation of space on the basis of these experiences.

The Motion Trail at Søndervang School in Denmark, designed by architects Friis & Moltke, is one of six pilot projects offering a diverse and varied sports and exercise program. As part of the "Skole+" campaign, the interior spaces are to be redesigned in such a way that they encourage people to get active (Friis & Moltke n.d.).

Figure 1. Motiontrail Søndervang School in Viby, Dänemark, Arch. Friis & Moltke. Source: https://friis-moltke.com/architecture/education/the-motion-trail-soendervang-school/

During the renovation of the Konrad Lorenz Gymnasium in Gänserndorf (Austria) by Franz&Sue Architekten, the break areas were supplemented with low-threshold exercise facilities such as climbing poles in addition to communication and retreat options, which are particularly popular with pupils up to the age of 14.

Figure 2. Range of exercise in the break areas, Konrad Lorenz Gymnasium in Gänserndorf/Austria, Franz&Sue Architekten. Source: https://www.franzundsue.at/projekte/konrad-lorenz-gymnasium-in-gaenserndorf-niederoesterreich/

Another example is the redesign of the corridors in the St. Johann school building in Basel by ZMIK Studio for Spacial Design. The innovative corridor design of the existing building offers pupils both spaces for movement and retreat in everyday school life and meets many different needs with its diverse range of spaces.

Figure 3- Redesign of the corridors in the school building St. Johann, Basel, 2019, ZMIK Studio for Spacial Design. Source: https://www.zmik.ch/de

5. SUMMARY

In summary, the concept of "Movement in Between" is an excellent way to provide gender-inclusive movement opportunities in both new and existing school buildings in order to promote gender-balanced movement in everyday school life. In this way, discrimination can be counteracted on different levels and the needs of a heterogeneous group of pupils can be met. It is therefore both desirable and advisable for planners to promote and further develop this concept, as well as for politicians to support the establishment of this new school space concept through guidelines and legislation.

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LEARNING SPACE DESIGN: THE RIGHT TO A FAIR SPACE DESIGN, AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH BETWEEN PEDAGOGY, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN. THE RESULTS OF AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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The influence of spaces on people's experiences, behaviour and well-being is widely recognised in the literature (Kozlovsky, 2013; Mallgrave, 2018). In particular, the design of educational environments plays a crucial role in supporting the growth and learning processes of children and young people (Woolner, 2010; Stadler-Altmann, 2015). However, as several authors point out (Hertzberger, 2008; Means, 2018; Weyland & Attia, 2015), the design of schools and other educational facilities often follows standardised parameters that do not take into account the complexity of interactions between people and the built environment.

It is precisely out of the need to rethink educational environments from a perspective that pays more attention to the needs of those who inhabit them that the panel 'Learning space design: the right to a fair space design, an interdisciplinary approach between pedagogy, architecture and design', promoted by the EDENlab laboratory of the Faculty of Education of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, was born. The initiative aims to stimulate an interdisciplinary dialogue between pedagogy, architecture and design in order to identify innovative design approaches that focus on the right to a fair education. This essay presents the results of the discussions.

In order to increase the richness of the contributions and stimulate a deeper and participatory debate, we opted for an innovative format: three round tables spread over one day, where the 14 selected speakers (11 of whom were present in Cagliari) had the opportunity to engage in a direct and informal dialogue, overcoming the limits of the classic academic conference, which consists of individual contributions with little room for discussion. The round table model, which is still rare in academic conferences, proved to be an effective way of promoting interdisciplinary exchange, the interpenetration of ideas and perspectives and the development of joint reflections and proposals. Several studies (Flecha, 2000; Laal & Laal, 2012) have highlighted the benefits of dialogue-based learning methods, where knowledge is built through equal interaction between subjects with different backgrounds and skills.

The three working sessions were intense and lively, thanks to the different profiles of the participants: researchers, university lecturers, architects, educators, philosophers and agronomists. This diversity of voices and perspectives made it possible

to look at the issue of the most equitable educational spaces from different angles and to identify critical points, innovative experiences and possible paths for change.

The following pages present the most important contents of the roundtable discussions. The aim is not so much to draw definitive conclusions, but rather to identify directions for work and reflection that can inspire further research and experimentation. This is based on the firm conviction that the right to a fair and inclusive educational space can only be the result of a collective and participatory process that involves not only experts and decision-makers, but the entire educational community. The Designing learning spaces committee should be a small step in this direction. During the discussions, Vladan Klement, philosopher at the Faculty of Architecture in Prague, emphasised the political nature of space and how much it influences emotions and behaviour. With this in mind, involving students and children in design becomes an opportunity to experience the transformative power of participation, as also demonstrated by Karin Harather's experience with the BibLab project at the Faculty of Architecture in Vienna, where young people are protagonists in the creation of flexible and customisable spaces.

'Secil Uğur Yavuz from the Faculty of Design in Bolzano and Alessandro Frigerio from the Politecnico di Milano emphasised the importance of undecided spacesthat are open to diverse and creative use. While Frigerio pointed out that every space is 'defined' in some way', Uğur Yavuz noted that designing 'open' and flexible spaces can encourage freer and more stimulating forms of interaction, allowing children and adults to experience unusual perspectives and imagine new ways of relating to the world.

The relationship between nature and education was at the centre of several speeches. Giulia Torta spoke about the experience of the Botanical Gardens in Florence as a laboratory for the coexistence of humans and non-humans, a 'third landscape' (Clément, 2005) in which the dimension of the wild is mixed with that of the domestic, suggesting a different way of inhabiting the city.

Alessandro Frigerio presented the project for the regeneration of the Somali university campus, in which the natural elements are not just an object of study, but real learning partners. Giusi Boaretto from the Faculty of Education in Bolzano suggested that plants should be understood as pedagogical subjects capable of fostering multiple intelligences. Michela Schenetti highlighted the potential of outdoor education to rethink the relationship between the inside and outside of the school, transforming open spaces into learning environments in dialogue with the territory. This requires a redesign of spaces, materials, time and relationships that puts children's well-being at the centre.

The theme of the school as an urban planning tool that can overcome the division between indoor and outdoor, formal and informal spaces was at the centre of the presentation by Massimo Faiferri from the Faculty of Architecture in Cagliari: the challenge for the architect is to design flexible spaces that can adapt to different age groups, learning styles and pedagogical approaches; spaces that evolve over

time and meet the needs of their inhabitants.

Franca Zuccoli from the University of Milan Bicocca emphasised the importance of involving lecturers from the earliest planning stages and taking into account the actual use of the spaces. Katarina Tielsch from the Vienna University of Technology, on the other hand, brought in the perspective of those involved in cultural mediation in the field of architecture and showed how even regulatory constraints can inspire creative and unprecedented design solutions, taking the same position as Kuno Prey from the Faculty of Design in Bolzano.

In general, the discussions crystallised the image of an educational environment as a dynamic ecosystem in which the physical dimension is interwoven with the relational, emotional and value dimensions, but also the image of a school as a complex and layered 'landscape' consisting of a multitude of spaces and subjects. In order to inhabit these landscapes in a fair and generative way, it is necessary to re-think the processes and languages of design and open them up to the contribution of a multiplicity of knowledge and experiences.

From this point of view, the interdisciplinary dialogue that the panel stimulated is an important step towards creating new alliances between worlds that are only seemingly distant from each other. Pedagogy, architecture, design, agronomy, philosophy, natural and social sciences are called upon to work together to imagine educational environments capable of responding to the challenges of our time. Inclusive, poetic and wise spaces where boys and girls can grow as persons and citizens, in harmony with themselves, with others and with the earth that harbours them (Weyland, Boaretto 2024).

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THE UPTURNED SCHOOL: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EDUCATIONAL CO-DESIGN EXPERIENCE FOR 'EDUCATING FURNISHINGS' AND UNCONVENTIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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This contribution aims to explore the pioneering vision of the 'upturned school' as an innovative educational paradigm for the learning of children and young teens. This vision is rooted in anti-authoritarianism, individual freedom, and participation, in a perspective, still relevant today, that invites us to rethink the school as a contemporary environment, freed from ministerial rigidity and capable of reflecting the evolution of educational needs (De Carlo, 1968). Aware that from the formation of children can derive the creation of a future society that is more or less free and creative (Munari, 1977), and that this formation can take place through that "very serious business useful for understanding the world" that is play (Mari, 2011), the upturned school promotes an unconventional learning environment. This environment is designed so that young people can innovate and transform thinking into reality. Inspired by the ideas of 'prepared environment' (Montessori, 1931) and environment as a 'third teacher' (Malaguzzi, 2010), it is rooted in a fundamental question: if teaching aims to train and teach how to think, how to live in today's world, how can school train people, if it does not pose the question of bringing young people closer to the very concept of happiness? (Santoianni, 2016). In this complex framework of positions, questions, and expectations, a didactic workshop experimentation was launched involving students and teachers of the CdL in Community Design of the 'Federico II' University of Naples, joined by lecturers from the Humanities Department, in the development of a co-design process with the 'Europa Unita' State Comprehensive Institute in the Salicelle district of Afragola (NA). The interdisciplinary approach supports an operational methodology where the pedagogical design of learning environments coexists with the architectural design of spaces, furniture, and educational objects. The latter were co-designed starting from the needs and desires of the school community and based on pedagogical criteria that revolve around certain keywords relating to the current experimental models of education, which promote the idea of interaction, flexibility, and open to the world of the implicit. The design outcomes – presented in November 2023 as part of the 3rd edition of the "Afragola Film Festival of Architecture and Design – Beyond the Vision"– are proposed as evolving answers, versatile containers for nurturing thought, "elastic" containers that expand the spatial dimension, opening the school to places, territories, the world, cultures. These environments are conceived as labs where nature and artifacts mix and coexist dynamically, where the interior is an intimate space that becomes plural as it opens up relationships. Within this framework, the construction of a more inclusive, sustainable educational future inspired by

children's creativity takes a bold step forward and welcomes the non-conformist utopia, which gives backspace to the pleasure of life (Vittoria, 1987). In this way, children and youths, as social innovators, become the protagonists of peer experimentation, capable of challenging the adult world, and can play the role of 'pattern destroyers' and activators of visionary 'models' of a desirable future.

Co-design experience, Interdisciplinary Approach, Learning environment, Pedagogical Models

INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century school faces a crucial challenge: preparing new generations for an uncertain and ever-changing future while fostering well-being and resilience. This goal requires rethinking traditional educational models, emphasizing the integration of disciplinary knowledge and transversal skills. Such integration transforms schools into environments simulating contemporary challenges, teaching students to address them while going beyond the transmission of knowledge, seeking to mitigate the risks of error and illusion (Morin, 2015). Education, by bridging thoughts and knowledge, transcends misunderstanding and fosters the recognition of others through the ethics of dialogue. It must nurture, from early childhood, a vision of the future rooted in care for oneself, others, and the community (Manzini & Jégou, 2003). This path values quality of life over economic rewards, rethinks lifestyles, safeguards the environment, and broadens our concern to humanity as a whole (Norman, 2024).

Within this framework, the "Upturned School" emerged—an interdisciplinary educational experiment involving first-year undergraduate students from the Bachelor's in Community Design (Co.De.) at the DiARC, Department of Architecture, "Federico II" University of Naples, and 3rd-grade pupils from the I.C. "Europa Unita" in the Salicelle district of Afragola (NA). Their interaction revealed a model redefining education, starting with learning environment objects to offer tools for meeting contemporary challenges.

As part of the "Materials, Technologies and Structures for Design Studio", [1] the innovative contribution of design to creating furniture and materials for primary schools was explored, employing co-design approaches. This initiative arose through a co-creation process involving children, teachers, and experts in pedagogy, design, technology, and architecture, envisioning environments both stimulating and welcoming.

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[1] The Studio, divided into two sections, A and B, took place during the 2nd semester of the a.y. 2022–23. It was structured around 3 modules: Technologies and Processes for Design (Proff. Block and Falotico), Structures for Design (Proff. Portioli and Cascini), and Materials for Design (Proff. Liguori and Caputo).

The school was reimagined not as a static container but as an organism populated by objects reflecting children's needs, fostering the flourishing of imagination (Meschiari, 2020). This aligns with European and national policies, including the European Green Deal's "Priority Themes of the European Education Area" and the "Goal 4 – Quality Education" of the 17 SDGs in the 2030 Agenda, which promote equitable, inclusive, experiential, and practical learning.

Children provided insights into their educational and recreational needs through drawings and interviews. Complementing this, seminars enriched students' knowledge, supporting concept development and refinement. Noteworthy lectures included "Educational Design for Learning Environments" and "Safety and Compliance of Furniture Products: Focus on Childhood and School Furnishings".[2] These sessions bridged pedagogical theories and regulatory frameworks, enabling informed and meaningful design solutions.

1. THE THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Faced with the growing complexity and multi-disciplinarity of the design process, a three-phase approach was defined, guided by Munari-inspired methods emphasizing "tactile design" and play to develop ways of proceeding to arrive at a solution to a problem (Munari, 1981). The Studio combined theoretical insights, such as the environment as a "third educator" (Malaguzzi, 2010), with hands-on exercises to connect with the truth of things (Pallasmaa, 1996).

The studio explored innovative schools by examining drivers of change in learning spaces, analysing operational models and real-world examples in Italy and abroad, and identifying areas for improvement through research insights.[3]

The project embraced student-centred learning, using experiential approaches to foster growth and inclusion, aligning with INDIRE's "Manifesto 1+4 Educational Spaces" and its effective strategies for learning environments (Tosi, 2018). The studio explored pedagogical theories and their spatial implications, focusing on Maria Montessori's "prepared environment" and its adoption abroad. Hermann Hertzberger's "Open School" exemplifies the importance of creating "non-official-spaces" – areas defined by interactions and activities rather than fixed functions – highlighting the role of design in fostering dynamic educational environments. (Hertzberger, 2019).

The inquiry explored shifts from traditional didactic models to innovative learning paradigms, driven by constructivist theory[4]. These principles informed

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[2] The lectures were delivered, respectively, by Prof. Flavia Santoianni from the Department of Humanities at the Federico IlUniversity, and by Dr. Serena Petaccia and Dr. Arianna Visintin from the company CATAS.

[3] In particular, the latest School Building Reportpublished by the Fondazione Agnelli, which has long been committed to promoting innovation in education and training.

[4]In particular, reference is made to Piagetian neo-constructivism, which has challenged the idea of stage-based structures of knowledge, moving toward more flexible structures of knowledge (see Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A.N., Constructing the World: A Theory of Cognitive Development, McGraw-Hill, Milan, 2000. Carey S., Gelman R. (1991), The Epigenesis of Mind,

methodological activities where students developed prototypes of educational devices, embracing play as a meaningful way to understand the world (Mari, 2011). A systemic approach analysed the performance, material, and usability of innovative furniture, involving deconstruction and reintegration to create scaled models for classrooms, hallways, and outdoor school areas.

The central element of the studio, serving as a bridge between the theoretical-methodological phase and the design phase, was the direct involvement of children as end-users, guided by the goal of forming individuals bringing young people closer to the very concept of happiness (Santoianni, 2016).

Through interviews and drawings, children expressed their needs, offering valuable insights for designing "educational furnishings". Developed with flexibility, integration, and personalization, these designs foster inclusive, participatory spaces that support learning and empower children to innovate and bring their ideas to life, reflecting Munari's (1977) belief in education's power to shape a freer, more creative future society.

Fig. 1. Exhibition panels explaining the translation of children's desires into "educational furnishings" projects (edited by B. Toledo and L. Montella, 2023)

2. DESIGN OUTCOMES IN EXHIBITION

The results of the design experimentation were presented in November 2023 during the third edition of the "Film Festival of Architecture and Design in Afragola – Beyond Vision", emerging as dynamic and evolving responses.

Erlbaum, Hillsdale).

During the study day, it became evident that the approach adopted promotes experiential and informal learning, fostering participation and creativity as tools to challenge traditional models and imagine new educational scenarios.

Fig. 2. Some Images of the Study Day (photo by M. Block, 2023).

A critical retrospective analysis of the pedagogical criteria guiding the co-construction of the furnishings and educational objects – focused on key terms relevant to contemporary and experimental education – allowed for the articulation of a clear and structured narrative of a "formative design of learning environments".

In the context of the experimentation, two main types of educational models emerge: "experimental models", which explore new forms of learning and interaction, and "current models", which integrate identity and sharing with a more established approach (Santoianni, 2017).

The "experimental models" of education emphasize interaction and flexibility, fostering openness to the implicit world of experience (Reber & Allen, 2022). These principles are exemplified by projects such as *Kids Kaleido*, a sensory garden with four platforms dedicated to stimulating hearing, sight, touch, and smell. Similarly, *Jump On* presents a sensory pathway where students generate music through play and physical activity. *EduMotion* features a modular system for outdoor free-body games, encouraging movement and peer interaction.

The bodily dimension in learning is further highlighted by *Sempering*, a mat divided into sections teaching colors, numbers, fruits, and animals, integrating cognitive and physical learning. *Giostrina*, made from recycled colorful materials, combines

sustainability with sensory stimulation for perceptual development. *Cart*, a multi-functional cart, inspires creativity by offering diverse uses for children.

In school environments, *COC*, a furniture system based on collaboration, organization, and composition, and *Kuber*, an informal study station with mobile structures for individual and group activities, promote flexibility. Additional examples include *Emotional Wall* and *Ties*, colorful modules for diverse activities engaging the emotional dimension. The *Ruota delle Emozioni* encourages emotional expression, while *Totorem*, a modular and transformable "gentle giant", integrates collective and imaginary identity in classrooms.

Projects like *Tavulì*, *8 AGON*, and *Othoni* stimulate curiosity, collaboration, and creativity through transformable forms, fostering implicit learning. Along this line is *TreeTris*, a furniture system evoking the organic nature of knowledge, complemented by *Code Flower*, a flower-shaped desk symbolizing the connection to nature.

The *re-CIRCLE* project creates a psychomotor pathway using modular containers to teach waste sorting, enhancing perception through colors, sounds, and lights (Santoianni, 2010).

The "current models" of education are characterised by their focus on the concepts of identity, sharing, and balance (Wenger et al., 2002). The interconnection between individuals is expressed through projects such as *Rainbow Circle*, which symbolises unity as a collective strength, and the *Ponte dell'Accoglienza*, a symbolic structure that connects diverse identities and reduces cultural and social distances. Other projects, such as the one dedicated to fragility and the *Casa dell'Accoglienza*, explore the emotional impact of diversity, fostering an inclusive and empathetic approach to education.

Bee Your Bee, a system of modular niches for play and study, and *Sundome*, a refuge space designed to protect without isolating, exemplify child-centred educational design that also encourages sharing.

Projects such as *31salvitutti*, a safe haven for every student, further highlight the integration of protection, creativity, and collective participation in educational spaces.

Finally, tools such as *Tino il cestino*, a metaphor for the interweaving of diverse identities, and *Colored Belt*, a belt made from recycled materials that becomes a socialisation game, demonstrate how educational design can foster innovation and interaction through active and shared engagement.

The composition of these educational furnishings, deliberately free and adaptable to diverse contexts, aims to anticipate learning environments conceived as laboratories where nature and artifacts blend and coexist dynamically.

Fig. 3. Exhibition panel explaining the critical retrospective analysis for the definition of a formative design of learning environments (edited by B. Toledo and L. Montella, 2023)

Fig. 4. Some Images of the Exhibition Setup (photo by M. Block, 2023)

These spaces transform interior intimacy into plural experiences as they open up to relationships and invite us to rethink the school as a contemporary environment, freed from ministerial rigidity and reflective of the evolving needs of education (De Carlo, 1968). This framework seeks to take a bold step toward building a more inclusive, sustainable, and creatively inspired educational future, one that embraces a visionary ideal that challenges conformity and rekindles the delight of living (Vittoria, 1987). In this context, children and youth, as social innovators, actively shape desirable futures and redefine the boundaries of traditional educational paradigms.

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RE-DESIGNING SCHOOLYARDS THROUGH PHOTOVOICE. A PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCE WITH PRESCHOOLERS

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The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and Agenda 2030 (2015) emphasize the importance of involving children in decision-making processes. International literature highlights that the most stimulating play contexts for children aged 3-6 are those discovered through free initiatives rather than solely designed by adults. However, play environments often reflect adult ideals, far from children's desires. Therefore, it is crucial to include children in designing their spaces, recognizing them as playful designers capable of making meaningful contributions. This study focuses on the use of photovoice methodology to involve children from two kindergartens in Milano in order to transform their schoolyards. Through self-made photographs and group discussions, children documented their environment, expressing what they want to do and change. The thematic analysis of the data revealed how children perceive and imagine their garden, identifying physical and cultural constraints (e.g., adult rules) and proposing transformations. Photovoice proved to be an effective tool for promoting children's participation and helping adults to observe the environment from children's perspective, fostering participatory redesign processes.

participation; co-designers; photovoice; schoolyard; early childhood

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) emphasizes the importance of listening to children's perspectives and including them in decision-making processes. Also, Agenda 2030 (2015) declares the need to develop democratic practices that enable children to be involved in community decisions: this progressive focus on participation led to learning experiences and research processes *with* children (Mortari & Mazzoni, 2010; Christensen & James, 2017) rather than on children, that seems to be able to promote social and cultural change, starting from children's active engagement.

Relating to the design of children's play contexts in the 3-6 age, the international literature highlights that the most interesting possibilities for actions or affordances (Gibson, 1979; Kyttä, 2004; 2006) for the youngest are those discovered and experimented according to their free initiatives. In continuity with these assumptions, the international literature sheds lights on a lack of understanding regarding children's

preferences in how to use and explore outdoor contexts, in fact some play environments reflect adult's ideals and seems to be different from children's desires (Moore, 2015). Children's perspectives, in fact, have not yet been enough acknowledged in playground and/or schoolyard provision, design and evaluation. Since they're built to encourage and support interesting play experiences for children, their subjective perspectives need to be explored, taken more seriously into considerations and acted upon: this requires a better understanding of what children grasp, seek and would in these environments (Morgenthaler et al. 2023). In addition, the literature underscores that children have clear views regarding their play spaces, that are capable to identify areas that need to be changed (Ward, 2018) and can offer ideas for the improvement of these play spaces (Pearson & Howe, 2017). While poorly-designed areas fail to be sufficiently imaginative and aesthetically appealing for them, more attention to the design of these spaces is necessary for meeting the overall children's needs. In this sense, a scoping review conducted by Martin et al. (2023) about children's opportunities for play in different outdoor environments highlights that more emphasis should be placed on space co-design processes with children. Through participatory research and collaborative design approaches, children can be involved as competent decision-makers, listening to their play experiences (Bishop & Corkery, 2017),

Despite the growing body of literature on the topic, there is still little research describing how participatory design and research with children can highlight children's experiences and perceptions of play spaces, supporting their creativity to re-design play spaces (Malone, 2013) and encouraging play and community connections through the creation of innovative areas (McGlone, 2016) more in line with children's needs, who in this sense can take part in participatory observation, reflection and co-planning processes.

Thus, it emerges the need to explore the youngest point of view, starting from an involvement in design processes of their outdoor contexts (Muñoz, 2009), encouraging the spread of spaces and experiences that they can fully appreciate, exploit and shape. In this sense children, here conceived as playful designers with agency (Kangas et al. 2014), experts in their play and competent affordances creators, seems to be capable of making contribution in the space design, increasing the fit between their needs (Sivertsen & Moe, 2021) and their physical and socio-cultural context.

2. AIM OF THE CONTRIBUTION, METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANTS

In light of these premises, the contribution intends to reflect on preschoolers' involvement in participatory design and transformation of schoolyards through photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Photovoice is a participatory action-research methodology that can allows people to document contexts through a multimodal documentation, made by pictures and words, shared in both oral and written form. The photographic documentation is then discussed within dialogical processes in order to promote awareness,

empowerment (Luini, 2023) and, finally, transformation (Luini & Guerra, 2023) of the physical and cultural contexts.

The research involved two kindergarten groups, for a total of 44 children aged 3-6 years old, coming from two preschools located in the municipality of Milano and both with direct access respectively to a school garden and a schoolyard.

The children were invited to take part in the participatory process, which provides for the possibility of document their outdoor contexts through self-produced photographs, group discussions and writing captions to accompany their shots, in order to describe what they feel they can do, cannot do, want to do and do not want to do (Waters, 2017) when they are outdoor, and to transform it according to their needs, expectations and personal desire, beyond what was encouraged or discouraged by adults.

3. MAIN FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data produced by children, made by photographs, captions, transcripts of conversations and group discussions, were analyzed through a reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022): the analytical process, which used affordances theory in its most recent declinations (Kyttä, 2004; 2006) as a lens for analyzing children's outdoor experiences, shed light on different affordances that can actually be experienced, and those appealing but constrained by physical and socio-cultural limitations. Data makes clear, through snapshots, in-depth captions and dialogical exchanges, how children actually use, wish to use and imagine their schoolyards, in order to respond to their play desires and exploratory expectations. More specifically, the multimodal documentation produced through photovoice process (Shaw, 2021) showed some affordances that can actually be experienced by them, revealing certain play's possibilities that are allowed by the educators, sometimes liked and sometimes disliked by the youngest; in addition, it was possible to identify some appealing affordances, desired but not actualized because constrained by some physical-structural and socio-cultural limitations, in particular for the presence of rules imposed by adults that forbid the use of some materials or access to certain play areas of the garden or the schoolyard. In particular, as the children themselves have documented, access to hidden or forbidden spaces intrigues them because it allows to experience a certain amount of risk (Sandseter, Kleppe & Sando, 2011) and to exercise personal and collective agency away from constant adult supervision (Aminpour, Bishop & Corkery, 2020). Also, children seem to be attracted to open materials and play contexts, which seem to offer more and various opportunities for play and interpretation.

The photovoice process, through the proposal of different languages and experiences, which include moments of documentation, discussion and reflection, both individual and collective, it would seem to effectively allow children to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of their outdoor educational contexts, stimulate change-oriented awareness processes. In particular, dialogical exchanges based on the images produced by each one to answer simple stimulus questions posed

by the researcher such as – *What is your favorite game outdoor*? *The game you don't like*? *And the one forbidden by adults*? – can allow children to reflect on the possibilities offered by their own living contexts: specifically, it is observed that the experience of photographic documentation allows to highlighted certain salient aspects, but it is precisely through group dialogue, which uses the images as a support for more spontaneous verbalization, that thoughts, hypotheses, needs and transformative desires are made explicit and put into circulation, representing assumptions for redesign and change children's play spaces, responding more to everyone's wishes. In fact, the group discussions on photographic material (Riddett-Moore & Siegesmund, 2012) made it possible to identify and reflect about some transformative desires and proposals for change for the outdoor areas, staring from some of the conditions reported in everyone's documentation.

Hence, these suggestions have invited the re-designing and the structural transformation of certain play spaces in the garden and the schoolyard, but above all a different posture for educators who accompanying the outdoor experiences, that children imagine being more open and flexible to accept less oriented and more free ways of using spaces and materials. In this sense, children's images and words, previously analyzed and organized by themes and categories, has been used to make a documentation readable for children, made up of photographs and simple phrases taken from captions and conversations produced during the participatory experience through photovoice. This material represented the basis for reflections, discussions and deep listening processes among children and educators about the redesign of the school garden, starting with the desired features and affordances described as most appealing.

As highlighted in the international literature (Morgenthaler et al., 2023) considering children's perspective in the redesign of their outdoor play spaces can contribute to positive outcomes such as meeting their needs, fostering community belonging and deeper interest in spaces, and making spaces more inclusive. In this sense, it becomes adult responsibility to provide contexts, proposals tools capable of ensuring moments of exchange, listening to each other's perspectives and constructive dialogue between peers and adults, in which everyone, even the youngest, can have a say and highlight interesting characteristics of play spaces.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, photovoice turned out to be a participatory, dialogical and transformative tool, capable of allowing children to describe strengths and weaknesses of their schoolyard with a transformative aim (Luini, 2024): the possibility of making photographic documentation, then discussed with peers and practitioners, can represent a participatory and reflective experience capable of allowing event the youngest to take an active role in redesigning processes, accompanied by adults with whom processes of dialogue and mutual listening can take place, starting with the observation of the photographic materials produced by the children. In this sense, photovoice proves itself to be an engaging process for children and, at the

same time, an interesting tool for teachers and educators to observe the outdoor affordances from children's perspectives, to foster authentic dialogical processes in which the children's point of view can actually be placed at the center and to promote concrete participatory re-design of play areas outdoor.

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BIB-LAB. AN INNOVATION LAB TO CO-CREATE FAIR SPACES FOR EDUCATION

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The 'BiB-Lab / Innovation Lab for Educational Spaces in Motion' was run by a multidisciplinary research team from the Faculty of Architecture and Spatial Planning at the Technische Universität Wien (TUW) from September 2021 to October 2024 and led by Karin Harather. This teaching and research project was funded by the Innovation Foundation for Education (ISB) and carried out by the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG) as part of the 'Innovation Labs for Education' programme. In participatory processes, the importance of spaces and environments in school and extracurricular educational processes was thematised and researched using aesthetic-artistic methods and tools. Sensitising learners and teachers to the spaces physically surrounding them was an important first step. Suitable playful methods had to be developed and used to create awareness of existing (spatial) qualities and potentials, but also of deficits. The BiB-Lab made it possible to integrate university teaching and research in a very practical way in order to create different school and extracurricular laboratory situations in which innovative collaborative spatial appropriation and spatial design processes could be initiated and tested. University lecturers and students worked together with children, young people and teachers to identify (spatial) needs, develop temporary, low-cost test settings and develop further design measures based on these participatory experiences and feedback from the participating 'experts in their everyday lives'.

educational spaces; participatory processes; educational test settings

INTRODUCTION

The 'Arbeitsraum Bildung' research team, which was founded in 2015 at the Faculty of Architecture and Planning at Technische Universität Wien (TUW) is developing novel educational spaces at the interface between education, art, architecture and society. Spaces for thought, action and design currently lacking in existing (educational) structures are developed, implemented as models and tested by users (cf. Arbeitsraum Bildung 2024).

This article presents the arts- and design-based spatial research project 'BiB-Lab / Innovation Lab for Learning Landscapes in Motion' that was launched in the fall of 2021 with the aim of creating three different spatial lab settings in Vienna's largest municipal housing estate. In a broad-based three-year cooperation process running until October 2024, new models of creative spaces for thinking, acting and

designing have been developed to complement the programme of existing (educational) structures. On the one hand, the existing spatial conditions (existing schools that have too little space, are not equipped for afternoon care, are not feel-good places) were explored through a low-threshold, playful and yet analytical approach. On the other hand, (spatial) strategies against the various disadvantages to which the children and young people living and learning here are exposed, were developed and tested in participation processes (strategies for appropriating space, shared use of space, co-creation, acting as equals, learning with and from each other). The joint, collaborative experimentation and research of the BiB-Lab team in a school context, but above all in an extracurricular context, is about changing mindsets, raising awareness and rethinking processes, questioning routines and values, and the right to grow up in a democratic and fair space for education.

With the mobile *Bus Lab*, the *School Space Lab* in the partner schools and a *Neighbourhood Lab* in the small shopping centre, test settings for creative, accessible, shared and inclusive educational spaces have been developed in a participatory manner and tested as part of innovation projects in order to establish models of a sustainably effective educational space culture in the (urban) spatial inventory.

The Bus Lab, a mobile multifunctional studio space in a converted municipal bus, was temporarily stationed in the public space of the project area offering extracurricular creative programs for young people. The School Space Lab comprises several neighbouring schools whose spatial facilities no longer meet current requirements of hybrid teaching and learning. In participatory processes, the BiB-Lab team developed spatial test settings and cost-effective spatial interventions together with architecture students and the school community. Vacant stores in the nearby little shopping center were activated in the so called Neighbourhood Lab as open educational spaces where the university and the community learn from each other (cf. BiB-Lab 2024). These three different laboratory types were located within a distance of about 200 metres and could be reached on foot in a few minutes.

Fig. 1: Site plan of the project area 'Per-Albin-Hansson-Siedlung Ost' (PAHO, Vienna) with location of the BiB Laboratories. Graphic editing: C. Schwaderer, N. Lechner.
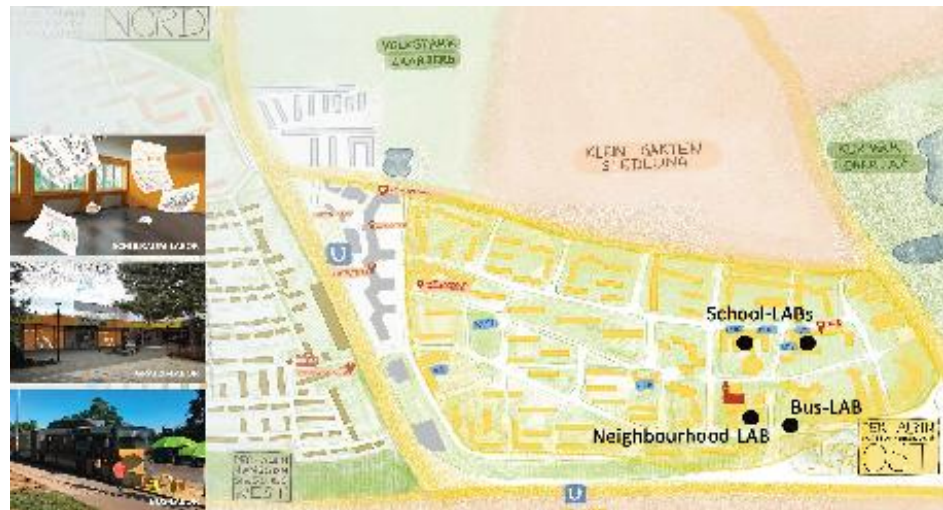
1. BUS LAB: Playful appropriation and use of public space

The mobile Bus Lab, a former public transport bus converted into a multifunctional space, served as a highly visible contact point in the project area as well as an artistic research base.

This bus laboratory has been converted and expanded by architecture students at TU Wien already in the winter term 2016/17 as part of a design.build course. In 2019, the Bus Lab was adapted for the project ICH BRAUCHE PLATZ! by the artist duo HARATHER/LECHNER and stationed as an art and spatial research laboratory *on the move* in three different urban development areas of the International Building Exhibition IBA_Vienna from October 2019 to October 2020 (cf. Harather 2021; IBA_Vienna 2024). One of these three IBA sites was the Per-Albin-Hansson-Housing Estate East (PAHO). The Bus Lab was used here, in Vienna's largest municipal housing estate, in an artistic research context and as a kind of *pop-up city laboratory*, from mid-June to the end of July 2020, for the first time. The impressions and insights gained during these summer months were decisive in defining PAHO as the target area for further research as part of the follow-up project BiB-Lab / Innovation Lab for Educational Spaces in Motion.

This former public transport bus was equipped with fixed and flexibly expandable work surfaces and workstations, a lounge area in the rear that can be extended into a reclining area, a large fold-out monitor, a sound system including a disco ball and spotlights, a mini kitchen with electric cooker, fridge and water tank system, infrared heating panels as well as storage space for various equipment, tools and work materials. A photovoltaic system on the roof of the Bus Lab was financed as part of the BiB-Lab project to ensure a self-sufficient power supply. Toilets were available in the nearby Neighbourhood Lab.

With its multifunctional equipment, the 18 metre long, highly visible Bus Lab served as a studio, workshop and office space as well as a popular meeting place and socially integrative research platform: in the processual joint activities of the BiB-Lab team with young people from the nearby schools and architecture students, it was explored, experimentally tested and documented how the surrounding public (green) space can be appropriated for extracurricular uses and how urban space can become an educational space. The Bus Lab was used intensively, partly as part of workshop collaborations with partner schools and as part of lessons, but above all as part of the extracurricular BiB-Lab holiday programme during the summer months. This is because many of the people living here can neither afford summer holidays with their families nor paid holiday programmes for their children. Therefore setting up social justice was an important objective of this certain innovation lab type in public space to offer an inspiring, free afternoon programme with a very low threshold, seven days a week during the school holidays in July and August: Children and young people from the nearby partner schools were invited and encouraged to actively participate in the experimental, co-creative research process without prior registration, and no time commitment.

Fig. 2: Bus Lab. Photos: BiB-Lab-Team.

Individual and collective spatial needs were brought to light and scrutinised in playful spatial exploration processes, new forms of spatial perception were stimulated, different possibilities of participation were made tangible and practices of spatial appropriation were developed jointly and democratically (cf. BiB-Lab 2024; Harather 2021).

2. SCHOOL SPACE LAB: EXPERIMENTAL AND PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESSES

2.1. Architecture and pedagogy

The cooperation with four existing public schools in Wendstattgasse, one primary school and three secondary schools, built in the early 1970s, offered the BiB-Lab the opportunity to draw attention to existing spatial and pedagogical potentials, but also to existing deficits. The research of BiB-Lab was focused on *building bridges* between the specialised worlds of architecture on the one hand and of pedagogy on the other hand, between the different technical languages, levels of meaning and spatial terms. It aimed on the change in the perception of space after dealing with existing spatial conditions and existing needs, on the innovative interaction of formal and informal educational concepts in order to formulate and implement sustainable educational goals and feel-good spaces. Therefore the acceptance *of* and identification *with* democratic processes of participation that involve all those affected, including also the pupils, the cleaning staff, the administration, etc. – are important lessons to learn, for the architects, for the educators, for the school maintenance organisations, for the entire educational system. Therefore the BiB-Lab research team considers it essential to address these theoretical and practical interdisciplinary approaches in (higher) education and to develop an awareness of the possible positive effects of participatively developed and designed spaces on teaching and learning behaviour and on the public welfare-oriented effects of participation processes in general.

2.2. Experimenting with test settings as an open and ongoing process

It seems essential not to see the development of an educational space laboratory as a completed construction or spatial design project, but rather to define the conception and development process of the laboratory settings as a joint creative and research process between users and operators. The concepts of the laboratory environments themselves are thus already designed as innovation processes that, in the best case, generate innovation. The artistic and research-based exploration of spatial qualities and atmospheres, spatial perception and experience, spatial appropriation and utilisation releases a wide range of potential for innovation, as does the creative exploration of design possibilities and variations. Temporary spatial test settings, such as those developed as part of the BiB-Lab courses and implemented as DIY projects in the partner schools, have proven to be highly effective in this respect.

Fig. 3: Test settings in the School Space Lab. Photos: BiB-Lab-Team.

2.3. Sustainable learning effects through artistic thinking and acting

As Anne Bamford, the author of *The Wow Factor. Global Research Compendium on the Impact of the Arts in Education* has analysed, the arts promote holistic thinking as well as the free flow and creative merging of ideas – and these are important prerequisites for future developments and innovations. Seen in this light, the arts in education are a fundamental means of equipping (young) people with the social and intellectual skills they need for the unpredictable future (cf. Bamford 2006: 33).

Experience from BiB-Lab and previous projects have shown that the freedom of artistic work, without the pressure of time and performance, can be very motivating and promotes a willingness to learn and networked thinking. The positive experience of self-efficacy and the certainty of having actually *achieved something* also contribute to sustainable and personality-building learning effects. The involvement of students in joint spatial research and design with children and young people has always proved to be very positive in the projects carried out to date – both

for the pupils involved and for the students: Reflection discussions have repeatedly shown that learning together and from each other in a spirit of partnership can lead to a wide range of professional and social learning experiences (cf. Harather et al. 2023).

3. NEIGHBOURHOOD LAB: SOCIAL LEARNING AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Two empty shops in the small shopping centre, which was built in the 1970s like the entire municipal housing estate, were rented and financed with project funding. These premises formed the working basis for the university teaching and research of the BiB-Lab team on the topics of artistic education and spatial design of learning settings, a socially integrative field of experimentation and a fixed point of contact, especially for kids from the neighbouring schools but also for residents of all ages (cf. BiB-Lab 2024).

The Neighbourhood Lab turned out to be a *hot spot* for social learning and community building by bringing university education and research in this educationally deprived, culturally and socially disadvantaged neighbourhood. Learning with and from each other through shared space use and design making helped to promote the coexistence of different interest and population groups and thus social justice. Changing, temporary designs both inside and outside the Neighbourhood Lab and a variety of events such as public lectures, artistic co-creation and summer cinema in the outdoor space of the shopping centre have brought very positive socio-spatial effects.

Fig. 4: Neighbourhood Lab. Photos: BiB-Lab-Team.

An important goal of the three-year BiB-Lab project was therefore to maintain the Neighbourhood Lab as a university outpost and creative, socially integrative meeting place even after the official end of the BiB-Lab project. As no public funding was made available, it took a great deal of effort to find private sponsors and volunteers

to keep the Neighbourhood Lab running and thus to ensure the active participation of young people and to give them *their space*, *their voice* and *their importance* in educational processes and in our society in general. Since mid-September 2024, more than 70 young people aged between eight and 16 have already signed up for what is now known as the *LÄB Club* at the Neighbourhood Lab (cf. BiB-Lab 2024).

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RECONSTRUCTING THE CAMPUS OF THE SOMALI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY IN MOGADISHU: THE VISION FOR A PARK OF KNOWLEDGE

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Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, is a city shaped by conflicts and climate change, striving to rebuild conditions of safety and livability. This paper presents the regeneration project for the main campus of the Somali National University as an opportunity to explore the role of contemporary universities in promoting a sustainable and just urban future. The Gahayr Campus, designed in the 1970s through collaboration between Italian and Somali technicians, remained operational until the outbreak of civil war in 1991, which brought to its partial disruption. Since 2020, a project funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation and coordinated by the Politecnico di Milano has been working on the reconstruction of the campus. The design strategy draws from the campus's history, aiming to strengthen its identity and create an inclusive and safe environment for learning and socializing. The new campus is envisioned as a sustainable park of knowledge, where urban and landscape solutions can be tested to improve living and study conditions. This vision of "growing the future" portrays the campus as a seed for Mogadishu's rebirth, symbolizing resilience and civic renewal. The project explores how design can integrate justice, education and beauty, contributing to the strengthening of civil society.

Somalia; international cooperation; university campus; access to education; climate change

INTRODUCTION

The transformative potential of the nexus relating education, nature and social justice is key in fostering more equitable and inclusive societies. The regeneration project of the Gahayr Campus at the Somali National University (SNU) provides a compelling case study in this regard. It underscores the essence and critical role of educational institutions and invites reflection on how they should be designed, particularly in contexts of extreme fragility and resource scarcity. This is especially pertinent in Mogadishu, a city profoundly shaped by years of conflict and the impacts of climate change.

Officially titled "Infrastructural and Strategic Strengthening of the Somali National

University: Reconstruction of the Gahayr Campus in Mogadishu", the project has been financed by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation and coordinated by Politecnico di Milano. The SNU's current strategy responds to the urgent need for highly qualified professionals and specialists essential for rebuilding the country (Ministry of Planning, Investment and Economic Development, 2020). It envisions the provision of a safe, appropriate, accessible, and inclusive learning environment that integrates research, learning, and practical experience. Building on these strategic objectives, the project aspires to create an advanced educational space that prioritizes environmental sustainability and social resilience. Conceived as a "park of knowledge", the masterplan adopts a holistic approach, integrating urban, landscape, infrastructure, and social dimensions. Its ultimate goal is to establish the campus as a socio-ecological infrastructure and a driver and symbol of renewal and hope for Somalia's future.

1. THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION PROJECTS

The involvement of the Italian university in the reconstruction of the Somali National University (SNU) is deeply rooted in the historical ties between Italy and Somalia. As in the original construction of the SNU campus in the 1970s (Puglielli, 1996), the project was designed to position the Italian contribution as an advisory role. This approach aimed to facilitate dialogue among stakeholders and provide tools and expertise, ensuring that the actual design and development work would be carried out by Somali professionals. From the early phases of master planning, the project has been characterized by continuous dialogue with local actors, serving as a platform for both Somali and Italian scholars to engage in capacity development and collaborative research.

In international cooperation projects such as this, universities play a pivotal role as key actors, leveraging their capacity for intercultural dialogue and balanced engagement to advocate for the common good while strengthening local capacities through the co-creation of knowledge. Their involvement not only fosters social justice but also strengthens partnerships through shared learning and mutual understanding. This approach promotes inclusive, sustainable, and context-sensitive development models (Petrillo & Bellaviti, 2018). Their involvement not only promotes social justice but also enhances relationships built on shared learning and mutual understanding. By combining homegrown expertise with innovative strategies, these initiatives inspire inclusive, sustainable, and context-sensitive development models (Petrillo & Bellaviti, 2018). Adopting a "research by design" perspective – particularly in architecture and urban planning – broadens possibilities for local actors, providing a platform for reciprocal learning and genuine exchange. In this way, the project remains both forward-looking and firmly rooted in the realities of the communities it intends to serve (Montedoro et al., 2022).

2. MOGADISHU AND GAHAYR CAMPUS BETWEEN CONFLICTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Mogadishu, a coastal city founded around the 10th century, has a long and complex history. As a strategic crossroads for trade between Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, it developed into a multicultural center influenced by Arab, Persian, Indian, and later European colonial powers (Jama, 1996). After gaining independence from Italy, Somalia embarked on a national consolidation program, prioritizing the planning of its capital and the construction of critical public infrastructure (Puzo, 1972; Arecchi, 1984; Abulkadir et al., 2020). However, this trajectory was abruptly halted in 1991 with the outbreak of the civil war, which plunged the country into a prolonged period of instability and insecurity. In addition to socio-political fragility, Somalia is now one of the regions most vulnerable to climate change, experiencing rising temperatures, irregular rainfall, and recurring events of drought and desertification (Eklöw & Krampe, 2019; Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, 2020).

Fig. 1. Aerial view of the campus in 2020. Source: Politecnico di Milano (2020)

The Somali National University (SNU) Gahayr campus, designed in the 1970s through collaboration between Italian and Somali technicians, was a significant component of the post-colonial urban development plan for Mogadishu. It was envisioned as the country's leading academic institution, essential for shaping the new Somali society. Architect Ludovico Quaroni, alongside Salvatore Dierna, developed the masterplan at the University of Rome, within their research activities on university campuses as test grounds for urban design (Terranova, 1985). The layout was carefully designed to integrate urban structures with the surrounding landscape, setting a clear morphological configuration. Despite initial setbacks and challenges, the campus was eventually completed and began operations in 1985, serving its educational role until the outbreak of the civil war (Puglielli, 1996). During decades of conflict, the campus was occupied for military purposes (Gentile, 2017), leaving its facilities in a state of severe degradation. Today, many of its structures are dilapidated, with large sections overtaken by wilderness or informally inhabited.

3. THE NEW CAMPUS AS SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

3.1. The vision: a park of knowledge

Currently a segregated green oasis of wilderness amidst the sprawling urban fabric of Mogadishu, the Gahayr Campus holds the potential for a symbolic and functional rebirth, part of the plan for the renaissance of the city and the nation (MOPIED, 2020). Moving from the concept of a "park of knowledge", the design team envisioned its regeneration as if the campus could become a park, a place that, much like Somalia itself, has endured hardship but is ready to flourish anew. With new plants, fresh seeds germinating, and students taking their first steps toward a brighter future beneath the shade of its trees, the campus becomes a metaphor for renewal. In this vision, the campus itself serves as a seed for Mogadishu's broader revival. Just as a tree requires care and time to grow and bear fruit, so too does a university – and its students – nurture the growth of a society.

Guided by this vision, the project aims to transform the campus into an inclusive and multifunctional space, providing educational, ecological, and social services. The goal is to establish a distinct identity for the campus by celebrating its historical legacy while fostering a culture of sustainability and environmental stewardship. The masterplan focuses on the creation of a welcoming, safe environment where learning and social interaction occur in harmony with nature.

3.2. Design principles: the structural role of open spaces

The masterplan takes inspiration from the original layout designed by Quaroni, preserving the concentric structure centered around the rectorate, which continues to serve as the symbolic focal point of the campus. Existing buildings are restored and integrated into the new plan, while new structures are designed to respect the topography and enrich the spatial hierarchy. The campus, including cultural, religious and sports facilities, as well as housing for students and professors, is intended to function as a small town with an expected population of more than 20.000 people.

Fig. 2. Aerial view of the new campus masterplan. Source: Politecnico di Milano (2023)

As the masterplan is conceived to guide phased development through an incremental approach, significant attention has been given to the design of open spaces

organizing the future buildings. These spaces serve as a robust and enduring framework, ensuring the campus maintains its quality and coherence throughout its evolution. Flexibility is a core principle of the masterplan, allowing the campus to adapt to changing conditions and emerging needs, and alternative scenarios have been incorporated to address potential contextual changes. The modular structure ensures that the campus can be developed in stages without compromising architectural integrity or spatial harmony.

The quality of open spaces is envisioned as a unifying element, performing multiple educational, functional, and environmental roles. These spaces not only enhance the campus's aesthetic appeal but, above all, provide critical services that contribute to its sustainability and livability.

The project is the result of interdisciplinary collaboration among architects, engineers, landscape designers, and agronomists. This approach enables the integration of ecological, social, and cultural dimensions into the design, fostering an educational environment that supports both learning and research, comprising a variety of multifunctional green spaces:

- Educational Arboretum: a curated collection of plants typical of the Somali landscape, used as an educational resource.
- Gardens of Knowledge: outdoor study areas enriched with fruit-bearing native vegetation and natural shade, fostering creativity and diverse uses.
- Palm Boulevards: key relational spaces planted with geometric patterns of palms, equipped for multiple purposes and fostering campus community life.
- Tree-Lined Pathways and Roads: facilitating slow mobility.
- Agricultural Fields: outdoor laboratories enabling experimental practical application of sustainable farming techniques.

Fig. 3. Diagrams of the typologies of open spaces. Source: Politecnico di Milano (2023)

Arboretum   Gardens of Knowledge   Palms Boulevards   Tree Rows   Agricultural Fields
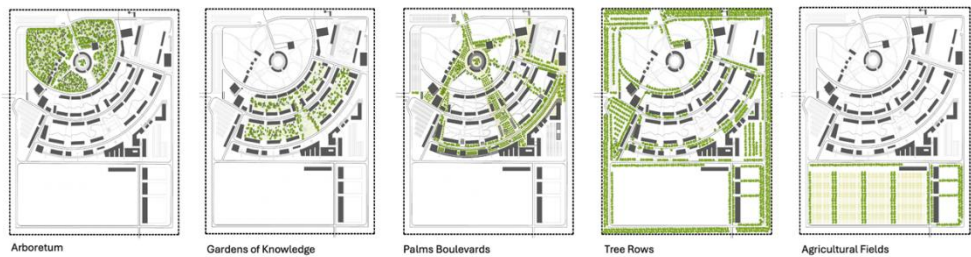
While these spaces are designed with a prevailing character, they also allow for future adaptation and reinterpretation in alignment with evolving academic programs, which can be co-designed and refined over time.

The mosaic of open spaces offers an array of ecosystem services that support the campus's daily activities. The project aims at demonstrating that it is possible to design and create high-quality educational spaces even under challenging conditions, by leveraging local resources in a virtuous and sustainable manner. In this perspective, the campus maximizes the implementation of smart infrastructure for

sustainable energy and water resource management, which includes rainwater harvesting and wastewater treatment for reuse in irrigating gardens and green areas. Thus, the campus evolves into a living laboratory for environmental sustainability, enabling students and faculty to explore innovative strategies for adapting to climate change, establishing it as a model of sustainability and resilience for the local context, where resources are particularly scarce.

CONCLUSIONS: THE CAMPUS AS AN INCUBATOR

The campus project is conceived as a privileged space that serves multiple roles: as an educational lab, where context-sensitive pedagogical approaches can be explored; as a landscape lab, preserving local ecological richness and experimenting with climate adaptation strategies through vegetation and agricultural practices; and as an urban lab, where forms of urban vitality can be reimagined in open spaces, addressing the limitations currently imposed by security concerns in Mogadishu. In all three capacities, the campus functions as an incubator of social and environmental justice. This incubating role is achieved through a delicate balance in design: the structured organization of the masterplan provides a clear mental map and a guideline for a progressive development, while the inventive and adaptive nature of the spaces allows for flexible interpretations of use, fostering self-expression, curiosity, creativity, and discovery. Such a dynamic equilibrium enables the campus to evolve as a living and learning environment that adapts to the needs of its users and the surrounding community. In this context, particular attention must be given to the role of beauty and the contribution of nature in shaping the spaces where we live, study, and work. The nexus relating pedagogy, nature and beauty serves as a powerful driver, fostering a sense of belonging, care, and stewardship, and evoking emotions that can inspire significant behavioral changes in favor of community building and social justice. The campus project, therefore, represents a design model that extends its significance beyond the specific case-study. It has the potential to inspire similar initiatives, both within the broader Mogadishu and Somali society and in other contexts facing similar socio-economic and environmental challenges.

Fig. 4. Aerial visualization of the new campus masterplan. Source: Politecnico di Milano (2023)

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ECO-INCLUSIVE PLAY SPACES FOR CHILDREN: REFLECTIONS ON INSTITUTIONALISED AND NON-INSTITUTIONALISED ENVIRONMENTS IN ITALY AND SPAIN

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This article presents the results of a transdisciplinary and transnational research project involving researchers and students in pre-service teacher education, kindergarten teacher training, and urban planning between Italy and Spain. The research focused on institutionalised play spaces (school playgrounds) and non-institutionalised spaces (urban parks). The aim was to analyse how well these spaces designed for children's recreation and free play comply with the principles of eco-dependency, interdependency and inclusion, proposed as key axes of analysis. This research was jointly conducted by the University of Cantabria and the University of Catania, within the collaborative framework provided by the European University for Customised Education (EUNICE).

Eco-Dependency, Interdependency, Inclusion, Urban Planning, Pedagogical Spaces

INTRODUCTION

To what extent are school playgrounds, parks, and public spaces designed to be both ecological and inclusive for children and, more broadly, for diverse groups of users? What are the main characteristics of "eco-inclusiveness" and how can spaces be improved to reflect these principles? These questions guided the study presented in this article. Positioned at the intersection of childhood studies, education and urban studies, this research explored how children experience, interpret and (re)shape the spaces they inhabit and, considers how public spaces can better serve children and their communities (Derr & Tarantini, 2016).

Previous studies (Francis & Lorenzo, 2006) highlighted the limited connection between urban playgrounds and children's needs. Standardised designs often cater more to adult preferences over child-friendly features, neglecting children's diverse interests and abilities. Additionally, urbanisation trends prioritising commercial development have led to diminished investments in public parks. Consequently, outdoor spaces that cater to free play have been largely replaced by indoor environments driven by consumerism and technology-based leisure activities.

In contrast, this study starts from the premise that playgrounds and urban parks are essential in children's daily lives. It analyses their limitations and potential for improvement in two urban contexts: Santander (Spain) and Catania (Italy).

School playgrounds have the potential to be versatile spaces for different interests and abilities, offer opportunities for free play and reduced adult authority. However, challenges arise from the under-utilisation of playgrounds as educational spaces (Vincent, 2006). Urban parks are those spaces where people of different ages, ethnicities, status and gender have the opportunity to coexist and spend time together, enriched by their differences and in contact with more than human species. However, challenges arise from underestimating the potential of such coexistence (Neal et al., 2015).

Using an eco-social perspective (Hirvilammi et al., 2023), the study examines the challenges and possibilities of school playgrounds and urban parks in fostering eco-dependency, interdependency, and social inclusion. The following sections detail the research's theoretical premises, methodology, and findings.

1. ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN DISCIPLINES AND CONTEXTS

This research emerges from a longstanding collaboration between the authors, initiated in 2016. Combining expertise in educational processes and urban planning, this partnership began within the 'Mafia Landscapes Lab' at the University of Catania, an interdepartmental initiative engaged students and researchers in community-focused projects to address socio-ecological challenges (Piazza et al., 2018). The lab was part of a broader system of interdepartmental university labs that involved students and researchers in a process of community engagement with local actors in order to fulfil the institutional role of the 'third mission' for universities (Boffo & Gagliardi, 2015), that is, to integrate education, research, community and public service through the practical development of applied knowledge in collaboration with different actors (residents, associations, municipalities, etc.).

Further, the authors participated in a transnational collaboration within the European University for Customised Education (EUNICE), involving colleagues from the University of Cantabria. The project aimed to analyse institutionalised (school) and non-institutionalised (urban park) children's play spaces in two European cities: Santander, Cantabria (Spain) and Catania (Italy) from an eco-social perspective. University students from Spain and Italy contributed to the research through an innovative process, creating "postcards" that depicted play spaces and reflected on their eco-inclusiveness. Exchanging these postcards provided a platform for comparing different geographical contexts and fostering critical reflections.

2. AN ECO-INCLUSIVE APPROACH FOR PLAYGROUNDS: KEY ASPECTS AND QUESTIONS

This research draws from childhood geography, a subfield of cultural and social geography (Prats et al., 2012), which aims to explore how children experience the spaces they occupy, as well as the activities and practices they engage in within

those spaces (Ceballos and Susinos, 2022). Moreover, the work aligns with urban studies that focus on identifying the most effective principles and tools for enhancing the quality of public spaces (Carmona, 2019).

Within this framework, this research examines how play spaces can be transformed to be more inclusive for children, drawing on what the literature identifies as an eco-social approach (Mandelli, 2022; Hirvilammi et al., 2023). This approach provides a set of interpretive criteria for exploring the relationship between ecological systems and the dynamics of local actors. In this research, three main axes were established.

- 1) Eco-dependency:
  Examines the use of natural resources (e.g., water, materials) in play spaces, their origins, and waste management practices.
  Investigates whether spaces encourage a respectful relationship with nature.
- 2) Interdependency:
  Explores the types of interconnections and relationships fostered in play spaces, including interaction and collaboration, competition, and intergenerational connections.
- 3) Social justice
  Adopt the "just city" framework (Fainstein, 2010) to examine the distribution of play spaces within cities.
  Questions whether access to these spaces reflects equity or perpetuates social inequalities.

These principles guided the students from Catania and Cantabria in analysing and re-imaging both school playgrounds and urban parks in their local context.

3. METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS
The work has been organised into 5 phases.
- The first phase was related to a joint design of the project (between Cantabria and Catania), during which all the participants developed a framework and common tools for the evaluation of existing parks.
- The second phase was related to the development of the fieldwork, through photographic survey, selection and analysis of playgrounds, including the use of satellite maps. The activities were carried out by the students on the basis of some guiding criteria and protocols provided by professors.
- The third phase was the creation of visual postcards, carried out by the student groups (2 – 5 students) under the guidance of the professors.
- The fourth phase was the exchange of virtual postcards between Cantabria and Catania via an online platform to facilitate reflections on similarities and differences.
- The last phase was the evaluation and dissemination of findings.

The analysis followed a series of steps, outlined as follows: i) identifying the space; ii) mapping the area and examining routes and access points; iii) exploring the site;

iv) asking key questions such as "How is the space experienced?", "By whom?", "How does it change at different times of the day?"; v) capturing and selecting significant photographs to support the students' arguments; vi) writing reflections and engaging in discussions with teachers; vii) processing the insights through the creation of postcards.

The active involvement of the students in the production and analysis of the postcards promoted proposals for the improvement of playgrounds and urban parks and enhanced their ability to imagine the design of play spaces in line with eco-social principles.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 205 students from Catania and 293 students from Cantabria analysed 110 institutionalised and non-institutionalised play spaces, creating an equal number of postcards (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Some examples of postcards from Catania and Santander. Source: https://educaexchangeunict.unican.es/it/

The analysis of the parks reveals a prevalent standardization of spaces, often characterized by pre-assembled plastic elements, with limited natural materials. Where natural materials are present, they are frequently poorly maintained. This points to a deficiency in 'context-sensitive' co-design approaches and minimal community involvement in shaping their environments.

Accessibility to these spaces is also an issue, particularly for those without access to a car, as pedestrian routes and public transport are often inadequate. This creates social inequities and limits access to playgrounds for vulnerable groups.

Additionally, the design of these spaces often neglects the creation of shaded areas, rendering them unusable during peak heat hours, particularly in regions with high temperatures. Natural elements are commonly employed as decorative

features rather than as opportunities for play or discovery.

Intergenerational spaces, designed for both children and older people, generally lack thoughtful integration. Similarly, the potential of public spaces to promote multicultural interaction and cultural exchange is largely untapped. The emphasis tends to be on individual play, with little provision for collaborative or group activities. Features such as mud, water and spaces for creative building or exploration are almost entirely absent.

On a more positive note, the analysis highlights some attention to inclusive play, particularly for people with motor and cognitive disabilities. However, this inclusivity is often based on standardised equipment. In rare cases, inclusive design has been enriched by sensory pathways – features designed to stimulate different cognitive processes and accommodate those with psychomotor difficulties – tailored to the specific context.

With regard to the educational process in Catania, and to the students' ability to develop a critical observation of the play spaces, it was noted that they initially had difficulties in identifying the significant elements to carry out the analysis. However, thanks to the continuous interaction with the professors who guided their learning, they were able to develop the necessary skills, including a better sensitivity to spatial analysis, facilitated by the use of satellite maps. Although they were not used to this type of analysis, the opportunity to work at the intersection of disciplinary fields allowed them to enrich their toolbox for understanding a redesign of play spaces.

In addition, a questionnaire revealed some other significant improvements: at the beginning of the project, 64.2% of the university students surveyed knew what an inclusive space was, but 89% did not know the characteristics of ecological and inclusive spaces. Also, 65.9% had only sporadically visited play spaces before, confirming the problem of their under-utilisation.

Finally, despite the initial difficulties, the university students made some important suggestions for improving the play areas, highlighting the potential benefits of involving different actors, including the same university students, in the design process of public and collective spaces.

5. CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

The university students' learning outcomes were demonstrated by the final postcards they exchanged between Cantabria and Catania. They showed not only a maturation of the students' analytical and design skills, but also their growing enthusiasm for engaging in a practical activity that allowed them to explore the context in which they live. The project has thus confirmed the validity of transdisciplinary and transnational collaborations as an opportunity to improve the quality of university students' learning processes. It has also confirmed the strategic role of focusing on "spaces", such as playgrounds and urban parks, as arenas of fruitful experimentation for innovating the ways in which university students can engage with the territories in which they live, confront other contexts and prepare themselves to become educators capable of developing awareness and sensitivity to the quality of

children's play spaces.

The study offers valuable insights from an urban planning perspective, shedding light on the neglect of playgrounds and urban parks in Catania while echoing broader trends in the literature. These trends reveal a systemic disregard for public spaces, largely shaped by the persistent influence of neoliberal urban dynamics. This neglect is closely tied to reduced funding for public services and policies, which undermines maintenance efforts and complicates renovations, particularly when eco-inclusive design principles, often less financially convenient, are involved. Furthermore, it underscores the standardization of space equipment, driven more by market forces than by the specific needs or creative contributions of the local communities.

We believe that studies such as the one presented in this research, carried out within the collaborative framework of the European University for Customised Education (EUNICE), hold significant potential to advance research and, just as importantly, to inspire actionable solutions to enhance children's play environments and urban spaces more broadly.

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DESIGNING INCLUSIVE OUTDOOR SPACES: AN ADVANCED UNIVERSITY TRAINING COURSE

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Outdoor education has become increasingly relevant in Italy over the last 15 years, as evidenced by the growth in scientific publications, professional interest, and training initiatives. This trend has spurred the organization of conferences, the development of university specialization courses, and in-service training programs across the country. Outdoor environments, seen as the "third educator" alongside teachers and peers, provide rich and meaningful learning contexts. They offer less structured settings that foster early cognitive, emotional, and social development. However, international research highlights that outdoor spaces are still underutilized in education, despite their potential to enhance children's overall well-being and lifelong learning. In 2023, the University Advanced Training Course "Designing Inclusive Outdoor Spaces" was launched, co-financed by ARPAE, the Emilia-Romagna Region, and the Municipality of Bologna. The course brought together 46 professionals, including environmental educators, urban planners, and pedagogical coordinators, in participatory workshops using Thinking Routines to foster collaboration and innovation. Through interdisciplinary approaches, participants co-designed projects aimed at creating inclusive and equitable educational spaces, from school gardens to urban parks, with a focus on children's rights and well-being.

outdoor education; inclusive spaces; interdisciplinary approaches; participatory planning/design; well-being; sustainable architecture

A NEED TO RETHINK OUTDOOR SPACES

In recent years, the need to rethink outdoor educational spaces has become increasingly evident, in line with the growing recognition of their educational, social and environmental value. Several national and international documents emphasise the importance of integrating such spaces into educational pathways, with a focus on sustainability, mental health and well-being, focusing on inclusion, accessibility and the rights of children, young people and adults.

In Italy, the introduction of Law 92/2019 has refocused attention on the objectives not only of citizenship education, but of the school system, to be truly democratic, equitable and inclusive. At the global level, the World Health Organisation (WHO)

highlighted the importance of green and blue spaces for mental health in 2021. This reinforces the recognition that accessible natural environments contribute not only to the mental and physical well-being of young children, but also to the health of the whole community. The Covid-19 pandemic emergency had a major impact on the school sector and, by highlighting existing problems, led to a rethinking of teaching and experimentation with new spatial solutions. The need for more ventilation in indoor spaces and the distances required by regulations brought the focus back to school and urban outdoor spaces.

In 2002, the European Union introduced *GreenComp,* the European Framework of Competences for Sustainability, a document that defines key competences to prepare citizens capable of facing the environmental and social challenges of our time.

These references underline the urgency of considering outdoor spaces as fundamental educational environments, capable of combining sustainability, learning and well-being, and promoting a culture of inclusion and active citizenship.

ARCHITECTURE AND EDUCATION IN DIALOGUE

The University Advanced Training Course "Designing Inclusive Outdoor Spaces" launched in 2023 is conceived as a workspace for developing knowledge and practices that support the promotion of inclusive and educational outdoor contexts on the one hand, and participatory and collaborative planning on the other. This requires an approach based on dialogue between pedagogy and architecture.

From an educational and pedagogical point of view, the importance of promoting deliberate and conscious outdoor education has gradually become clear. At the same time, however, it became clear that this dimension could only be truly sustainable if it was accompanied by an appropriate rethinking of spaces, equipment and materials. Hence, the design of any context endowed with educational intentionality consists of two inseparable parts: the educational and pedagogical design and the architectural design (Weyland & Galletti, 2018, p. 9). It has been recognised that these dimensions cannot continue to proceed in parallel without ever meeting, but rather that it is necessary to appreciate the potential inherent in a joint and participatory design between them.

The challenge, which has long been at the centre of the architectural debate, of creating a "school without walls" through the design of school gardens and urban parks, highlights the importance of learning models that are not tied to defined physical spaces, but open "to a circuit of functions integrated with cultural services and with the expressive values of each context and territory" (Del Nord, 1991). Where the outdoor space is no longer a neglected space, but a place of continuity with the school environment, which Del Nord defines as an "educational structure" (Bologna and Torricelli, 2021).

Several publications in recent years have highlighted the growing desire and need to develop action processes that integrate these disciplines in a collaborative perspective, particularly with regard to the redesign of school spaces (Castoldi, 2020; Tosi, 2019; Weyland & Attia, 2015). Recognising the benefits of such collaborative

work, it has been highlighted in the aforementioned field of research that the construction or reconstruction of educational spaces in a participatory sense is "a journey that takes those involved to the limits of their fields of expertise, to meet in the (usually no man's) land of interdisciplinarity, between the sciences of education (in the broad sense) and those of planning (architecture and design)" (Weyland & Galletti, 2018, p. 43). The constructive intersection between pedagogy and architecture is thus offered as an opportunity to become aware of one's own positioning and to move towards the inclusion of perspectives other than one's own. In this regard, Weyland and Attia (2015), in a study based on interviews with teachers, architects, administrators and school leaders, highlight the difficulty of mutual understanding between these professionals. The motivation they identified was often due to different terminological and interpretations around the theme of spatial design.

The creation of a place for sharing and dialogue between these areas, such as the Advanced Training Course, is in this sense proposed as a context that can potentially respond positively to this issue, allowing the construction of a common language. Through a space for reflection, shared and collaborative training involving multidisciplinary professionals from the pedagogical-educational and technical-architectural fields, it is possible to understand how to design open-air environments characterised by good architectural and structural quality and optimal pedagogical-educational-didactic coherence. The need for training in the design of spaces capable of promoting a sustainable development perspective (Dessì & Piazza, 2022) and of supporting educational approaches based on outdoor education has been recognised, particularly by professionals in the educational field. This desire was combined with the need, expressed by professionals and architects, to better understand what the users of the spaces they design really need, with their wellbeing and quality of life as a principle. To achieve this, it was necessary to structure a training context that would take on the task of not only rethinking outdoor spaces from a design and architectural perspective, but also supporting and stimulating participants' reflexivity about what it means to educate outdoors from an inclusive perspective and in a participatory context.

This need seems fundamental today. It is necessary to reverse course and work towards changing a cultural paradigm that has often led to a lack of attention to the real needs of children, adolescents and adults when it comes to their living spaces and contexts. This requires careful attention to the skills of those who deal with this issue daily in their work contexts, to unravel the historical and cultural conditioning that has often led to false beliefs from an adult-centred and non-inclusive perspective.

TO BUILD A COMMON LANGUAGE

The main objective of the "Designing Inclusive Outdoor Spaces" postgraduate course by the research group that led to its creation was to train a professional profile competent in the design of outdoor spaces, able to reflect on the characteristics of spaces in relation to the needs of those who use them and to collaborate in an

interdisciplinary way with institutions and other professionals.

The course enabled the training of a heterogeneous group of 46 participants, including teachers, environmental educators, pedagogical coordinators, municipal green technicians, architects and town planners. All united by a common interest and/or commitment to work around the themes of designing environments with an educational intention in the outdoors.

The participatory and interdisciplinary nature was one of the main strengths and characteristics of the course, which invested in a wide range of speakers with different educational and professional backgrounds, who approached the topic from their own point of view and approach. Specifically, the speakers included: educators, psychologists, ecologists, architects, landscape architects, institutions and associations in the sector; with the aim of offering and creating, together with the participants, a common framework and language around the design and care of outdoor spaces.

The training focused on promoting a shared understanding of inclusive design, children's culture, health promotion and environmental sustainability. Training was given on how to co-construct active citizenship based on collaborative and interdisciplinary work, exploring methodologies, outdoor education and learning, and issues related to the planning and maintenance of spaces. The training was focused on promoting common knowledge related to inclusive design, childhood culture, promoting health and environmental sustainability.

A fundamental objective underlying the creation of the course was the desire to create a network linking the various educational institutions in the area. It was essential to activate relationships between participants aimed at developing concrete experiments in participatory planning in their own reference contexts and beyond. All this was to converge towards a single goal: to arrive at a rethinking of educational services, of the professionals who work within them and of those who, in various capacities, are involved in the design of open spaces as open ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), competent and connected to the world; a conception that, recognising their fundamental role of agency, leads to the concrete possibility of creating networks of different people and institutions, always with a view to activating processes of training and educational and cultural change. In fact, "the quality of outdoor education processes is closely linked to the quality of the design of outdoor spaces, which in turn depends on the involvement of all participants who use those spaces, so that it can be co-designed and participated in by all" (Schenetti & Petrucci, 2023). As stated by Milotay (2016), the key to the success of pedagogical experimentation initiatives capable of generating educational and social innovation lies precisely in being able to activate – and make sustainable in the long term – the mutual interdependence between top-down and bottom-up oriented transformative processes (Schenetti & Petrucci, 2023).

In order to promote the collaboration between the pedagogical and architectural dimensions, already highlighted by Weyland and Attia (2015), the course emphasised the importance of a performance-based approach in the design of learning

spaces. This approach starts from the needs of the users involved, from a user-centered design perspective, to define design solutions that meet specific environmental and technological requirements (UNI 8289). The definition of the 'demand', which integrates the needs of the different users, is therefore essential to provide an adequate 'response' through design.

The many variables involved in the design of an outdoor education space require a rethink of the design process, which must necessarily consider the different points of view of the child, the educator, the manager, the parent and the specific characteristics of each user. The environment is both a constraint and a stimulus that the project cannot ignore. The outdoor space 'without walls', also through the integration of furniture and equipment, must be inclusive and flexible to respond to the needs of the different users, often not known in advance, to the stimuli of the children and teachers, to environmental and weather variables. During the course, a role-playing activity was carried out to simulate a co-design process in which the points of view of the participants, all directly involved in outdoor education but with different roles, were discussed. It should be noted that the activity was initially carried out in homogeneous groups, which were then brought together in a more heterogeneous way by the teachers to stimulate reflection and open less usual perspectives. Architects, agronomists and teachers tried to identify with the children, teachers, parents and headmasters to construct the question to ask the designers. The groups then tried to come up with a design response that would meet the needs expressed. This was a pragmatic way of testing the extent to which this approach can create environments that truly meet the needs of all, thus promoting outdoor education that is truly inclusive and sustainable. The experience of the course also shows how important it is to integrate the methodology of user-centred design with co-design in the design of outdoor spaces. In fact, the former is somewhat limited to considering the user as a mainly passive subject whose needs are studied and analysed by the designers through observations or interviews. Co-design, on the other hand, focuses on how to involve the user with an active role in the design process (Cocina et al., 2019). The main difference between these two approaches is therefore the shift from designing 'for users' to designing 'with users' (Sanders and Stappers, 2008). There was no lack of attention to the requirements of landscape architecture, which made it possible to consider the wide range of design possibilities offered by the characteristics of the ground, paving and topography, as well as natural elements and colours. This was linked to the multiple possibilities offered by spaces designed as 'playgrounds' and 'play universes', where an approach based on dialogue between architecture and pedagogy was adopted. In this direction, the right of children and young people to play and their way of learning becomes an essential condition for design. The perspective is that of the 'playable city', in order to move away from the concept of an urban context characterised by fenced and enclosed schoolyards and playgrounds, in which the playable space is relegated to the periphery in predefined locations. The proposal is to reverse the perspective and make all public spaces available to citizens playable, such as squares, natural and pedestrian areas, and spaces around schools; to think of cities

where play begins in school areas and extends into the urban space, understood as open and continuous. In this sense, the "Plan for Play in Public Spaces" of the city of Barcelona has been studied, which has set itself the goal of becoming a playable city by 2030, moving towards a change in the concept of urban play space and promoting more and better opportunities for play in public spaces, in close connection with citizenship and nature.

META-REFLECTION PRACTICES TO SUPPORT CHANGE PROCESSES

The actions described and planned had a common objective: to build a group that, by working together, listening to each other and questioning each other, would create a participatory process. What the design of the training course was intended to train, i.e. the ability to design spaces from a shared point of view, focusing on the multidimensional participation of disciplines, professions and users, was in fact experienced first and foremost by the participants themselves during the course. The practices of reflexivity and confrontation, born from the proposal of the Thinking Routines of Harvard University, were essential for activating the participation of the students.

During the training, the participants were involved in Thinking Routine sessions (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008): strategies that originated from Harvard University's Project Zero with the aim of making learning processes visible and shareable. This method was used to increase the trainees' awareness of the learning process underway: to activate their reflexivity, to exchange between professions and to heuristically track the evolution of co-constructed thinking over time. Thinking routines are simple, short strategies that can be proposed to students and trainees with the aim of intervening in their thinking processes, enhancing them and making them visible. They are therefore strategies that aim to extend and deepen thinking and, if used frequently, become part of the fabric of the learning community's daily life (Mughini & Panzavolta, 2020).

CO-DESIGN PROCESSES AND PROJECT WORK: TOWARDS NEW PERSPECTIVES

At the end of the course, co-design processes were activated between participants aimed at the construction of group Project Work. This project proposal envisaged the activation of a reflective process by the individual which, in addition to taking shape for the individual himself, was then open to the possibility of becoming a participatory design constructed by and for several individuals in a shared and collaborative manner (Deluigi & Marino, 2023).

The course aimed to create participatory contexts among students by encouraging them to experiment with design in their own environment. The course, therefore, did not limit itself to training the subjects included in the course, but also sought to put them in a position to produce effective and concrete changes from a participatory and shared perspective, promoting a new culture of education and childhood at a community and social level. The decision to conclude the training with the elaboration of group Project Work was made precisely in order to achieve these objectives.

The 46 participants autonomously divided themselves into 6 multi-professional groups, formed according to their disciplinary skills and experiences. Over time, thanks to getting to know each other and the training experiences offered with active methodologies, often carried out during immersive days in natural settings, the participants began to establish relationships and connections between their experiences and interests. It is in this way that common design ideas were developed for the qualification and innovation of outdoor spaces of educational, school and neighbourhood services, which later came to concrete life in the Project Works.

The methodological learning proposal adopted for the Project Work construction phase can be associated with Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Project-Based Learning (PjBL) approaches, given their strong appeal and connection with the participatory and co-design methodological set-up adopted throughout the course. Again, the approach was strongly student-centered, with students organizing themselves into working groups that collaborated for a considerable period of time (Helle et al., 2006). The project works were focused on real needs and problems of environments known to the students, who, through dialogue and direct confrontation with the recipients of the learning spaces and soil analyses, raised questions that were fundamental to the construction of the projects. The team of teachers and tutors played a careful role of facilitation, guidance and support throughout the projects, helping the participants to frame the processes, monitoring the development of the final products and assessing the learning at the final moments (David, 2008; Helle et al., 2006). In order to support the concreteness of the design processes put in place, the production of final artifacts made by the trainees through the construction of posters representative of the projects constructed by the working groups was planned. Finally, in the design phases, also in this training environment, the recursive recall made by the students to their prior knowledge was evident, reinforcing the learning internalized during the course. The projects presented demonstrated the value of multi-professional co-design that places the need for interdisciplinary and participatory work at the center. Each project highlights the importance of community involvement, interdisciplinary dialogue and the adoption of ecological approaches to transform educational spaces into places of growth, socialization and sustainability. Specifically, the 6 project works can be traced to three main outcomes:

- Transformation of outdoor space from garden to experiential educational space (i. e. "The garden belongs to everyone"; "Polo 0-99");
- Redevelopment of outdoor space to promote nature-related sensory-type activities to counteract isolation and promote inclusion and socialization (i. e. "Hourglass"; "Pole 0-99"; "Green space, white sheet, lots of mud");
- Renovation of damaged outdoor areas as an opportunity for redesign with a view to outdoor education involving furniture, natural elements and equipment to promote interaction and collective responsibility (i. e. "Towards new perspectives for the gardens of educational services"; "Kalipè"; "Green space, white sheet, lots of mud").

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THE ROLE OF BUILDING CULTURE MEDIATION IN ACHIEVING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SCHOOL SPACE DESIGN ISSUES. RELEVANCE, METHODS AND EXAMPLES OF PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES THAT PROMOTE DEMOCRACY

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Schools have an educational mission and must face up to the challenges of the times. But what are these major challenges of our time? How are they changing educational plans, curricula and school types? How are we currently responding spatially to pedagogical changes and how should the physical space of the school have a positive effect on teaching, learning and life in the future? What interactions are there between architecture and pedagogy? The article highlights the role of building culture education as an important and necessary component of participation processes with children and young people in the design of school spaces. Based on the relevance of building culture mediation in general, it is discussed as a democracy-promoting measure for school communities in participation processes. Finally, specific mediation measures that were carried out prior to the redesign of school spaces are presented. Architecture students from the Vienna University of Technology were significantly involved in both projects.

Communicating building culture, education, participation, involvement, school space design

CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME AND THE RESULTING STRUCTURAL, PEDAGOGICAL AND SPATIAL CHANGES

As an educational establishment school is an organization, an institution and a learning environment. As such, it is a place whose central pedagogical task is to promote children in a legally secure space on an equal footing so that they can develop the ability to lead an enlightened, responsible and self-determined individual life (Budde, 2018).

Appropriate spaces must be made available for the corresponding locations of the didactic measures for imparting knowledge and skills that best meet the requirements of everyday school life and the needs of the various user groups.

In doing so, schools must always take into account the diverse and simultaneously occurring challenges.

These currently include the structural change to integrated school forms, the individualization of teaching and learning, the inclusion of children with disabilities and the digitalization of teaching and school organization. In addition, there is a need to create more equal opportunities for children from disadvantaged social backgrounds and to better integrate children with different immigration histories and languages of origin into the education system (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung).

New structural changes inevitably lead to new methods, which are applied in differentiated spatial learning settings and result in more learning, teaching and supervision times in the institutions (keyword: all-day school). The school is now increasingly becoming a living space for children and young people and must be (re)designed accordingly. Pupils' participation and co-determination in school-relevant topics increase the possibility of identification with the school and thus fulfill an important function in strengthening the sense of belonging to the school community.

Promoting democracy is considered a fundamental goal of general education and is therefore also an educational mandate of the school. Participation as co-determination, involvement and co-decision (cf. Eikel 2006) can be understood as an indispensable, albeit limited, component of democracy (cf. Bettmer 2008, p. 214f). According to John Dewey, democracy is more than a form of government, it is "first and foremost a form of common and shared experience" and thus concerns social interaction (Dewey, 1993, p. 12), which in the best case leads to social justice.

The changing demands on school space, such as all-day use or differentiation of teaching methods and individualized knowledge transfer, manifest themselves structurally in Austria in newly built school typologies, such as "Cluster schools" (Haselsteiner, 2010), which are equipped with open learning spaces, learning landscapes and 'learning environments'.

However, the majority of pupils in Vienna attend schools that were built in the 19th century during the industrial revolution and whose floor plans already convey the order and discipline required for life in an industrial society (Kühn, 2010).

In particular, these existing schools need to be redesigned or rebuilt to meet today's social requirements and the pedagogical demands on knowledge transfer.

As children and young people spend a significant part of their time in school buildings and the demands on schools are expanding from teaching and learning spaces to living spaces, it is obvious to start participation processes for the redesign of existing school buildings. In addition to the pupils, teachers, management and other school staff (such as the "school caretaker") should also be involved. These users can be seen as experts on the school buildings.

2. EDUCATION IN BUILDING CULTURE ("BAUKULTUR") IN GENERAL

2.1 "Baukultur" needs dialog and the involvement of everyone

The Austrian Building Culture Policy Platform identifies eight challenges that politicians urgently need to address. In addition to the major issues such as stopping

land consumption, ensuring the preservation of existing buildings, providing afford-able and high-quality housing, establishing quality features for the promotion of Baukultur, increasing the quality and usability of public spaces and green areas, en-suring quality-oriented awarding of planning and construction management con-tracts and creating financial incentives as a control system for sustainable action, attention is also paid to the education and communication of Baukultur for every-one, and in particular for children and young people (Plattform Baukulturpolitik 1). Anyone who wants to make a contribution to participation later on should be able to experience and learn this as a child.

Children are directly affected by Baukultur measures and decisions today and will be particularly affected in the future. Awakening interest in this topic and encourag-ing children to think about it, have their say and participate is therefore essential, as architecture and spatial planning have a direct impact on the quality of life of each and every individual. And as A. de Botton has already aptly formulated the basic assumption of building culture education, "life is better and more satisfying when we begin to understand the built environment that surrounds us architectur-ally" (de Botton, 2006).

2.2 Education in building culture ("Baukultur") is an issue for schools

Children and young people are particularly affected by all facets of "Baukultur", even if they themselves are often only able to participate in decisions that affect their immediate surroundings, such as their own homes. This makes it all the more important for them to be involved in more general design processes at an early stage and to be consulted as experts, especially about their school, residential and leisure environments (Plattform Baukulturpolitik 2). In line with the mission of cul-tural education, environmental education, sustainability education, political edu-cation and democratic skills can be achieved here with different focal points in var-ious formats using partly artistic means and methods and always based on the STEM subjects. Increasing the social value of our designed living space is based on the ability to assess high-quality architecture and design and requires co-decision-making. The aim of early education in building culture is to provide young people with the competence to assess high-quality architecture and design and thus con-tribute to increasing the social value of our designed living space (Aldrian-Schnee-bacher, 2022).

3. PARTICIPATION – FORMATS AND METHODS

Baukultur improves when people can (or are allowed) to participate in its develop-ment process. Participation processes in specific redesign and construction tasks make building culture a direct experience.

In order to be able to participate on an equal footing and away from vested interests, simple basic skills are required that relate to knowledge of design and an under-standing of space.

The first step is to develop an interest in the topic and learn about design options.

Subsequently, the surrounding space is explored with the now expanded knowledge and consciously perceived with open eyes. Positive and negative aspects can now be recognized, own concerns and needs can be derived and formulated. This serves as the basis for the productive dialog that follows. Ideally, pupils are also invited to get creative, either by making suggestions in the form of models, collages etc. or by participating themselves. The brainstorming and creative processes require support and guidance and, last but not least, the visible results are decisive for the children and young people (cf. Bundes Jugend Vertretung 2006).

It is also important to clarify how and in what way participation can take place. According to Richard Schröder, the 9-stage model of participation distinguishes between participation, involvement, co-determination, self-determination and self-administration.

For the following two project-oriented methods of participation for children and young people at Austrian schools, the didactic tripod "Listening/Learning – Exploring – Doing" was used. Research-based and playful approaches were chosen which, in addition to motivating, enabling and empowering, always aimed to identify the needs of the pupils.

4. EXAMPLES OF PARTICIPATION PROCESSES WITH SCHOOLS FOR THE PURPOSE OF SCHOOL SPACE REDESIGN

In various course formats ("Learning in educational institutions – architectural mediation/architectural research (3 ECTS) and design programs (10 ECTS), architecture students at TU Wien have developed different mediation formats on the topic of learning, teaching and living space since 2017 and implemented them with classes in different schools (elementary school, middle schools and high schools).

Two examples that led to the realization of school room redesigns are presented.

4.1 Intervention GRG GEBLERGASSE, Vienna in winter semester 2023/24. Building culture mediation as an initial spark for student participation in future renovation measures

In a planning phase 00, pupils of a Viennese grammar school (GRG Geblergasse) were sensitized to their school building in order to subsequently ensure that the entire school community, including the pupils, had a say in the planned conversion and renovation measures.

The needs of the pupils were collected in a participatory process consisting of silent post formats, which on the one hand raised awareness and on the other encouraged pupils to explore their own school building, a pupil forum and discussions. In a final exhibition, the results of the process were presented to parents and decision-makers in school and district authorities.

Among other things, the process identified a desire for more colorfulness and comfortable seating areas for breaks. As a visible result of the participation process and as an initial spark for further changes, colored seating niches were realized in the long access corridors. While the corridor in the basement now has green window

niches that correspond with the green in the adjacent schoolyard, the niches on the top floor were designed in blue to match the view of the sky. On the first floor, the orange color has a stimulating effect and invites people to sit together and chat. The colors, stools, cushions and plants give the areas of different heights their own identity. At the same time, these simple measures have encouraged the pupils in their effectiveness.

The collaboration with the school was part of the BiB-Lab research project: innovation labs for education and, in particular, school space labs.

4.2 Architecture mediation with primary school pupils and pupils at the new secondary school in Rappottenstein, Lower Austria

In the case of the schools in Rappottenstein, there were spatial capacities, concrete financial resources and interest from the entire school community and municipality for changes to the school building, but no concrete ideas. Students from the Master's degree program in Architecture carried out a planning phase zero, delivered design proposals and a concrete plan with prototypical school furniture. Finally, the project was accompanied by researchers and students from TU Wien until the handover of the realization.

Architecture students took on the role of architecture mediators. Their task was to define relevant content as topics and to present them in an understandable way. The communication processes initiated by the mediation work provided information about positive and negative aspects of the space. A win-win situation for both sides can be noted: the close contact with the users was described by the students as extremely valuable and instructive.

Different formats were used:

- the children's view of the school was thematized by the school children presenting their school. In this workshop, the TU students were guided through the school building by children, with two pupils showing each group of 3-4 students the school and its surroundings. Subjectively preferred places and atmospheres were revealed and the frequency of use was determined. In this step, the children themselves became mediators of their perspectives.
- In the next phase, the students occupied parts of the school building as a place of work, where they also worked together with the children. This enabled them to experience the atmosphere of the school as a place of learning and work at first hand, while at the same time the presence of the students working with the users emphasized the significance and importance of the school building.
- Workshops with the pupils, where actions such as constellations in the room or placement of furniture in the room took place, were used for participant observation.
- The children's drawings of their dream school were interpreted by the students.

- Discussions and interviews were held with the children (but also with the teachers) and there were spontaneous discussions and participatory observations.
- At a public information evening, the students presented case studies of successful school renovations. Questions were answered and concerns, wishes and ideas were collected.

Contact with the users took place on a formal and informal level. For example, a model-making workshop was initiated with the pupils, in which the school and its surroundings were recreated as realistically as possible on a scale of 1:500. The pupils practiced abstraction, creating models, working to scale, etc. At the same time, an informal exchange about the school space and its surroundings took place during the discussions, which, according to the students, happened in passing and was very intensive and informative.

The students' needs and wishes, such as places of retreat and nests that are designed to be unseen by adults, a desire for coziness and flexibility, visual connection between outside and inside should be possible, desire for bright, friendly rooms, to experience the class from different perspectives (e.g. different levels in the room) were identified and realized.

- Pictures of the school interventions can be seen under: Rappottenstein: https://vsrappottenstein.jimdoweb.com/unsere-schule/projekt-fehra-bildungsraum/
- Geblergasse: https://bib-lab.at/biblab-news/95.html

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BRINGING SCHOOLS AMONG PLANTS: A CASE STUDY FROM THE BOTANICAL GARDEN OF FLORENCE

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According to the definition given by the BGCI, a botanical garden is an institution open to the public that preserve well-documented collections of living plants for conservation, research, recreational and educational purposes. They are, or at least should be, strongly connected to their communities and territories, as is required to any cultural institution. For ancient botanical gardens such as the one of Florence, it is essential to find a key to be relevant in today's world, not only as a tourist site or a symbol of a glorious history, but as a living and vital institution, open to the society's needs. To answer these questions, there is no recipe that fits for all cultural and organisational contexts. This article focuses on the case study of the Botanical Garden of Florence and on its work on the educational activities for different kind of audiences. What comes up is that educational programmes can effectively contribute at reinforcing the identity of the Botanic Garden as an educative place, in which a new awareness of the indissoluble bond between humans and plants can arise.

botanical garden; plants; museums; schools; wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

Botanical gardens today should be considered dynamic spaces that combine scientific research, education, conservation, and recreation. According to the Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI), they are institutions that maintain well-documented collections of living plants to foster public education, biodiversity preservation, and research. Differently from formal learning spaces, botanical gardens offer unique environments where scientific knowledge can coexist with beautiful landscapes and emotional well-being. They act as cultural and scientific hubs, allowing urban populations to experience nature within cities increasingly marked by urbanization.

Modern botanical gardens hold a privileged position in bridging academia and broader society. Visitors enter them not only to learn but also to relax and disconnect from daily stresses, creating a receptive mindset for educational experiences. Additionally, these gardens could serve as platforms for addressing global issues like climate change and sustainability while fostering an understanding of plants' roles in human life. They are more than well-managed collections of plants: they are living laboratories and cultural institutions that connect people to the natural world.

As custodians of centuries of botanical and cultural heritage, many botanical gardens face the dual challenge of honoring their historical significance while remaining relevant to contemporary society. The oldest gardens, such as those in Florence, Pisa, and Padua, were originally established as "*giardini dei semplice*" focusing on medicinal plants. Over time, their role expanded to encompass broader scientific research, plant conservation, and public education. By embracing innovative educational programmes and promoting active engagement with communities, botanical gardens can transform from historical landmarks into vibrant institutions that support biodiversity and foster public understanding of global ecological challenges.

Considering the evolving role of botanical gardens in the 21st century, this article focuses on their educational potential and community involvement. Using the case study of the Botanical Garden of Florence, it explores which educational activities can be implemented in these peculiar museum contexts. The analysis of data for the three-year period 2022-2024 also highlights the effect of adopting new educational methodologies and programmes on public engagement.

1. BOTANICAL GARDENS AS EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL HUBS

Botanical gardens could serve as critical intermediaries between academic institutions, schools, and local communities. By blending scientific research with public outreach, they provide unique opportunities for informal education that extends beyond the classroom. These spaces act as bridges between the often-insular world of academia and broader society, offering hands-on learning experiences that foster curiosity and engagement with the natural world. In collaboration with schools, botanical gardens design tailored programmes to support curriculum goals while introducing students to broader concepts such as biodiversity, sustainability, and climate change. Programmes for children, such as those offered at Florence's Botanical Garden, range from simple plant identification activities to more complex projects like ecosystem monitoring and citizen science initiatives. These experiences enrich learning by combining theoretical knowledge with real-world application, encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Moreover, botanical gardens can engage communities through workshops, guided tours, and events that emphasize the interconnectedness of humans and plants. They serve as venues for cultural exchange, promoting inclusive participation while addressing local and global environmental challenges. By involving diverse audiences, botanical gardens foster a shared sense of stewardship for the natural world.

2. FLORENCE'S BOTANICAL GARDEN: A CASE STUDY

The Botanical Garden of Florence, known as the *Giardino dei Semplici*, was established in 1545 by Cosimo I de' Medici. It is one of the oldest university botanical gardens in the world, following those in Pisa and Padua. Originally, the garden was intended to train physicians, pharmacists, and herbalists in the identification and

use of medicinal plants. Spanning nearly 24,000 square meters, the garden boasts 50 outdoor cultivation areas and an impressive greenhouse complex. These structures house collections of tropical and subtropical plants, including orchids, bromeliads, and medicinal species. With over 5,000 specimens representing 3,000 species, the botanical garden mission is to address global challenges like biodiversity conservation while promoting education and well-being through its living collections.

Since 2018, the Botanical Garden is part of the Museum System of the University of Florence, which preserves and promotes the University's scientific, historical, and artistic collections, offering a range of public activities, including educational programmes. These reflect the University's educational mission and its openness to both the school community and the public. The educational services are managed by a single contractor, who works with curators across various locations to develop and implement activities. Between 2023 and 2024, the management underwent significant renewal, including a new contract. This led to a collaborative strategy to offer a more participatory and thoughtful service, focusing on innovative methods, materials, and meeting the needs of special audiences. The revamped educational programmes now include guided tours and didactic labs, catering to students from kindergarten to high school.

2.1 Innovative Educational Approaches

The educational activities at the Botanical Garden of Florence aim to connect plants and people through meaningful experiences rooted in experiential learning. This approach, based on Kolb's theory, emphasizes hands-on activities, reflection, and the use of prior knowledge to foster transformation and deeper understanding. The Object-Based Learning (OBL) methodology plays a central role, encouraging interaction with botanical objects like seeds, fruits, and plants, stimulating curiosity, collaboration, and critical thinking. Effective for all age groups, OBL enhances social and cognitive development in children, strengthens family bonds, and offers adults opportunities for intellectual growth and personal meaning-making. Education at the Garden also integrates sustainability awareness, encouraging behavioral changes to protect the environment. These efforts aim to create impactful experiences that resonate cognitively, emotionally, and experientially, positioning the Botanical Garden as a hub for both scientific education and environmental awareness.

2.2 Educational programmes: an overview

The Botanical Garden of Florence offers a wide range of educational activities designed to engage different audiences, from schools to families and the general public. Teachers can choose between free tours, guided tours and didactic labs, in which students are engaged in workshops and hands-on activities. Guided tours and didactic labs are tailored to different age groups. For example, *Un anno nell'Orto per piccoli curiosi di Natura* is an annual program aimed at younger students, allowing them to explore the garden's seasonal changes and learn about the

plant life cycle through hands-on activities. Similarly, *Ronzii* is a program for primary school children focused on pollinators and their role in ecosystems. Students learn about insects and plants through observation, experiments, and data collection, fostering an understanding of biodiversity and ecological balance.

For the general public, the garden offers an annual calendar of thematic guided tours that delve into the history of the garden, its plant collections, and its seasonality. These tours are designed to make botanical knowledge accessible and enjoyable for visitors of all backgrounds, with expert guides providing insights into the garden's rich heritage and ecological significance.

In addition, the garden provides an annual program of family-oriented workshops and interactive activities such as plant-based crafts, nature walks, and sensory experiences. These hands-on workshops not only make learning about plants fun for children but also help parents foster a deeper connection with nature, promoting environmental awareness and creativity in an enjoyable and inclusive way. By offering a variety of educational experiences, the Botanical Garden of Florence aims to inspire and engage visitors of all ages, helping them develop a lasting connection with the natural world and fostering a deeper understanding of the importance of biodiversity and sustainability.

2.3 Data analysis and trends (2022-2024)

The following figures provide an overview of the educational activities at the Botanical Garden of Florence between 2022 and 2024. They explore participation trends, the types of activities offered, and engagement across various audiences, highlighting key developments in the Garden's educational outreach.

Fig. 1. Activities at the Botanical Garden of Florence, overview 2022-2024. Source: original data elaborated from the author.
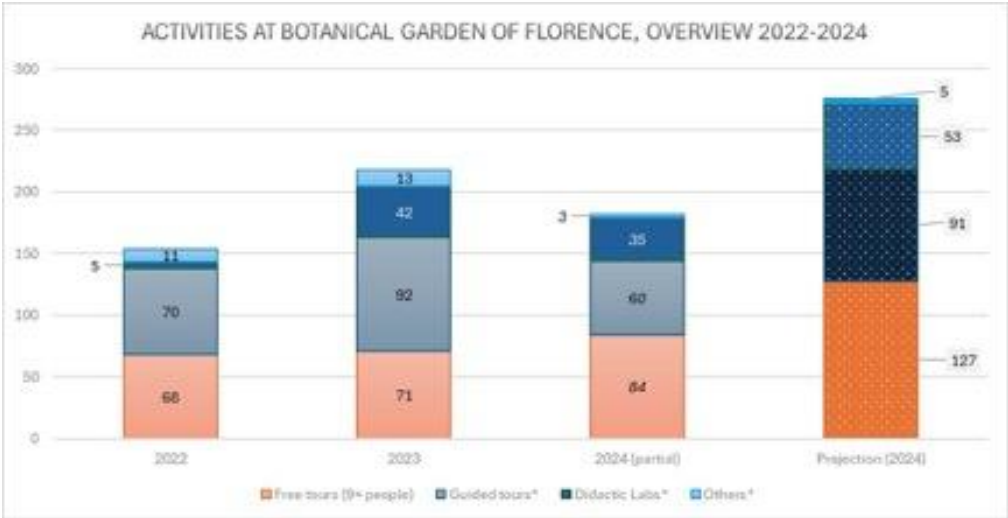
The first figure provides an overview of the activities held at the Botanical Garden of Florence from 2022 to 2024, including a projection for the full year 2024. Activities are categorized into four groups: free tours for groups (9+ people), guided tours,

didactic labs, and other cultural events. Between 2022 and 2023, all categories increase, particularly the ones of guided tours (from 70 to 92) and didactic labs (11 to 42). The partial data for 2024 indicates strong participation, with 84 free tours and 60 guided tours conducted. The projection for 2024 estimates significant growth, reaching 127 free tours, 91 guided tours, 53 didactic labs, and 5 other cultural events.

Fig. 2. Activities by type for school groups, trend 2022-2024. Source: original data elaborated from the author.
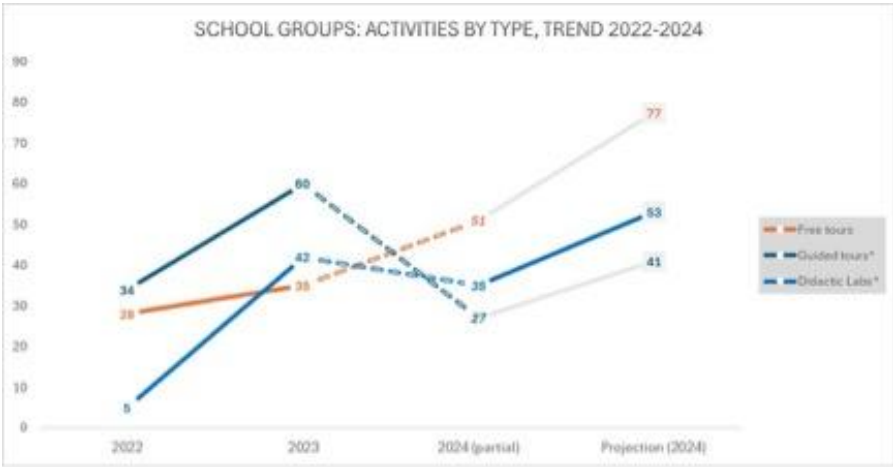
This second figure focuses on the trends in school group activities at the Botanical Garden of Florence between 2022 and 2024, with projections for 2024. Activities are divided into three categories: free tours, guided tours, and didactic labs. Guided tours showed significant growth, rising from 34 in 2022 to 60 in 2023, with a slight decline in 2024 (partial data), yet projected to reach 53 by year's end. Didactic labs displayed the most dramatic increase, jumping from just 5 in 2022 to 42 in 2023, though they are expected to stabilize at 41 in 2024. Free tours have shown steady growth, starting at 28 in 2022 and projected to peak at 77 in 2024.

Fig. 3. Activities to the Italian school system, totals 2022-2024. Source: original data elaborated from the author.
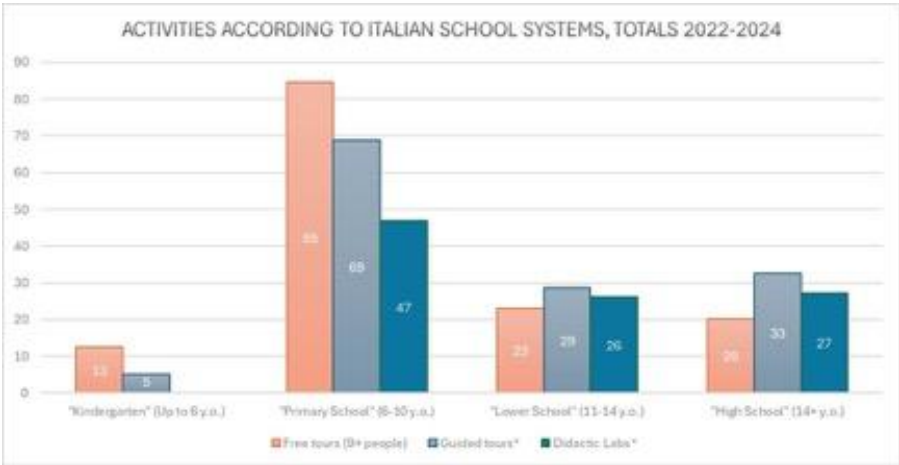
The third figure illustrates the distribution of activities at the Botanical Garden of Florence from 2022 to 2024 across the different degrees of the Italian school system: Kindergarten, Primary School, Lower School, and High School.

Primary schools dominate participation, accounting for 85 free tours, 69 guided tours, and 47 didactic labs. Lower schools engage in 23 free tours, 29 guided tours, and 26 labs, while High schools follow closely with 20 free tours, 33 guided tours, and 27 labs. Kindergarten shows the least activity, with 13 free tours and only 5 labs.

Fig. 4. Activities to the Italian school system, trends 2022-2024. Source: original data elaborated from the author.
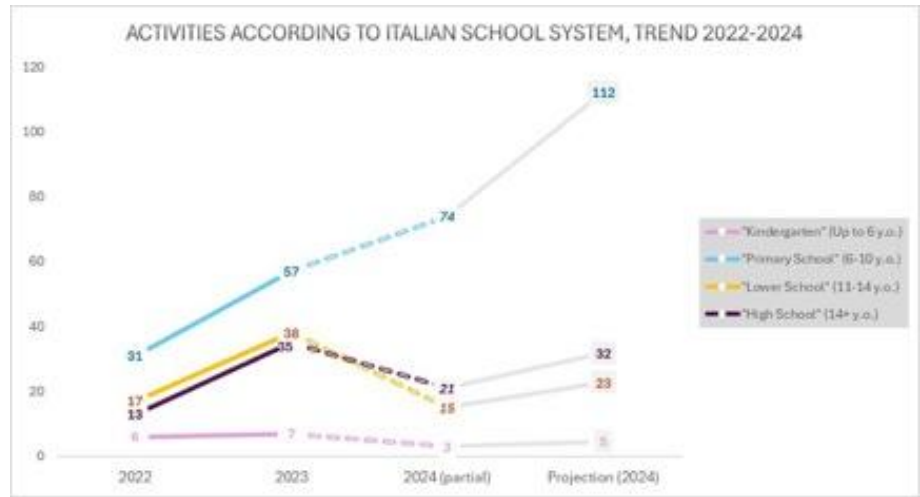
The last figure illustrates the trend in activities at the Botanical Garden of Florence from 2022 to 2024, categorized by the Italian school system. Activities for "Primary School" (6-10 years old) dominate, increasing significantly from 31 in 2022 to a projected 112 in 2024. "Lower School" (11-14 years old) and "High School" (14+ years old) show consistent but modest participation, with slight fluctuations across the years, reaching 23 and 32 activities respectively by 2024. Activities for "Kindergarten" (up to 6 years old) remain minimal, with numbers fluctuating between 6 and a projected 5.

3. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Data demonstrate the garden's expanding role as a hub for education and community engagement, showcasing steady growth in activities from 2022 to 2024. In particular, there's a clear focus on primary education, while participation from other educational levels remains stable. Kindergarden do not experience the Botanical Garden, and this affects negatively its educative potential. Guided tours are the most popular, especially among school groups, with primary schools (6-10 years old) driving participation and projected to exceed 100 activities in 2024. Didactic labs foster hands-on learning, particularly appealing to primary and high school students. The Garden's activities diversification extends its reach to families and the general public, reflecting its commitment to education, community engagement,

and sustainability. The projections for 2024 highlight record activity numbers, underlining its expanding capacity to connect with diverse audiences and promote environmental awareness through nature-focused experiences.

To improve the educational role of botanical gardens, as the case of the Botanical Garden of Florence demonstrates, skills in developing innovative educational programmes, including early childhood pedagogy and designing experiential learning paths for different age groups, are essential. Of course, scientific knowledge of botany, ecology and natural sciences are the basis of all programmes, but they alone are not enough to realise truly effective and engaging activities. Community engagement skills, such as event management and intercultural communication, are essential to attract a wider audience. Finally, accessibility skills will ensure that programmes appeal to all, increasing the social impact of the cultural institution.

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INNOVATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PROJECTS WITH NEW VERSUS ESTABLISHED SCHOOLS

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This paper offers a comparative reading of two research projects from the dual perspectives of education and architecture expertise. The first project involved an initiative by a group of teachers to design and construct a new environment within an existing school: specifically, an outdoor classroom in the schoolyard. The second project examined the initial occupancy of a newly built school, prompting the teachers to critically reflect on their teaching practices. Our objective was to identify key themes emerging from feedback activities, including the importance of involving teaching staff from the earliest stages of any new construction or modification project and maintaining a clear focus on the intended use of the proposed new spaces from the outset. The first project originated from the school's internal requirement to upgrade its existing spaces. It was a complex process that engaged multiple and diverse actors with the aim of enhancing the well-being of both students and teachers. In contrast, in the second project, the authors of this paper were commissioned to assess the practical use of a new school's spaces after the first two years of occupancy. This assessment explored the alignment between the design solutions adopted and the day-to-day experience of the school community, drawing on various kinds of data collection and discussions with school staff.

school; environments; students

INTRODUCTION

The innovation of learning environments is increasingly regarded as a fundamental strategy for advancing school innovation more broadly, particularly in terms of educational and instructional design (Barrett, Treves, Shmis, Ambasz and Ustinova 2019). Innovating learning environments entails not only envisioning new types of spaces but also rethinking how spaces are utilized (Weyland, 2014). Achieving this requires close collaboration between designers and users, as well as the ongoing integration of diverse kinds of disciplinary knowledge and expertise. To explore this aspect in greater depth, this paper examines two case studies involving two schools that followed different approaches to implementing innovation, with different levels of teacher and student engagement.

The first case study concerns the Polesine primary school in Milan, housed in an early 1900s building. The teachers, in reflecting on potential transformations, were primarily interested in improving the school's spaces with an emphasis on fostering more innovative teaching practices (Dessì, Fianchini & Zuccoli, 2016). In the second case study, which involves the newly built Viscontini primary school in Milan, the teachers were involved in the process by Milan City Council, under the auspices of an experimental project within the 'Constructing Education' Framework developed by the Council of the European Development Bank (CEB). This "framework of multi-stakeholder collaboration combining an architectural and educational perspective" (Duthilleul, Woolner and Whelan, 2021, p. 22) spans the entire implementation process, ending with a POE or post-occupancy evaluation (Preiser, Rabinowitz and White, 1988), to be conducted by the end of the second year of occupancy of the school building.

In a sense, we could describe the two cases presented as two paradigmatic approaches to the process of renewing and innovating school environments. In the first case, the action was bottom-up, originating within the school community itself, which identified its own needs for improvement, highlighted priorities, and sought ways to address them. In the second case, however, participation was driven from above. Specifically, the authors of this paper were asked to conduct the Viscontini POE, in collaboration with the Italian National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research (INDIRE). Their brief was to evaluate the effectiveness of the new school building – with respect to the project goals and broader expectations surrounding innovation in schools – and to reinforce previous initiatives to engage the school community. This was part of an experimental application of the 'Construction Education' framework implemented by CEB, INDIRE, and Milan City Council. The authors brought to bear a shared research approach informed by a transdisciplinary perspective and refined directly in the field over time. Their multi-year experience has enabled them to develop research methodologies and tools that combine different frameworks and competences and may be flexibly adapted to meet the needs of specific contexts (Fianchini, 2017). Importantly, the teachers at the Viscontini Primary School were engaged in the POE process on the initiative of Milan City Council.

1. THE CASE STUDY ON THE POLESINE PRIMARY SCHOOL IN MILAN

The project carried out at the primary school on Via Polesine (which is part of the Istituto Comprensivo Candia) involved an existing, completed school building of traditional typological design. The experimentation originated from a deeply felt need to improve the overall school environment, a concern strongly shared by the teaching community and management, which served as the driving force throughout the entire process. This initiative directly engaged students (Cook-Sather, 2002), teaching and non-teaching staff, focusing primarily on outdoor spaces that were previously dedicated almost exclusively to play and recreation (Farné and Agostini, 2015). The goal was to increase these spaces' usability and functional

potential by introducing possible modifications with a view to conducting teaching activities outside the traditional classroom setting.

During an initial phase, the school community was engaged via three distinct questionnaires targeting teaching staff, non-teaching staff, and students from third, fourth, and fifth grades, respectively. Two subsequent focus group discussions were conducted with a more limited number of participants—in-person with students and remotely with teachers. The insights gathered from these participatory activities were collected and transformed into a project framework by a working group.

In the second phase, which involved constructing a new outdoor classroom, the school implemented professional development activities in support of the outdoor education project. These activities were designed to innovate teaching approaches, document implemented practices and facilitate knowledge sharing among teachers across all the participating classes.

The student questionnaire featured a limited number of questions, supplemented by visual spatial maps, designed to capture the pupils' perceptions of the schoolyard's uses – both current and desired – while eliciting suggestions for its improvement. Completed at school as an educational activity, the questionnaire achieved an approximately 80% response rate from the potential sample. A notable finding was students' strong desire for increased utilization of the yard —not just for recreational purposes, but also for other activities. Specifically, they expressed interest in physical education/sports activities, followed by vegetable gardening and scientific-expressive pursuits. During the subsequent focus group, a representative group of students from the third, fourth, and fifth grades were tasked with developing proposals for renovating the schoolyard. Graphic materials and pictures of the different areas of the yard were supplied to assist them in this activity.

The teacher questionnaire was completed by almost the entire potential sample. The responses demonstrated a nuanced awareness of the value of outdoor space – confirmed by the high rate of usage reported (approximately 80% of teachers) – and an understanding of its concrete benefits for both students and teachers. Participants also identified existing critical issues in different areas and potential opportunities for improvement. During the subsequent focus group discussion, the participating teachers reviewed and discussed the outcomes from the questionnaires and the student focus group. Among the key themes that emerged, the most prominent was a strong interest in greater utilization of outdoor spaces, with a particular emphasis on developing innovative teaching practices. This approach was deemed especially important in a context with a high proportion of non-native speaking students.

2. THE CASE STUDY ON THE VISCONTINI PRIMARY SCHOOL IN MILAN

The Viscontini Primary School was selected by Milan City Council for the experimental implementation of the final phase in the Construction Education Framework (Zuccoli and Fianchini, 2024) as it met the timeline requirements for post-

occupancy evaluation. Specifically, the Viscontini Primary School is one of the most recently built publicly funded schools in Milan. It was inaugurated in the 2021-22 school year, with twelve classes enrolled out of the originally forecast twenty. The school complex incorporates numerous innovative features among its technological and typological design solutions. It includes a block housing an auditorium and a library, as well as another block containing a gymnasium. These blocks are internally connected to the main school building and directly accessible from outdoor spaces and parking areas, potentially enabling shared use by the local community. Additionally, the abundance of open spaces and folding walls inside the main building provides flexibility and multiple potential uses for learning activities.

The Viscontini POE included the following activities: a walk-through tour to gain an initial understanding of the school's spatial organization; interviews with teaching and non-teaching staff; seven days of occupancy observations to assess how and to what extent different school spaces and types of equipment were used; and the administration of an online questionnaire to teachers. Finally, the outcomes were presented and discussed with both the school staff (to help them make the best possible use of the building's potential) and the City Council (to raise awareness of critical issues and inform improvements for future schools).

The occupancy observations revealed (and the teacher survey confirmed) that classrooms were the most frequently used spaces for all classes. However, variations in the arrangement of student desks reflected a diversity of teaching approaches to the use of learning spaces. On the other hand, the laboratories (except for the music room) were underutilized, with even their few scheduled occupancy hours largely unused in practice. No learning activities were observed in the open spaces, although groups of older students occasionally gathered there during breaks when not in the schoolyard.

The schoolyard itself was primarily used for free play but also featured two educational vegetable gardens, which students actively tended to with great dedication. The gym was found to be heavily utilized throughout the day by both school classes and an external volleyball club. In contrast, the auditorium was rarely used, while the library remained closed to external users, with no classes or groups of students present there during the observation period.

Teacher participation in the POE process was encouraged through various approaches. A few teachers engaged with us informally during break times to share their personal experiences with the new school learning environments. Additionally, an electronic questionnaire was distributed to all staff to encourage reflection on the impact of school spaces on educational activities and to gather more detailed information about space usage and building performance.

About half of the school's teachers participated in the survey, and their responses indicate a keen awareness of the importance of learning environments. Nearly all respondents (88.2%) reported having opportunities to discuss learning environments with colleagues. A majority (62.5%) indicated significant changes compared to the past, in their teaching practices generally and in their use of space

specifically, while the rest reported more limited changes, except for one teacher who noted differences only in space usage.

Regarding the use of learning spaces, the classroom remains the most frequently used environment for both teaching activities and breaks. While classrooms were considered adequately sized, many teachers highlighted limited storage space for materials. About half of the respondents stated that they primarily used group pods as their desk layout, followed by horseshoe formations, while just over 10% reported using the traditional arrangement. However, when it comes to using non-classroom settings, almost all teachers concurred that there is insufficient time to make changes of this kind during regular teaching-learning activities.

Among the environmental comfort issues flagged, the most reported problems were excessive heat and poor ventilation in some areas. The questionnaire also allowed teachers to provide personal observations or elaborate on their responses, addressing aspects such as rules, functions, and the characteristics of the building itself.

The final step in the POE process at the school involved a focus group discussion with the teaching staff to review findings from the on-site activities. This activity saw the highest level of teacher participation, with attendees demonstrating great commitment and engagement. Teachers appreciated the identification of critical issues that had emerged from the survey. These issues were discussed and, in some cases, clarified in light of technical or organizational guidelines.

Regarding the centrality of classrooms and the lower-than-expected use of other learning spaces, no strong reasons were identified, apart from the absence of a clear design vision for using and configuring these spaces as educational environments. It was therefore suggested that the teaching staff, both individually and collectively, address these challenges by continuing to monitor the use of the different spaces and developing shared projects to maximize the potential of the school. For instance, the success of the educational gardens project was highlighted as a model to emulate. This recommendation was made in light of the strong appreciation teachers expressed for most of the school's spaces and the building as a whole.

The historical evolution of SEAs (State Education Agencies) provides important background here for understanding how their role has shifted over the past two decades and is likely to continue evolving. Until recently, SEAs were not heavily involved in K-12 education policymaking or school district oversight. Instead, school districts and local school boards were the primary decision-makers for primary and secondary education.

CONCLUSION

In the two case studies presented in this paper—one involving the transformation of selected spaces in a dated school (Polesine) and the other examining the usage of a newly built school (Viscontini)—some key aspects emerged that could be extended to other schools seeking to initiate change in their learning environments,

despite the different starting points of the two cases.

First, the direct involvement of school staff and students was shown to be a critical driver of change, particularly when it stems from internal needs and is initiated by the school itself (as in the Polesine case). When the need for transformation is perceived as essential—whether to enhance the day-to-day well-being of students and staff or to innovate educational and teaching practices —the process tends to begin collaboratively, from the ground up. This shared, grassroots approach facilitates smoother management of the various steps involved in the change process. Conversely, when change involves a total transformation, such as the construction of a new school (Viscontini), it becomes essential to involve the school community from the initial conceptual stages of the process. If professional development activities take place only after construction is completed, there is a risk that the school may be perceived by teachers as an unfamiliar space—designed solely by engineers or architects without meaningful input from the school community. This perception in turn may hinder full appropriation of the new environments.

However, even in the latter situations, pathways such as those offered by the POE (Post-Occupancy Evaluation) can help reestablish a genuine connection between the school community and the space. These processes raise awareness about the environments and their potential uses.

From the data collected, it may be concluded that any transformation of school environments—whether total or partial—does not automatically trigger a path of change and innovation in teaching practices. When transformations are directly initiated by teachers, the process tends to be more independent, as teachers have the opportunity to identify what changes are needed and implement documentation processes in support of proposed changes. In such cases, professional development activities can be tailored to address specific needs arising from practice.

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Stream K

YOUNG PEOPLE IN/AND EDUCATION

BECOMING ADULT. HIGHER EDUCATION IMPACT PRACTICES TO ENSURE AN EQUITABLE AND QUALITY TRANSITION

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INTRODUCTION

Educational research defines High-impact practices (HIPs) as initiatives that can increase rates of retention and student academic engagement by fostering a purpose-driven approach, which may help improve student outcomes (Kuh, 2008).

Such initiatives may encompass various teaching and learning formats, each designed to actively involve students and encourage greater investment in their own development; they include strategies in higher education that have been shown to significantly impact 'transitions' (e.g., from undergraduate to graduate studies, or from education to the workforce) through their contribution to students' personal, and professional development, beyond the academic.

Emerging adulthood is characterized by multifaceted transitions, as it is a period of significant change across various domains of life, including identity exploration, cultural and societal expectations, mobility, and shifts in social and parental relationships. This phase 'represents a singularly important life stage in the development of purpose (Bundick, 2011) and is crucial for acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve full autonomy at both the social and community levels, as well as for developing civic responsibility and reflecting on one's career.

Formal and informal educational contexts may activate HIPs with the aim of helping students explore life experiences beneficial to the process of becoming adults, with the added benefit of supporting minoritized students (Lee et al., 2024) who risk being underserved by higher education.

They offer invaluable opportunities for students to reflect on their values, expand their worldviews, and refine the skills needed to navigate the complexities of adult life, including career development, social responsibility, and civic engagement.

1. HIPS AND TRANSITIONS: AN OVERVIEW

High-impact learning experiences designed to support transitions focus on strengthening student agency and active engagement through the development of critical skills that can help ease the challenges of this demanding life phase. Among the various formats internationally recognized as beneficial, we can mention:

- First-year seminars: In the United States, the first year of university has long been a focal point for practices designed to support students as they

transition from high school to higher education. These initiatives aim to ease the adjustment to academic life and foster a sense of belonging. They can have an holistic focus (cross-disciplinary) to equip students with life-long skills and/or career exploration and planning; many first-year students still struggle to connect their academic choices with future career opportunities, often lacking a clear understanding of how their degree aligns with the professional world and influences their employability (Fedeli, 2020; Harrington and Orosz, 2018);

- Orientation programs and advising practices: These practices foster a sense of belonging and help create a supportive network for meaningful interactions, centered around shared goals and interests. This network plays a crucial role in helping students transition into college life by equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed for both academic and social success. Faculty advising, as well as mentoring or informal advising by fellow students, can be instrumental in guiding students through the curriculum and managing their personal resources effectively (Keup and Young, 2021);

- Study abroad as field-based experiential learning: Studying abroad offers students a unique form of field-based experiential learning, immersing them in diverse cultures and educational systems. These programs provide an invaluable opportunity to engage with worldviews that differ from their own, fostering greater cultural awareness and intellectual flexibility. By stepping outside of their home academic environment, students make a meaningful transition to global perspectives that significantly enhance both their academic and personal growth. Through this exposure, they develop key global competencies—such as cross-cultural communication, adaptability, and critical thinking—which are essential for success in an increasingly interconnected world. Such experiences not only broaden students' understanding of global issues but also empower them to navigate complex, multicultural contexts with confidence and insight (Schenker, 2019);

- Cooperative education (Co-op) programs and internships: co-ops/internships help students apply theoretical knowledge in a real-world setting with the key benefits of gaining hands-on experience, and networking with experts and mentors, and often improving job prospects after graduation. Furthermore, entering the workforce introduces students to reflect on a range of potential transitions – such as temporary positions, career shifts, transitioning from being an employee to becoming self-employed, downsizing, reemployment, and expats and global mobility – that can challenge their career paths in unpredictable ways. These hypothetical transitions require students to develop resilience and adaptability, key qualities for navigating an increasingly dynamic and uncertain job market (Wyonch, 2019);

- Service Learning: Bringle and colleagues (2006, p. 12) define it as a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs

and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. This process facilitates the transition of students into civic-minded, globally conscious citizens who are attuned to the values of social responsibility and civic engagement. As students engage in service learning, they not only gain an understanding of their role in fostering social change but also develop essential social skills and attitudes that promote inclusion, empathy, and collaborative action. Through active participation in real-world community initiatives, service learning nurtures the ability to adopt transformative strategies (Fedeli, 2022).

In conclusion, high-impact learning experiences are integral to supporting students during critical transitional phases, providing them with the information, skills and perspectives necessary to face the complexities of academic, social, and professional life. By fostering key skills such as critical thinking, adaptability, and social responsibility, these practices not only ease the transition to higher education, but also prepare students for the challenges of an ever-changing world (Arikan et al., 2022). Whether through first-year seminars, orientation programs, study abroad experiences, co-op programs, or service learning, each of these initiatives contributes to the holistic development of students, helping them cultivate the competencies required to succeed as individuals.

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SELF-EFFICACY IN THE INTERNSHIP ENVIRONMENT FOR EDUCATORS AND PEDAGOGISTS: SOME REFLECTIONS

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The transition from university to the professional environment represents a critical process during emerging adulthood, a period marked by uncertainty and opportunities for identity exploration and the achievement of socially recognized goals. University students are faced with significant decisions regarding their personal and professional life trajectories. Curricular internships, essential for the initial training of future educators and pedagogues, provide a unique opportunity to integrate theory and practice, fostering the development of competencies crucial for professional identity formation. In Europe, internships are recognized as a strategic tool for enhancing the employability of young adults, promoting the acquisition of soft skills. The construction of professional identity, understood as a multidimensional process involving both individual factors and contextual influences, is central to this transition. This longitudinal study aims to investigate the evolution of students' self-efficacy perceptions during the internship, defined as their belief in their ability to manage social or professional situations. A three-wave questionnaire was employed to assess self-efficacy, the perceived importance of competencies, and professional identity, with the aim of examining how students' experiences in educational services contribute to the development of their professional identity.

internship; self-efficacy; educator; pedagogist; professional identity

INTRODUCTION

Among the transitional processes that characterize human life, the shift from university to the working environment is marked as one of the most significant and defining stages of adulthood. The period of life in which this transition occurs is referred to as emerging adulthood, a phase characterized by uncertainty, but also by the opportunity for identity exploration and the achievement of goals that lead to social recognition (Biasin, 2019; Wood et al., 2018). Furthermore, students who find themselves in this particular stage of life desire to engage as young adults in order to achieve goals that allow them to be recognized as such on a social level (Sestito et al., 2011) in a process that leads to a "re-centering" of the individual (Cornacchia et al., 2021), who feels the need to emancipate from their dependent status in order to begin orienting their identity toward adult matters. It is a period marked by an identity challenge in which professional identity also becomes central.

University students, especially those nearing the end of their academic journey, are faced with important decisions regarding their personal and professional life projects. In this decision-making process, the academic context offers tools aimed at providing ongoing guidance and support for students' transitions from university to work. The curricular internship is particularly important among these tools because it is a privileged training opportunity that begins with the experience of educational practice, which is essential for the initial training of future educators and pedagogists. The internship, a strategic device that links theory and practice, offers individuals an exceptional opportunity to experiment with and shape themselves as future professionals, to develop skills and abilities, and is crucial for career guidance and the development of a professional identity (Bowen, 2018).

In the process of constructing a professional identity, defined as a multidimensional construct involving both the individual and the context in which they are embedded, particular importance is placed on both the gradual awareness of one's potential and the personal commitment to fostering identity development. These elements are essential for the creation of a life project (Pellerey, 2021). The students' adoption of an active and exploratory stance within the context of their internship allows them to take the lead in identifying the key objectives of their professional life project, setting goals that lead them in the direction of and create meaning in their initial training process, as well as the internship itself.

Hence in Europe, particularly following the Bologna Process and the strategies promoted by the European Union, internships are considered a strategic tool for integrating young adults into the workforce. Furthermore, they promote soft skills and strategic competencies that are fundamental for the employability of individuals entering the labor market (Council of the European Union, 2021; United Nations General Assembly, 2015; Santoro, 2015).

This contribution aims to present some preliminary reflections based on the results of a study designed to investigate the process of constructing professional identity in relation to the concept of self-efficacy within the context of internships. Specifically, the study considered the concept of self-efficacy in relation to the learning outcomes expected from undergraduate programs designed to prepare future educators. Literature on this topic indicates that the perception of self-efficacy in a professional context must be measured based on specific tasks related to that profession (Bandura, 2000) and is one of the main mechanisms of agency. The sense of self-efficacy tends to calibrate itself according to the domains and operational contexts in which one feels most competent, considering four key factors: the experience of mastering challenging tasks while observing effective action models offered by others; verbal feedback to foster beliefs in personal efficacy; personal reflection; and finally, awareness of one's own ability to complete challenging tasks (Bandura, 2012).

Considering self-efficacy as the belief that individuals can deal with social or professional situations and complete a task (Bandura, 2000), the aim of the current study is to understand how this perception varies with direct experience during the

internship. Moreover, the study aims to consider certain quality characteristics of internships, specifically those factors that contribute to improvements in terms of competencies, knowledge, and abilities. Based on the literature pertaining to internships, it emerges that the presence of a company mentor, support tools for observation and reflection, and supervision sessions for critically reworking experiences were particularly relevant.

1. A RESEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PARMA

As part of a larger mixed-methods research project (Trinchero & Robasto, 2019), a longitudinal study was designed which included two data collections (September 2023 and February 2024) over the academic year. The study utilized a questionnaire comprising of three sections related to self-efficacy connected to the learning outcomes of the degree program (A), the importance attributed to these outcomes (IA), and the process of constructing professional identity (IP, comprised of five dimensions: In-Depth Exploration; Identification with Commitment; Reconsideration of Commitment; Practices; and Affirmation) (Mancini et al., 2015).

The study was proposed to students in the final-year of their bachelor's degree program in Education Sciences and Educational Processes (class L-19) at the University of Parma. This sample was chosen because the internship is a mandatory component of the study program. The main objective of the study was to investigate whether students' perceptions of their self-efficacy evolved during the internship and how, as well as individual awareness of their professional identity development.

2. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS PLAN

To assess any potential variations related to the internship experience, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used on the data collected from the two administrations. Repeated measures of ANOVA were used on the three scales considered (A, IA, IP) on both occasions for the responding sample.

Subsequently, to examine whether specific dimensions of quality related to the internship experience significantly impacted the results, these quality factors were included as fixed factors in relation to the three scales; however, only within the group of students who completed the internship. These internship quality variables were identified from the relevant literature (Bastianoni & Spaggiari, 2016; De Canale, 2015; Gambacorti-Passerini, 2019; Palese et al., 2016) and from action research conducted with company mentors supervising internships for the same degree programs. The quality variables considered were the following: monitoring and supervision by the university and participation to orientation meetings with other students; attentive and personalized mentoring by the company mentor with constructive feedback and encouraging to integrate theoretical knowledge with daily practice; access to internal service documentation and support in understanding the use of internal service planning; use of a logbook for reflection and observation tools; thesis project connected to the internship experience.

3. ANALYSES RESULTS

Regarding the analysis of variance on both occasions when data was collected, the only scale that showed a statistically significant variation related to the internship experience was the self-efficacy scale (A).

The analysis conducted on the group of students who completed the internship aimed to highlight whether there were significant differences in the scales considered in relation to specific quality variables. Below are the values that showed statistical significance.

On the *Importance Attributed* scale (IA), significant variations were found related to the use of observation tools for gathering data useful for individual reflexivity.

The dimension of *Identification with Commitment* showed statistically significant results in relation to the following factors: monitoring and supervision by the university; constructive feedback on strengths and weaknesses from the company mentor; encouragement to integrate theoretical knowledge with educational practice by the company mentor; and participation in team meetings.

In the dimension of *Reconsideration of Commitment* within professional identity, a significant variation was found regarding the opportunity to engage in reflection with the student group.

The *Practices* dimension shows statistically significant results in relation to receiving attentive and personalized mentoring from the company mentor, as well as being encouraged to integrate theory and practice.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In the transitional processes that lead an individual to adulthood, the shift from the academic world to the world of work undoubtedly represents a key milestone. At the end of their studies, university students find themselves suspended between the academic world and the labor market.

The literature on professional identity (Mancini et al., 2015) has shown that decisions regarding professional choices can only be integrated into one's identity. These decisions provide a sense of self-efficacy and personal value when they are perceived as aligning with one's personal characteristics, talents, and abilities. This highlights the importance of guidance pathways that help students focus on their educational and professional choices through an autonomous but guided process such as the curricular internship, which serves as an orientation tool accompanied by a company mentor.

The results of the study confirm that direct experience and active student involvement in their learning process promote agency processes (Pellerey, 2021, p. 164), fostering the planning and organization of their actions; such as setting a goal and planning the necessary steps to achieve it, or organizing an activity and responding to experiential feedback (Ivi, p. 167).

Participation in team meetings, as well as access to and guidance in understanding the internal service documentation is essential for grasping the nature of

educational work. Through collaborative work with more experienced staff within the host organization, the intern has the opportunity to engage in moments of reflection and interaction, in addition to the construction of shared practices and reflexive approaches to the educational work carried out. Moreover, as highlighted in the literature on company mentoring (Santoro, 2015), the opportunity to receive attentive and personalized guidance that fosters the integration of theoretical knowledge with daily preparation would support the dimension of *Practices*, which includes direct knowledge of professional practices.

Furthermore, as evidenced by the analyses conducted, the strong connection between self-efficacy perception and direct experience supports the internship experience as a privileged environment for training and guidance. During the period of emerging adulthood, identifying key elements for one's professional training goals becomes a driving force in the process of constructing professional identity. This makes the transition from the academic world to the workforce more focused, conscious, and sustainable.

Engaging in direct experience, as indicated by the studies conducted, leads the students as future educators and pedagogists not only to feel more effective, but also to place greater importance on certain competencies. The student's personal reflection on how important a specific ability is and their perceived level of competence in that area enables them to adopt an active and exploratory posture, which is essential in the construction of their professional life project.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that engagement with daily educational practices within different types of services enables students to recognize the competencies, skills, and knowledge necessary to operate within them. Therefore, the concept of identity evolves through personal and social experiences, shaped by environmental and interpersonal factors that influence its development.

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EMPLOYABILITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN IEFP AND IFTS TRAINING COURSES

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INTRODUCTION

This article illustrates the data that emerged from an Inapp survey on the employment impact of Vocational Education and Training (IeFP) and Higher Technical Education and Training (IFTS) training courses. These are two types of training which – together with ITS Academies – make up the long chain of vocational training. The aim of the training systems is to provide trainees with professional technical skills required by companies, thus enabling rapid entry into the world of work.

The IeFP pathways can be chosen after the state secondary school exam, when young people are still in their current legal obligations: the obligation to be educated[1]1 and the right to education and training[2].

IeFP, with three-year or IV-year pathways, is a regional competence and defined within a national framework regulated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies.

The three-year pathways deliver a Professional Operator qualification, the IV ones a Technician diploma; the qualifications refer to a national repertoire initially with 22 qualifications and 21 diplomas, currently 26 qualifications and 29 diplomas[3].

The courses last about 1,000 hours per year and are characterized by: internships (about 200 hours); the use of active teaching methods; laboratory experiences and in operational contexts; project work; organization by learning units.

The qualifications are issued by the Regions and are referenced to EQF levels III and IV respectively, which guarantee their national and European recognition.

Once the IV diploma has been obtained, it is possible to enter the labour market or to continue studies by enrolling in an IFTS course or in the 5th year of secondary school.

The IFTS system was established in Italy with Law 144/99, the aim being to introduce a highly specialized training system. The National Directory of IFTS

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[1] Imposes school attendance from the age of 6 to 16 to guarantee the acquisition of basic skills useful for individuals to exercise their active citizenship rights (L. 296/06 and MPI Decree no. 139/07).

[2] Obligation to participate in training courses for at least 12 years or until the attainment of an upper secondary school qualification or an IeFP professional qualification or diploma, or through an apprenticeship pathway for the attainment of a professional qualification and diploma (Legislative Decree 76/05).

[3] Agreement in the Conferenza Stato Regioni of 1/08/19 and implemented by D.I. 56 of 7/07/20. The Repertoire has been revised through the introduction of the new qualifications and diplomas from f.y. 2020-21.

Specializations dates back to 2013[4], with the definition of five of the seven vocational areas provided for. The IFTS courses provide for a total amount of between 800 and 1.000 hours, of which at least 30 per cent must be spent in internships. Part of the teaching staff comes from the world of work.

The implementing bodies must be partnerships composed of a school, a university, an accredited training facility and a company. The aggregation of these entities is a distinctive feature of IFTS courses and ensures a close link between training and the production system.

The courses can be accessed if in possession of an upper secondary school diploma and an IeFP diploma. At the end of the course, it is acquired an IFTS higher technical specialization with national recognition and related to EQF level IV.

As part of a larger analysis activity on training, Inapp Department, dedicated to Training Systems, carries out on a recurring basis field surveys on the transition to work of those who have obtained a final qualification in the IeFP and IFTS pathways.

The starting hypothesis is that participation in these training courses is a decisive factor in the employment prospects of trainees. Therefore, interviews were conducted with former participants of these courses using the CATI technique.

Considering the different numbers of the two reference universes (about 87.000 in IeFP and about 2.000 in IFTS), it was decided to adopt a mixed survey technique: sample-based for the first sector, census-based for the second.

For the IeFP, qualified and graduates students from the 2015-16 academic year were interviewed throughout the territory; for the IFTS, those specialized in courses completed as at 31/12/2017. In this edition of the survey, the courses were active in: Lombardy, Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, Marche and Friuli-Venezia Giulia.

1. THE MAIN DATA FROM IEFP

In this section we present some data concerning the transition to work of IeFP qualifiers and graduates. In general, we can emphasize that the results emerging from the analysis are positive. Examining the employment conditions at the time of the interview (about 3,5 years after leaving the course), 67,5% of the total number of qualified people were employed.

Those who had already worked but were unemployed in search of a new job accounted for 15% of the total, with 9% being young people in training. Those in employment (in various capacities: internships, community service, etc.) make up 4%. Those seeking their first job account for 3,4% of the total, while the percentage of inactive persons is residual.

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[4] Through the D.I. of 07/02/13.

Fig. 1. Employment status of qualified and graduates at the time of the interview (v.%). Source: Inapp – Fourth survey on the outcomes of IeFP and IFTS pathways – year 2023
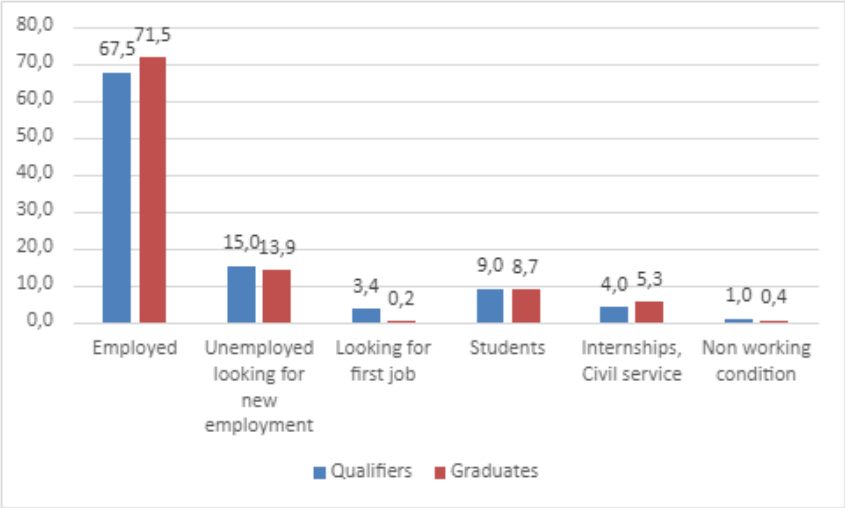
On the graduate side the results appear better than for the qualified: employed, at the time of the interviews, make up 71,5% of the total; followed by 13,9% of unemployed jobseekers; 8,7% in training; 5,3% engaged in other activities; with small proportions of inactive and unemployed seeking their first job.

The analysis of values by territorial constituency shows important differences. In the qualified, there is a higher employment rate in the Northwest (74,8%) and a higher than expected figure for the Islands (73,4%), followed by the Centre (70%). While in the South the employment rate is lower (54,8%) and the percentage of unemployed is the highest (23,8%).

Looking at the type of employment relationship of the qualified, an equal split between fixed-term and permanent employment can be seen, with 5,5% self-employed and 5% fixed-term contracts.

Fig. 2. Employment relationship of the interviewees (v.%). Source: Inapp – Fourth survey on the outcomes of IeFP and IFTS pathways – year 2023
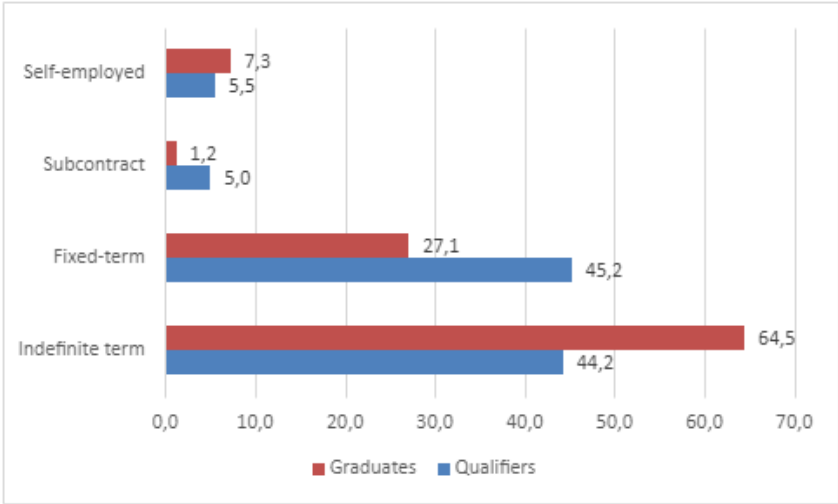
Both permanent and fixed-term contracts are almost always full-time contracts: 95,4% of permanent contracts and 93,5% of fixed-term contracts.

Among graduates, the share of permanent contracts is significantly higher than that of the qualified, reaching 64,5%, compared to 27% of fixed-term contracts, 7,3% of self-employed and 1,2% of para-employed.

Even among graduates the prevalence is almost entirely full-time contracts, both for permanent and fixed-term contracts (98,6% and 94,7% respectively).

2. THE MAIN DATA EMERGED IN THE IFTS COURSES

The composition of the IFTS trainees is heterogeneous: there are both very young school leavers and over 30 employed or unemployed people with previous work experience. The majority of those enrolled are jobseekers; very few are students.

The employment status of the participants in the IFTS courses, 12 months after the completion of the specialization, is one of the main steps to understand the effectiveness of the system. The general data is quite clear, the employment impact is already noticeable in the short term: 73.2% of people who declare themselves employed 12 months after the end of the course certify the capacity of IFTS courses to facilitate entry into the labour market and thus respond to the needs of local production systems. The regional data are affected by the specific characteristics of the respective local labour supply and demand systems; however, the general trend is positive in all the regions analyzed.

Fig. 3. Employment status after 12 months after the end of the course (%). Source: Inapp – Fourth survey on the outcomes of IeFP and IFTS courses – year 2023

- Employed
- Redundancy Fund
- Unemployed looking for new employment
- Looking for first job
- Internships
- Housewife
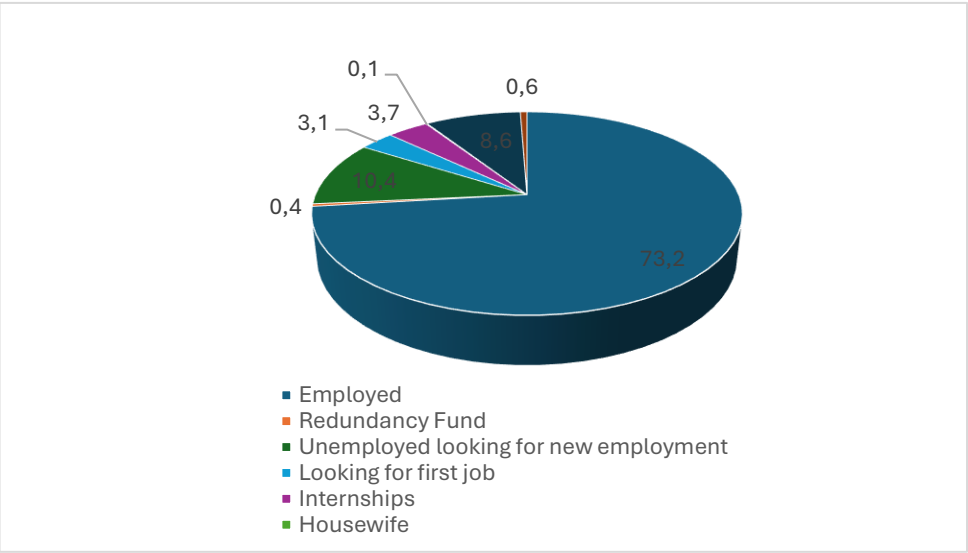
The internship is a tool with a dual function: on one hand it allows learners to experience in the company dimension what they learn during the course, on the other hand it promotes an interconnection between labour demand and supply whose final output is that companies often make a job offer to interns. It emerges from the

survey that 45% of respondents received a job offer from the company where they had done their internship. Obtaining an IFTS specialization therefore represents a good opportunity to find employment, quickly, sometimes even before the end of the course. This good connection with the production system can be found, with natural territorial specificities, wherever the course is planned.

Given that the IFTS are indeed a useful tool for people's employability, a further avenue of analysis was to bring out the most frequent ways in which former participants, who declared themselves employed during the interview, found a job: direct acquaintance of the employer, which for 25% of those interviewed was the decisive element – confirming what was seen above with regard to internships -, closely linked is the share (18,7%) of those who benefited from the intermediary role of the organizations promoting the IFTS course. 7%) of those who benefited from the intermediary role of the organizations promoting the IFTS course; the role of word-of-mouth among peers, a factor which is traditionally very well established in the Italian labour market, is also very substantial. What is interesting is the percentage of former trainees who got employed by consulting or using websites specialized in matching job supply and demand (22,7%). Employment centers data are very clear: only 2,2% made use of this service, an almost insubstantial percentage in the face of a very large number who, on the contrary, turn to private structures for the same service.

In a general context where work is often characterized by precarious contracts: at the time of the interview, 61% of the former trainees in employment stated that they had an open-ended contract and about 28% a fixed-term one; the share of parasubordinate workers is very small, while the percentage of self-employed workers is just over 8%. Data therefore confirm that the supply chain generates technical skills that are really needed by the production system, and consequently the contracts are largely stable contracts.

Fig. 4. Type of contract (%). Source: Inapp – Fourth survey on the outcomes of IeFP and IFTS pathways – year 2023
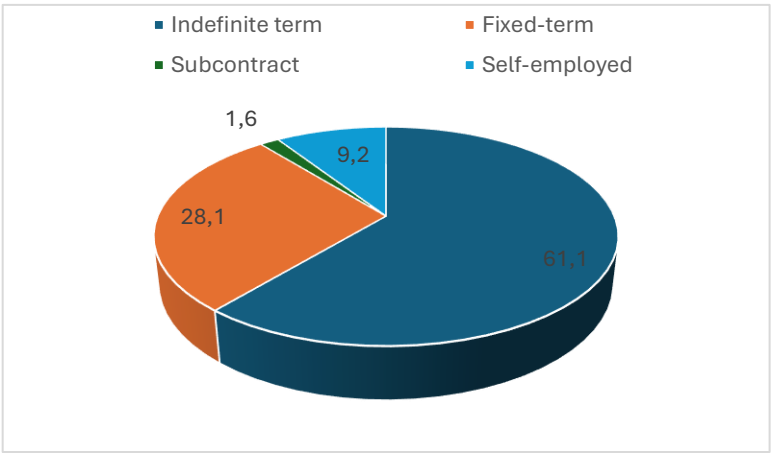
3. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the employment impact triggered by the IeFP and IFTS training chains makes it possible to analyze these systems, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, both of which are useful in stimulating their growth and consolidation within the Italian training system.

The strengths that emerged from the research are: the rapid transition from training to work, the strategic role of internships, the low incidence of precarious contracts, and the ability to include subjects most at risk of dropping out.

Within this general framework, it is also important to emphasize that training systems are not static systems but are in continuous evolution. One example is precisely the evolution of IeFP: while in the past these pathways were chosen mainly as a result of previous school failures, in recent years the proportion of young people who choose IeFP immediately after the eighth grade state examination is increasing, and this is reflected in the large percentage of young people who qualify or graduate on time, without failing, dropping out or changing study pathways[5]. The IeFP is thus configured not only as an anti-dropout tool capable of reducing social inequalities through the professionalization of young people, but also as an additional option for those who wish to enter the labour market quickly.

However, there are still weaknesses that need to be addressed. A first element is the existing unevenness in terms of the presence of courses in the different regions. This aspect has a huge weight if we talk about IFTS, where courses are available in only a few regions, mostly in the center north.

As far as IeFP is concerned, the chain is present practically everywhere, however, two aspects need to be emphasized: the first is that the IV year is less widespread than the three-year courses; the second is that, in some regions, the courses are often delivered at vocational institutes in a subsidiarity regime, with the relative loss of that added value guaranteed by the Vocational Training Centers in terms of workshop experience in companies and connection to the local productive fabric.

A second element of weakness, common to both training systems, is their lack of recognition and visibility. Vocational training, also due to our cultural heritage, has less appeal than other educational pathways, and its characteristics and potential are less well known, which is why, very often, both potential participants and their families are unaware of its very existence. In order to address this knowledge deficit, it is necessary to promote a important orientation activities – already at school level – to allow more conscious choices to be made and also directed towards those professional figures that are actually in demand in the world of work.

Another weakness of the system concerns the need to update the National

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[5] INAPP (2023), XXth Monitoring Report of the Vocational Education and Training System and of the Dual Pathways in IeFP, Rome, Inapp <https://oa.inapp.org/xmlui/handle/20.500.12916/3936>;
INAPP (2023) XXI Monitoring Report of the Vocational Education and Training System and of the Dual Pathways in IeFP, Rome, Inapp <https://oa.inapp.gov.it/handle/20.500.12916/4325>.

Directory of IFTS specializations, which dates back to 2013 and is no longer sufficiently in line with the – increasingly rapid – evolution of production processes.

Finally, a useful element of analysis for stakeholders governing training systems refers to the 'long chain of vocational training'. IeFP and IFTS constitute two segments of the chain, the apex of which is represented by ITS Academies (Higher Technical Education courses).

Although included in this system architecture that links these three segments, it should be emphasized that these are self-consistent training offer systems, i.e. they can be used autonomously and are designed to enable participants to acquire technical skills useful for a rapid job placement. The possibility of creating one's own specialization pathway integrating two or three segments of the 'long chain' is an additional possibility.

It should be specified, however, that this possibility of modulating one's own specialization pathway combining the three training segments of the 'long supply chain' is in fact very remote, since it can be implemented in a limited number of professional sectors[6]. In addition to this there is the territorial factor: the absence of training courses, both IFTS and IV-year IeFP, in some regions constitutes an insurmountable obstacle if not through individual mobility to those regions where such a training offer is available.

The implementation of the long chain of vocational training is therefore still a work in progress. The enlargement of the vocational training offer catalogues of the regions, the coherence between the different national repertoires and the guarantee of stability in financing system of the chains constitute the field of intervention on which the future of vocational training and its consolidation in the Italian education system will play.

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Inapp, M. Franceschetti, M. Santanicchia, F. Giovannini (2022). *Continuity of training and matching of skills needs in the IeFP-IFTS-ITS long chain*. Working Paper no. 91, Rome, 2022, Inapp

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[6] Inapp, M. Franceschetti, M. Santanicchia, F. Giovannini 'Continuity of training and matching of skills needs in the IeFP–IFTS–ITS long chain', Working Paper no. 91, Rome, 2022, Inapp

DESIGNING EXPERIENTIAL, INCLUSIVE, AND INTERCULTURAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS. PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGIES, PLURAL LANGUAGES, AND TECHNOLOGIES FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHING

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The design of a Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) experience highlighted the importance of working collectively in focusing on inclusive and participatory learning strategies and methodologies. The synergies established between NTNU/The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, UNIMC/University of Macerata, and TUB/Technische Universität Berlin provided for the realization of different levels of cooperation. The analysis of some relevant aspects of the pathway implemented in the academic year 2023/2024 makes it possible to enhance teaching approaches aimed at promoting meaningful learning experiences among teachers, among students, and between teachers and students. The international dimension of the project also recalls the importance of opening intercultural dialogues, both in terms of approach and content in the training of future educators, teachers, and pedagogues. It becomes, therefore, essential to be immersively engaged with practices, existing projects, and educational and scholastic spaces in which plural and creative languages make community participation accessible in all its complexity. The feedback gathered from the participants will return the elements considered most relevant and impactful following the experience, opening up to meta-reflections and evaluations that will enable the designing of new paths.

Blended Intensive Programme; Participative Learning Environment; Co-Design Didactics; Intercultural Competences; Inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

The planning of an experience of a "Blended Intensive Programme" (BIP), within the framework of Erasmus +, aimed at promoting the exchange between teachers and students in online and face-to-face learning contexts. These short, intensive programmes aim to combine a virtual training with a physical mobility of students and professors of at least three higher education institutions (HEIs). "The programmes may include challenge-based learning where transnational and transdisciplinary teams work together to tackle challenges for example those linked to the United Nations' sustainable development goals or other societal challenges identified by

regions, cities or companies" (wikis.ec.europa.eu). The innovative use of teaching and learning is focused on the collaborative approach on several levels: between university institutions, between professors, between students, between students and professors, and between territorial and local contexts. In addition, the team-work ability and the critical dialogue with colleagues from different fields and backgrounds are promoted both in the online training modules and during the mobility period abroad. It is, therefore, a matter of choosing to activate a collaborative teaching and learning experience, in which all subjects are valued, promoting active, dialogued and collective reflexivity (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Jasper, 2003; Schön, 1983).

1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BIP PROJECT

The project "Intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration for more inclusion" was implemented in the academic year 2023/2024. The training involved students from NTNU/The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, UNIMC/University of Macerata, and TUB/Technische Universität Berlin. The BIP programme was the result of the interdisciplinary scientific collaboration of the partner universities, which have planned a didactic-training pathway oriented towards the acquisition of intercultural competencies of educators and teachers, applied from a didactic-relational point of view in school and social contexts (Islam & Stamp, 2020; López-Rocha, 2020).

The involvement of two reference professors from each university started from previous research and co-teaching collaborations, within the individual institutions and in co-created projects already experienced. This is a meaningful element as having already various shared research and training paths between colleagues allowed for a better definition of the aims of the course designed for bachelor's and master's degree students in education and teaching as far as PhDs students in education. Getting to know each other and mutually recognising the scientific-disciplinary competences, teaching methodologies, and relational models allows for mediation between professionals. In this case, the construction of a training alliance, aimed at supporting students' active learning, required constant dialogue, between ongoing process evaluation and self-assessment, paying attention to the development of participative dynamics.

The course covered 75 hours of training, from 27 October 2023 to 5 February 2024. The first part was organized in 3 online seminars (co-led by the different universities). Following this, there was a week-long in-presence at NTNU, Norway, in which seminars, visits at cultural centers/schools, participatory workshops, experimentation with VR technologies, a final conference, and various socialising moments were organized. The BIP project ended with an international online conference managed by the students, who dealt with the topics most relevant to them through presentations, group activities, and participatory dynamics. During the training course, heterogeneous, highly complex environments were analyzed from a theoretical perspective and explored from an experiential and narrative point of view. In

addition, also thanks to the collaboration of an Italian educational agency, Cooperativa Lella 2001, already involved in learning and training projects for teachers and educators, attention was paid to the welcoming, learning, and inclusion processes of unaccompanied foreign minors and young refugees. The partnership between universities and the private social sector allows for a direct dialogue with social contexts, enriching reflexivity regarding inclusive and intercultural educational strategies that reflect challenging environments.

The working group dealt with issues related to different ideas of interculturalism and educational and teaching practices in highly complex contexts, with a focus on unaccompanied foreign minors and people with refugee and migration backgrounds. These socio-political challenges were also addressed through intervention methodologies and tools useful for participation and social inclusion, by conducting practical workshops on: the use of different languages and creative media, the design of spaces for youth protagonism, the use of the body and expressive arts, the design of accessible multilingual teaching materials, and the discovery and exploration of digital environments through the VR technologies.

Designing experiential, inclusive, and intercultural learning environments has meant developing participatory methodologies, plural languages, and technologies for university teaching. The sharing of didactical practices and the choice of content to be covered highlighted the possible synergies between universities and social contexts, supporting the importance of promoting research and active teaching, in which the role of students is not marginalized (Børte, Nesje, & Lillejord, 2020; Martínez Casanovas, Ruíz-Munzón, and Buil-Fabregá, 2022).

Student activation highlighted how the role of the lecturer becomes essential to open up new participatory scenarios and how spaces and times for personal and group reflexivity makes it possible for participants to position themselves meaningfully. Designing participatory learning paths means revising learning paradigms, moving towards "a theorisation of teaching that sees education as an open, semiotic and recursive system that operates with the principle of 'complexity reduction,' bearing in mind that if the complexity of the education system is reduced too much, education turns into indoctrination and thus loses its educational 'identity,' so to speak" (Biesta, 2023, p. 277). Moreover, collectively going through and reflecting on the experience becomes a vocational exercise for future educators, pedagogues, and teachers. As will be seen in the next section, the students analyzed their experience from different perspectives, including that of professional foreshadowing, in a kind of projection and mirroring in present and future practice.

2. BIP AS HIGH IMPACT PRACTICE

Short-term travels in terms of study abroad programs, exchange programs, or short-term cultural immersion experiences (such as BIP, but also summer schools) offer significant benefits for emerging adults (Schenker, 2019), especially when it comes to shaping their identities as students aiming to become future professionals in the field of education.

The educational impact of the BIP was a focus for the partnership who agreed on the modalities (approach and techniques) for collecting student feedback about the experience and, thus, assessing its results. The qualitative approach included observations during the visiting period and the final online group presentation; a written reflection paper required at the end of the experience in Norway; and a focus group conducted soon after students returned to Italy.

In this paper, we focus on Italian students, and the data were analyzed to identify core aspects connected to personal development, autonomy, civic responsibility, and professional identity. Content analysis revealed various ways in which the experience helped students explore themselves in relation to others, embrace cultures and worldviews different from their own, activate cross-cultural communication, and engage in critical thinking.

Three interpretative categories were used to group students' perspectives:

- Category 1: Personal Development
- Category 2: "Group" as Empowerment
- Category 3: Professional Identity

Starting with the first category, we can state that the experience was seen as a key step toward achieving openness to others, and specifically, the realization that (1) direct and immersive contact with the environment can help overcome stereotypes; (2) verbal communication is often seen as the primary means of interaction, rather than one of the possible options for communication. In this context, students viewed body language and expressive channels (theatre, painting, music, etc.) as powerful tools for self-discovery and social interaction.

The short, one-week experience abroad was instrumental in "unlocking" personal barriers and setting aside uncertainties and worries. Many students reported feeling more motivated to activate an Erasmus program or pursue further studies abroad. The experience, particularly the comparison with the attitudes of German students and their active participation in classroom discussions, led several students to reflect on their own shy approach in class. Italian students reported being consistently hesitant to express their opinions, not only due to concerns about their English proficiency but also because of a deeper reluctance—a habit they also have in Italy. This reluctance is something worth reflecting on: "I'm important, and my opinion is valuable, even if others might think it is wrong".

This final remark is closely connected to the "Group as Empowerment" category, as experiencing learning activities through and with the group was seen as a high-impact opportunity to overcome some perceived barriers. Specifically, the common and shared space/time—such as the daily routine and workshop activities designed to foster cooperation—was a motivating factor that encouraged students to leverage each individual's strengths ("we shared the same motivation in the learning process"). The balance between the structured learning path provided by the host institution and the free time with space for autonomous interaction created the perfect mix for deeper socialization and collaboration.

Finally, peers served as a source of reflection when, through shared living, students

had the chance to tell and listen to each other's life stories—sometimes very different from their own experiences. Students seemed to become more aware that this practice is important in the professional context, where they will need to embrace others' biographical stories and build transformative actions.

Students recognized how the participatory dynamics are influenced by different socio-educational contexts. When practical, embodied activities are encouraged in the educational space-time students have the chance to create artifacts which can help represent their learning path and this aspect was identified as a best practice in the professional development.

The entire experience represented a step forward in terms of self-esteem, efficacy, and purpose, fostering a systemic growth. We can also add that a significant step was made in developing so-called global competencies, defined as

> the capacity to examine local, global, and intercultural issues; to understand and appreciate the perspectives and worldviews of others; to engage in open, appropriate, and effective interactions with people from different cultures; and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development (OECD/Asia Society, 2018, p. 5).

The transition in the BIP experience had, in fact, different personal and professional connotations in terms of intercultural approach, sustainable development, and social interaction: students moved from a passive attitude to the awareness that active engagement can help one become part of the community and rely on it at the same time (both in learning and social contexts), also thanks to improved communication and social skills in contexts that revealed different dimensions of what being "professional" may mean.

CONCLUSIONS

The final evaluation by the organisers, the collection of feedback from the participants, and the in-depth analysis with UNIMC students through focus groups revealed the high impact significance of the experience. In this essay, we have highlighted the importance of the co-design of the learning environment and the collection of feedback as places for conscious learning and the acquisition and sharing of transversal and professional skills. The intent was to emphasise the transition from the inclusive approach to the inclusive impact of the BIP in three main areas. The first area concerns the inclusive design of the project: the online-presence-online combination made it possible to implement seminars, teamwork, workshops, and social activities offering a Participative and Intercultural Learning Environment. Subsequently, we stressed the attention on the importance of the Inclusion for cooperation approach: the encounter with several communities and collective processes of learning and understanding the "Otherness" made it possible to deepen processes of Learning and Discovering Together. Finally, the last area concerns the importance of knowing how to cross the border: from the content – competences for teachers and educators in multicultural contexts – to the experience – between

personal/professional postures in the group/community, generating Active Reflexivity and Awareness.

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NARRATIVES AND BIOGRAPHIES IN EMPLOYABILITY DISCOURSE

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The work narrative has been stable in past decades, with a remarkable focus on the identity definition of the citizens and placing the onus of finding, staying and re-entering the labour market on the individual. In particular, after the pandemic, the meaning of work and the need to find a different work-life balance seems to be under revision in our society. Individual biographies are increasingly moving far from current narratives of work and employability. A study carried out at the University of Macerata seems to confirm this trend: against the push toward entrepreneurship, self-fulfilling through work, mobility for work and successful professional life as a successful life, the sample of students, future graduates, value work-life balance as a first desirable feature for a job, and life in the region of origin as the ideal place to live.

employability; career development; GenZ

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of work has changed over the centuries, shifting from regular daily activity in the pre-industrial era (Polanyi, 1947) to the expression of self-fulfilment and skills deployment in the second part of the 20th Century (Méda and Vendramin, 2017). Universities were consequently asked to contribute to society's growth and well-being through Third Mission activities and by preparing employable graduates (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Tomlinson and Holmes, 2017). Universities then increased relations with external players, arranged new support services, e.g. career services (Kretovicks et al., 1999), and revised curricula and teaching and learning (Pegg et al., 2012) to support the acquisition of employability skills. Transversal and soft skills are considered enablers of the "employable individual" to access, stay, and re-enter the world of work in a continuous life design process (Savickas, 2012). Experiential learning is thought to be effective for developing generic skills in higher education (David, 2008; Mergendoller et al., 2006).

Additionally, work-based learning experiences could serve students' professionalisation needs and the university's needs to strengthen the links between academia and its region (Healey, 2005; Cyert and Goodman, 1997). Globalisation and digitalisation also pushed universities toward significant changes. In this rapidly evolving scenario, there was the 2020 Covid-19 shock. Concerning pedagogies for employability, the most remarkable impact was on work-based learning. Involved players

were not prepared for online internships previously limited to specific fields (Ruggiero and Bohem, 2016). New forms of work-based learning and new career development skills (e.g., online interviews) were suddenly essential.

Just after the pandemic, against the narrative of "normality", it became clear that structural changes had happened in the work environment. In 2022, Eurostat statistics reported an increase in the share of workers from home (8% on average; peak 33% in Sweden). The Eurofund (2021) noted there will be "no looking back" about telework. Also, phenomena such as the *Great Resignation*, emerging attitudes such as the *Quite Quitting*, and the spread of the *YOLO (You live only once)* economy showed a rising evolution of the social conception of work – and possibly a revolution of the meaning of work. Work-life balance became a central concept, particularly for GenZ, as a signal of priority given to flexibility and time for family and leisure (Nieżurawska et al., 2023).

Narratives still look at work as a crucial identity component: debates revolve around the potential validity of working from home, focus on innovative companies and start-ups, and pass the idea that success in life is booming on the job. Concurrently, a new generation of graduates is entering the labour market, and their attitude towards work does not necessarily align with this widespread narrative.

The specificity of the Italian context is also an essential feature in this subject: even if Italy is one of the European countries with the lowest share of graduates in the active population aged 25-64 (20.1% against the EU average of 32.8%, ISTAT 2021), the country is also characterised by a high level of overeducation (Mandrone et al., 2022) and low absorption of graduates into the labour market. Italy is also well-known for its low entrepreneurial intentions rate (GEM, 2023). Furthermore, Italy has the third oldest population in the world: in 2022, 24% of the population was over 65; the average population age was 46.4. Fertility is steadily decreasing fertility rate (1.2, the lowest of the EU), and the country is facing what has been defined in Italian as "the demographic winter". Finally, it should be stressed that the country suffers from a strong brain drain phenomenon, accounting for 8% of the total number of graduates (+41,8% in the past 8 years, according to national statistics).

1. BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at the University of Macerata, a small-sized university located in a peri-urban/rural location in Central Italy. The University offers degrees only in the fields of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Following low participation in career guidance and placement programmes, a survey was undertaken better to understand students' needs and perceptions about work. Concerning the latter, narratives of work were analysed, and the following assumptions were formulated:

- Assumption 1. Students are not confident to find a job after graduation.
- Assumption 2. A high number of students wish to move to vibrant labour market areas.
- Assumption 3. A high number of graduates wish to work remotely.

- Assumption 4. A high number of graduates would value secure employment.

1.1. Survey design

A survey was designed to verify the assumption. Like other issues on the placement's programme, the survey has been previously discussed with the students' representatives and promoted through them in the frame of the organisation of the Career Day (October 2023).

The survey opened to the entire student body in June 2023, closed in July 2023, and was managed by the central office for placement at the university. The questionnaire was composed of two main sections: the first section, whose results are not addressed by this article, was focused on career guidance needs; the second section investigated work perceptions by addressing the following topics:

- Job position, as interest in pursuing private or public careers or entrepreneurship journeys. References to this item were based on own elaboration and inputs from references from Eurofound (2021);
- Job location, as preferred geographical location, concerning labour market and professional goals; items in this sub-section were elaborated adapting inputs from De Hoyos and Green (2011) and Lindsay et al. (2003).
- Confidence in getting a job after graduation: items of this sub-section were based on Qenani et al. (2014) and UNIMC's students' revision.
- Relevance of job components: to understand the value of job components, items from the "Annual Population Survey UK" were used.

1.2. Sample composition

The survey was opened as an optional activity to the entire university student body (9.362 enrolled students in the academic year 2022/23): 308 valid answers were collected.

Respondents profile:

- Sex: 77,60% female; 21,43% male; 0,97% preferred not to choose.
- Age: 21-25 years old represented 62,34% of the respondents; 26-30, 4,87%; 31-35, 12,34%; 36-40, 7,17%; others were over 40.
- Study level: respondents most represented were from Master's (46,43%), followed by Bachelor's students (45,45%); others were enrolled in postgraduate courses, PhD, or lifelong learning courses.
- Study field: most represented respondents were from Education, followed by Humanities, Law, Political Sciences and Economics, which correspond to the number of enrolments of the university.

2. FINDINGS

Findings are presented according to assumptions.

2.1 Assumption 1. Students are not confident of finding a job after graduation

This assumption was verified utilising two items as follows.

How confident are you that you will find a job immediately after graduation? (%) And how useful do you think the study course you are doing is for finding a job? (%). Findings are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1. Confidence to find a job after graduation
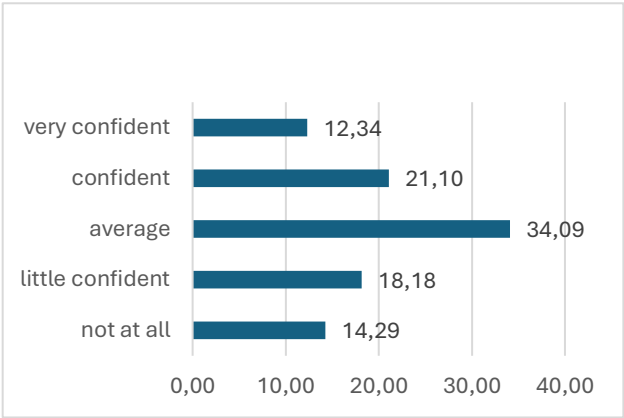
Figure 2. Perceived usefulness of the study course to find a job.
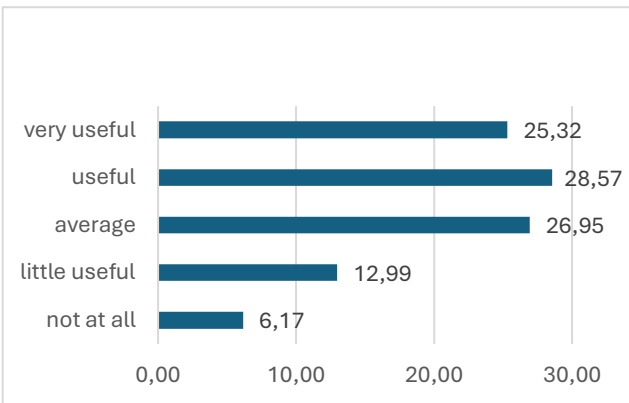
In general, students (future graduates) perceive their study course as applicable for work purposes: this is surprising against the narratives defining STEM degrees as ensuring easy access to the labour market.

2.2 Assumption 3. A high number of students wish to move to vibrant labour market areas and Assumption 4. A high number of graduates wish to work remotely

Half of the sample expressed the wish "to stay home", meaning being back or staying in their region of origin. A small number of respondents look at abroad as a potential place to live; the most interesting result is that a very small number of respondents wish to work remotely.

Figure 3. Geographical preferences for work. Ideally, where do you prefer to work? (%)
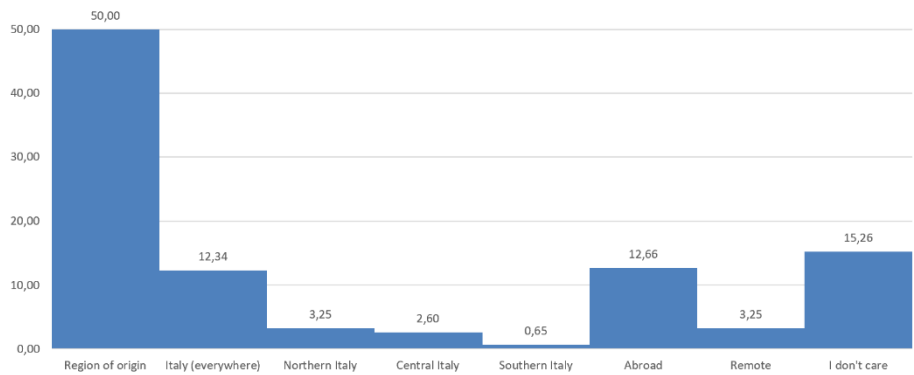
2.4 Assumption 5. A high number of graduates would value secure employment.

The item "Ideally, which would be your preferred job position?" on a Likert scale of 1-5, highlighted a preference for public employment (4.13), followed by private employment as an employee (3.73), a position as professional (3.34) and finally as an entrepreneur (3.17).

Concerning items on job components, relevance is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Most relevant component of the job (%).

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Interesting job	30,52	17,86	18,51	10,06	10,71	7,79	4,55
Secure employment	25,97	15,26	16,56	12,66	14,29	10,06	5,19
High income	10,71	14,94	16,88	15,58	10,71	16,23	14,94
Contribute to society	11,04	14,29	12,66	16,23	13,96	15,91	15,91
Time for leisure	6,82	8,12	9,74	12,01	15,58	19,48	28,25
Time for the family	6,17	16,23	13,96	20,78	18,18	11,36	13,31
Helping others through work	8,77	13,31	11,69	12,66	16,56	19,16	17,86

Comparison by age – youngest segment (20-25); older segment (over 40) – highlighted a common trend, with slight differences in the item "secure employment" (7,29% of the youngest segment vs 12,50% of the oldest segment). Both samples identify "Time for leisure" as the most relevant feature of the desired job (24,22% of the youngest segment and 32,95 of the oldest).

3. DISCUSSION

Findings point out that the first assumption about the discouragement of young people in their working futures within the country is not confirmed: the sample seems to be relatively confident about the chosen study programs. Most

importantly, most of the respondents would like to live in the region of origin; therefore, there is little desire to move for better job prospects or to pursue remote employment. The picture highlighted by findings relates to a not-competitive life, possibly with a job as a civil servant, which in Italy is the most protected target of employees in turbulent times. Entrepreneurship is not as valued as expected.

Above all, links with societal trends about work are more consistent with the survey's results, in particular concerning the most critical components of work, which are aligned with literature on work-life balance: future graduates value time for leisure, for family, and seem to be less interested both in income and in finding interesting jobs.

Therefore, the way of life and priorities in life seem to be under revision in the population, including youths. Several areas of investigation should be deepened in the upcoming years to make career and placement services at the university suitable for the target. Universities should review their career development programmes based on narratives of success through work, branding, and competition. Furthermore, a dialogue should be opened with business players: usual approaches to pursue an understanding of the needs of the enterprises; it would be advantageous for the future to support enterprises in understanding and adjusting their structures based on the human resources needs. The university could also initiate a dialogue with the place by gathering positive forces from the place and stimulating reflection and joint design of possible futures.

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SOCIAL ROBOTICS AND VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS TO PREPARE ADOLESCENTS WITH ASD FOR EMPLOYMENT

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Unemployment rates among individuals with ASD are often linked to difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication, needed in job interviews and workplace interactions. Emerging interventions using VR systems and robot-mediated training offer promising solutions by creating safe, structured, and adaptable environments for skill development. This paper presents an ongoing project focused on evaluating the effectiveness of social robots and virtual worlds in improving social skills in children and adolescents with ASD, with particular emphasis on preparing young adults for employment. By combining immersive, interactive experiences with targeted skill-building, robotics and VR provide innovative approaches to enhance social functioning and employment readiness for people with ASD.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence marks a critical developmental period for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), during which the characteristics associated with their condition may evolve (Schall & McDonough, 2010). While some adolescents exhibit improvements in communication skills, persistent challenges in social communication often extend into adulthood (Seltzer et al., 2004). These difficulties can significantly impact the ability to manage the social dynamics of workplaces, households, and communities.

Effective social skills and the ability to adapt to diverse social situations are fundamental for achieving successful employment and broader life outcomes (Schall et al., 2012). For individuals with ASD, self-determination plays an important role in identifying personal strengths, preferences, and interests, enabling them to explore career paths aligned with their capabilities. This process requires a combination of knowledge acquisition, skill demonstration, and opportunity recognition to be empowered and exercise freedom and choice in meaningful ways (Morán et al., 2021). Established practices, including internships, volunteering, and vocational programs, have proven effective in fostering these competencies (Hillier et al., 2007; Nieto et al., 2015; Alfieri et al., 2024).

Emerging technologies, such as social robotics and virtual environments, hold

significant promise as innovative tools to further prepare these individuals for the transition to employment. The paper explores the potential of these technologies to address the needs of adolescents with ASD and present a program that use such tools to prepare them for a future employment interview, promoting social and communication skills.

1. EMPLOYABILITY IN ASD

Employment outcomes for individuals with ASD are still limited, with unemployment rates estimated to range between 50% and 75% (Hendricks, 2010; Liptak et al., 2011; Volkmar et al., 2009). Despite these daunting statistics, some individuals with ASD can achieve employment and independence when supported by personalized, goal-focused curricula and intensive, structured instruction. However, critical barriers persist, particularly during the job interview process, which has been identified by stakeholders, such as those in the Autism Speaks community, as a major obstacle for adolescents and adults with ASD (Autism Speaks, 2012).

The communication difficulties characteristic of ASD can disrupt conversational reciprocity and flow, compounding difficulties in interview settings (Morgan et al., 2014). Also, nonverbal communication behaviors – such as limited eye contact, atypical facial expressions, and inconsistent gestures – are particularly impactful, often contributing to poor interview performance (Strickland et al., 2013; Kandalaft et al., 2012).

To address these issues, previous interventions have focused on building essential social and cognitive skills. Programs that provide explicit instruction in emotion recognition and social cognition have shown promise in improving individuals' abilities to understand and attribute mental states to themselves and others (Golan & Baron-Cohen, 2006; Kandalaft et al., 2013; Ozonoff & Miller, 1995; Turner-Brown et al., 2008). Effective social skills trainings include elements such as explicit teaching, modeling, role-play, performance feedback, and the systematic transfer of skills to novel situations to ensure generalization (Lopata et al., 2010).

2. THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS FOR ASD

Technology is mainly used in programs to promote skills for employment in ASD to offer safe and controlled environments – both real and virtual – where users can practice and integrate social cues to improve their skills (Kandalaft et al., 2013). A systematic review by Walsh et al. (2017) highlights the effectiveness of technology in enabling individuals with ASD to experiment with new behaviors, demonstrating strong outcomes in the maintenance and generalization of acquired skills across various contexts.

Recent advancements in technology, particularly internet-based training and virtual reality, have shown promise in enhancing employment-related skills for individuals with ASD. Previous studies highlighted the partial effectiveness of such tools in improving job interview skills. Strickland et al. (2013) demonstrated that participants with ASD who completed an internet-accessed training program

exhibited significant improvements in verbal communication compared to a control group. Similarly, Burke et al. (2018) employed a Virtual Interactive Training Agent system, revealing that individuals with ASD could develop critical skills such as identifying personal strengths, self-promotion, self-advocacy, and effectively responding to situational questions. Despite these encouraging outcomes, both studies noted a lack of progress in the realm of nonverbal communication, suggesting an area where further innovation and refinement of these technologies is needed.

To address this limitation, Kumazaki et al. (2019) introduced a role-play-based guidance system featuring an android robot. This system, designed to closely replicate the appearance and movements of a human, provides a platform for individuals with ASD to practice job interview scenarios. By combining advanced robotics with role-play methodology, the system offered a comprehensive approach to improving both verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

Recently, Shahverdi et al. (2023) evaluated the effectiveness of robot-mediated training for job interviews for young adults with ASD. The intervention, conducted over six weeks, utilized a Furhat social robot (Al Moubayed et al., 2013) in simulated job interview scenarios, focusing on enhancing nonverbal communication and interaction skills. The study assessed four key nonverbal behavioral challenges commonly observed in individuals with ASD: maintaining eye contact, minimizing excessive body movements, reducing atypical vocalizations, and maintaining proper orientation toward the interviewer. The results revealed diverse outcomes, with some participants who demonstrated consistent improvement, while others showed fluctuating progress. This variability underscores the importance of tailoring interventions to individual needs, supported by objective and quantitative analysis to optimize training efficacy.

Both VR and robotics create safe, controlled environments where users can practice workplace scenarios and develop essential skills without the stress or risks associated with real-world interactions. VR enables highly realistic simulations of job settings, allowing individuals to explore tasks and challenges that mirror real-life experiences, while robotics, particularly humanoid robots, provide opportunities to practice social interactions and communication. The adaptability of these tools ensures that training can be personalized to the individual's needs, offering repetitive practice, immediate feedback, and gradual skill-building at a pace suited to the learner (Cersosimo & Pennazio, 2024). Furthermore, their interactive and immersive nature enhances engagement and motivation, making the training process more effective (Charron et al., 2017).

3. OUR PROJECT

Starting from the considerations illustrated in the previous paragraphs, an ongoing research project at the DISFOR Department of the University of Genoa and started in September 2023 is described. The two-year project, funded by the "Fondazione Italia per l'Autismo" (FIA – Onlus), is based on an innovative framework that merges the use of social robots and VR in order to develop the social, communicative and

conversational skills of adolescents with ASD. In this framework, the communication channel opened by the robot as a social mediator allows access, through the subsequent use of virtual worlds, to higher levels of abstraction, complexity and generalization, ultimately leading to the application of the learned skills in a socially engaging context. This framework, tested in previous studies (Pennazio et al., 2020) has demonstrated its effectiveness in the development of communicative and social skills, including emotion recognition and the analysis of eye contact, attention and imitation. By honing these skills, adolescents with ASD can gain confidence and better navigate social scenarios, ultimately contributing to their success in various aspects of life, including employment opportunities.

The project has three objectives: (a) improve social skills, (b) stimulate communication skills (c) promote conversational skills needed to support a job interview in a structured and interactive way.

The project plans to involve in the initial phase 6 children with ASD aged between 15 and 19 who attend PHILOS, a specialized pedagogical Academy with cutting-edge techniques for the enabling and rehabilitative care of people with ASD and their families, active for many years in the Genoa area.

In order to calibrate the educational intervention around the needs, desires and real possibility of participation of the children, a User Centred Design approach will be followed. Through this approach, the needs and desires of the user will be given a lot of attention in every step of the design process in order to maximize the usability of the intervention itself. The recipients of the project (teachers and pupils/students with ASD and their families) will therefore be actively involved, when possible, as they will be able to offer suggestions, ideas but also stories, narratives, as well as feedback to the proposals put forward by the researchers. These suggestions will be useful for defining the work sessions to be implemented, the activities, the appearance and methods of interaction with the robot, the type of application to virtual worlds and the methods of evaluating the quality and effectiveness of learning paths mediated by robotic systems and virtual worlds.

The study will therefore follow both a top-down approach in which the research team will suggest to therapists and educators activities to implement on the robot and in virtual worlds appropriate to the age and development of the children, and an approach aimed at understanding the recipients themselves, their ambitions and needs. Through a phase of comparison and co-design between the partners (DISFOR researchers, PHILOS professionals, and researchers from the DIBRIS Engineering Department) the educational activities will first be designed by defining the methodologies and strategies to be used (tutoring, small group work, free work), the role of the robot and the virtual world and then implemented on the devices through the creation of interfaces necessary to modify the perception and the degree of sensory stimulation produced (customization of the robot and the virtual environment) and define the environmental scenarios within which the activity will be carried out.

The robot that will be used in the project is Pepper, configured for vocal and visual

interactions. Initially, the choice was made to use the Nao robot, but Pepper's physical and structural characteristics were later found to be more suitable for the age of the people involved. The virtual environment that will be used to replicate the activities proposed in the interaction phase in person with the robot is still being selected, with the aim of allowing a generalization of the skills learned through the simulation of different environments. The choice is however directed towards the use of protected environments such as Edmondo. A final phase aims to propose the same activities in the participants' school environment. In this context, the learning path will begin with just one classmate and will continue involving two, then three, then four classmates. The work, in rotation, will involve all the classmates. The experimenter and the class teachers will always be present.

Since the interaction with the robot is based on social stories, created by Carol Gray (2021) with the aim of improving social skills in individuals with ASD, these will be used in an adapted way in association with the robot. For example, the participants will be presented with stories about how to behave during a job interview and in the work environment.

For each work session, a work script will be created that will be implemented on the robot in which instructions will be given to the robot not only on what it will have to say but also on the feedback it will have to provide through movements and language.

Before the start of the experiment, a test will be administered by the psychologists active at PHILOS to evaluate the communication and conversational skills possessed by the children. This test will be repeated at the end of the experiment. Monitoring tools will also be used (observation grids prepared by the researchers) to observe the various experimental sessions.

In this online supplementary document (link) it is possible to find a description of the first phase of work, the one mediated by the robot, with the articulation of the experimental sessions implemented in the robot by the researchers and then applied with the adolescents by the professionals of PHILOS and the researchers of the University.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The use of social robots as innovative tools to support the acquisition of communication and conversational skills in adolescents with ASD has been shown to have a significant impact in supporting their social and emotional development. As highlighted in the paper, interaction with social robots offers the possibility of structuring a controllable and predictable environment, where children can practice without the pressure of traditional human interactions. This approach not only improves their communication skills, but also offers an important opportunity to prepare for real-life situations, such as job interviews.

However, to maximize the effectiveness of such interventions, it is essential to continue with research and innovation. It is essential to program robots that can adapt to different learning styles and specific needs of individual users. Personalization

allows to address more effectively the variations in the behavioral profile and communication preferences of adolescents with ASD. Also essential is the collaboration between experts from various disciplinary fields: robotics (engineers), psychologists, pedagogists and therapists who can contribute to further enrich the development of application formats suitable for social robots. Such synergies could lead to innovative intervention models, able to address the various communication and social challenges that children with ASD face. The goal of research in this area, including that of the presented study, should explore not only the use of robots in therapeutic or school settings, but also their application in real work contexts. Experimenting with training programs that integrate social robots and opportunities for internships or supported jobs could create an effective bridge between education and professional integration.

Furthermore, it is crucial to implement evaluation systems to monitor the effectiveness of social robot-based interventions. Regular feedback from educators, therapists, and families can provide valuable information to optimize programs and improve the learning experiences of people with ASD.

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DON LORENZO MILANI AND MARIA MALTONI: TWO EXPERIMENTS OF THE DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

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Don Lorenzo Milani with the school of Barbiana and Maria Maltoni with the experience of the school of San Gersolè are two representative figures of the 20th century because they proposed and realised an alternative education with a democratic purpose. Although they did not know each other, they both worked in Mugello; Maltoni was from 1920 to 1956 in the municipality of Impruneta; Don Milani created his own educational community in Barbiana. Maria Maltoni was a militant teacher, whose commitment to innovation in childhood education and didactics was appreciated by intellectuals such as Lombardo Radice, Italo Calvino and Francesco Bettini. His education was inspired not by an authoritarian educational model, but by a democratic paradigm that aimed, through knowledge and direct experience of things, at a self-education that transformed children from spectators into protagonists of their own education. This is why he adopted a new methodology involving the use of notebooks and diaries where children wrote and drew, expressing and narrating their daily lives.

Don Lorenzo Milani, Maria Maltoni, Inclusion, Democratic Education, Rural Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Don Lorenzo Milani and Maria Maltoni are two transformative and emblematic figures of 20th century Italian schools, particularly for implementing alternative and democratic educational practices. Although they never met, both made important contributions to education in Tuscany: Maria Maltoni worked as a teacher in the municipality of Impruneta from 1920 to 1956, while Don Lorenzo Milani served as a parish priest in San Donato in Calenzano in the 1950s and later in the small community of Barbiana during the 1960s.

A comparative analysis of Maria Maltoni and Don Lorenzo Milani highlights their shared commitment to building democratic schools. Both dedicated themselves to fostering critical and independent thinking in each student, firmly believing that education should not merely transmit knowledge but also empower individuals to question, reflect, and actively engage with the world. The innovative methodologies of Maria Maltoni and Don Lorenzo Milani represented a challenge for their time, especially for the Italian school, prioritising the needs and potential of each student in view of a more equitable and just society.

1. MARIA MALTONI AND DON LORENZO MILANI

Maria Maltoni, teacher and pedagogist, underwent a challenging ideological journey throughout her life. Initially a supporter of the regime, she later became a staunch opponent. Although in 1924 she was forced to join the Fascist School Association and in 1935 to join the National Fascist Party (Socci 2024, p. 21), as was obligatory for all teachers, she always disagreed with the directives imposed by this regime policy. Maltoni openly defied the regime's directives, refusing to adopt official textbooks, and faced several denunciations as a result of this and other conflicts. Notable accusations came from Leo Codacci, the commander of the Balilla youth group in Impruneta, and the local doctor and health officer, who claimed she did not encourage her students to participate in physical activities led by Codacci. Although these episodes contributed to further souring her already strained relations with fascism, no tension attenuated Maltoni's commitment. She continued to dedicate herself with determination to education, concentrating on the development of the personality of each of her pupils, with the aim of forming men and women capable of observing reality with a critical spirit and autonomy of thought.

Don Lorenzo Milani, a priest and educator deeply interested in pedagogical innovation and social commitment in post-war Italy, adopted an educational approach focused on uplifting the marginalized. In post-war Tuscany, he too fought for an education to be given to all; there was no alternative: either school teaches people to be free, even free to rebel, or it is an instrument of power and the enemy of the poor (Balducci 1993, p. 101). Don Milani was not the only one to fight for an education for all in post-war Tuscany; many others had the welfare of the entire community at heart: Giorgio La Pira, Father Ernesto Balducci, Father David Maria Turoldo, Archbishop Elia Dalla Costa, Father Giulio Facibeni, Father Divo Barsotti, Father Luigi Rosadoni. Animated by a religious spirit, these teachers, defined not by chance as 'Folli di Dio', shared the defence of the last ones and the urgency of a social and ecclesial revolution (Lancisi 2020, pp. 135-145). They met and intertwined their different stories, with the sole purpose of restoring dignity to men and women who remained on the margins of society, poor, orphaned, unemployed, different. The essence of Don Lorenzo Milani's educational vision, rooted in solidarity as a pillar of civic coexistence and personal growth, was encapsulated in the motto *I Care* "I care, it matters to me". This phrase epitomized his pedagogical ideal, standing in direct opposition to the cynical *me ne frego!* ("I don't care!"), a hallmark of fascist ideology.

2. SAN GERSOLÈ AND BARBIANA

In the San Gersolè school, Maria Maltoni based her educational philosophy on the rejection of authoritarian and traditional models, which in her view stifled children's curiosity and natural development. The teacher advocated a democratic paradigm that placed knowledge and direct experience at the centre of learning, with an approach that sought to promote self-education by transforming children from passive recipients of information to active participants in their own learning processes.

In the hamlet of San Gersolè there was a community of a few dozen families, mainly farmers and artisans, who lived in a social reality linked to sharecropping. There was no real school, only a small convent where the nuns taught the children to read, write and count, and the girls the art of sewing and embroidery. With the arrival of the teacher, the nuns were transferred, and Maria Maltoni was put in charge of setting up the school.

> Maria Maltoni ha dato vita a una scuola nuova, a un nuovo modo di fare insegnamento, stimolata senz'altro dalla realtà del luogo e dalla tipicità dei suoi alunni che hanno compreso l'impegno straordinario della loro insegnante, la sua totale dedizione affinché crescessero consapevoli e giusti (Socci 2024, p. 83).

Thanks to the diaries and drawings preserved in the Maltoni Fund, we have evidence of the daily life of the children and their families, marked by harvest times, ploughing of the fields, festivals and peasant life.

Barbiana was also a rural school area, located in the mountains, an isolated area characterised by great poverty. It was inhabited by the families of those few farmers who had not yet left the countryside to move to the cities and work in the factories, as was happening in many other rural areas of post-war Italy. In this context of marginality, don Lorenzo Milani's school aimed to respond to the needs of children who often abandoned their studies to work, contributing to the family's livelihood. The school in Barbiana, like the school in San Gersolè, placed knowledge and direct experience at the centre of the educational, which was realised through reading, analysing and discussing newspapers and magazines, which became tools for delving into topical issues and developing critical thinking. Equally important was the engagement with judges, lawyers, professors, journalists, doctors, photographers, and trade unionists who visited Barbiana with the specific goal of interacting with the students. These encounters sparked debates and reflections, encouraging analytical skills and the development of well-reasoned arguments.

> La mia parrocchia di montagna, quando arrivai c'era solo una scuola elementare, cinque classi in un'aula sola. I ragazzi uscivano dalla quinta semianalfabeta e andavano a lavorare, timidi e disprezzati. Decisi allora che avrei speso la mia vita di parroco per la loro elevazione civile e non solo religiosa. Così da undici anni in qua, la più gran parte del mio ministero consiste in una scuola (Milani 1971, p. 31).

The school founded in Barbiana was a place of intense and rigorous study where pupils dedicated themselves to learning every day of the year, studying for about twelve hours a day, but despite the commitment required it was a school that was alive and capable of making every pupil a protagonist, a school where solidarity was not a simple feeling of compassion but an active and conscious process, which required first of all an awareness of the community's problems. This was followed by the development of concrete solutions and the building of a collective consensus based on dialogue and the sharing of common goals. It was a path that involved both individual and collective commitment, in a continuous tension towards the construction of authentic relationships capable of enhancing differences without flattening them.

3. DEMOCRATIC METHODOLOGIES

The teacher Maltoni arrived in San Gersolè and found herself immersed in a rural reality deeply marked by the historical events of that period. Indeed, the social tensions of the post-war period were also reflected on the youngest children, as their drawings and diaries testify. The use of the diary, introduced by Giovanni Gentile's reform in 1923, as school inspector Francesco Bettini[1] writes, was 'the most genuine fruit of the activity spontaneous expression of our schools' (Bettini 1940, p. 491) and especially of the rural schools. The diaries of San Gersolè represent a precious fragment of memory of that small rural village, giving us back vivid and authentic images of landscapes, everyday life, wheat fields, brightly coloured flowers, insects observed with curiosity and narrated thanks to a few coloured pencils and 'in those strips of paper, of American manufacture, which fortunately came to the school and of which two large boxes still exist in the Maltoni Fund' (Socci 2024, p. 75). To make children not spectators but protagonists of their knowledge by making direct experience the focus of their education, Maltoni introduced an innovative methodology, an alternative pedagogical tool to textbooks, based on the use of notebooks and diaries. These diaries are not just artistic representations, but real visual and written accounts, telling both the work in the fields, nature, and stories of life in the village, as knowledge had to be gained through the direct study of things. He also concentrated on the dissemination of his pedagogical system, its contents and methods.

In 1946, the Italian Cultural Institute in New York accepted the invitation of teacher Maria Maltoni to exhibit the works of her pupils, which led to a travelling exhibition organised by the same institute some 20 years later, and some of the drawings were later included in the exhibition 'Children's Art' organised by Central Washington State College (Socci 2024, p. 40). In 1945, the teacher, aware of the innovation of her pedagogical practice, inspired by real experience and the encouragement of children's spontaneity in artistic expression, asked the Superintendent of Education in Florence for permission to transform the school of San Gersolè into a 'rural school of educational differentiation', also inspired by the pedagogy of the Pestalozzi school-city, a request that was granted in 1947. Don Lorenzo Milani's educational method was an apparently simple one, based on reading texts, discussion and collective writing, which involved the older pupils in particular. Each person would write down on a piece of paper a word, an idea or a theme that he or she felt needed to be explored, and this would become the starting point for a community discussion. Everyone expressed their opinion, asking questions or sharing doubts, and in this process of confrontation the subject matter was deepened, favouring a deeper understanding, the work culminated in the drafting of a common text summarising the students' reflections. At Barbiana, lessons did not take place in formal

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[1] Francesco Bettini (1879-1959): an elementary school teacher in the provinces of Mantua and Padua, he was appointed school inspector in 1909. Appointed chief inspector, he was transferred to Florence in 1924, and seconded to the Ente Nazionale di Cultura in Florence, directed by Ernesto Codignola, on which the rural schools of Tuscany, Emilia and Romagna depended; he remained there until 1934, when the Ente was forced to cease its activity and returned to its inspective function.

classrooms with desks and a teacher's podium but often under a tree or seated in a circle on the ground. There were no registers or grades, and a single shared book was used by everyone. The teaching was tailored to meet the needs of all students, and learning was grounded in an inclusive and communal approach.

4. CONCLUSION

At a time when inequalities continue to persist, the work of Maria Maltoni and Don Lorenzo Milani underscores how deeply committed both educators were to the development of each pupil's critical and autonomous thinking, and how much their shared commitment was to building democratic schools. Both believed that education should not be limited to imparting knowledge, but should also enable individuals to question, reflect and actively engage with the world around them. The innovative methodologies of Maria Maltoni and Don Lorenzo Milani challenged the status quo and offered a radical vision of what education could achieve. By prioritising the needs and potential of each student, the two masters laid the foundations for a more equitable and just society, their mountain schools, always open and with extended hours allowed their students to put themselves on an equal footing with their urban peers. Their legacy continues to inspire educators and advocates of education reform, highlighting the enduring importance of democratic principles in teaching and learning. With a focus on the marginalized and the promotion of an inclusive school attentive to the needs of all students, their work demonstrates the transformative power of education. It serves as a tool capable of shaping a generation of engaged socially conscious citizens.

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THE FUTURE REIMAGINED BY GENERATION Z IN THE FACE OF THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

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Members of Generation Z showed a markedly progressive orientation in the 2022 Italian general election, diverging from the overall trend observed in the wider population. An action-research project employing focus groups and interviews was conducted to investigate the motivations behind this epoch-making phenomenon, with the participation of high school and university students. The findings reveal the influence of TikTok on the political decisions of 18-year-olds. Furthermore, the sense of democracy among high school students is undermined by a lack of appreciation for the structural value of social equity. Additionally, the socio-cultural level and the productive training of technical and professional institutes are configured as reservoirs of anti-politics. It is therefore imperative that educators make appropriate pedagogical choices in order to support the reimagination of the future as called for by UNESCO and to counteract the neoliberal disimagination denounced by Critical Pedagogy.

new social contract for education; critical pedagogy; Italy's 2022 general election; social justice; TikTok.

INTRODUCTION

UNESCO and Critical Pedagogy both recognise the need for a radical *re-imagination* of a just, sustainable, and peaceful future (ICFE, 2021; Bearzi, 2023) in response to the *dis-imagination* produced by neoliberalism (Giroux, 2020; Marcuse, 1991), as well as to populist and authoritarian trends. As educational practice is inherently political (Freire, 1996), promoting continuously and creatively reconstructed participatory experiences can help overcome the crisis of democracy (Dewey, 1988). In the perspective of a lifelong and transformative education, we must not, at any age, lose the critical hope of a better world for all, which can resist the 'liquid culture' (Bauman, 2021) of neoliberal training (Freire, 1996; Secci, 2012). It is young people in particular — ideally with the support of competent adults — who are called to the task of transcending gerontocracy (ICFE, 2021). Political education, as opposed to politicizing education (Giroux, 2020, pp. 224-225) must humanise technology and engage in dialogue with the hybrid media system that regenerates values and identities (Chadwick, 2017) to respond to postmodern educational challenges.

1. ITALY'S 2022 GENERAL ELECTION: THE SURPRISING POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF GENERATION Z

According to pre- and post-election polls conducted by the leading research institutes in the field (SWG, 2022; IPSOS, 2022a), the vote expressed by Generation Z differed significantly from those of other age groups, in epochal terms. We will focus here on the most pertinent data for our research purposes. The significance of the reference to the 18-24/26 age group is further enhanced when considered in conjunction with the student status. In this scenario, the centre-right coalition that won the 25 September 2022 does not reach half of the consensus obtained in all age groups. The result of the centre-left coalition, comprising AVS, +Europa and PD, is almost two and a half times higher than that of the centre-right, and almost three and a half times if we include the M5S. It is noteworthy that the ballot boxes visited by Generation Z students exhibit a proclivity for progressive political representations that are distinctly more liberal democratic than social democratic, despite the considerable endorsement of AVS (9.4%). Finally, it is imperative to recognise that the abstentionism observed among Generation Z is aligned with the patterns revealed by other age groups (IPSOS, 2022b). This fact has been overlooked by many as a result of the often superficial and sensationalist nature of post-election media analyses.

2. THE POLITICAL SEMIOPHERE OF 18-YEAR-OLDS IN THE LIGHT OF AN ACTION-RESEARCH COURSE

Inquiring into the reasons for this remarkable discrepancy, which the pre-election polls from late August 2022 had already highlighted, would undoubtedly offer significant pedagogical, as well as sociological and political insights. In pursuit of this objective, an action-oriented research project was undertaken between September 2022 and July 2023. It took place within the context of the activities conducted by a research group operating at Espéro srl – University of Salento, led by Salvatore Colazzo. This research path, which employs the use of focus groups and individual interviews, exhibits similarities to emergent mix method designs (Trinchero and Robasto, 2019).

Between 12 and 18 September 2022, three teachers involved 66 students (aged 17-19) attending the final two years of higher education institutions from central and southern Lazio in a focus group aimed to investigate the motivations behind the voting orientations of Generation Z as revealed by pre-election polls. The high school participants (55 students, 37 females, 18 males) belonged to three different courses of study, linguistic (three classes), humanities (one), and socio-economic (one). A class from an industrial technical school (11 males) was also involved. The focus groups (Cyr, 2019) were structured as in-depth group interviews (Merton, 1987).

In the following months, two in-depth focus group sessions were conducted in one of the linguistic classes. Recursive individual interviews, both short and in-depth, were also conducted with ten students who had participated in the focus groups

and with four teachers. In addition, ten university students (aged 20-23) from the same geographical area were involved in in-depth individual pre-election interviews. Inter alia, they provided valuable support in bridging the generation gap with high school students. Ultimately, in August 2023, four of the university students and three high school students who had participated in the in-depth focus groups were invited to take part in a concluding in-depth individual interview.

The narrowness of the sample, especially in geographical terms, means that the results, which on the other hand show a high degree of consistency with the national statistical surveys mentioned above, should be treated with caution. The following analysis will focus on the most salient data that emerged from the high school groups. However, it is important to note that within the semiosphere of the technical institute class group, there is a prevailing sense of disillusionment towards politicians. Minimal interest is shown regarding civil rights, and instead, there is a heightened awareness of the significance of socio-economic issues in everyone's life. Finally, it should be pointed out that the political semiophere of the socio-economic group, which lies between that of the high school and that of the technical institutes in terms of socio-cultural background, is clearly intermediate between the latter and provides an ideal link to understand their differences.

In the high school groups, a self-described progressive and left-wing political identity clearly emerges. The left is inclusive, makes no distinctions, belongs to everyone, promotes. The right divides, condemns, is exclusivist. The primary drivers of progressive identification are a sensitivity to civil rights, particularly those pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community and gender equality, and a commitment to sustainability. These motivations align with those identified in the aforementioned national statistical surveys. However, in the last month of the campaign, shifts in ideology and sense of belonging can be observed.

3. TIKTOK'S ROLE

The findings of the focus groups and interviews indicate that the evolution of collective political identity during this period was shaped, to a greater extent than by direct interactions with family members and close friends in private settings, by the interactions experienced on social media platforms. In this context, it is important to emphasise the relevance of TikTok. This tool has been literally assailed by politicians craving neo- and re-intermediation (Barberis and Giacomini, 2020) in the hybrid media system, extemporarily hunting for votes among the very young, mostly with clumsy performances and disappointing results, at least according to many students. Nevertheless, the majority of political content hosted by TikTok did not originate from official party accounts. Instead, it was created by members of Generation Z who addressed their peers or by more dedicated content creators. Some of the latter engaged in the exploration of innovative forms of political communication, facilitated by the implementation of effective and engaging strategies. These approaches provided insights into the recognition of one's political identity, among other outcomes (Amendola and Masullo, 2023; Iazzetta, Punziano, De Falco and

Trezza, 2024). TikTok, which was alien to most teachers' experience, had now become a nerve centre of online campaigns alongside Instagram. It was undoubtedly an important differentiator for teenagers from millennials and even members of Generation Z who had recently entered university. It can be argued that it played a role not dissimilar to that observed during the invasion of Ukraine (Bearzi and Tarantino, 2022). In focus groups and interviews, many high school students emphasised the added value of this tool. The findings of the serial focus groups and in-depth thematic interviews also indicate that 18-year-olds do not refrain from accessing all media that are commonly used by adults, as well as some high-profile information sources, including international ones. It is also noteworthy that the level of knowledge of the values and programmes of the various political forces appears to be at least equivalent to that of other age groups among high school students, whereas it is markedly higher among university students.

TikTok, used in synergy with other media, seems to have enabled new high school voters to intuitively grasp meaningful aspects of political complexity without excessive reductionism, breaking through the veils and filters of newspeak and the mainstream. The image of the reassuring mother, which formed the basis of Meloni's election campaign and constituted an undoubtedly successful 'normalisation strategy' (Giordano and Antonucci, 2023), failed to convince their prevailing progressive sentiment. As one high school girl pointed out in the focus groups: 'when I *see* Giorgia Meloni in a debate with an immigrant on TikTok, I *understand* who Giorgia Meloni is'. In this sense, it can be argued that this social, *experienced* rather than *used* by teenagers, represented a free zone of the infosphere, of which the connective intelligence of Generation Z was able to take advantage.

However, not everything went so well. The spontaneous 'progressive conformism' of high school students, which was rooted in values that were genuinely felt and matured over time, had to confront the potential distortions produced by the algorithmic structure of the social medium. In the pre-electoral debate on TikTok, in alignment with the media propaganda complex, certain issues (in particular, the rights of the LGBTQ+ community) were prioritised at the expense of others (e.g. social equity, but also issues perceived as more relevant by teenagers, such as sustainability). This helps to explain why the PD's election campaign, which was focused on civil rights (Bertero and Scaduto, 2023) and anti-fascist rhetoric, was disastrous across all age groups, but it did succeed in fostering an acceptable consensus among Generation Z. The 18-year-olds involved in the in-depth individual interviews conducted in July 2023 eventually acknowledge, with the aid of the critical diachronic distance, the 'distorting' and 'catalysing' effects of generalist propaganda and the medium under consideration. These effects appear to be less significant in the voting decisions of university students.

4. THE PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES

Finally, it is important to note that, in the face of deeply-rooted liberal and democratic values, the awareness of the inseparable link between freedom, democracy

and social justice does not seem to play a role in the political choices of eighteen-year-olds. Very sensitive to the issue of civil rights, sympathetic to the idea of a more inclusive society capable of guaranteeing equal opportunities, these young people have not really metabolised the structural value of social justice, especially in terms of political agency.

The fragility of the sense of global citizenship is also evident, despite a culture that is more open to it than older age groups. There is a lack of awareness of the interdependence between national and international politics, which is woven into everyday experience. This is also applicable to the wars themselves, which are closely linked not only to nationalism, populism and authoritarian phenomena, but also to deficits in social equity, in substantive democracy and to the hegemony of neoliberalism. At the time of voting, the identification of these young people, who tend to espouse pacifist views, with the defence of the rights of friends and acquaintances belonging to the LGBTQ+ community was of greater consequence than conflicts that, although intensely experienced, such as the moment of the invasion of Ukraine via TikTok, were still too distant from the existential priorities shared with their peers.

Those responsible for the education of young people in high school settings should consider these problems even though they are operating in a very favourable context, dealing with a Generation Z that is far more advanced than the rest of society. In order to emancipate themselves from the various reasons that undermine their own agency (Bearzi, 2023), educators must weave critical reflection on current events and the reimagination of the future into their pedagogical praxis. It is imperative that they do not evade the challenges presented by the hybrid media system. The technical-professional sector of secondary education requires more ambitious and concrete solutions, aimed at a structural reform of the goals of the curriculum. The objective should be to educate citizens, rather than merely producing uncritical producers.

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PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN BRAZIL: HISTORY AND STRUGGLES FOR DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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This work aims to point out some elements, still on a preliminary basis, of the history of the struggle in defense of public and democratic education in Brazil in the period between the 1990s and the 2000s. The conditions generated from above in the context of world politics and the process of resumption of democratization made the 1990s fruitful for the political organization of the working class in general and for the educational field, in particular, resulting in an organization of collective strength in the history of Brazilian education. From the 1990s onwards, in different governments – José Sarney, (1985-1990); Fernando Collor (1990-1992); Itamar Franco (1992-1995) and Fernando Henrique (1994-1998), supported the educational reforms implemented within the neoliberal State and the advance of the offensive of the dominant classes by the hegemony of capital, there was a process of curbing its capacity for collective struggle. Between 2003 and 2016, Brazil experienced important social and economic changes that directly affected the well-being of the population, especially the poorest. These changes took place after the arrival of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Roussef (Workers' Party – PT) to the presidency of the republic, who, although he continued some economic policies of the previous government, established as a priority the social policies of tackling poverty and South-South regional integration processes, recovering the role of the State as an inducer of economic growth. After a political, legal and media coup by the Dilma government, educational policies suffered constant tension in their laissez-faire led by the governments of Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro in the years 2016 to 2022, converging with the denial of scientific knowledge guided and based on assumptions of the invisible hand of the market that intentionally hid the political dimension for a segment of Brazilian society. National education was emptied of content aimed at emancipation that would have concrete chances if implemented within education policies and materialized in the school institution, having the effect of not individualizing or mitigating the emancipatory possibilities of education and teacher training that would bring about transformations. The resumption of forms of collective resistance and confrontation, capable of altering the historical conditions of Brazilian education, requires, among other things, an in-depth understanding of the specificities of this history of educators' struggle to learn lessons that indicate what are the fundamental elements in current situation of development of capitalism crises and reaffirm the fight for public schools, social justice, secular and democratic.

democratic school, government policy, social justice

INTRODUCTION

Class struggle was not invented by the workers, but imposed by capital and translates into opposing and contradictory political/social projects. For Gramsci (1978), such clashes permeate the structural issue, the relationship of production, and the superstructural issue that express gnosiological and ontological perspectives. In this sense, in the clash between the political function of social and human constitution, ways of thinking and conceiving life are elaborated that can be identified as overcoming contradictions in the struggle to build a new social and political order. One of the contradictory spaces of social struggle is the school, as it contains within itself the social function of training subjects in the adaptive and/or emancipatory sense for democracy. According to the Gramscian conception, the school consists of a space for the promotion of culture, technology and the various fields of science, providing the training of intellectuals at different levels.

For Gramsci, the scientific notions disseminated in school allow for debate and reflection with fragmented, prejudiced and denialist ideological conceptions. Likewise, the notions of rights and duties built in school confront the existing "individualistic barbarism". In Gramsci's words,

> The school, through what it teaches, fights against folklore, against all traditional sedimentations of conceptions of the world, in order to spread a more modern conception, whose primitive and fundamental elements are given by the existence of natural laws as something objective and rebellious, to which it is necessary to adapt in order to dominate them, as well as civil and state laws that are the product of human activity established by man and can be modified by him aiming at his collective development (Gramsci, 1991, p. 130).

The school contains a social mark, since each social group has its own type of school aimed at perpetuating a certain traditional, directive or instrumental function. The school organized for the people increasingly restricts its capacities with a merely instrumental/professional training, contributing to the perpetuation of social differences. From this scenario, we will discuss the repercussion of educational policies in force in Brazil between the years 1990 and 2022 in their conceptions of school and school knowledge, as well as their impact on the constitution of a democratic process. From a methodological perspective, we use document analysis to identify policies that guide the role of the school and its relationship with democracy.

1. PROJECTS IN DISPUTE: POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL DEBATES AMALGAMATED WITH NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE GROUPS

The history produced by men has its own cultural manifestations, emanating from the way in which society lives and organizes itself. In the same way, practices, discourses, justifications and terms are produced to express power and its determinations. Not without contradictions, but under the necessity of capitalism's crises, new sociabilities are generated adapted to the interests of the groups in power.

Brazil experienced authoritarianism assumed by dictatorships, as in the Estado

Novo (1937-1945) or in the Civil-Military Coup (1964-1985), or blurred in centralized governments, with restrictions on democratic participation in state decisions. More recently, during four years of the term of President of the Republic Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2018-2022), a government was evidenced whose ideological-political formation has roots in European proto-fascism – however with its own expressions and manifestations through sophisticated mechanisms of expression [Latin-massman] – but which was barred by restrictions imposed by the State, understood in the expanded/integral conception.

In the different conjunctures, abundant theoretical production was elaborated resulting from historical, sociological and philosophical studies that sought to understand the transformations that Brazilian society was going through. Thus, the debates began to express the conflicts and impasses experienced by the aforementioned society, which allowed the circulation of a fertile theoretical production in the area of education to break with the prevailing conceptions and understand the ongoing changes.

There is, therefore, a debate around the construction of hegemony understood by Gramsci as political, moral, cultural and ideological leadership. In this conception, culture is the fundamental element, since the leadership (hegemony) of a society is conquered not only through economic and political domination, but through a consensus established in the ways of thinking and knowing, and in the cultural and ideological orientations of a society.

International authors who discuss the educational purposes and curriculum proposals in dispute in recent decades by international organizations, such as Lenoir (2016), Pacheco and Marques (2014), Young (2007), Lessard and Mieirieu (2005), reiterate the need to apprehend their forms of expression and their rational core imbued with their purpose, that is, their ideological purposes. In Brazil, recent studies such as those by Guerra, Gonçalves and Figueiredo (2021), Libâneo (2021), Silva, Silva and Ferreira (2022) and Amorim and Leite (2019), Freitas (2018) and Evangelista (2014), among others.

The role of the school in the hegemonic proposal of a neoliberal vision of education, represented in the State expanded by cohesion and strength, is to offer students the search for skills required by the labor market, including the socio-emotional resilience of being an entrepreneur of oneself. There is, therefore, no training for or of emancipated culture, the development of critical thinking and the formation of a collective civic conscience. In other words, "... the role of the school system is to provide the human capital necessary for companies, to aim from an early age at individual insertion, as human capital, in the economicist logic of the market" (Lenoir, 2016).

Educational policy in Brazil has been marked by significant transformations, shaped by distinct political and economic contexts, which have influenced the priorities and rumors of education, specifically from the perspective of training for democracy. During the governments of Fernando Collor (1990-1992) and Itamar Franco (1992-1994), education received limited attention due to political and

economic instability. State policies symbolized efforts to expand access to basic education and modernize the educational system, although critics point to a specific democratization of the system and the training of social subjects.

The first female president, Dilma Vanna Rousseff, of the PT, elected in 2010 and reelected in 2014, continued the policies of former president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, suffering a political-legal-media coup in 2016, when the financial system crisis erupted. Educational policy was marked by the expansion of access to education at all levels, with an emphasis on social inclusion and the strengthening of basic, technical and higher education.

The government periods of President Michel Temer, of the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party – MDB (2016-2019), after the political-legal-media coup of 2016, and of Jair Bolsonaro, of the Liberal Party – PL (2019-2022), represented the development of new educational policies. The guiding training apparatus aimed at basic education, from the initial training of teachers to each of the teaching segments, infers questioning the intentions of the training of social subjects directed to the labor market without major pretensions, functioning as a limiter and regulator of what is meant by education for democracy.

At the beginning of 2020, the international and national scene was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, which drastically affected the entire planet. However, the Federal Government did not react to the extent demanded by the situation of public calamity. From this, there were (and are) repercussions throughout society and, as could not fail to be, in the educational field with the absence of effective actions to articulate the efforts of the federative entities in facing this sanitary crisis of enormous proportions that impacted educational institutions and the lives of students, education professionals, families and the educational community as a whole.

At the end of the Bolsonaro Government, even though the challenges of Brazilian education were not exclusive to this administration, the set of mistakes and setbacks of the government in the period from 2018 to 2022 diverted basic education from the advance, albeit slowly, but consistent that was achieved by previous educational policies. The apprehended reality of Brazilian educational policies was delimited by the analysis of concrete materiality constituted under certain conditions in the society of capital, subjugated by a particularity that has been Covid-19, in addition to the singularity of the recent moment in national political history that had a denialist president.

The governments of President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, of the Workers' Party – PT, who governed the country in two terms (2003-2006; 2007-2010; 2022-2026), is seen as the president of the social cause in Brazil due to the increase in the purchasing power of a large part of the Brazilian population, especially the poorest portion of Brazil, there are contradictions regarding the role of – at least in terms of public school education and higher education with teacher training, as it allowed and allows the management of private apparatuses of hegemony in public school education.

The integral State in Brazil has been ineffective in advancing quality education programs that seek to break with inequalities, train critical and active subjects in society in an equitable way. This points to setbacks in the form of denialism, control of education and an ossified educational model with management only to serve the market with a vision of restricting freedom, that is, education that previously walked to break this mercantilist circle, has gone back to its bases of subservience to capital.

CONCLUSION

As a partial result, it appears that, given this scenario, it is pointed out that democracy in Brazilian education reflects the principle that education must be a universal right, guaranteeing equal opportunities and respect for diversity. The 1988 Federal Constitution was a milestone in this process, by considering education as a fundamental social right and establishing democratic management as one of the pillars of the educational system.

This principle, reinforced by the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education (LDB) of 1996, seeks to guarantee the participation of different participants – such as teachers, parents, students and the community – in the formulation and management of educational policies. This democratic approach aims to promote inclusive and equitable education, combating historical and regional inequalities that affect access and the quality of education in the country.

However, the consolidation of democracy in Brazilian education faces significant challenges. Despite institutional advances, structural inequalities persist that hinder the full exercise of the right to education, especially in the poorest regions and for socially vulnerable groups. In addition, issues such as insufficient public investment, the precariousness of teaching work and unequal access to technological resources highlight the limitations of democratic management in everyday school life. Educational democracy in Brazil requires not only a formal guarantee of participation, but also the construction of social and political practices that ensure that all individuals have real conditions to exercise their educational rights.

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EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP THROUGH SIMULATION GAMES AT SECONDARY LEVEL

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This study examines how simulation games can enhance democracy education at the secondary level, emphasizing the development of democratic competencies. Using a mixed-methods approach, it was conducted in Ticino with 187 students and 8 teachers testing a Toolkit (TEDYC) designed to foster critical thinking, argumentative dialogue, conflict management and decentration. The findings indicate that students improved cognitive, social, and emotional skills, particularly in respecting others' opinions, developing empathy, and managing debates. Teachers valued the simulations for promoting analytical thinking and perspective-taking, although some highlighted challenges with assigned arguments. The study highlights simulations' potential as tools for integrating democratic competencies into education.

Education for Democratic Citizenship, Simulation Games, Critical Thinking, Argumentative Dialogue, Secondary School

INTRODUCTION

In a global context of rapid social, economic, political and environmental change, social justice through education implies the strengthening of students' democratic competences, which play an important role in promoting the maturity of people so they can contribute to society and critically shape democracy (Frech et al., 2020). They are therefore an important pedagogical objective throughout the world. Education for democratic citizenship involves equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to defend democratic rights, value diversity, and actively participate in democratic life, promoting and protecting democracy and the rule of law (Council of Europe, 2018b).

CRITICAL THINKING, ARGUMENTATIVE DIALOGUE, DECENTRATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF A DYNAMIC CITIZENSHIP

To promote education for democratic citizenship, it is crucial to view citizenship not merely as a static concept, but also as a dynamic one. Citizenship is closely linked to the sense of belonging to a community. This sense of belonging can be seen as either inherited and linked to a status, or chosen and connected to a decision

(Audigier, 2002; Staeheli, 2011). Viewing citizenship as dynamic highlights its polysemic, multi-scale, and evolving aspects (Audigier, 2002; Staeheli, 2011). Education for democratic citizenship which understands citizenship as dynamic goes beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge about the State and its structures; it also requires the development of competencies (Tutiaux-Guillon, 2006) and involves everyone living in the community, bridging the gap between citizens, recognized as members of the State, and non-citizens or foreign citizens.

Education for democratic citizenship takes place in the political, which is understood as the space between people produced by human speech and action (Arendt, 1998; 2003), where different conceptions, systems of thought, visions and ideologies about the functioning and goals of common life in society meet (Bedorf & Röttgers, 2010; Mouffe, 2005). It is a potentially conflictual space, and education in this space should be grounded in problem-oriented teaching and learning activities that address politically contentious issues, defined as "authentic questions about the kinds of public policies that should be adopted to address public problems" (Hess, 2009, p. 5).

To deal effectively with politically controversial issues and guide decision making and conflict resolution (Frech et al., 2020), it is important to develop critical thinking, a "self-regulating process of judging what to believe or what to do in a given context" (Facione, 2000, p. 65). To analyse, interpret, explain and evaluate controversial situations, students should use their inference skills, to identify and secure the elements needed to draw reasonable conclusions and adopt a self-regulatory attitude towards their own conclusions to challenge, confirm, validate, or correct their reasoning or results (Facione & Gitters, 2013).

Dealing with controversies also requires argumentative dialogue and decentration, essential skills in a work based on critical thinking (Gaussel, 2016). Argumentative dialogue is based on considering argumentation as a process, as a "complex of communicative and interactional acts aimed at resolving a disagreement with the addressee by putting forward a constellation of propositions for which the arguer can be held accountable, in order to make the position in question acceptable to a rational judge who judges reasonably" (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 3). Argumentative dialogue is a useful tool in conflict management because it is based on decentration, i.e. considering other positions, not just one's own, as viable (Muller Mirza et al., 2007) and taking them into account in a constructive discussion, without overlooking disagreements or allowing them to degenerate into personal animosity (Greco, 2018).

DEVELOPING EDUCATIONAL SIMULATIONS

Toolkit for educating to a dynamic citizenship (TEDYC) is a three-year international and interdisciplinary research project involving the Dipartimento Formazione e Apprendimento/Alta Scuola Pedagogica (Department of education and learning/university of teacher education) (DFA/ASP), based in Locarno and part of the Scuola Universitaria Professionale della Svizzera Italiana (University of applied sciences

and arts of southern Switzerland) (SUPSI); the Istituto di argomentazione, linguistca e semiotica (Institute of argumentation linguistics and semiotics) (IALS) based in Lugano and part of the Università della Svizzera italiana (University of southern Switzeland) (USI), and planpolitik a Berlin-based company specializing in the development of educational games. The project runs from September 2022 to August 2025.

The objective of the project is to develop educational simulations aimed at mobilizing critical thinking, decentration and argumentative dialogue. Educational simulations are a teaching method that involve students in activities that replicate realistic scenarios, identifying stakeholders, their resources, their relationships and their interactions (Thémines, 2011; Vidal & Simonneaux, 2011). Simulations allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. This method emphasises interactive/communicative, systemic and action/decision skills and is suitable for developing negotiation, teamwork, compromise, social and action skills (Raiser & Warkalla, 2011).

The first developed simulation is set in a school and simulates a round table meeting called by the school administration to discuss the introduction of a dress code. The second is a more complex version of the first, as the roundtable has also been convened to discuss a teacher's response to a student's outfit and her Instagram post about it. The third simulation involves a roundtable convened by the council of a fictional city to discuss an entrepreneur's plan to convert an abandoned industrial building into holiday apartments.

TESTING THE SIMULATIONS

The simulations were tested between March and June 2024 in different secondary I and II classes in Ticino. The simple version of the school simulation was tested in six secondary I classes with students aged 12-15. The city simulation was tested in one secondary I class with students aged 13-14 and in three secondary II classes with students aged 15-17. A total of 187 students were involved, 135 in secondary I and 52 in secondary II. Eight teachers took part in the test phase. Table 1 shows their profiles. In the last column, the different shades of grey indicate which teachers collaborated on the chosen simulation. Teachers who worked together during the simulation participated in the interviews and completed the survey together.

The following tools were used for monitoring: surveys of students and teachers, semi-structured focus groups of students, and semi-structured interviews of teachers. The main goal of the monitoring was to gather information about the simulations in order to revise and improve them. However, all instruments include a section on learning. In this article, only the questions focusing on learning were considered. The responses regarding learning were subjected to qualitative analysis.

The student survey includes an open-ended question about perceived learning, Q1: What did you learn by playing this game? What do you think you have learned? Figure 1 illustrates the categories emerged from the analysis of the responses to this question.

Table 1: Profiles of the involved teachers

Level	Branch/es taught	Setting of the simulation	Used simulation	Students age	Year teaching				Percentage employement			Code
					1-5	6-10	11-20	20	<50	50-80	80	
Secondary I	italian	Co-teaching Italian-geography	City	13-14	X						X	A
	geography		City	13-14	X						X	B
	italian/history	Citizenship Education	School simple	12-13			X				X	C
	italian/history	Citizenship Education	School simple	12-13			X				X	D
	italian/history	Citizenship Education		14-15				X			X	E
	history			14-15				X		X		F
Secondary II	geography	Geography	City	15-16	X				X			G
	geography	Geography	City	16-17	X					X		H

Figure 1: The categories used for analysing Q1

1. Debating
- In general
- Consider other opinions and evaluate them
- Refute
- Argue
- State in public
- Collaborate
- Persuade

2. Reaching a compromise
3. Playing a role
4. Decision making in the society
5. The discussed subject
6. Nothing
7. Other

One of the focus group items was also about perceived learning. In this case, the responses to this item were categorized into social skills (respect for others' opinions, ability to compromise, conflict management), cognitive skills (argumentation, critical thinking), and emotional skills (emotion management, empathy, and understanding).

In the survey, teachers were asked to evaluate on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (completely) students' mobilization of eight of the competencies of the Framework for a Democratic Culture (Council of Europe, 2018b), specifically: self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity, autonomous learning skills, analytical and critical thinking skills, skills of listening and observing, flexibility and adaptability, linguistic and communicative skills, knowledge and critical understanding of the self.

During the interviews, the teachers answered the following question: *Q2 – In terms of argumentation, critical thinking and decentralization, how do you assess the effectiveness of the game tested?* The categories used to analyse the answers to this question are the three competencies.

FINDINGS

Of the 135 students who answered Q1 it emerges that they consider having learn about:

- debating (57), and particularly: considering other opinions (20) and argue (11),
- reaching a compromise (26),
- decision making in the society (20).

In terms of social skills, the focus groups show that students believe they have learned to respect other people's opinions and to compromise even when they don't like it. In terms of cognitive skills, they show that students believe they have improved their argumentation skills and developed critical thinking by defending opinions different from their own. In terms of emotional skills, the focus groups show that they perceive the possibility of having learned to regulate emotions during debates and to have developed empathy and understanding for the opinions of others.

Figure 2: Answers to Q2
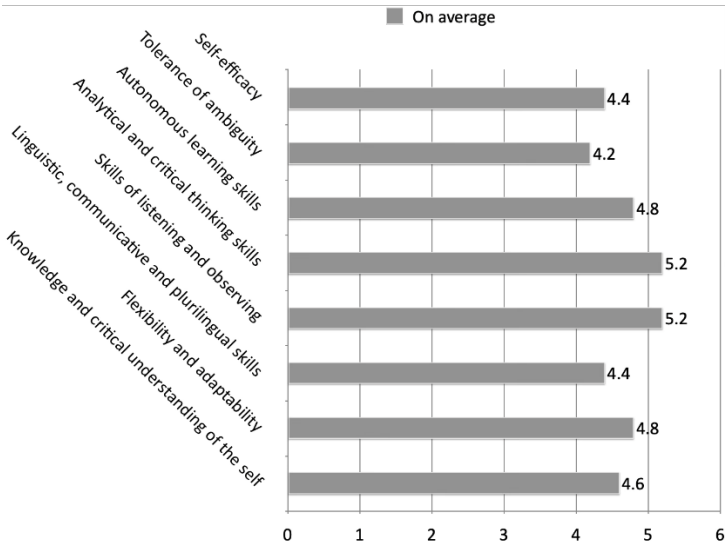
As indicated by figure 2, teachers' average level of satisfaction with the mobilization of selected is between 4.2 and 5.2. The less satisfactory competence is: tolerance of ambiguity. During the interviews, led after the compilation of the survey a difficulty to understand what is meant by 'tolerance of ambiguity' emerged. It is the fact to accept that there can be different points of view and that different answers to the same question could be equally correct. The higher satisfaction in mobilizing the competences has been reached for: analytical and critical thinking competencies and skills of listening and observing.

The answers of the teachers in the interviews to the question about students' learning during the simulation show us a high satisfaction with the activity, although most of them emphasize the problems caused by the fact that the examples of arguments were provided with the descriptions of the roles. This can be seen in the following answers (the codes refer to Table 1).

> E: "In my opinion, the main problem with the fourth grade (author's note: 14–15-year-old students) was to give them the arguments already. Frankly, I do not know if I would do it again because it slows down their ability to find new arguments".
> F: "I think I would give one of the three suggested arguments".

Nevertheless, a different point of view on this point emerges from these answers:

> D: "Moreover, students more than just following what was written on the papers, also proposed arguments (...) and that was also good".

> H: (Students were able to) "develop their arguments, despite of the fact that maybe it was not exactly the role they would have wanted to defend".

Regarding decentration, the answers are more positive; the interviews show a general agreement on the positive effects of the simulation in promoting decentration, not only because some students were asked to advocate a point of view that they do not support in their lives, but also in the sense that the simulation was really based on the need to listen to the other in order to propose something, to walk together towards a compromise.

> B: (Decentration as) "not only, I play a role that is not my own, but in addition I listen to what is said to me from the other side, from the other characters, I listen and I take into account".

> C: "In the sense that everyone was more focused on expressing their own opinion rather than listening to the other people and then either taking something from the other person and refuting it or saying I think the same way instead, then after a while, after a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes, they realized that there was this mode as well".

The responses regarding critical thinking were also all assertive, teachers agree when considering the effects of the simulations on critical thinking as already seen in the survey.

A: "Critical thinking eventually works because you are stimulated anyway when you have two different ways of thinking in front of you".

CONCLUSIONS

Monitoring simulations during testing shows their impact on perspective-taking and critical thinking. Moreover, students find them effective for training argumentative dialogue skills. On their side, teachers have different opinions on this point. Some of them see as positive furnishing the arguments with the description of the roles, other think that this is not necessary and reduce the positive effects on training argumentative dialogue skills. Teachers also highlight positive effects on analytical thinking, listening, and observation.

Finally, we would like to point out that the measurement of progress is the result of a process of self-awareness, not an external evaluation. A possible development of the research could be to organise external evaluations of the simulations. This could be done by recording video replays of the simulation, at least of the roundtables, and then applying an evaluation grid, such as the one developed by the Council of Europe (2018a).

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DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE FROM AN EARLY AGE. BEYOND THE DEMOCRATIC CRISIS WITH CHILDREN'S IDEAS

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Democratic citizenship has much to do, from childhood, with learning both to mutually feel the reality of the other, as an essential component of a caring orientation, and to approach the encounter with the other with empathy and authenticity. In the complexity of the present, one might assume that the order generated by sharing would not be able to find space in the apparent disorder of multiple identities, both migrant and non-migrant, that characterize it. The authentic ideas about social justice expressed by children only protect against this risk if they are listened to and welcomed. In this perspective, the quality of the educational relationship with the youngest members of our societies must be guided by the participatory principle. This means accepting the premise that the youngest of human beings has an original and personal point of view as a present, active citizen and has the right to participate, like any adult, in the definition of social justice educational choices that affect children. Starting from this hypothesis, this paper presents qualitative and participatory research, initiated with a playful-narrative approach. It is an experiential investigation that focuses on the creativity and personal development of children and their ideas of social justice.

Democracy; Education; Culture; Poverty; Social Justice.

INTRODUCTION

It is not only families, but also public/private institutions that interact with children that must learn or meta-learn to listen to children before making any policy choices about them. Indeed, children have the right to express their opinion whenever decisions affecting them are made and their opinion must be given due consideration (Art. 12 UN Convention 1989), whether they are unaccompanied foreign minors or minors who are Italian citizens. In compliance with this statement, the pedagogical devices of listening, observation and care should find space in places of educational care characterised by experiences of sociality and relationships. These assumptions are present in Law 107/2015[1] in Article 3 establishing the creation of

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[1] LAW No. 107 of 13 July 2015 Reform of the national education and training system and delegation for the reordering of existing legislative provisions. (15G00122) (OJ General Series No.162 of 15-07-2015).

childhood hubs, *Poli dell'infanzia* in Italian (Legislative Decree 65/2017), of the integrated system 0-6 as permanent laboratories of research, innovation, participation, and openness to the territory. The strategic objectives pursued by these laboratories are primarily focused on the inclusion of all children. In a perspective of social justice, it is therefore clear that the role of the educator, the parent, the teacher, the decision-makers should be, first of all, to build an educational relationship with the child/children based on the participative principle; this means assuming the conviction that they have an unprecedented and personal point of view and, as present and active citizens, they have the right to participate like adults in the definition of educational dynamics. This contribution investigates this perspective of the democratic participation of children in political life and asks whether they are educated in an active, generative, and committed way (Mortari, 2008) to the effort of empathically feeling the other. To this end, we present the results of a qualitative participatory research initiated with a narrative-ludic approach; an experiential investigation that, in its practical implementation, focuses on children's creativity and personal development (Knowles, 1973), with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of children's emotions and consequent ideas on two areas related to democratic education: the choices of adult decision-makers or, to use the children's words, '*those in charge*'; and social justice.

1. WHY DOES DEMOCRACY NEED CHILDREN'S IDEAS? THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A first answer can be sought in the idea of the person in solidarity that is shared in any given society. Such exploration can find answers starting from some questions on the theme of social justice: what are the responsibilities required of the citizen and the citizen of minor age? What are the questions that can be formulated by them? What are the ideas that can be expressed by the youngest citizens? Some might be tempted to think that the multiple minor-child identities do not enjoy an orderly formulation of the rights and duties of citizenship. Others, on the contrary, might think that it is possible, in the apparent disorder of childhood, to find the order generated by the commonality that is expressed through the exercise of one's rights and the assumption of responsibilities in the spaces of childhood life, particularly in the family, the educational services, and at school. The assumption of such paradigm allows to observe a democratic order/disorder in the behaviour of children, as well as in that of the teacher who shares the intellectual and spiritual growth of their pupils, whether migrants or non-migrants. This is also true for the actions of the professional educator who shares the responsibility for a collective and cooperative action capable of questioning the idea of what a good citizen or good person is in any given society, and for the actions of those parents who are able to educate by allowing their child's life to become aware of their instincts in order to become a master and not a prisoner, of themselves or of the opinion of others (Dolto, 2019). Democratic education must shape a liberal education that is not only critical reflection and respectful argumentation, 'but also pluralistic, i.e., one that fosters an understanding of the histories and contributions of the groups with which we come

into contact', because 'it is relatively easy to conceive of an education directed at a homogeneous elite. It is, on the other hand, much more difficult to educate people with very different histories behind them and turn them into citizens of a complex world' (Nussbaum, 1999). Recalling the thought of Mario Lodi, (Benetton, 2023) democratic education starts precisely by putting oneself 'on the side of the child', recognising, involving, and activating them, allowing them to live fully:

> Don't tell me that it is difficult or that it requires special attitudes. It does, however, demand one thing: that we are on the child's side against those who want to adapt them to medieval patterns of subordination to power. In short, reclaiming the child to creative play and the normality of growth is an aspect of the broader and harder battle for humankind's substantial freedom. (Lodi, 2022a).

All of this invites us to consider children's ideas as the basis for democracy and possibly a peace-oriented democracy. You must be on the side of the child to recognise the ability to achieve a democratic peace that cannot be based on injustice towards the child, very often expressed by ignoring the child's presence in the absence of their ideas about the present. The figure of the child must shine before us as a symbol not as a goal, but as the only way to reach it. The appeal by Montessori invites us to consider the child, from a social point of view, as a citizen and as a human being, with his own dignity in any country in the world. Every child must be recognised as a citizen. The principle of the equality of all springs from democracy. This means, recalling Dewey, promoting an associated life rich in communicated and joint experience; the individual, although free to move, always has the other to deal with through dialogue. It is a question of placing the individual in a democratic environment where diversity and multiplicity of stimuli and interests produce a real liberation of faculties because they gather ideas from all those sources to which they turn, to promote the fundamental pedagogical instance: the liberation and improvement of the individual in social life.

2. RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

The research seeks to answer three questions. 1. Can children facilitate democracy? 2. What are children's ideas about democracy? 3. Are governments and their policies attentive to children's ideas?

The study was carried out using qualitative contextual analysis, as described by Svensson (2005, 2021), which can be defined more as an approach than a specific research method designed according to the epistemological assumptions specified in relation to the object of research under investigation, as it focuses specifically on the ways and gazes used to carry it out. A qualitative and participative research, initiated with a playful-narrative approach; an experiential investigation that focused on the creativity and personal development of the children and their ideas of social justice. To define the object, we started by listening to the children's ideas on social justice, their different wordings were observed through the identification of emotions. It was chosen to work in this direction because, qualitative research is linked to the paradigms of complexity (multidimensionality of

experiences), contextuality (phenomena are considered considering situational re-alities), and processuality (survey data are dependent on the temporal dimension that characterises the research process). Indeed, qualitative research is a situated activity, which places the observer in the world. (Benelli &Tozza, 2022). A set of in-terpretative practices that make this world visible by transforming it. Given the the-oretical hypotheses already argued, which place at the centre the construct of de-mocracy as a participatory principle through which a shared order is generated in the apparent disorder of multiple identities, a research design characterised by the following steps was developed

- object of the research: the disorder and order of multiple identities.
- The main parts of the object are Sharing = Democracy
- The part within the main parts are Children's ideas about democracy

The investigation was conducted with different types of observations according to the perspective of the mixed method (Niglas, 1999; Guba, Lincoln, 1994; Niglas, 2000):

- field observation.
- participant observation.
- Indirect observation (interviews).
- Analysis of documents (cards).

Timeline of activities: July 2023-June 2024. Four hours of activities with the children in each group.

2.1. Three different contexts

1. A Neighbourhood Centre in Italy 'Bottega dei Sogni' an intercultural context Cagliari. Participants 20 children aged 5-6 years.

2. A pre-school in Italy 'Via Dublino sez. B, I.C. via Stoccolma' Cagliari. Partic-ipants 17 children aged 4-5 years.

3. A kindergarten in Sweden 'Förskolan Södra Sälöjorsgatan' Gothemburg. Participants 16 children aged 4-5 years.

2.2. Activities, time, and materials

1. Stage 1. Reading a picture book: *The Wall* by Giancarlo Macrì and Carolina Zanotti, illustrated by Sacco and Vallarino. The book tells the story of a king who, after falling from his throne, realises that his kingdom, once populated by blue faces, is now inhabited by faces of all colours. He then decides to go back in time and separate his people from the 'foreigners', expelling them and ordering the construction of a wall. However, he soon realises that all his wishes can only be fulfilled with the help of the coloured faces he has driven away. The king then orders the demolition of the wall and rec-ognising the value of integration between peoples, manages to rebuild a kingdom living in harmony.

2. Stage 2. We animated and acted out the storybook together, distributing coloured faces and playing the game "What will the king decide?". The boys

and girls represented the emotions the king went through when making his decisions.

3. Finally, we worked in groups to complete the story, decide for the king and, through a structured interview, discuss the solutions in a time circle. What emerged from the discussions was that that the king had to welcome everyone and build together to discover the stars and be happy.

3. DATA AND CONCLUSIVE ANALYSIS

The starting point was to define the object of the research, to understand whether, through the experience of play, children can express their ideas about social justice starting from the recognition of the emotions represented and experienced. We observed four behaviours by analysing cards and listening to children's discussions about people's lives:

Tab.1. Observation results.

Behaviors	Bottega dei sogni	Scuola infanzia via Dublino	Förskolan Södra Sälöjorsgatan
Recognizes emotions	20	17	16
Find solutions	9	13	14
Generate new ideas	9	13	14
Promotes and proposes behaviours	6	11	16

It is worth pointing out that the children in the neighbourhood intercultural centre had a much easier time recognising emotions than in finding solutions and making proposals, it is assumed that the language barrier did not favour a fluent interlocution despite the fact that studies on Child Language Brokering (CLB) by Harris (1976) – Harris and Sherwood (1978) indicate that every human being has the ability to translate in any circumstance, despite not having received training to do so. In the two kindergartens in which the children expressed themselves in their mother tongue – in Italian Scuola infanzia via Dublino Sez. B, in Swedish Förskolan Södra Sälöjorsgatan – ideas were expressed more immediately and proactively. These results emerged from their ideas expressed during the interview, the outcomes of which are reported. The interviews were conducted after the activities; the results, grouped by word meanings, show that in each group the children were able to express ideas and solutions.

Tab.2 Some of the children's ideas grouped according to the meaning they attributed to the words

Question 1: What would you put in place of the wall?	
Words and ideas that unite and connect	I would make windows in the wall. Bushes and a road for a walk. A big road. A car. A bridge. A train.
Words of well-being:	A place to eat. A bush with many flowers. A fountain. A sofa.
Creative thoughts	Building a playground for the king to play and be happy. A playground where everyone can be friends. An amusement park. Slides and inflatables. A swimming pool.
Question 2: What should the king do for his people?	
Words and ideas that unite and connect	Be happy, in peace and without quarrels. Everyone is happy together, playing and building many things. Playing without quarrelling. Welcoming everyone into one home.
Words of well-being	Having a party to have fun, play and eat cake. Make everyone laugh.
Creative thinking	To make everyone happy with shared games and play areas. A castle for everyone. Build a house with many floors and a big tree.

In conclusion, the fact that we got the more immediate responses in the groups of younger children attending the two kindergartens, while we experienced a greater difficulty in the neighbourhood centre group, confirm the initial hypothesis: that the continuous and recurring democratic participation of young children in political life, in an active, generative, and committed way educates them to empathically feel the other (Mortari, 2008). It is believed that the mutual trust established between interviewer and children, contributed to the success of the research (Darlington & Scott, 2002). In general, it emerged that 'the king had to accommodate everyone and build together with others to become happy'. The ideas suggested for problem-solving, indicate that the language of children is a harbinger of solutions; it is the responsibility of adults to listen attentively to such language and engage with them to identify the idea of democracy and social justice using language that fosters unity and connection, promotes well-being, and encourages creative thinking. Very often, the ability of children to take an active part in society is underestimated; they are considered immature, incompetent, in need of help and of a long process of education and instruction, within the family and the school, before they can take part in the adult world (Hall & Guéry, 2010). This conception of childhood is based on an idea of a child who is confined elsewhere. It is a requirement of democracy; it is a hope for the future of children: 'To practise what one preaches is to a great degree worth following, not the least for researchers' (Svensson, 2021).

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RETHINKING CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

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How can we respond to the crisis of democracy and, at the same time, guarantee a full personal engagement to each citizen on a social and political level? Nowadays, several remarkable changes are leaving a profound mark on society, the most relevant ones being globalization; the increasingly unequal distribution of resources; the rapid growth of powerful companies and multinational corporations; the complexity of global migratory phenomena; the exclusion of a large part of the population from productive, economic, social, and political processes. These changes have generated unstable and precarious identity bonds: not only is closeness to the other associated with their acceptance and understanding, it can also trigger frequent divergences and often conflicts. These processes can have negative consequences on the way people participate in the life of their community, on both a political and cultural level. That is why they are closely connected with the pedagogical issues related to human formation and the development of a democratic conscience as citizens. Before being the best form of government ever theorized and experienced, democracy is the way a community conceives life, and its crisis can perhaps find a solution in active citizenship. Democracy, education, and citizenship are so closely interconnected that the education of man cannot exist without the education of the citizen. In democracy, the development and education of a community are not based on the conflict between social and individual goals, they rather coincide with the enhancement of each citizen. Everyone's experience helps find suitable methods for developing positive behaviours that respect human rights and citizenship; it also improves feelings of belonging to the community and implements participation in political life. The educational models reflect upon the person's belonging to a territory and a social context and tend to orient themselves towards a broader sense of the term citizenship, which include geographical, social and cultural perspectives: in this regard, Edgar Morin extends the concept to terrestrial citizenship. Therefore, the need to rethink citizenship education emerges once again to configure broader scenarios and possibilities, since no aspect of political and social life is foreign to citizenship, at local and planetary level. This paper aims to investigate how pedagogy can support a transformation in this sense, in different educational contexts, with a peculiar focus on schools. There is no doubt schools are undergoing a severe crisis and are far from fulfilling the educational needs of the new generations on their own. However, they play a key role for community development: despite school projects are often hindered by numerous issues, they represent a useful tool for citizens' fulfilment and for positive change, since they activate a connection with daily experience and the living environment and stimulate a deeper sensitivity towards the other. These aspects will be explored, paying attention to the thematic issues, problems, and methods, suitable to promote the full participation of citizens, in community life both from a territorial and global perspective.

democracy; citizenship; participation; pedagogy; education.

INTRODUCTION

The ecological paradigm considers the context, the environment, the set of circumstances in which everyone lives; as fundamental in order to understand the deeper meaning of a phenomenon and to build new knowledges (Bateson, 1979; Mortari, 2007; Fadda, 2002).

At the moment, different remarkable changes are leaving profound marks on society, as they add distortions to the pre-existing imbalances. For this reason they must be read as an organic totality, that generates precarious identity bonds and can often cause conflicts. The widening of the economic gap between nations, the unequal distribution of resources, the proliferation of pervasive outbreaks of war are intrinsically linked, because they are factors of the same phenomena that origins instability. These asymmetries are not only unjust; they alone are the reason why democracy is experiencing such a crisis, furthermore they are a proclamation of a state of belligerence. As Umberto Curi (2016, p. 10) underlines: it would be equally arbitrary and misleading to argue that a world in which 4/5 of the population have just over 1/5 of the resources can be peaceful, while the remaining 1/5 of the world's population can use 4/5 of the economic, monetary, energy, food resources available. Erasing or refusing to acknowledge the bonds between these different dimensions of a single phenomenon, would mean depriving oneself of a knowledge base, without which the understanding of the present, and even the prudent prediction of the more immediate future, would become impossible.

The same links can be found with the migratory flows (Silva, 2015), the underdevelopment and the imposed poverty, which require an immediate attention, as serious as that of war and death under bombs, because these decisions taken consciously by western governments. Peace cannot be sustained without a more equitable distribution of resources, and the risks of entire population migrations cannot be effectively avoided if the gap between the opulence of the few and the misery of the many is not reduced (Santerini, 2017). It is worth noting that these processes have caused the crisis of democracy; day after day, they are undermining its principles of equality, which constitute its foundations.

Why is democracy facing such a deep crisis? Maybe because economy and politics are no longer interconnected as they were in the past: economy is now thought of at a global level, whereas politics is dependent on the local context. The gap between economy and politics generated the crisis of democracy, because the economic dimension develops on a global and supranational basis, while the political reasons remain linked to national contexts. These processes compromised the way people participate in their community life. It is perhaps superfluous to recall that civil and political rights are complementary to economic and social rights, since access to essential goods is the first requirement for the substantive and not only formal realization of the rights of every person (Santerini, 2001). The definition of economic and social rights is the product of a democratic debate based on social and civil rights (Mortari, 2008).

1. PEDAGOGY AND CITIZENSHIP

In democracy, the development of the community is not based on the conflict between social and individual goals; it is addressed to improve the enhancement of the citizen, towards the respect of human rights and the participation in community and political life (Baldacci, 2020). Each citizen is both the holder of rights established by law or by the cohabitation's rules, that define the background in which everyone exercises his freedom; and of duties, the first of which is the exercise of freedom within the framework defined by law, therefore, the designation and control of people exercising power is a citizen's responsibility. Democratic citizenship is aimed at the autonomy of the person, who becomes aware and responsible for the control over public authority. That is why democracy and citizenship are closely connected with the pedagogical issues of human formation and to the development of a democratic conscience as citizens (Cambi, Cives and Fornaca, 1999).

Democracy is not only the best form of government ever theorized and experienced, it is the way each community conceives life. At present, the relationship between citizens and public institutions is characterized by two poles. The citizen is both sovereign, who delegates the community to solve problems that he has no chance to solve alone; and he is a member of the political community, where institutions must guarantee the rights and freedoms of each one. Power is an emanation of free and equal citizens, thus, citizenship is given only in democratic contexts, which respect the equality and dignity of everyone (Cera, 2019). In this perspective citizenship is anchored on democracy, since both involve the recognition of citizens' rights to legal and political equality. Democracy, education, and citizenship are closely related: the education of man cannot exist without the education and enhancement of the citizen. The answer to democratic problems can be found in citizenship education.

Critical pedagogy can help to understand and transform the context and to improve the citizens' engagement; indeed, it analyses education as a category capable of emancipation towards radical forms of access to knowledge (Granese, 2008; Fadda, 2009). Social changes, with deep historical roots, which quickly follow each other, lead to new theoretical reflections and activate the experimentation of new dimensions of citizenship education. The ways in which human societies are organized, are responsible for the need to extend reflections and educational practices on citizenship. The latter responds to the transformations of the associated living and, to the political crisis, by promoting at different levels, the mobilization of all citizens.

2. CITIZENSHIP'S ROOTS

Citizenship education has both historical and recent origins. Historically this idea has as its ancestor, the notion of *paideia* in Ancient Greece, where this term was enriched with meaning, to the point of expressing the ideal of human formation (Jaeger, 2003). It was not only a cultural preparation in a quantitative and objective sense, but a value of personality in its high qualitative and personal expression.

According to Jaeger, *paideia* aimed to internalize those universal values that determined the *ethos*: the place to live, the identity of people, the norms and values, the spirit of belonging and citizenship. The *ethos* distinguishes man as responsible and able to answer for he himself. In this regard, *paideia* was the whole of civic and ethic virtues: it was a task of citizens and politicians; it aimed to act in the civil and cultural custody. *Paideia* has a persistent and radical nucleus linked to the existence and understanding of the essence of human being. Its evolution cannot be reconstructed here, but it is a focus of meanings to promote the person and the citizen.

In recent history, the beginnings of attention to citizenship education can be traced in 1948 with the publication of the *Declaration of human rights,* in which education aims to the full development of human personality to promote tolerance and friendship among all nations. In 1974, the *UNESCO Recommendation on Education for International Understanding* investigated on what does it mean to be citizens. This document pursues the abilities to communicate with others, the participation in solving community problems, as well as the respect for other people. In 2014, the development of citizenship is defined as a key target by UNESCO and today we are still working on the construction of appropriate educational models for this purpose.

The term *citizenship* has historically been related to belonging to a territory and a group in which certain rights are recognized. The actual challenge is to prepare citizens for life, thinking on citizenship no longer anchored in life of individual states, but as a presupposition of community life that is terrestrial, planetary (Morin, 2012). This concept is also related to the proposal (Morin and Kern, 1996) for *planetary humanism*. This broader sense of citizenship involves geographical, social and cultural perspectives. Man is human beyond the nation and ethnicity, he is the bearer of his humanity that is universal and can be recognized in the subject undergoing a process of internalization and radicalization, that means to find common roots.

The extension of citizenship leads to rethink it, since no area of associated living is detached from it; this extension involves proposals concerning its contents, since it develops from the individual sphere, it increases its horizons towards wider dimensions around each person, as family and institutions, and it affects all community, with sustainability. Therefore, the need to rethink citizenship education emerges to configure broader possibilities at local and planetary level. It is the assumption of responsibility for the individual and the community, for the citizens and the democratic institutions. Citizens belong at local level to the city and to the state, but they are also citizens of the world and they must take an interest on it. Citizenship education necessarily accompanies each person throughout the entire life cycle and in many areas of life, thus it can be adapted to local contexts and cultures, and also to education at school.

3. SCHOOL'S ROLE

School is a formative institution that contributes, not only to the teaching and learning process, but also to the acquisition of ethical attitudes and values related to

democracy and citizenship. Dewey (1992) defines school as a democratic community, where decisions are taken through discussion, expression of opinions, respect, argumentation and participation. Schools are undergoing a severe crisis and are far from fulfilling the educational needs of the new generations on their own. However, they still play a key role to promote every sphere of community development. It isn't enough to strengthen students' knowledge about the functioning of the democratic system; it is necessary to introduce at school different topics in a problematic way, stimulating students through the pleasure of investigation and discovery. Citizenship education is one of the educational emergencies that school must face, connecting personal experiences and living environment, and stimulating a deeper sensitivity towards the other.

Citizenship education projects at school are internationally valorized, because they promote students' skills on democracy, as well as their involvement in institutional practices, both from a local and global perspective (Euridyce, 2017). Students' engagement improves the ability to plan together to solve problems around them, as individual and as part of the community.

Citizenship education cannot be abstract, it is related to specific contents and to practical approaches (Chistolini, 2006). The dimensions of reflection and action are interdependent: at school theory and practice of citizenship education enrich each other. The theoretical reflection develops hand in hand with the practice towards the achievement of different skills. It is possible to identify three dimensions of citizenship that can be developed at school:

1. On the *cognitive* level, knowledge implements the informations on the historical evolution of citizenship and democracy. It is exercised with reference to juridical and political norms that regulate community life.
2. On the *attitude* level, affective involves the ability to think in an original way, to listen other people and take part in a discussion. It entails the awareness of each citizen and the responsibility in the promotion of democracy.
3. On *skills* level, psychomotor is the ability to question the world, to employ critical thinking to solve problems, to evaluate the better decisions to take. It means to review choices and actions, to cooperate to achieve a goal. It is linked to conflict's resolution by discussion, negotiation or mediation. This dimension concerns the recognition and acceptance of the other, dialogue, listening, responsibility and equality.

Developing these areas at school would mean to promote a full personal engagement of citizens, activating a connection with the living environment and giving attention to other people.

In this context, it has been possible to offer only a few points of reflection, but it would be interesting to study more practical suggestions to adapt them to different school situations.

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TEACHING FRENCH BETWEEN FASCISM AND DEMOCRACY. AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION AND DIDACTICS OF FRENCH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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It is commonly believed that fascism contributed to a deterioration in language teaching compared to the previous period. In this paper, the interest is to understand the origins of this trend, but also the modalities and concepts conveyed, since the Fascist two decades, regarding language teaching and, in particular, the French language. To do so, two trajectories were chosen: the first concerns a historical-educational approach, the second a linguistic-epistemological approach. In the first case, through the reading of ministerial laws, programs and a comparison with school publishing, it emerged how the fascist government's relationship with language education in schools was ambiguous and inconsistent. The other approach examined the discursive traces on the forms and symbolisms of domination, foreignness and colonialism found in French grammars published from 1920 to 1945. These grammars show a state ideological apparatus, as they are an essential tool in the practice of power and are the totalizing locus of different expressions of language. Reflecting on language education in the light of historical-educational research on the French language during fascism offers new tools for understanding and new educational strategies for dealing with the current crisis of democratic culture.

French grammar books, History of Didactics of French as Foreign Language, Education, Fascist School, Linguistic Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

According to the most recent Italian and European statistical surveys (ISTAT and Eurobarometer Data), language knowledge in Italy and the ability to use a foreign language is still lower than the European average (Rapisarda, 2015). Italy is among the lowest in Europe: on the one hand, the Italians interviewed show an apparent interest in the study of languages, eager to learn a foreign language; on the other hand, however, they show little confidence in their own linguistic abilities, declaring themselves unable to use a foreign language fluently because it is a preparation, the one received at school, which is superficial, insecure, theoretical, lacking in reality.

Our investigation started from this question: what is the historical root of this anti-democratic situation that runs counter to the growing multiculturalism that characterises our post-modern societies? And if there is a historical root of this incapacity, how come Italians share it with other European peoples such as Spain, Portugal and Greece? Without wishing to hypothesise a deterministic link between 'fascisms' and the 'marginalisation of foreign language teaching', one cannot however fail to admit that these countries have in common a past (20th century) of military governments and 'autarchic' phases with total closures to the outside world or episodes of intentional or subdued isolation: Francoism in Spain, Salazarism in Portugal, the 'dictatorship of the colonels' in Greece and fascism in Italy (Rapisarda, 2015).

Can the current difficulty of Italians in mastering a foreign language be traced back to the twenty years of Fascism and, in particular, to the Fascist school and the ideological representations of foreign languages that were conveyed during that period?

For many scholars, the answer is yes. In fact, it is generally agreed that the various school reforms that ran through the twenty-year period, the Gentile reform (1923), the School Charter (1939), the Bottai laws (1940) and De Vecchi (1943), contributed to a deterioration in language teaching compared to the previous period.

1. FASCISM AND THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

When Mussolini came to power in 1922, he immediately realised the value of culture as a propaganda tool and launched a pedagogical programme that aimed to fascist Italy through a culture of propaganda that placed culture at the service of fascist ideology and that, in an increasingly systematic and effective manner, made propaganda an educational method to manufacture the consent of the masses (Romano, 2021). Fascism's relationship with foreign languages and, in particular, with the French language should be understood in the light of this educational programme that wanted to 'recreate a nation' by building an ever broader consensus through various strategies: the support of culture; the control of information with an unscrupulous use of the media; the promotion of propaganda through sport, the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, the Opera Nazionale Balilla and schools (Cannistraro, 1975; Betti, 1984). In particular, the school was one of the places of maximum investment in the construction of popular consensus, as Mussolini stated during a speech in 1925:

> the government demands that the school be inspired by the ideals of fascism, [...] that it educate Italian youth to understand fascism, to renew themselves in fascism, and to experience the historical climate created by the fascist revolution' (Mussolini, 1926, 249-253).

A clear example of this political instrumentalisation of the school was the institution in 1929 of the State's single text for primary schools (Law No. 5 of 7 January), a powerful means of ideologisation and political education that formed the new generations through continuous references to the figure of the Duce and the regime's

initiatives (Ascenzi & Sani, 2005).

It has been noted how in the period of twenty years between 1923 and 1943 there was strong resistance in the Fascist school towards the educational value of learning foreign languages, taking a step backwards compared to the post-unification period, if one thinks that the Baccelli reform of 1899 had introduced no less than seven hours of German and three hours of French in the reformed high schools in addition to Greek and Latin.

Instead, with Giovanni Gentile's 'proto-fascist', but in reality 'elitist-bourgeois' reform of 1923, the foreign language was only recognised as having some value of instrumental utility and essentially no pedagogical validity in the context of higher education. Thus, at first glance it would appear that Gentile drastically downgraded or even eliminated foreign languages from the curriculum altogether. Instead, on a closer reading, the relationship between the fascist regime and foreign languages was in many ways ambiguous and controversial and far from monolithic. It was a complex and varied situation, and there were many contradictory facts.

It is true, on the one hand, that Gentile had in mind above all and almost exclusively the educational centrality of classical languages, but it is also true that his publishing house, Sansoni, launched some of the most Europeanist initiatives imaginable in Fascist Italy, such as the series *La civiltà europea* (European civilisation) in which books were produced that were anything but "nationalist" or "provincial" such as some History of literature (Russian, English...). It is true that the number of language hours at secondary school was decreasing, but it is also true that language hours were rather shifted to the gymnasium than simply eliminated.

An attempt at greater and increasing fascistization of culture and education occurred with The School Charter, the reform that Bottai had approved at the Grand Council of Fascism on February 15, 1939, but which was blocked by the war and thus never implemented. However, it indicates the direction that the Fascist school would have taken had the regime not fallen. Bottai valued technical and vocational education and stated that the study of languages should take on a practical character and serve in the workplace, to the point that: the same degree in foreign languages and literatures would become a degree awarded at the Faculty of Economics and Business. The study of 'foreign languages' was necessary not out of recognition and homage to a foreign culture, but because it could be useful for personal and utilitarian purposes: to find a good job, improve one's economic position, advance one's career, advance socially (Bottai, 1941); it could also be an advantage for propaganda: the Italian who travelled abroad became, if he/she possessed a certain linguistic ability, a "beacon of italianity" (Foresti, 2003).

Thus, language study was not eliminated but ideologically oriented. Added to this were purist campaigns with often ephemeral or ridiculous results aimed at "normalizing the language", that is, normalizing the way Italians spoke and wrote with respect to the many Anglicisms and Americanisms that were already becoming established. This was a protectionist legislation enacted to protect the "purity" of the Italian language: through a series of decrees, from 1923 to 1940, the use of foreign

terms in various circumstances, public places, commercial activities, was prohibited, and it was also forbidden to give foreign names to Italian babies. It was necessary to Italianize the language as much as possible, even creating neologisms as long as no foreign words were used, as was most evident in the autarkic period.

2. FRENCH LANGUAGE GRAMMARS

Thanks to an investigation into the teaching of the French language, it emerges that fascist school policy was not so unitary and that the political will for autarky aimed at eliminating foreign languages sometimes found support but other times obstacles in the new tools of cultural diffusion and of propaganda (Rapisarda, 2015). Through a linguistic and historical-epistemological perspective (Chevalier, 1968; Coffey, 2021) we want to examine the discursive traces on the forms and symbolisms of domination, of the foreigner and of the colonialism. These traces are to be found in some grammars of the French language published in the period from 1920 to 1945 (Malfatti, 1929; Gerace, 1932; Caricati, 1944) as the grammars show an ideological state apparatus, that is to say that they represent an instrument essential in the practice of power (Althusser, 1970).

Regarding the distribution of editions of French language textbooks in the twenty years of fascism, it can be observed, as Mandich (2002, 5) states, that the printings and reprints of French language textbooks increased slightly until 1934. Indeed, instead of decreasing as expected from the Gentile's reform which provided for the spread of other modern languages, French language manuals actually decreased starting from 1935.

There are two reasons: the first concerns the fact that the positions intended for English, German and Spanish languages were, in reality, occupied by French professors who could not be fired and this situation continued for at least ten years as the professors of French Language were numerous while there were few candidates for the other languages (Vignola, 1929, 391-392).

The other reason is of a political nature and concerns the fact that, starting from 1934, Mussolini's policy became aggressive and distanced Italy from the idea of the League of Nations, pushing the Italian people towards increasingly evident isolation (Mandich, 2002, 6). Sometimes titles are eloquent. We move from the celebration of work and homeland (*Travail et patrie*, 1926; 1929; *École et famille*, 1927; *L'Italie au travail*, 1929; *A l'ouvrage, jeunes filles!*, 1930; *L'étude et le travail; Honneur au travail*, 1933) to the glorification of the new Italy (*Lumière nouvelle*, 1928; *La nouvelle Italie*, 1931; *La jeunesse nouvelle*, 1934; *Enfants de la patrie*, 1937; *À la jeunesse italienne*, 1938) up to the exaltation of the Duce: *Lectures fascistes (1930), un voyage Au pays des fascistes* (1934), *Foyers fascistes* (1940), *L'école fasciste* (1941); *Novissima grammatica francese* of 1942 is presented as a "fascist book for the fascist "school".

As Mandich (2002) states, other manuals – those from before 1923 – do not take into account the new ideologies since they are intended for the practice of the French language. Generally, to reassure readers and censors, authors add a few

pass phrases to the title such as: "book according to the previous programs for use by all schools and all Italian institutions", "in conformity with the programs of 1923", "after the ministry programs for Italian schools", "according to the last programs".

Our corpus includes two manuals: Malfatti Guido (1929). *En causant... Nuovo corso di lingua francese ad uso delle scuole commerciali e professionali*. Torino: Paravia; Caricati Augusto (1944). *Grammatica della lingua francese*. Milano: Carlo Signorelli Editore. These are editions of works that never appeared before 1923.

The method of creating these grammars fits into a well-defined historical and socio-cultural context: on the one hand, the interest in foreign languages such as French, already taught in technical institutes, and which has become an optional language "Gymnasium" (Albano, 2016; in press); on the other, the need to take into account the ideologies of the moment and, for the grammar of Caricati (1944), the need to build a national identity within a country where illiteracy and a marked national division prevail from regional dialects and languages. Furthermore, the fall of fascism on July 25, 1943 does not mark the end of the Second World War. On the one hand, the authors must build a balanced exemplary apparatus relating to the cultural heritage of France and Italy; on the other hand, all this reflects the need to build a grammar for a targeted audience represented by the children of the educated, Catholic and nationalist bourgeoisie (Albano, 2016; in press). This means that the examples become the place to observe instances of this dialogue between author and reader.

By observing the grammars taken into consideration, we immediately realize that the themes on which scholastic knowledge was built during the regime are identical to those circulating in newspapers, on the radio and in ministerial circulars. The contents of these texts insist on the moral and patriotic education of youth, ideas such as homeland, love for the Duce, love for the family are found. These themes are well highlighted in the examples and translations proposed.

Chevalier (1976, 238) states that the example can be considered an element of argument or a definition of the applied grammatical approach. The problematic nature of the example as a linguistic expression "qui permet aux grammaires de jouer" (Chevalier, 1976, 235), leads us to resort to the definition of Chevillard et al. (2007, 6) whereby the example in a grammatical text is "tout objet linguistique, quelle que soit sa structure, issu de la langue objet: tout fragment de la langue objet inséré dans le discours grammatica" (Chevillard et al. 2007, 6). For the author of a foreign grammar, endowed with a reflective attitude, the example represents a need for pedagogical relief because "appartenant à la langue naturelle, vient la concrétiser ou l'illustrer, ou sert de départ au raisonnement" (Marchello-Nizia & Petiot, 1977, 85). However, it should also be underlined that the author must respond to the needs imposed by the work carried out by his predecessors and, by choosing some examples rather than others, shows a specific attitude towards the object "language", an "reconnaissance explicite de la nécessité d'un métalangage" (Marchello-Nizia & Petiot, 1977, 87) and a shared agreement on the notion of good use of language. To do this, the author is obliged to situate his thought within the

text and/or paratext, justifying his choice (Derrida, 1967, 7).

In this regard, Guido Malfatti's manual (1929) offers learners two translations from French into Italian on "man's occupations" and "woman's occupations".

In the first translation there is a long list of jobs to which a man can aspire (craftsman, farmer, employee, etc..). Regarding women's occupations we observe:

> La femme a bien des occupations même chez elle: d'abord elle doit se rappeler que le foyer domestique est son royaume, que la bonne mère de famille aime son intérieur et fait tout son possible pour le rendre agréable à son mari: elle est, en un mot, maîtresse de la maison. Si elle est jeune fille elle doit obéir à sa mère, l'aider dans la direction de la maison, ou bien, être une écolière studieuse et diligente. Mais il y a des femmes qui sont obligées de travailler pour gagner leur vie. Il y en a qui, au lieu d'aller travailler comme ouvrières dans les diverses fabriques et usines de la ville, préfèrent aller se mettre en service comme domestiques, cuisinières, institutrices, dames de compagnie, nourrices, ou concierges (Malfatti, 1929, 154).

Caricati draws from the Bible or the philological treasure (Albano in press), reporting quotations such as, for example, "La géographie et la chronologie sont les yeux de l'histoire (geography and chronology are the eyes of history)" (Caricati, 1944, 20), phrase it is most likely drawn from authors of the atlas such as Ortelius in the 6th century or Blaeu in the 17th century (Besse, 1995, 243-297).

We can observe fixed sequences with variations such as, for example, "Demande pardon à celui que (à qui) tu as offensé. (Ask for forgiveness from those who have offended you)" (Caricati, 1944, 88).

Our grammarians borrow examples from codified fields, particularly those of history, philosophy, literature, mythology and religious texts, and from non-codified fields, such as everyday language and popular language (Albano in press). Within the grammars examined we find a series of examples concerning history sometimes mixed with myth and literature. They are statements regarding the war, the homeland or Italy.

A first echo will be found in the explanation of the syntax rule relating to the pronunciation before the verb to be as "è bello morire per la patria. Il est beau du mourir pour sapatrie engl. it is beautiful to die for the country" (Caricati, 1944, 214), a quote that refers to Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle. However, authors do not limit themselves to dealing with quotations within the rules but also in interlinear version and translation exercises. Here are examples such as "la nostra nazione aveva bisogno di espansione colonial", engl. "our nation needed colonial expansion" (Caricati, 1944, 53).

Beyond the examples examined, what emerges is that most of the grammatical examples come from religious texts (Bible, Patristics, Scholasticism and catechisms).

We can observe that the grammatical apparatus responds to stereotyped sentences that serve to highlight a system of values (Albano in press).

3. CONCLUSION

Let us therefore summarize in a few words what we have observed so far: the packets of examples are an invitation to imitation because they are sentences taken from specific areas that represent the values of Italian society of the time, in particular religion, interest in authors classics or nationalism.

The analysis carried out so far has allowed us to identify some mechanisms underlying the choice of examples that suggest an underlying ideology.

Borrowing the words of Althusser (1970), grammars show a state ideological apparatus, that is, grammars represent an essential tool in the practice of power. The grammars examined reveal the political system established in Italy. In fact, for an Italian reader, these examples immediately enter into a game of denotation, connotation and supernotation (Chevalier, 1976, 244).

The method of creating these grammars fits into a well-defined historical and socio-cultural context (Albano in press). Textbooks are tools in which you can find the traces, the reflections of an era and a mentality that lasted several years. Even if fascism did not have time to leave its real mark in the field of education, it remained deeply anchored in minds, an ideology that imposed itself beyond laws and ordinances, in everyday life and of which we still find traces in the manuals of the twenty years of fascism and beyond.

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BETWEEN GESTURE, SILENCE, AND WORDS. DANCING TO GIVE BIRTH TO THOUGHT AND RHYTHM TO DIALOGUE. THE DANCEPHILOSOPHY LABS

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The article explores the epistemology and practice of *Dance (philo)sophy labs*, which are embedded within an alternative philosophical-pedagogical-educational framework aimed at cultivating innovative paths of thought in motion. The underlying hypothesis is that through the body's dancing actions, participants can develop a new capacity to understand and interpret the world. Guided by methodologies rooted in Philosophy for Children (Lipman 2005; Cosentino 2008) and contemporary dance, the labs take participants on a sensory and kinetic journey that fosters an awareness of communicative and creative movement, ultimately leading to novel forms of thought processing. Somatic-choreographic practices, starting from subtle sensations and kinetic potentials, are employed to facilitate the autonomous emergence of questions and reflections arising from a newly "embodied" awareness. Using a Socratic-maieutic methodology, the labs encourage the creation and adoption of new words to express sensations, emotions, and concepts originating from the moving body. The Dancesophy lab thus establishes a philosophical dialogue where words find space within the silent discourse of the body, gaining weight and elasticity, lightness and density, presence and suspension.

dance; philosophy; body; education

INTRODUCTION

When the child was a child,
It walked with its arms swinging,
wanted the brook to be a river,
the river a torrent,
and this puddle to be the sea. [...]
Why am I here and why not there?
When did time begin and where does space end?

Peter Handke, Lied vom Kindsein

The dance (philo)sophy workshops, designed for children aged 5 to 10, were first implemented in Belvì (Nuoro) during the doctoral research period of the author (Spada 2024), with the invaluable collaboration of Professor Giovanna Frongia, a

philosopher specialized in Philosophy for Children[1] (Lipmann 2005; Cosentino 2008).

Grounded in a pedagogical and epistemological approach informed by the principles of embodied education (D'Ambrosio-Spada 2021), the workshops are premised on the hypothesis that the act of dancing can foster new capacities for understanding and interpreting the world.

The activities are initiated by gentle impulses derived from attention to the smallest internal sensations and kinetic possibilities, such as the heartbeat, breath, or movements of minor and major joints. From playful exploration of weight and gravity, and experimentation with diverse dynamics and intensities beginning with the minimal gesture of a finger, hand, or foot—accompanied by whispered prompts of imagery, qualities, and colors—spontaneous and abstract movement sequences emerge. These sequences gradually become more conscious, acquiring new meanings.

In the second phase of the workshop, participants gather in a circle to transform the images and new thoughts generated through movement into words. These words, still imbued with the rhythm and dynamic flow of the recently lived experience, are shared, sparking further questions and reflections.

In this way, the dance (philo)sophy workshops (*danzasofia*) operate within an alternative philosophical-pedagogical-educational framework. This approach prioritizes corporeality and movement, paving the way for innovative paths of thought in motion.

1. PLAY, DANCE, SPACE, RHYTHM

The *danzasofia* workshops build upon the creative movement workshops developed over the years by the author, enhancing the promotion of free and spontaneous movement (Laban 2009) and choreographic and creative play with an additional phase of shared dialogue and reflection on the emotions, images, and 'ideas' that emerge from improvisation and choreographic composition.

Although tailored differently in each instance to emphasize poetic, playful, or dynamic aspects, the workshops adhere to a *choreoaesthetic*[2] (Spada 2024) pedagogical-educational framework. This approach combines creative movement practice and free play with a parallel pathway that fosters aesthetic experience in a broad sense (Dewey 2020; Fink 2008).

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[1] 'Philosophy for Children' is an educational program developed by the American philosopher Matthew Lipman in the mid-1970s. It is based on recognizing the educational value of philosophical inquiry, understood as a practice of investigation into the fields of human experience in its aesthetic, ethical, and logical dimensions.

[2] The term *choreoaesthetics* (from the Greek χορεία danceand *aisthesis* sensation) refers to the set of theories and practices that explore the dialogue and relationship between the realms of choreographic art and aesthetics. It is aimed at enhancing sensory, cognitive, and relational capacities through danced movement and the awareness, skills, and abilities of the body.

Fig. 1 Dancesophy workshop (Belvì-Nu juin 2022), photo by Enrica Spada

The danzasofia workshops build upon the creative movement practices developed over the years by the author, enhancing the exploration of free and spontaneous movement (Laban 2009) and choreographic play with an added phase of shared dialogue and reflection. This final stage focuses on the emotions, images, and ideas that emerge through improvisation and composition.

Though adapted in each instance to highlight poetic, playful, or dynamic aspects, the workshops are rooted in a choreoaesthetic (Spada 2024) pedagogical framework. This approach integrates creative movement and free play with a parallel pathway that fosters aesthetic experiences in a broad sense (Dewey 2020; Fink 2008).

Movement-based play, the common thread of every choreographic experience in the workshops, serves as a lever to activate the body's sensory faculties, starting with the kinesthetic sense. To enable new experiential dimensions, the workshops often take place in a neutral, undefined space, preferably spacious and empty. A simple blue linoleum mat, a change in lighting, a single object in the center of the room, or a distinctive sound can transform the environment and infuse each session with its own unique rhythm and emotional tone.

The magic of these workshops lies in the surprise of discovering a new atmosphere each time, even when they are held daily. Attention to space is the cornerstone of this activity, shaping both the choreographic and pedagogical process. Something as simple as three paper boats resting on a floor imagined as the sea can spark dances and inspire the creation of new images and thoughts. Alternatively, a thin

ray of light filtering diagonally through shutters can set the direction, rhythm, and quality of movement, inspiring participants to seek new gestures and symbols. Sometimes, the trigger is as small as a leaf, a handful of soil, a book, or a phrase written on the floor.

The adult facilitator, taking on the role of a 'dance guide,' harmonizes rhythms, voices, sounds, and silences. Children enter a special dimension where, for an hour, they create and move in a small group, listening to one another. Without suppressing their desires or unique expressive modes, they explore new forms of group play, free from competitive pressures.

Through dance gestures, they learn modes of exchange and sharing based on curiosity, respect, and kindness, giving rise to new words-substantial, colorful, and rich in emotional and sonic nuances.

While clearly maintaining their role, the facilitator adopts a subtle, non-demonstrative position, acting more as an observer than a participant and minimizing verbal communication.

Fig. 2 'Tenendo per mano il sole', Dancesophy workshop (Belvì-Nu juin 2022), photo by Enrica Spada

Occasionally, the work draws inspiration from visual imagery or illustrated stories, as in one edition where participants engaged with *Tenendo per mano il sole* by Sardinian artist Maria Lai (Lai 1984). Inspired by small fabric figures suspended in time and space by colored threads, participants created abstract stories of lines, colors, and moving emotions. Using colorful textile drapes to enter, exit, and stay on the border, imaginary and visionary worlds were brought to life.

The movement generated in the workshops always arises from spontaneous

improvisation and is never imposed by a command or a verbally dictated situation. It is always about seizing the opportunity that the space – with its moving shapes, its lines, its colors – offers as a trigger for creative invention.

2. MOVEMENT AS A SOURCE OF NEW THOUGHTS AND WORDS

By fostering deep, personal, and autonomous reflection rather than proposing pre-conceived themes or suggesting answers, *dancesophy* draws upon the Socratic method of maieutics. The thought emerging from danced movement nurtures and is in turn nourished by linguistic imagination, encouraging the invention of new vocabulary, not only to articulate emotions and sensations but also to describe concepts tied to physical science, such as weight and gravity, as well as ecology and the natural world.

After dancing together in a space that transforms with each session into a new environment – whether it be the sea, the air, a plant, or a simple line like in a Kandinsky painting – participants move into the second phase of the workshop, called *the circle of words*.

Here, in a state of relaxed yet attentive bodily awareness, they listen internally to their sensations, generating new insights.

This reflective state follows the experience of meeting, listening, and sensing one another during the dance, naturally leading to a democratic mode of dialogue. Participants take turns, respect each other's voices, and share emotions with spontaneity and immediacy.

In summary, these workshops shape small 'communities of philosophical inquiry' that, beginning with the awareness of one's own movement and kinesthetic sensations, cultivate deep listening skills and refined *choreosomatic* hermeneutic competencies. They open pathways for embracing diverse communicative styles and qualities.

The space opened by dance becomes fertile ground for dialogical thinking that, even in moments of maximum expressive and kinetic intensity, remains deeply attuned to listening.

It invites participants to take risks in seeking new ways of connection and recognition.

In *dancesophy* workshops, Words emerge from the body's silent expressions, gaining elasticity and weight, lightness and density, flowing naturally from the rhythm of the movement.

When inspired by visual or poetic imagery or natural elements, participants create delicate words imbued with the rhythmic energy of their motion. The spoken words naturally carry a kinetic expressiveness, accompanied by flowing hand and head gestures, continuing the emotional quality of the preceding dance. At times, participants may choose to sing or clap rather than speak, creating a harmonious, spontaneous concert.

3. FORMS OF WORK AND METHODS

The work involves guiding participants to connect with their bodies, beginning with a simple gesture, placing a hand on the chest to feel the rhythm of the heartbeat and breath.

Verbal instructions are kept to a minimum, allowing the group to synchronize at its own pace. As the harmony in mutual listening develops, the movement proposals intensify.

The facilitator uses words sparingly, offering qualitative references about dynamics, spatial dimensions, and emotional tones. Moving with the group, they avoid suggesting an exemplary model to imitate, instead focusing on cultivating a collective flow.

Despite being aware that mirroring occurs nonetheless, the idea is to find a measure in one's dance that does not present itself as an example. By acting from within, avoiding positions or attitudes of control, the facilitator simply moves and maintains, by contagion, concentration in the group's work.

For younger participants, dynamic spatial proposals are paired with vivid, concrete images such as comparing "closed/open" to an oyster or "fluidity" to sea waves. Other elements such as ice, fire, rock, or clay evoke extraordinary changes in the group's movements through their temperature, texture, and consistency. These elements give life to silent stories, built through bodily expression and spontaneous sounds.

Exploring contrasting dynamics – fluid/broken, slow/fast, heavy/light, sharp/round -creates moments of aesthetic and emotional engagement, fostering inclusivity without the need for explicit invitations to participate. As the group moves together, a shared awareness emerges, highlighting how gestures and their emotional tones can create a harmonious counterpoint in continuous transformation.

This process generates a space for seemingly chaotic movement but rich with possibilities, where control is unnecessary. The system self-regulates through free action, guided by collective listening.

The space opened up by dance becomes fertile ground for dialogical and reflective thinking, fostering – through play, lightness, and the joy of movement -new learnings such as the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct beliefs, rooted in respect for diverse expressive styles.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY PROCESS
Initial Phase (in a circle):
- Breathing exercises while seated
- Massage and awakening of the joints in the fingers, hands, arms, and feet
- Exercises for mobilizing the gaze
- Articulation and coordination of head and gaze movements
- Breathing exercises while lying on the back
- Rolling and moving through the space

Core Phase (in free space):

- Creation of movements exploring different dynamics and qualities
- Creation of movements as a group
- Alternating mimesis of movements, taking turns leading
- Spontaneous mimesis in pairs or groups
- Guided improvisation inspired by poetic, visual, or acoustic suggestions

Final Phase (in a reflective circle):

- The philosophical facilitator presents, one by one, the words that emerged from the choreographic work, which were recorded on a board during the workshop.
- The group responds freely, with each person speaking in turn and inviting responses from others.
- The discussion continues until all the words have been collectively explored.
- A word that most profoundly extends the reflection and fosters collective engagement is selected as the "title" of a verbal and/or choreographic composition.
- This composition, serving as a synthesis of the workshop, is refined and performed by each participant and kept as a "gift" to take away.

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ADDRESSING THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY AND THE ESCALATION OF CONFLICTS: PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN PATHS IN THE AUTONOMOUS PROVINCE OF TRENTO

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This paper addresses the issue of democracy and the erosion of democratic values, considering the school as a starting point for change. It explains the Philosophy for Children (P4C) project by the Rosmini Center, emphasizing the integration of local philosophical resources and cultural heritage. The project involved collaborative activities that engaged students with contextually rich content, including discussions based on literary, multimedia, and musical stimuli. Theoretical conclusions suggest that P4C serves as a valuable resource for fostering philosophical thinking through critical, creative, and caring approaches

P4C; philosophical thinking; didactics; cultural heritage; democracy

INTRODUCTION

Since John Dewey's educational project (1916), schools have played a pivotal role in fostering democratic values and civic engagement among students. This is achieved through Democratic Activities, which mediate the impact of students' social backgrounds on political participation, civic knowledge, and self-efficacy. Advantaged students, however, report greater participation in such activities (Mennes et al., 2023). Schools also influence socio-political attitudes and behaviors through curricula and democratic experiences, forming a key element of socio-political socialization (Eckstein, Noack, 2016). Inclusive civic education has proven effective, particularly in engaging marginalized groups and improving civic skills and attitudes (Bartlett, Schugurensky, 2024). These efforts foster a "We-Mentality", linked to increased civic participation and positive attitudes toward civic issues (Hüning, 2022).

Nevertheless, promoting civic engagement faces significant challenges. First, a complex relationship between civic engagement and education in Western societies is shaped by polarization, extremism, societal changes, and the digital divide. Additionally, a shifting global context, marked by media transformation and post-

digital challenges, necessitates teaching critical reflection on technological stimuli. Virtual relationships woven on social networks, media of all kinds, from newspapers to television, portray an increasingly problematic, polarized, and violent society. Everyday experience is not immune to this conflict, which also affects the school environment and enters the classrooms. As educators, it is crucial to acknowledge the tensions and disagreements present among younger students, bring them to the surface, dual aim of promoting and offer tools to manage them. Educational research underscores the impact of social imbalances on young people's relationships and school experiences, highlighting the need to focus on both cognitive and emotional development. (Haidt 2024; PISA 2022; Chiosso et alii, 2021).

1. PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AND LEARNING DEMOCRACY

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is an educational approach designed to foster critical and argumentative thinking among young people, with the democratic communication and active citizenship. Its distinctive features include non-competitive argumentation, continuous questioning, and the collaborative exchange of ideas. Rooted in the reflective and pedagogical traditions of philosophy, P4C emphasizes the "community of inquiry", a concept introduced by Matthew Lipman and expanded by thinkers like Matthews and Kohan. This model encourages reflection, critical thinking, rational dialogue, and self-awareness within both educational and community contexts.

P4C aligns with moral education (D'Addelfio, 2011) and with the framework for civic education and citizenship (ECC) outlined in the Eurydice guidelines (2017), which focus on competencies such as constructive interaction, critical thinking, social responsibility, and democratic engagement. By integrating these competencies, P4C supports individual growth while preparing students to become active, responsible democratic citizens.

2. THINKING WITH ROSMINI: P4C IN AUTONOMOUS PROVINCE OF TRENTO

The Antonio Rosmini Study and Research Center at the University of Trento launched a Philosophy for Children (P4C) program during the 2023/24 school year, involving 11 primary and secondary classes in Trentino. Chosen collaboratively by the Municipality of Rovereto and the Antonio Rosmini Study and Research Center, the project emphasized connections with the territory's rich cultural heritage, including Casa Rosmini and its philosophical traditions. This approach reflected P4C's socio-constructivist and aporetic roots, prioritizing community-based philosophical inquiry to foster reflection, critical thinking, and dialogue. In fact, the assumptions of Lipman and his followers' P4C, emphasize "forms of community-based philosophical investigation, a sign of a pronounced socio-constructivist component, but in fact also of an instance of an 'aporetic' type, so to speak, perhaps as old as philosophy itself" (Volpone, 2016, p. 80).

The initiative addressed the contemporary issue of conflict, aligning with SDG 16 of

Agenda 2030, which advocates for peaceful, inclusive societies. The theme "conflict" was selected in response to real classroom dynamics, marked by relational challenges and complex management issues. Many participating schools, particularly those in peripheral areas, faced additional challenges, including a significant presence of second-generation immigrant students and those with learning difficulties or certifications. Teachers actively supported this theme, recognizing its relevance to their students' contexts.

The program was structured collaboratively by facilitators and reference teachers, who prepared sessions centered on texts chosen as stimuli for dialogue. Each session involved activities with students, reading the stimulus text, collaboratively building an agenda, and conducting self-assessments.

Facilitators documented each session using structured forms and, where consent was given, recorded sessions to analyze outcomes. By emphasizing collaborative learning and leveraging local resources, the program fostered a stronger bond between education and community, offering a holistic strategy for conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

2.1. The realization of the sessions

The five sessions took place during school hours. Below (tab. 1) is a schematic illustration of how the general theme 'conflict' was structured, the stimulus text used and the main outcomes of the dialogues, taken from the philosophical Inquiry Agenda, the facilitators' reports and the teachers' and students' feedback.

Tab. 1 – Description of sessions. Source: data collected by the authors.

Session	Stimulus	Main outcomes
Conflicts and inner emotions.	Scene from the film *Inside out* (2015, Pixar Animation).	The questions and the development of the dialogues focused on the contrast/difference between joy and sadness (why do Joy and Sadness see the world differently?), on the connections and differences between sadness, anger and revenge, on the possible coexistence in the inner experience of contrasted emotions and on the observation that emotions can be together even if in contrast with each other
Conflicts in the family and with adults.	Lisa goes shopping (from *Lisa* by Mattew Lipman).	dialogues on the difficulty of negotiating and understanding different opinions and wills, but also the importance of having different ideas, otherwise we would all be the same. Opinions have been expressed that Lisa wants to decide independently how to dress because she is fine with herself, she has her own style that is not that of her mother. There hasn't been much insight into intergenerational conflict.
The conflict generated by unfair behaviour.	The Ring of Gyges (from the myth of Plato, *Repubblica: II* 358a-	Students have observed that there are different behaviours when you are alone or with others. Other opinions expressed: invisibility (not being discovered) leads to loneliness and conflict and to individualism;

	360d).	one becomes irresponsible and the will to have more power causes injustices to be carried out. The conclusion of many sessions was that Gyges used power in the wrong way and it's better if there are shared rules in the classroom.
The exclusion of those who think/express themselves differently.	Everyone sees things differently (from *Il prisma dei perchè* by Mattew Lipman).	Many students said it is difficult to understand others and that they argue with those who have different opinions; there is also fear of expressing ideas that feel different from those of others. Many young people have concluded that a compromise can be found between opinions: by including in the group those who feel different, it can help them express themselves more freely.
The war	final scene of the movie *WarGames* (1983).	Pupils expressed appreciation for video games. Regarding war, they said that those who make war have no interest in the people who die and that it is the desire for power that causes wars. Anxiety was expressed about the current wars because they could come to us: it would be better to reach peace agreements.

At the end of the five sessions for each class, a meeting was organized at the birthplace of A. Rosmini[1] to summarize the sense of the experience made and to understand from the participants what they have taken away from the activity. In this final meeting, when asked by the facilitators "What have we done in these meetings?" and "Is the dialogue concluded?", the students responded "We have philosophized, with questions and in-depth discussions" and "After this experience, one can continue to ask questions endlessly. Before this, it wasn't possible because we hadn't learned to always ask questions".

2.2. Main results of the experience

Five sessions of P4C are certainly not enough to eliminate the widespread conflict even among boys and alleviate negative emotions such as anxiety, dissatisfaction, sadness, and anger reported by themselves in their relationships with their peers and towards the events that dramatically occupy the daily news. However, they can incorporate a method into their training that can assist them. Philosophizing, understood as a process of detaching from immediate emotions, allows for the integration of conflicting feelings into a general and abstract reasoning process. It facilitates mediation of these feelings through dialogue with others and with oneself. This is made possible by connecting (explicitly or implicitly in classroom activities) with the philosophy of authors who have addressed the themes under discussion in the dialogues.

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[1] Cf.: http://casanatalerosmini.it/.

The main strengths and weaknesses of the P4C approach to conflict are outlined below in tab 2.

Tab. 2 – Main strengths and weaknesses of the P4C approach. Source: data collected by the authors.

Weaknesses of activity	Strengths
Difficulties in inserting the activity of P4C in the daily curriculum of the school.	The choice of the topic addressed a real and widespread need in the schools involved.
Often the working hours were reduced and were carried out when students are tired.	The work shared with the teachers (only one teacher was male) who collaborated significantly.
Interpersonal difficulties with various individual challenges in the classes in which they were inserted.	The positive response of the students to the activity, even at the time of the final self-evaluation.
Due to time constraints, there was no final presence meeting with the class teachers.	Many teachers have included the P4C path in the civic education and citizenship program.
Some of the tools used by the facilitators (structured grids, recordings of meetings, etc.) need to be improved.	The connection with the territory and the cultural resources presents in it and their support

3. PARTIAL CONCLUSION

The Rosmini Center's P4C project emphasized critical thinking, community inquiry, and dialogic learning as integral to an educational journey aimed at fostering personal and collective growth. Grounded in the belief that philosophy transcends abstract theorization, it framed philosophy as an accessible, transformative practice relevant to all individuals, regardless of age. The core principles of this approach are:

1. *Philosophy as existential inquiry*: philosophy was presented not just as a logical tool but as a means to explore individual thoughts and emotions in the pursuit of meaning, helping students understand themselves as rational, emotional, and embodied beings.
2. *Relational nature of philosophy*: dialogue and interaction were central, reflecting the relational nature of human beings. This dialogic approach reshaped internal thought processes, opposing monologic reasoning.
3. *Critical Thinking as a means*: Critical thinking was used as a tool to challenge students' comfort zones and foster active engagement with reality, encouraging them to become agents of change while embracing collective growth.

In addition, this project shows a structured Educational Design: it integrated established philosophical ideas with the lived realities of students. The theme of *conflict* was explored through five classroom sessions using varied stimuli, literature, multimedia, and music. The culmination featured a reading from Antonio Rosmini's *Philosophy of Law*, enabling students to connect their reflections with the

insights of a philosopher deeply engaged with the topic (Tian & Liao, 2016). This deliberate choice not only introduced advanced philosophical concepts but also highlighted Rosmini's local significance, connecting academic inquiry to the students' cultural context.

There also a few innovative elements. First, local and experiential dimensions in P4C: engaging with Rosmini's work at his birthplace added a tangible layer of historical and cultural context. The final session, held at Casa Rosmini, incorporated museum education to link abstract concepts to real-world artifacts, enriching the students' philosophical reflections. Guided tours and exposure to Rosmini's life and environment fostered a sense of identity and belonging, leveraging regional heritage as a learning stimulus (Echeverría & Hannam, 2017).

Second, an interdisciplinary impact: by blending P4C methodology with local cultural engagement, the project exemplified the value of interdisciplinary education. The students' transition from a research-focused community to a listening community underscored active participation, reflection, and the contextualization of abstract ideas in tangible experiences.

In conclusion, the Rosmini Center's initiative demonstrated how local cultural resources, integrated with philosophy and innovative teaching methods, could foster critical thinking, deepen students' appreciation of cultural heritage, and address contemporary issues through inclusive and reflective educational practices (UNESCO, 2007).

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EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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Physical education is a very suitable subject for educating to democracy, especially when its teaching includes, in addition to traditional lessons, situations of self-government by the pupils. Valuable experiences of democratic coexistence are gained by forming of teams, assigning roles, refereeing a match, respecting the roles of the game, organizing a tournament and by choosing the activities to be practiced. To this end, the teacher must promote a playful and inclusive environment, avoiding authoritarian methods, but must also avoid every form of exacerbated agonism and misunderstood self-government of the students, which can degenerate into chaotic and tumultuous situations.

democracy; game; physical education; rules; self-government

INTRODUCTION

Education to democracy is a major pedagogical issue and a vital interest of all democratic societies, especially in our time, marked by ever-increasing migration flows and increasingly multi-ethnic societies. A democratic *forma mentis* is the basis of active and conscious citizenship; it is also a teaching objective to be pursued in schools of all levels and grades, so it must be thought of pedagogically, long and in all its complexity. Each subject in the curriculum can make a particular contribution, each with its own content and methods; this commitment is therefore transversal and aims to promote, in the student, not only habits of collaboration, sharing and participation, but also the democratic mentality. Among the various teachings, physical education is very effective in this direction, as long as it is thought and proposed in the most appropriate form. This subject, often underestimated compared to intellectual ones (Refrigeri, 1989), can make a valuable contribution to democratic education; this is due to its versatility, to the content, context, working conditions and, in particular, to play and group situations, more than ever socializing because they require the sharing and compliance with rules and regulations. Not by chance, the Italian *Indicazioni nazionali* of 2012, referring to the kindergarten and first cycle, suggest this valuable training, which is indicated, although with less emphasis, also for secondary school.

1. A PRIORITY OBJECTIVE

Before specifying the formative value of physical activities, it is worth noting a few aspects of democratic education, which has been very well theorized by Lamberto Borghi and John Dewey. It is important to point out that the future of democratic societies is related to the wide spread of the democratic ideal and the corresponding way of life (understood as habit and style of conduct); in other words, we are in front of a formative question to be thought of in relation to practice and experience, in order to acquire this mentality. The central point of the discussion is, therefore, the circular link between education and democracy.

In the reflection of Borghi, democratic education is defined as the one that closely links individual and social education (1967, p. 61) and the one that gives life to men, to people endowed with autonomy and sociality, in an inseparable connexion (1967, p. 61); the aim is to make communication and coexistence between men possible, through the maximum contribution of each, in relation to his characteristics and bents, to the life of all (1967, p. 61). Beside, the purpose of this education is the formation of complete, fully developed, choice-capable personalities who are aware of both the issues of principle and those of execution, both in the ends and in the means (1967, p. 61); Another of its aims is the ability to collaborate in creating the rules of common coexistence, to have a voice in decisions of common interest, to make a personal contribution to what has been decided by consensus (1967, p. 62). It goes without saying that a democratic society must pay particular attention to a certain type of education that must be thoroughly thought out and problematized, studying the most effective implementing ways.

Even in Dewey conception, democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience (1997, p. 87); thus, it is an educational, experiential reality, in a circular sense, because democracy is, at the same time, cause and outcome of education. At the most practical level, school must itself be a community life in all which that implies (1997, p. 358). For the American philosopher, social perceptions and interests can be developed only in a genuinely social medium-one where there is give and take in the building up of a common experience (1997, p. 358). The school should also be thought of as a miniature social group in which study and growth are incidents of present shared experience (1997, p. 358); therefore, Playgrounds, shops, workrooms, laboratories not only direct the natural active tendencies of youth, but they involve intercourse, communication, and cooperation,-all extending the perceptions of connections (1997, p. 358). Thus, education for democracy implies a close connection between learning and doing, understood as ethicality; the aim must therefore be an educational plan where learning is the accompaniment of continuous activities or occupations which have a social aim and utilize the materials of typical social situations (1997, p. 360).

As has been pointed, democratic education involves all school subjects, that must therefore be coordinated with a view to achieving the common objective. In the case of physical education, the unique context and gaming activities create ideal

conditions to encourage democratc mentality. In this respect, as will be explained below, some situations are preferable as more educational, whereas other method choices are, on the contrary, to be discouraged. Into Italian *Indicazioni Nazionali* for the curriculum of the first cycle (D.M. 254/2012), although there is no explicit mention of "democracy", the suggested teaching is, however, aimed at acquiring this mentality.

2. A HUMANISTIC CONCEPTION

To educate well to democracy, physical education must be thought in a humanistic key, privileging this epistemic figure. In its thousand-year history (Barbieri, 2002), this discipline has known more paradigms, mainly being configured, according to the times, like: a) a pre-military or para-military training; b) a form of hygiene, aimed at the health and strength of the practitioner; c) a sporting and competitive reality; d) an education of the whole person, not only of the body, but also of the affective, social and cognitive sphere. These paradigms had different dynamics, moment of luck, stagnation, decline and recovery, but they also lived partial alliances and forms of cohabitation. However, it is worth repeating, to educate for democracy it is good to privilege the humanistic conception which, much more than others, aims to socialize and promotes playful, sharing experiences. It is not out of place to mention some pedagogists who defended the humanistic figure; this is the case of J. Locke, J.-J. Rousseau, H. Pestalozzi, R. Baden-Powell, G. Gentile and L. Volpicelli.

To educate for democracy, it must be specified, by contrast, how physical education should not be oriented. To be sure, authoritarian teaching is not educational, because involves a directive conduct of the lesson, based on commands, orders, purely executive and disciplinary exercises that leave little space for play and creativity (Isidori, 2009, p. 81). Even the activities characterized by exaggerated agonism, with continuous competitions among the pupils, are not deal for the purpose. Neither are the situations of complete *laissez faire*, where the teacher leaves the class to its natural dynamics, without guide and vigilance. An effective guide is very important for the success of the lesson. The teacher must suggest, correct, avoid occasions of conflicts and abuse, although sometimes the age and maturity of pupils can allow for useful, valuable self-governance situations.

After these notations, it is good to indicate which teaching is more suitable to educate for democracy. The group play activities are highly socializing, provided they are well guided. In this respect, it is very important that the teacher knows how to make the group appear as a pleasant entity, to be researched and better known, and not as an adult-imposed situation (Casolo & Frattini, 2021, p. 41). By practicing team activities, the student appreciates both the moral value and the usefulness (that is functional validity) of the rules and regulations of the game. This acquisition is not merely theoretical, but has been lived in life, on the body and relational level, as a concrete, very formative experience that confirms fully Deweyan *Learning by doing*. Not only can the student agree on the benefit of the rules and the need to respect them, but he can go a step further, when the teacher explains the same

rules and makes him think about them, in view of a more convinced sharing. The teacher can also involve the students in choice of game and team composition; thus, in these moments of school life, valuable group experiences are made. In sports games, there is also arbitrage, which can be carried out by the students themselves in turn; after all, refereeing a match is an experience of education to the legality, an exercise in fairness and responsibility towards classmates. Depending on age and maturity, the teacher may delegate more and leave more space for forms of self-government and self-management of activities. It should be notes that teacher's guidance and supervision are essential for a successful lesson; besides, the prevention is not always sufficient and, during the group games, there may always be some controversy among the students; however, this may also be an opportunity to reflect on the spirit of the game, the usefulness of a conduct, the ludic and social aims of sports practice. Moreover, sports team activities require altruism, that should be promoted as a general disposition towards others; to say it with Arnold, altruism is to be understood as

> those forms of conduct not merely adopted to do what is right and correct in terms of playing and respecting the rules, because in addition to this, there is a spontaneous interest in all competitors, whether partners or antagonists (Arnold, 2002, p. 85).

In fact, any game situation and motor activity, if well managed, is educational to the sociality, as long as it is oriented towards participation, sharing, mutual respect and, more generally, democratic living. In emphasizing the playful and socializing figure, one should not forget the wide range of educational possibilities related to the emotional, affective and cognitive sphere. The practice of team games allows, in addition to the physical, health and social benefits, to exercise various intelligences (Gardner, 1987).

3. ITALIAN NATIONAL GUIDELINES

Education for democracy is gradually implemented, starting from the earliest years of life, so that the school provides this in the manner most appropriate to the age. At this point, it is worth noting the lines suggested by the National Guidelines of 2012 for Italian school, limited to the curriculum for kindergarten and primary school. From the lines emerges a physical education as ever formative in maturing the democratic mentality to little boys and girls. In outlining the competences at the end of the first cycle, an eloquent concept appears, covering all disciplines. The student assimilates

> the sense and necessity of respect for civil coexistence. He is concerned about the public functions in which he participates in the various forms in which this can take place: informal and non-formal educational opportunities, public exposure of his own work, ritual occasions in the community he attends, solidarity actions, non-competitive sporting events, volunteering etc. (Indicazioni nazionali, pp. 10–11).

Further on, the legislator explains the aims of the kindergarten that promotes the development of identity, autonomy and competence in children, introducing them to citizenship. This teaching guideline, which applies to all disciplines, is fully achievable with physical activities; in fact, To experience citizenship for the first time means to discover the other trough oneself and to give increasing importance to others and their needs; also, it means becoming more aware of the need of establish shared rules (Indicazioni nazionali, p. 16). It is clear that the child, when he performs group physical activities, he recognizes the body of others and understands the need for norms. It should be noted that the legislator, where he elucidates the teaching of "Body and movement", he does not mention democratic education, even if, from the set of indications a favourable thinking emerges in this respect, because physical activities promote awareness, self-esteem, ability to understand messages from the body of others. Moreover, about the transition from kindergarten to primary school, it is specified that the child shares experiences and games, uses common materials and resources, gradually faces conflicts and begins to recognize the rules of behaviour in private and public contexts (Indicazioni nazionali, p. 23).

More general pedagogical considerations are present in the first cycle school directions, starting with the more general ones, referring to all disciplines. An entire paragraph called "Citizenship and the Constitution" illustrates the democratic purpose of education in primary and lower secondary schools. To educate for citizenship it is necessary to foster experiences that promote forms of cooperation and solidarity; in addition, it is necessary to develop a sense of legality and an ethic of responsibility. It is very valuable to include a first knowledge of Italian Constitution in the curriculum; in particular, students learn to recognize and respect the values enshrined and protected by the Constitution (Indicazioni nazionali, p. 25). Later, when the legislator focuses on physical education, he highlights the link with education to democracy; in fact, participating in motor and sports activities means sharing group experiences with other people, promoting the integration of pupils with various forms of diversity and enhancing the value of cooperation and teamwork (Indicazioni nazionali, p. 63). If well-carried out, the school sport is therefore a valuable training for the future of living together in society; in fact, this activity promotes the value of compliance with agreed and shared rules and the ethical values that underlie civil coexistence (Indicazioni nazionali, p. 63). It is clear that these words are indicative of the desired democratic education. In addition, there is a competency to be acquired by the pupil at the end of primary school: Understanding, within the various gaming and sports opportunities, the value of rules and the importance of respect them (Indicazioni nazionali, p. 63). When the student ends up the first secondary school, he must know to use the communicative-relational aspects of body language in order to get in touch with others and he must also be able to actively practice sports values (fair-play) as a way of daily relationship and of respect for the rules (Indicazioni nazionali, p. 64); moreover, he must be able to integrate into the group, take responsibility and commit to the common good (Indicazioni nazionali, p. 64). At the end of third year of first secondary school, the

learning objectives are as follows: the student knows how to implement strategies of play, acts collaborative behaviours and participates in a prepositive way to the team's choices (Indicazioni nazionali, p. 65); beside he knows and correctly applies the technical regulation of the sports practiced, also taking the role of arbitrator or judge (Indicazioni nazionali, p. 65). Thus configured, the teaching of physical education is therefore oriented to educate for democracy.

To conclude, it is worth repeating how this teaching, carried out in both the gym and natural environment, is more educational if practiced in a playful, socializing, collaborative way, avoiding authoritarian, directive and disciplinary methods. The common play experience is fundamental, because it implies not only respect for the body of others and the rules of the game, but also sharing, collaboration and awareness that compliance with the rules is essential for democratic existence.

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PROMOTING YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP THROUGH STUDENT COOPERATIVES. FIRST RESULTS OF A NEET PREVENTION PROGRAM

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Grounded in the whole-school approach, the Bell'Impresa! project promotes active citizenship and democratic values to prevent school dropout and reduce NEETs among young people. By fostering entrepreneurship, personal responsibility, and creativity, it aligns with constructivist principles and adopts a student-centred capability approach. The project evaluation employed Kirkpatrick's four-level model and exploratory focus groups with 62 primary school students, 52 secondary students, 7 teachers, 15 educators, and 5 local authorities. Data were analyzed inductively to understand participants' perceptions and the development of student competencies. The creation of 25 student cooperatives and workshops fostered experiential and reflective learning, enabling students to acquire entrepreneurial, communicative-relational, organisational-managerial, and decision-making skills. These cooperatives facilitated students' active agency, teamwork, and exposure to democratic principles, supported by strong school-community partnerships. Bell'Impresa! demonstrates how student cooperatives function as learning environments that integrate educational and community needs. By producing tangible outcomes, students assumed responsible roles within their communities, addressing real needs and contributing to sustainable educational and social change.

student cooperatives; student entrepreneurship; democratic citizenship; whole school approach; student inclusion

1. BELL'IMPRESA! PROJECT: FOSTERING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP TO PREVENT SCHOOL DROPOUT

Scientific literature in the educational field emphasizes the effectiveness of the whole-school approach (European Commission, 2015) in fostering educational communities where students can thrive. This approach promotes active citizenship and democratic values among young people, while simultaneously preventing and countering the spread of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training)

(Bevilacqua et al., 2024).

Bell'Impresa! is a multi-year project (2020–2024) launched in the northwestern region of the province of Verona. It involves an extensive territorial network comprising 13 municipalities, 11 comprehensive school institutions, 5 non-profit organizations, and one for-profit organization. The project is designed to prevent school dropout by adopting an innovative approach that promotes entrepreneurship while fostering personal responsibility, initiative, and creativity among young people aged 8 to 13. It also aims to establish an integrated and active educational community beginning from early childhood.

The project is rooted in Dewey's educational philosophy, which views the social context as essential for understanding and fostering the potential of young individuals. Within this framework, education is not perceived as an isolated process but as an integration of psychological aspects—related to the expression of individual capabilities—and social dimensions, which prepare young people for adult roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, Dewey (2004) argues that schools should reflect real-life contexts, extending life beyond the school walls. Consistent with this perspective, Bell'Impresa! sought to create an educational environment where schools and local communities act as active partners. This approach placed children and adolescents at the center of their developmental journey, empowering them as active agents while fostering their competencies, passions, and aspirations. Through hands-on engagement, the project promoted entrepreneurship as a tool to address youth disengagement and create a network of aware, proactive citizens. Students were encouraged to become change agents, capable of positively contributing to the betterment of their communities.

The project was organized into three main lines of intervention. The first involved the direct engagement of students in establishing student cooperatives, structured as business simulations, enabling young participants to learn about business management dynamics and experience the value of collaboration. The second focused on building an educational community where young people could care for common goods, respond to the emerging needs of their community, and foster a sense of civic responsibility. The third line aimed to develop entrepreneurial skills, personal responsibility, creativity, and initiative among participants. This methodology led to the establishment of student cooperatives operating both during and beyond regular school hours, simulating business environments that encouraged teamwork. Students shared tasks and assumed responsibilities towards their peers, schools, and the community (Bevilacqua et al., 2022).

The choice of the cooperative model as a form of enterprise is integral to the method, as it involves direct engagement with democratic processes, including open discussion and participation in creating values, rules, and decisions. Each students' cooperative, based on work conducted by members in assemblies and within the Board of Directors, initiated productive processes tailored to the cooperative's mission. Workshop activities included producing items for sale, constructing school furniture, and revitalizing public spaces, emphasizing shared

responsibility and community activation.

Throughout the project, numerous initiatives were implemented, involving a total of 3,142 students and 425 teachers. These efforts resulted in the creation of 25 student cooperatives and the activation of 48 cooperative workshops and 61 skill development workshops, along with the organization of 72 public events and 74 informational meetings with businesses and experts. Collectively, these activities contributed to the development of a vibrant and generative educational community.

2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This presentation aims to introduce the outcomes of the first evaluation phase of the Bell'Impresa! project, realised according to Kirkpatrick's four-level model (1993). The study – aimed at understanding the perceptions of project participants (students, teachers, educators, school principals, and local authorities) and the students learning achievement in terms of knowledge, attitudes, and competencies – can be contextualised within the constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). For data collection, exploratory focus groups (Hevner et al., 2010) were held with 62 primary school students, 52 secondary school students, 7 teachers, 7 school educators, 8 cooperative educators, and 5 local authorities. Inductive content analysis had been adopted to analyse qualitative data (Elo & Kingäs, 2008).

3. RESULTS

3.1. The students' cooperatives: a student-centered approach

The Bell'Impresa! project adopted a student-centred approach that prioritizes students' roles as learners and their human, social, and creative dimensions. This approach has demonstrated that education can serve as a powerful medium for fostering students' personal and social development by recognizing their potential and offering meaningful experiences.

The capability approach emphasized the importance of perceiving students as complete individuals capable of achieving their full potential. Educators and local stakeholders involved in the project worked to offer opportunities that highlighted students' capacity to act and create. They were valued both for who they were in the present and for who they could become in the future. This approach fostered an environment where every individual felt recognized and respected, contributing to the development of self-esteem and motivation.

Educators stressed the importance of designing an educational pathway that goes beyond the mere transmission of knowledge, one that stimulates reflection and the ability to imagine new personal horizons. Territorial stakeholders supported this approach by providing tools and resources to help achieve tangible goals, while students reported an increased awareness of themselves and their abilities, demonstrating their capacity to translate these skills into concrete actions.

The concept of student agency played a central role in the project, enabling students to take ownership of their learning. Through practical and reflective

experiences, they were able to develop decision-making autonomy and explore their potential outside the traditional school context. Students actively participated in decisions concerning their communities and project activities, playing a key role in decision-making processes. This involvement helped them understand the value of mistakes as part of the learning process, enhancing resilience and responsibility.

According to educators, this experiential learning approach allowed students to discover new ways of interacting with the real world. Through activities that required them to take risks, make decisions, and work collaboratively, students demonstrated their ability to make a concrete impact on their surroundings. Territorial stakeholders noted that students' active involvement led to a heightened awareness of local challenges, fostering a strong sense of belonging and a more assertive political voice.

A distinctive feature of the project was the introduction of new experiences that transcended the limitations of traditional schooling. The project activities brought the school "outside the school", creating a bridge between theoretical learning and practical applications. This enabled students to acquire skills that would have been difficult to develop within the confines of the classroom. Among these experiences, hands-on work, the use of specialized tools, and the creation of tangible products contributed to the development of practical and creative abilities.

Educators highlighted how such experiences promoted the development of multiple intelligences, nurturing students' desire to learn and continue growing. Students, in turn, perceived these activities as meaningful and purposeful, often linked to the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, such as reducing inequalities, promoting health and well-being, and fostering sustainability. This approach gave learning a profound and concrete significance, encouraging students to see themselves as agents of change.

The project also created a democratic environment in which students experienced the importance of participation and sharing. Through collective decision-making processes, they learned to collaborate and respect others' opinions. The establishment of a student board was perceived as an inclusive and equitable tool, where every voice held value. The division of roles and responsibilities further reinforced their understanding of teamwork implications and the importance of collaborative leadership.

3.2. A path toward greater self-awareness and world awareness
Reflection was a key component of the project, supported by tools such as educator feedback and written self-assessments. These processes facilitated the development of enhanced self-awareness among students in three primary dimensions.

Students were given the opportunity to reflect on themselves, gaining a deeper understanding of their attitudes, strengths, and areas for improvement. Through guided moments of introspection, they learned to value their own competencies and recognize the progress they had made. Educators observed a significant increase in students' self-esteem and personal confidence, as they became

increasingly comfortable expressing themselves and tackling new challenges.

Engagement with the real world allowed students to develop a more critical and conscious perspective of reality. Through concrete experiences, they enriched their cultural and practical knowledge, learning to observe the world with fresh eyes. Territorial stakeholders contributed by creating opportunities for students to explore and appreciate the local context, strengthening the bond between school and community.

The project helped students understand their role in the world, inspiring in them a desire to become active members of their communities. They were able to see how the outcomes of their learning processes could extend beyond academic grades to make a tangible impact on society. This realization reinforced their intrinsic motivation to participate and contribute actively.

Through these reflective processes, students not only gained insights into their own potential but also developed a stronger sense of agency and responsibility, positioning themselves as meaningful actors within their social and educational environments.

3.3. Skills developed by students

The Bell'Impresa! project served as a transformative educational experience that significantly and multidimensionally promoted students' skills development. Through an innovative and participatory methodological approach, the program enabled young participants to acquire and strengthen crucial competencies for their personal and professional growth. Key dimensions of learning included autonomy in action, communicative-relational abilities, organizational and decision-making skills, which allowed students to challenge themselves in new and stimulating contexts. Collaborative work fostered the development of positive group dynamics, where students learned to build trust-based relationships, manage conflicts, and pursue shared goals, gradually transforming from a collection of individuals into a cohesive team.

The skills developed encompassed a broad range of dimensions, from effective communication to problem-solving, decision-making, and entrepreneurship, fully aligning with European frameworks for key and citizenship competencies. This process provided students with opportunities to explore beyond traditional school boundaries, allowing them to be recognized and valued beyond mere academic results. The experience marked a moment of profound reflection and self-assessment, enabling young people to explore their potential, gain awareness of their capabilities, and construct a broader and more informed perspective on their educational journey.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Bell'Impresa! project has demonstrated that school cooperatives serve as an effective educational tool for transforming students into active and responsible agents. By creating products and services as concrete responses to real community

needs, young participants experienced the value of service and civic engagement. This approach enabled them to take on meaningful roles in both their personal development and the improvement of collective conditions, fostering the development of key competencies to prevent school dropout.

The cooperatives provided a practical and democratic learning environment where students could exercise personal responsibility, creativity, and planning skills. Integrating experiential and reflective activities strengthened the connection between school and community, promoting active participation and establishing an inclusive educational network. Through teamwork, students developed relational, organizational, and decision-making skills, demonstrating their ability to act effectively and independently in addressing real-world challenges.

In the context of preventing and countering school dropout—broadly understood as the incomplete, irregular, or inadequate utilization of educational and training services by school-aged youth (Autorità Garante per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza, 2023), the project represented an innovative intervention that went beyond remedial education. Instead, it focused on motivation, agency, and active participation by students. Through the adopted methodology, an inclusive and meaningful learning space was created, capable of restoring value and purpose to the school experience, reorienting students' perspectives, and supporting them in constructing a more conscious and structured self-project.

These outcomes highlight the potential of school cooperatives to integrate learning and service, fostering in young people a sense of belonging and social responsibility that equips them for a conscious and proactive future.

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IS THE SCHOOL A DEMOCRATIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENT? A RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH (WSA) TO CCE

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This contribution presents the first findings of the PRIN project "The school as a democratic learning environment: promoting a whole-school approach to civic and citizenship education in the first cycle of instruction", created in collaboration between the University of Rome LUMSA, the University of Bologna and the University of Verona. The project aims at fostering civic and citizenship education and democratic learning environments through the adoption of a whole-school approach in the first cycle of instruction and includes two specific objectives: 1) Conducting an in-depth analysis about the dimensions of the whole-school approach in six first cycle schools through multiperspective case studies; 2) Providing the six schools with continuing professional development (CPD) using the Teacher Professional Development Research (TPDR) in order to implement the WSA for CCE in all the aspects of school life. The contribution will present the initial findings of the multiperspective case studies (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), carried out in schools in Spring 2024, highlighting the challenges in measuring the multidimensionality of CCE at the school level.

civic and citizenship education; whole school approach; case studies

INTRODUCTION

Civic and citizenship education (CCE) has become one of the main objectives of the European Union educational policies (CoE, 2018), considered as a means for providing students with the awareness and skills to develop a deeper understanding of current social issues and act responsibly in their life. The PRIN project "The school as a democratic learning environment: promoting a whole-school approach to civic and citizenship education in the first cycle of instruction" integrated perfectly into this view, since its purpose is to accompany participant schools of Rome, Bologna and Verona to the realization of CCE paths for the development of democratic learning environments in primary and lower secondary schools. During the

first year of implementation, an analysis of the school context and the needs of individual schools was conducted through quantitative-qualitative tools (a teacher and student questionnaires, focus groups conducted with teachers, an interview with the school principal and one with the coordinator of CCE at the school level called *referente* of each participating school). Areas under investigation include the vertical curriculum and how students participate in school; classroom climate and formative assessment practices; teaching practices related to CCE (in terms of topics, activities and methods); extracurricular activities and relations with the local community. The findings of this analysis represent the starting point for the next phase of work, to be carried out in the second year of implementation, the in-service teacher training on methodologies to implement CCE activities. After presenting the conceptual and theoretical framework of the project, this paper outlines the heuristic process, specifying the research tools used and the method of analysis adopted with a focus on the findings emerged from the analysis of the interviews with the school principals and CCE coordinators.

1. THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Education has a fundamental role to play in sharing and teaching fundamental values and civic rights and obligations (European Commission, 2018). In democratic societies citizenship education supports students in becoming active, informed and responsible citizens, who are willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and for their communities at the local, regional, national and international level and to contribute to the political process (European Commission, 2017). To achieve these goals, CCE must help students develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values (CoE, 2018a). Applying a whole school approach (WSA) can be an opportunity for students to develop and practice citizenship competence by integrating three overlapping areas: teaching-learning; school management; cooperation with the local community. The teaching of civic competences as a transversal issue must ensure the involvement of all actors and all aspects of school life to reflect democratic and human rights principles. Hence the need to create safe learning environments where these principles can be explored, experienced and even challenged (CoE, 2018b).

2. RESEARCH QUESTION, OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES

The research design includes two stages: in the first stage six case studies were conducted in the six schools involved in the project; while in the second one the CPD training activities will be carried out using the Teacher Professional Development Research (TPDR)[1] (Asquini, 2019). The entire research process starts from the following research question: "How to create democratic learning environments and

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[1] The term TPDR, found in the literature, has been chosen in order to correspond, though certainly not exhaustively, to the concept of Ricerca-Formazione defined by CRESPI, which provides a specific focus on the effects of such pathways on the development and growth of teachers' professionalism.

to develop citizenship competence at school through WSA?" and is characterized by the general aims consisting in promoting CCE through WSA in the first-cycle schools. This aim is followed by specific objectives for each phase of our study that generate different research outcomes (Figure 1). On the one hand, analysing the WSA dimensions in the six schools through the conduction of the six case studies leads to the draft of six research reports on WSA. This will lead to the creation of a toolkit for schools as a self-evaluation tool on WSA. On the other hand, promoting plans for improvement through the development of guidelines on school organization and WSA design for the school of the first cycle. This will be carried out after the training on the critical elements that emerged transversally in the three areas of investigation according to the WSA model. These trainings will include specific training activities to meet the needs and peculiarities of individual schools.

Fig. 1. Overview of the two phases of the research design
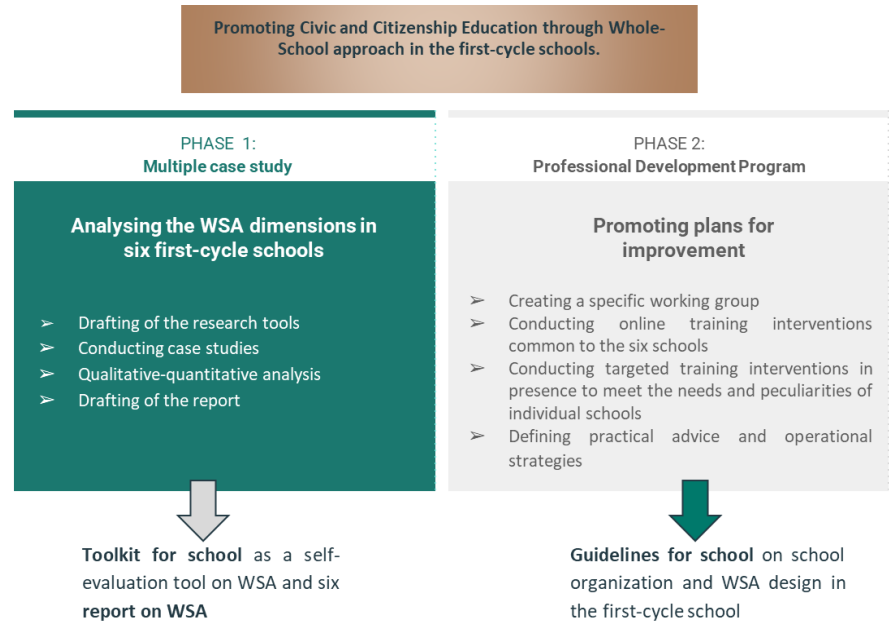
3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In the first phase of the project, researchers adopt multiple case studies that is a multi-perspective approach, which allows gathering a multiplicity of quantitative and qualitative data to understand each case in depth (Day et al., 2000). The multiple case study is characterised by the following phases: 1) collection of data from a multiplicity of perspectives; 2) analysis and comparison of the WSA areas; 3) identification of the WSA success elements and areas for improvement.

The multiple case study involves six first-cycle schools in the cities of Rome, Bologna and Verona. Specifically, each research unit conducts two case studies.

Then, the TPDR is the approach adopted in the second phase of the project which, in collaboration with teachers, aims to promote teacher reflexivity and change in teaching practices. CPD activities were structured on two levels:

1. online training seminars for common areas of improvement identified by the researchers. These seminars are an opportunity for schools to reflect on common issues and to work together to identify solutions;
2. targeted training interventions to meet the needs and peculiarities of individual schools. The specific and targeted training interventions follow the TPDR theoretical and methodological orientations:
   - a shared choice of the learning objectives to be pursued with the group of teachers on the basis of their training needs;
   - a full involvement and recognition of the participants and of the characteristics of the different contexts;
   - a focus on the importance of one's own beliefs and previous practices;
   - the use of active training methodologies and techniques of simulation and application;
   - the recursive confrontation among participants and between them and the trainer-researchers;
   - the use of moments of formative assessment addressed to participants in order to experience "democratic" and participated teaching and assessment methods;
   - the possibility to carry out concrete actions for change in the school context in order to foster the WSA for CCE.

4. DATA COLLECTION TOOLS AND FIRST FINDINGS

The research tools used to collect data in the multi-perspective case studies follow a twofold aim: 1) collecting quantitative data at the school level; 2) conducting in-depth qualitative analyses with all the relevant actors involved in the WSA (school principals, teachers, primary and lower secondary school students). The research tools include: a questionnaire for teachers; a questionnaire for students; semi-structured interviews with school principals and CCE coordinators; focus groups with teachers; observation; documentary collection. In this contribution, we will focus on the interviews and their findings. The interview allows researchers to collect, through a broad and balanced approach, feedback deriving from individuals' lived experiences (Harvey & Newton, 2007; Adams, 2015). Each of the questions is accompanied by suggested prompts and supplementary questions that an interviewer might use to obtain further details and invite the respondent to elaborate or seek clarification (Patton, 1990). The interviews with school principals and CCE coordinators, which last approximately one hour, take place in person, are audio-recorded and subsequently coded. The areas investigated are listed below:

- The Context
- The CCE curriculum and the main obstacles
- Democratic learning environment
- Development trajectories
- Suggestions for the training

Interview qualitative data are analyzed through inductive content analysis (White & Marsh, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The latter allows us to obtain a broad description of the phenomenon through the elaboration of concepts and categories. This analysis technique contributes to the elaboration of models, systems and conceptual maps to understand phenomena in depth.

To code and analyze the interviews, a grid was used, divided into topics, main issues, supporting evidence.

4.1 Findings of the interview with the school principals

Analysing the interviews with school principals conducted by the three research units, some common elements in the survey areas emerge. Specifically, all schools have a very diverse student population. Each school developed through a commission a vertical CCE curriculum, except one school, and has coordinators for CCE activities on its staff. Common positive elements for the creation of democratic learning environments are the presence of initiatives in collaboration with local organizations, while common negative aspects are the lack of student participation in the management and life of the school and the absence of systematic reflection on democratic learning environments. Some similar needs have emerged among the development trajectories: enhancing student-centered teaching approaches, improving assessment methods and tools, encouraging student involvement in decision-making processes, strengthening the verticality of the CCE curriculum. However, some differences also emerge from the analysis: not all schools have the same possibility of coming into contact with territorial associations and local authorities; the planning of CCE activities differs from school to school; there are different degrees of involvement and active participation of students in the initiatives.

4.2 Findings of the interview with the CCE coordinators

Similarly to the previous paragraph, this one will highlight the common points and the differentiations concerning the findings of the interviews with the CCE coordinators in the schools investigated by the three research units. Firstly, the vertical curriculum proves to be present in all six schools, except one school in Rome. It is generally drawn up by a special commission, which includes both primary and secondary school teachers, led by the figure of the CCE coordinator. The curriculum was created according to national guidelines, dividing it into three macro-areas and identifying the competence goals and learning objectives. In relation to the latter, all schools declare that teachers pay attention to adapting and differentiating activities and objectives based on the age group of the students. However, if in some schools there is a sense of freedom in teaching and managing civic education activities, in others the need to protect teachers' autonomy in defining CCE activities is highlighted. Each school, also, works through the design of learning units. For what concerns the CCE projects implemented, all the institutes have a great collaboration with external partners of the territory, with whom they have undertaken paths on different themes on citizenship. However, the level of collaboration is different from school to school and depending on the opportunities offered by the

location of the institute. Moreover, each school is characterized by the implementation of specific projects, such as the editing by students of a school magazine dedicated to ecology and sustainability. Some difficulties are also underlined, such as those related to the CCE planning and assessment phase as well as the lack of the time and opportunities to discuss and meet to share and give feedback among teachers. CCE is also perceived differently from the teachers: some perceive it as a burden of work and bureaucracy, others as an area imposed from outside, or as a subject already integrated into the daily curricular teaching. This can be an obstacle for working collaboratively.

Also, directions of development emerged from the interviews. Among these, there are the desires to strengthen the interdisciplinary and transversal nature of CCE, to establish greater coordination with local agencies and continuity between school grades, to document and share the learning units designed at the institute level. Other development trajectories, aimed at promoting student involvement, are the commitment to reinforce the sense of group and community, as well as the sense of belonging, responsibility and agency at school. The possibility to participate in continuous training courses and to develop a shared vision of the meaning of CCE at the institute level turns out to be a precious opportunity for teachers. In this view, different training needs emerge in relation to the field of digital technologies, environment and sustainability, gender equality, civil rights and teaching methodologies. All teachers agree that external support and refresher courses are useful for professional growth.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the different beliefs and practices about CCE among participants, the challenge is to reflect on the real role of CCE and find new and different ways of experiencing school: from the relational dimension to the participation, from the design phase to the assessment one, from the school climate to its organizational aspects. The implementation of training pathways, in the second stage of the project, aims to be a continuation of this democratic way of experiencing school, so far traced through the research activities and first analyses conducted. The TPDR, on which these paths will be based, will allow to interlace the aspect of study and research with that of training, through a positive synergy between moments of reflection and moments of action in teaching practice. The hope is to combine the different pedagogical knowledge and the multiple experiences gained by universities and schools within a fruitful process of discovery and mutual enrichment.

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EMPOWER YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN RURAL AREAS OF SOUTH WESTERN EUROPE. THE YOULEADERS ACTION RESEARCH

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In Europe, there is a growing need for sustainable transformation on a global scale, which underscores the importance of exemplary practices and innovative educational models. This paper aims to outline and critically analyze the YouLeaders action research project, designed to empower young leaders aged 14 to 19 from rural areas across Europe with essential digital and social innovation skills. This initiative, supported by the Erasmus+ Programme, involves a collaborative effort among three South-Western European countries: Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Using an action research methodology, the study facilitates the co-design and implementation of a hybrid Leadership Learning Program. This program is then piloted and adapted to fit the diverse national contexts through a situational leadership framework. The paper discusses the key findings of the research, contributing to the discourse on sustainable leadership education in rural areas. It also proposes a model that may be replicable in similar educational settings throughout Europe and beyond.

leadership; youth; rural areas; action research; community-based learning.

INTRODUCTION

Youth leadership is a fundamental right and a crucial opportunity for personal and organizational growth. The European Union highlights the importance of involving young people in the political, social, and economic spheres of its Member States, fostering leadership skills that allow them to contribute to their communities (EU, 2018). The need for a systemic approach to change and innovation is even stronger in rural areas which are local administrative communities outside urban clusters, mostly characterised by a low population density on the territory, and by a specific socio- geographical, economic and cultural configuration, which calls for the constant development of specific services for young and old resident in the territory (EU, 2022).

The YouLeaders action research project, discussed in this paper, endeavours to tackle this challenge. Its primary objective is to equip young leaders from rural regions in Italy, Portugal, and Spain with critical competencies in digital and social innovation. The project emphasizes the establishment of meaningful connections between these leaders and their communities, as well as the broader regional context.

By formulating a comprehensive framework, the initiative strives to empower these emerging leaders to actively engage in and advocate for inclusive citizenship within their communities. This paper specifically examines the collaborative development of a leadership program designed for young individuals, proposing a model that could be replicated in similar educational contexts

1. TOWARD A YOUTH-CENTRIC MODEL OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The concept of "youth leadership" encompasses various meanings and approaches, contingent upon the dimensions emphasized. These dimensions may include personality characteristics, relational influence, cognitive and emotional abilities, group orientation, and the balance between self-interest and collective interests. Paths and programmes for the development of youth leadership are now particularly widespread, in response to the perceived need to support the new generations in terms of self-efficacy and subjective agency, i.e., awareness and implementation of their own ability to act effectively on reality.

However, these are usually designed by applying an adult-centric conceptualisation of leadership, without taking into account how leadership is perceived, experienced and defined by young people (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007).

The study by Mortensen and colleagues, for example, points out that adults tend to emphasise the concept of responsibility, whereas young people are more likely to associate leadership with communication, collective action, modelling and mentoring (Mortensen et al., 2014). The call for the development of youth leadership competencies thus seems not yet to have translated into a theoretically grounded competency model designed specifically for young people (Seemiller, 2018).

The scholarly debate also points to a disconnect between the dominant individualistic behavioural approach used by many organisations and training or career guidance programmes that focus their intervention exclusively on social and economic constraints and the life skills that young people and the local community consider crucial for dealing with social and economic problems (DeJaeghere & Murphy-Graham, 2022).

This second approach, based on the development of life skills with a view to youth leadership empowerment, takes into account several dimensions: physical, mental and emotional health, economic productivity, democratic participation, relationship building and active participation of young people in civic and political life.

2. AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH FOR YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

The YouLeaders action-research is situated in this latter framework and it was established under the Erasmus+ programme to encourage active citizenship and youth self-entrepreneurship. The project aimed to engage youth and stakeholders from rural areas in three Western European countries: Italy (Trapani and Agrigento), Spain (Galicia), and Portugal (Fatima region).

2.1. Methodology

The project initiated with an exploratory community-based study (Lewin, 1946; Stenhouse, 1975; Argyris et al., 1985; Hopkins, 2002) aimed at identifying the leadership needs of young individuals (Chow et al., 2017; Hornyak et al., 2022; Mortensen et al., 2014).

The syllabus co-creation path included four interconnected phases (Fig. 1):

- Exploratory needs analysis;
- Co-design of a hybrid training program for developing leadership skills in youth;
- Pilot testing and adaptation in various contexts using the situational leadership approach (Ayman, 2004);
- Follow-up and development of a flexible toolkit for educators, trainers, and young people to use in their specific contexts.

Fig. 1. Syllabus Co-Creation Path. Source: Youleaders project (2024)
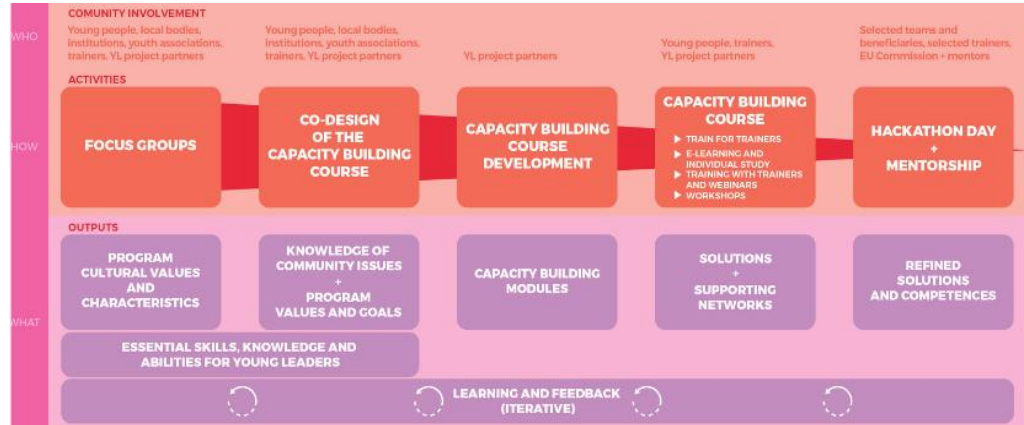
2.2. Needs analysis and expectations

During the first phase youngers and stakeholders, has been involved through focus groups and co-design sessions in order to identify, validate, and adapt the main learning outcome for the community-based program. The focus group sessions included 87 young participants and 38 stakeholders, distributed as described in Tab. 1:

Tab. 1. Focus Group participants per country. Source: Youleaders project (2024)

Country	Young people	Stakeholders
Italy	27	4
Spain	29	12
Portugal	31	22

The focus groups conducted with young people uncovered several important insights regarding their needs, expectations, and aspirations, showing commonalities across the participating countries.

The main findings from the focus groups helped shape the syllabus elements by exploring knowledge of community issues, cultural values and characteristics, as well as the essential skills, knowledge, and abilities required for young people.

Participants highlighted the need for young leaders to motivate and engage others effectively, focusing on community involvement to solve problems and optimize resources. They emphasized that capacity-building programs enhance self-confidence, critical thinking, and entrepreneurial skills. Young leaders expressed a desire to be more resilient in overcoming challenges, while also improving their relational skills and emotional intelligence for personal and community development. For what concern the impact of youngers in the community focus group discussions revealed a strong call for social cohesion and inclusion to address economic barriers that restrict access for certain groups. Participants noted that these barriers limit opportunities for involvement in international programs. The need for authentic representation and respect for diversity was also stressed. Additionally, there was a consensus on the importance of creating supportive networks and synergies within communities to foster entrepreneurial skills and prevent brain drain, ensuring that skilled youth remain engaged and active in their local territories.

The essential skills perceived as crucial for young leaders include being proactive, meaning they take initiative for both themselves and their community, as well as being self-aware. In this context, it is fundamental to possess strong interpersonal skills and the ability to foster a collaborative and sustainable environment. Particularly important skills for young leaders operating in a community setting are those related to sociability and collective or collaborative action. Additionally, there are specific knowledge areas to acquire, such as proficiency in English and digital skills, which can enhance their effectiveness at the community level.

In Italy and Spain, stakeholders underscore the vital role of leadership in inspiring and optimizing team potential, highlighting essential qualities such as passion, charisma, and a coherent vision. Furthermore, in Italy, there is a notable emphasis on the importance of social media proficiency and the need to confront gender-based perceptions of leadership traits. Advocates also stress the significance of a commitment to lifelong learning; despite the inherent challenges it entails.

In Portugal, the discourse revolves around fostering collaboration without the imposition of authority, emphasizing effective decision-making and the delegation of responsibilities. The capacity to persuade peers and lead by example is regarded as paramount, coupled with an imperative to cultivate inclusive connections among diverse groups. This collective insight from these three countries underscores the multifaceted nature of effective leadership within today's diverse and interconnected society.

2.3. A community-based path for young leaders

The training model was constructed through a comprehensive and iterative process, starting from the transnational comparisons and meta-reflections on the results derived from focus groups focused on identifying needs, expectations, and shared values. Furthermore, the model incorporated the design and implementation of tailored materials and content for young leaders in training, as well as for their trainers.

Additionally, it facilitated the development of projects and solutions aimed at addressing community challenges. Lastly, the engagement of stakeholder networks was critical to supporting the future practical advancements of the project ideas generated by the young leaders during the training path. The model also benefited from lessons learnt from the implementation and evaluation of project activities, in line with an idea of functional leadership for innovation in rural areas.

The community-based hybrid course consists of four modules, which are divided into two types of activities: in-person and collaborative activities, including webinars (online) and workshops (in-person); and self-learning activities delivered through an e-learning platform. Starting from a foundational understanding, the modules should be adapted by local trainers to meet the specific needs and context of the youngers, utilizing the competencies gained as tools to enhance both the community and personal growth.

The first module, focusing on soft skills and design thinking, serves as a foundational element that enhances the entire program. Additionally, the program includes essential modules on social innovation, self-entrepreneurship, digital and green skills, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and gender equality. Each of these areas plays a crucial role in fostering well-rounded participants capable of making a positive impact on their territory.

3. THE IMPACT OF THE YOULEADERS PROGRAMME

The participative nature of the YouLeaders action-research project entailed demanding research and coordination work, bringing to light critical issues and points of attention, among which we can include the need for longer implementation times, the uncertainty of the final result regarding the actual systemic manifestations and evolutions of the programme, and the need for a more structured pathway for trainers to ensure a greater impact on the training of young leaders.

On the other hand, the YouLeaders programme envisaged the development of diversified areas of expertise: social design skills, soft skills, digital and environmental 'green' skills, as well as entrepreneurial and gender equality skills. The challenge for the young leaders-in-training was to stitch them together into a project proposal that was relevant to the issues in the area and met the interest of institutions and civil society, and then take it to the next level of technical and financial feasibility.

From the analysis conducted ex-post, young people perceive an increase in their social well-being, understood as the awareness of being part of a wider reality where they can experience positive relationships based on trust and recognition by

others of the value that their belonging can bring to the entire community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

In fact, all the young people involved, regardless of nationality, express an increase in their self-efficacy with regard to the dimensions of participation in community life, the application of situational skills and the attitude towards the needs expressed by the territory. Open-ended responses to the questionnaire also indicate that they perceive themselves to be more capable of influencing local dynamics thanks to the skills they have developed during their training, radically changing a widespread demoralised and disinterested attitude towards local community development dynamics recorded during the initial focus groups.

In line with the integrated model of wellbeing proposed by the WHO (2021), the increased propensity and confidence of the young leaders to contribute to the development of their community, which was almost absent at the beginning of the project, returns an index of the growth of the subjective wellbeing of the young participants, confirming the validity of the programme with respect to the needs of the individuals and the communities of reference, with a positive impact on the promotion in the medium and long term, of an active and inclusive citizenship, respecting the diversity of the national and territorial contexts.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF CITIZENSHIP SKILLS IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT: THE CASE OF PCTO IN THE SAN SIRO DISTRICT (MILAN)

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The PCTO Social Cohesion and Urban Sustainability set in the framework of the MUSA-Spoke 6-Action 3.1.3 "Contrasting and prevention of early school leaving in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods". The paths aim to develop processes of social inclusion and to enhance cultural diversity. PCTO students have been involved in a team of researchers, professional educators, teachers, pedagogues, volunteers, PhD and university students, with a so-called Community service learning in the afterschool services of the QuBi network in the San Siro area. The research question explores on one hand, the opportunity provided to students by the extracurricular training program to reflect on their own life skills within a multiproblematic and multicultural context and, on the other hand, it examines the development of new skills, both among the students themselves and the children they support through individualized educational tutoring. A diachronic analysis of the student's diaries maintained throughout the program reveals a development in their approach to the context and an increased awareness of their role in supporting children's learning processes. This evolution also emerges in the two focus groups conducted by the researcher, midway through and at the end of the program, aimed at fostering a participatory reflection on their educational path.

citizenship education; community service learning; intercultural skills; PCTO; thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

The PCTO (Paths for Transversal Competences and Orientation) "Social Cohesion and Urban Sustainability" set in the framework of the MUSA-Spoke 6-Action 3.1.3 "Contrasting and prevention of early school leaving in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods". The research refers to the urban anthropology model of Learning Cities (Biagioli et al., 2022) to promote social cohesion and the enhancement of differences in a multicultural, multi-problematic, peripheral, and marginalized contexts.

The PCTO students have been involved in a so-called Community Service Learning (Zecca, 2024) in the afterschool services of the QuBi network in the San Siro district, a neighbourhood of Milan characterised by an important presence of inhabitants in economic and social fragility, 57% of them have a migrant background. CSL engages students in activities that begin with the identification of problems, however, unlike academic or hypothetical issues, these are real problems identified by the

communities themselves (Gallop, Guthrie & Asante 2023). CSL is aimed at supporting the development of key competences for lifelong learning (European Council, 2018), particularly, given the specificity of the context, intercultural (Nigris, 2015, Tarozzi, 2005) personal and social competences, as well as the ability to learn how to learn (De Vecchi & Carmona Magnaldi, 1999). The paths set also under the wider framework of citizenship education (Santerini, 2010) according to the cosmopolitan approach of Benhabib (2008), which problematises the relationship between person and citizen and bases the idea of citizenship on the very concept of the human being as a bearer of universal rights. It is therefore a matter of redefining the boundaries of the demos and overcoming any concept of citizenship linked to territorial or cultural aspects. The formative dimension of the PCTO is also linked with an idea of a school curriculum skills-oriented (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019) and rooted in an agency-based perspective (Pastori, 2022, Sorzio, 2022).

2. THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The after-school service of the Dolci Primary school (IC Cadorna, in the San Siro district), thanks to a scientific collaboration agreement between IC Cadorna and Bicocca University, hosted 8 high school students in the school year 2023/2024, within the PCTO program "Social cohesion and urban sustainability". In the running of the service, every Friday from 4.30 p.m. to 6.30 p.m. within the school, actively participate the Cadorna parents' Association, Social Cooperative Equa (ETS) and some volunteer teachers. The afterschool is also part of the QuBì network, within is active the wider MUSA research project (Fredella & Zecca, 2024), that implement several actions between schools, family and territorial services (European Commission, 2015), embracing a whole school approach to tackling early school leaving. The objectives of several after-school services go beyond just "doing homework" but have a broader educational purpose (Sorzio, 2020). Therefore, the PCTO students had the opportunity to face both with professional competences of teachers and educator who runs educational service, and with researchers that investigate their practice, methodologies and their impact on pupils' academic results and the implementation of life skills and key citizenship competences.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGIES

The research question explores the opportunity provided to PCTO students by the extracurricular training program to reflect on their own life skills within a multiproblematic and multicultural context and it examines how participation in Community Service Learning activities can support the development of key competencies for lifelong learning (intercultural, personal and social skills and the ability to learn to learn), both among the PCTO students themselves and the children they support through individualized educational tutoring. The PCTO paths have been monitored and assessed with a participatory design of fourth generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) in order to engage high school student in dealing with tools like reflexive diaries and focus groups.

In coherence with the research questions have been chosen an exploratory framework (Mortari, 2007) and the data set analysed for answering the questions consist of the student's diaries, maintained throughout the program (from October 2023 to May 2024), two focus groups conducted by the researcher, midway through (January 2024) and at the end of the program (May 2024), aimed at fostering a participatory reflection on their educational path, and the researcher's participatory observations.

The methodology chosen for analysing the data is reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach that Braun and Clarke (2021a) have detailed emphasizing its accessibility, flexibility, and rigor, to guide researchers through the process of identifying and interpreting meaningful patterns within qualitative data.

1. Familiarization with the Data (reading and re-reading the data).
2. Generating Initial Codes (concise labels identifying important features of the data relevant to the research question).
3. Searching for Themes (cluster similar codes into potential broader patterns of meaning).
4. Reviewing Potential Themes (refine and assess themes).
5. Defining and Naming Themes (defined and name themes and eventually sub-themes to highlight nuances within broader patterns).
6. Producing the Report (a compelling narrative that answers the research question.

Reflexive engagement and methodological transparency are key to achieving rigor and quality in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The codes have been clustered in tree main themes. The first theme is *Teaching/learning processes* over which, as shown in the two quotes in Tab. 1, the students reflect in their diaries and also in the focus groups, starting from the recognition of some children's difficulties, for example in memorizing concept, in dealing with textbook vocabulary often incomprehensible to them, and in maintaining concentration on exercises that are not meaningful to them. Looking at this topic diachronically in student's diaries is evident how they became more and more confident in proposing alternative methods (i.e. using pictures, multimedia tools, play) to engage pupils and support their learning ("to make them understand, even in a funnier "way" FG2). A second theme is related to *Personal skills* they declare to have discovered or improved during the PCTO, lots of them underline the "patience" they need in the tutoring activity and several of them in the diaries write about efforts and gratifications ("I'd prefer maybe if there was another person to help me more, especially with A. because I have a lot of difficulties with her, she also disturbs when I do the work with the other children, so I can't maybe manage the others well because she's always in the way";" "I am really enjoying having to help someone and being able to help them where they have difficulties is something that makes me feel good" FG1). The third theme, *Key competences,* includes all the

competences students recognise to have achieved or improved. Lots of them in the diaries stress the importance of supporting pupils in literacy and how, especially thanks to an Arabic speaking mate, they have discovered how useful is enhancing the use of their mother tongue. As well in the focus groups emerge the potential of the multicultural context: some of them report the "richness" of meeting and recognizing other cultures ("Children who come from Egypt or Morocco can teach, or at least transfer their culture to other children. And also, the other way around, so it is enriching, an exchange that brings wealth" FG2).

Tab. 1. Codebook

Codes	Themes	Patterns of meaning
Memorizing, Textbook vocabulary, Concentration, Significance (meaningless exercises, abstract concepts), didactic methodologies	Teaching/learning processes	It is very useful to *show pictures* when we do the exercises and I find that they don't know many things, for example, the meanings of some words or they don't have some concepts. (D4) The children had to learn this nursery rhyme that they absolutely could not remember. It was obvious that they did not like it. They got nervous because they didn't understand the words, the meaning, the words. So it was just like learning sounds to be repeated, to be memorised, I mean, if there's no concept behind *it in my opinion there's no point in making them learn it by heart. (FG2)*
Empathy, patience, confidence	Personal skills	I also try to *convey calm and confidence* to the children, because maybe the teachers, I don't know what they are like, but maybe they ask a question if they don't answer they ask someone else, without waiting to hear their answer. (FG1) I am not a very patient person, but I am *beginning to notice that I am getting better* with this PCTO, let's say because it is something I do at least once a week anyway and this *helps me to be more patient in everyday life too*. (FG2)
Problem solving, intercultural competences, literacy, learning to learn	Key competences	Maybe with this experience you can find *different ways to solve a problem*, for example if a child cannot do a task immediately, he cannot understand a certain topic, you have to search for other ways to try to explain it to him. (FG 1) Some brought their Arabic School homework, which I didn't know they did. They do an Arabic school in the afternoons. And I really liked this aspect of being able to *immerse oneself in both cultures*. (D17)

In the second focus group they were asked also to reflect on a comparison to their own primary school experience and some of them stated that they recognise some

of the pupils' difficulties as similar to the ones they had encountered and this was instrumental in recognising one's own learning style on the one hand, and on the other, it enabled them to better understand which strategies could be most effective.

Another interesting aspect stated in the second focus group is the underline of the professionalism of the educator who "manages to handle even moments of serious confusion". The recognition of the skills necessary to carry out certain jobs is an important aspect since one of the objectives of the PCTO is indeed to provide guidance in order to consciously choose a future educational pathway.

In conclusion the data show how the experience let the students understand the importance of relationship in the learning process and entailed the improvement on interpersonal skills.

The individual tutoring promotes their ability in supporting the children's learning processes ("problem solving"), reflection of their own leaning styles, and led also to questioning the meaningfulness of what is being taught.

In relation to the multicultural theme, they achieved awareness on their initial representations and sometimes prejudices about a socio-cultural context for some of them far away from their own experience, at the same time the acknowledge of its potential if the differences were enhanced and not stigmatized.

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PRODUCING MEDIA IN THE CLASSROOM TO STRUGGLE DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL POVERTY: A RESEARCH IN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL

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The article presents the results of a qualitative research that tested the effectiveness of the PRODACT tool (PROmote Digital Analysis and Competences in Transmedia), in the analysis of different digital formats produced by second and third year secondary school students, in a project to combat digital educational poverty in the civic education curriculum, promoted in 99 Italian schools between 2021 and 2024 by Save the Children, Cremit – Università Cattolica Milano, EDI Onlus. PRODACT is structured by intertwining the indicators of the aesthetic, critical and ethical dimensions of digital competence, typical of New Literacy (Rivoltella, 2020) together with the references of DigComp 2.2 and the four areas of Digital Educational Poverty. The analysis shows that the development of digital communicative practices implements not only students' digital skills but also teaching practices that combine formal and informal skills and facilitate participation and protagonism.

digital divide, digital educational poverty, digital literacy, media making, onlife citizenship.

1. PROSUMER IN SCHOOL TO STRUGGLE DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL POVERTY

Since 2021, the Research Center on Media Education, Innovation and Technology (Cremit) of the Catholic University has proposed using the new construct of "digital educational poverty" (Pasta, Marangi, Rivoltella, 2021) to update and expand the concept of digital divide (Sartori, 2006). The phenomenon is therefore not only understood as a deprivation of devices and access to the Internet but also refers to the failure to acquire digital skills, understood as new alphabets (Rivoltella, 2020) necessary in the post-media society to analyze the production and use of different digital contents by the "spectators" of the social Web (Pasta, 2021). From this perspective, the ability to design, create and disseminate media contents and formats is central. This strategy is the basis of the *Connessioni Digitali* project (2021-2024), created by Save the Children together with the Cremit of the Catholic University and the social cooperative Edi. The project, which involved 99 schools, over 6,000

students and 400 teachers, developed the fight against digital educational poverty in the civic education curriculum of the second and third year of lower secondary schools, through the activation of 7 participatory newsrooms in the classrooms.

The design and production of digital formats has followed the logic of cultural convergence (Jenkins, 2006), digital plenitude (Bolter, 2020), multimodal semantics (Kress, 2010) and Peer&Media Education (Ottolini, Rivoltella, 2014; Rivoltella, 2021), in a pedagogical perspective, even before a didactic one, of cross-media protagonism (Marangi, 2021).

The production of artefacts in the different newsrooms embodies the most contemporary frame of Media Education (Buckingham, 2020), which does not consider digital technologies as simple tools and products as mere objects in themselves or "tasks" to be created, but also aims to understand the logics that underlie the design, circulation and use of digital artefacts (Jenkins, 2010).

In this way, the fight against educational poverty is placed in a holistic approach to digital citizenship, characterized by three modes of action:

- interpretative: based on systematic strategies of textual analysis, according to a model of "extended semiosis", it includes, in addition to the cognitive aspects, also the affective, projective, ritualistic elements of media practices;
- cultural: adopts a macro perspective, studies the media according to their social, economic, ideological inferences and the network they maintain with institutions, groups, individuals;
- creative: in a situated perspective, combines the critical-interpretative approach with the proactive characteristics that emerge from the production of artefacts, in grazing with respect to the emergence and valorization of the personal and collective experience of the subjects who use and create different media and formats.

On this basis, we proceeded to analyze a sample of 350 products, which includes 50 examples for each of the formats created: Wikipedia entry; online petition; reportage with interviews; critical review; visual storytelling; video storytelling; social marketing.

2. PRODACT, AN INNOVATIVE SYNTHESIS TOOL

Evaluation research in the field of Media Literacy has long demonstrated that digital skills have a high pragmatic specificity (Bonaiuti et al., 2017), so that their possession cannot be assessed unless it is put to work in a problem situation, in a real context (Ranieri, 2022). This aspect represents an undoubted difficulty for any abstract certification approach, which often tends to be based on information collected in formal and hierarchical contexts, such as school classes, which do not coincide or in any case do not significantly represent people's lifestyles and consumption habits. In recent years, it has been emphasized from many quarters that digital skills should not be understood in a static and absolute way, but dynamic and adaptive: this means that they are expressed in a continuum of performance

and are co-determined by multiple subjective variables and by the relationship with the social and cultural contexts of reference; furthermore, they are subject to continuous changes over time, so there is a strong risk that a skill seems to be possessed today and is not detectable a few days later.

In line with this approach, an evaluation tool has been designed that allows the analysis of media products using different indicators, to measure digital skills both in terms of knowledge and skills acquired on literacy, communication and collaboration, in the creation of digital content, on safety, well-being and problem solving, and in terms of "Onlife Citizenship" skills (Pasta, Rivoltella, 2022), implemented in contexts that are as authentic as possible and connected to the real life of students.

The products were analyzed using the indicators of the aesthetic, critical and ethical dimensions of digital competence, typical of New Literacy (Rivoltella, 2020) together with the references of DigComp 2.2 (Vuorikari et al., 2022) and the four areas of Digital Educational Poverty (Save the Children, 2020).

These premises characterize PRODACT – PROmote Digital Analysis and Competences in Transmedia (Marangi, Pasta 2023), a name that was given to the evaluation tool created for the evaluation of all types of digital products created in classes[1].

Table 1 summarizes the elements that structure PRODACT, so that it can represent the convergence between the different classification methods and criteria.

Tab. 1. Tool PRODACT

Dimensions and Evaluation Indicators of communication products		A Digital Educational Poverty Area (DEP)	B Digital Competence Score (PCD)	C Dimensions New Literacy	D DigComp 2.2
A	Technical and structural aspects				
1	Ability to use applications and digital content while respecting copyright	Understand	Knowledge of rules	Critics	Copyright and Licenses. Troubleshooting Technical Issues
B	Thematic aspects				
2	Care in choosing sources	Understand	Filter data, info and digital content	Critics	Manage data, information and digital content
3	Ability to identify the essential aspects of the topics covered and to be consistent	Being	Narrative skills	Esthetics	Integrate and rework digital content

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[1] The tool is available at Cremit's website: www.cremit.it/prodact/.

	with the project approach				
C	Stylistic and narrative aspects				
4	Ability to use the expressive potential of the format used through an effective narrative and stylistic register	Being	Digital Creativity	Esthetics	Develop digital content
5	Ability to engage the reader, listener or viewer	Independent and active life	Share information	Esthetics	Using digital technologies creatively
D	Socio-cultural aspects				
6	Ability to contribute to a constructive debate, expressing a recognisable point of view	Independent and active life	Online citizenship for good causes	Ethics	Interacting with others through technologies. Protecting health and well-being
7	Ability to offer a pluralistic and open vision, not self-referential	Living together	Netiquette and cyberstupidity	Ethics	Netiquette. Protect personal data and privacy
E	Generativity				
8	Development potential to stimulate other people or groups to create further media materials or communication situations or to stimulate direct or indirect impacts on the territory	Living together	Collaborative knowledge	Ethics	Sharing information through digital technologies. Exercising citizenship through digital technologies

This is an evaluation sheet of communication products, divided into 5 dimensions and 8 indicators, which has been adapted and deepened in 7 specific versions referable to each type of format in relation to the characteristics of the product and in reference to the indicators of DigComp 2.2, the Digital Competence Score-PCD (each of the 12 indicators is present) and the three dimensions of New Literacy (2 critical, 3 aesthetic, 3 ethical). These three lines of evaluation have been intertwined with the 4 areas of Digital Educational Poverty (2 indicators for each of the 4 areas), to build and experiment the entire evaluation and weighing system of Digital Skills.

Each sheet also offers a final column with some basic indications that try to concretize the attentions to be considered specifically for each communication format.

The structure of PRODACT intends to cover in the most rigorous way possible all the aspects that characterize the creation of a digital communication artefact, to identify some objective criteria that are consistent with existing literature, but also to allow an evaluation that considers all the procedural elements that intervene in the construction of the products. From this perspective, PRODACT appears to be a key tool in determining the levels of competence, but it must be used in a non-

mechanical and not solely quantitative way. Each communicative and narrative product involves different levels of analysis and interpretation, which do not only have to do with a presumed objectivity of the technological, aesthetic and thematic elements that constitute the product, but also with the interpretative subjectivity of those who observe it and with the social and cultural variables of the context in which it was produced (Eugeni, 2023).

3. RESULTS

We analyzed 350 products with PRODACT, 13% of the total sample, randomly choosing 25 productions for each format in each two-year period, to have 50 total productions for each format.

The scores assigned are based on four levels (Table 2): the initial level includes ratings from 1 to 5.5; the basic level from 5.51 to 7; the intermediate level from 7.01 to 8.5; the advanced level from 8.51 to 10.

Tab. 2. Scores PRODACT

Minimal traces of the observed appearance	Elements of the observed aspect, but not articulated and explored in depth	The observed aspect emerges and recurs, but must be further articulated and structured	The observed aspect appears constant and well managed, in an original and conscious way.
1-5,5	5,51-7	7,01-8,5	8,51-10
Initial	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced

In summary, with the possibility of going into more detail in a further essay dedicated only to these aspects, below we propose some of the elements that appear most significant with respect to the outcome of the work carried out in the classes. For convenience and uniformity, the averages of the overall evaluations have been calculated.

Tab. 3. Average by format

Biennio 1   Biennio 2   Totale
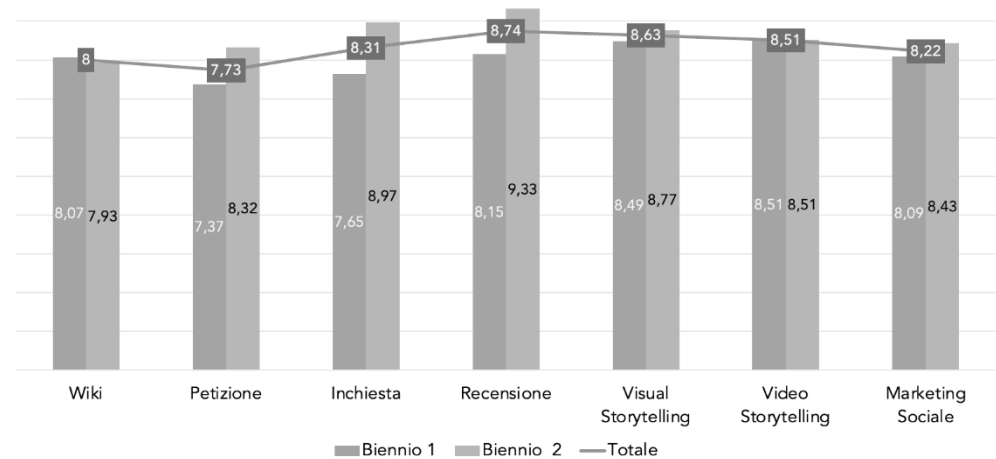
The in-depth analysis of the specific formats within the individual newsrooms (Table 3) allows us to grasp some significant elements.

The product that achieved the best results overall is the review, while the one that achieved the lowest results is the petition.

In addition to the review, visual and video storytelling are also positioned in the advanced level, above 8.5 of evaluation. The other products are in the intermediate level, between 7.01 and 8.5: the wiki entry, the investigation and social marketing are above 8, while the petition remains the only one below this threshold.

It is interesting to go and discover how the individual products determine the overall average of the newsroom.

In the case of digital writing, the Wikipedia entry obtains a better result of about 0.3 points compared to the petition. Considering the products analyzed, it seems to us that the petition has created greater difficulties, not so much for the writing itself, but for the difficulty of orienting it to a specific cause and organizing the narratives in a way that makes them more engaging for the reader. Conversely, the Wikipedia entries, even in cases of lesser effectiveness, still seem to maintain writing standards that are more consistent with the school activity that takes place daily.

In the podcast room, the better performance of the reviews in both two-year periods is striking, with an overall result of about 0.4% better than the survey, which however allows the reviews to be placed at the advanced level while the survey remains at the intermediate level.

From the qualitative analysis of the products, it often appeared that the reviews are experienced by the students as more personal occasions to deal with and talk about issues that they feel closer to, from cultural consumption to social activities or the perception of the territorial contexts they experience in a more engaging way. This does not mean that the investigations are less effective, but in the products analyzed, a sort of more marked direction by the adults emerged several times in the orientation of the issues to be addressed and the people to be involved. Furthermore, the investigation appeared more complex with respect to the need, not always respected, to construct and conduct interviews by combining them with a journalistic narrative line. From this perspective, the reviews seem to benefit from a style and management that in many cases may seem more colloquial, without losing any of the communicative effectiveness.

This dynamic of greater familiarity is confirmed in the digital storytelling newsroom, in which both formats, both visual and video, are placed at the advanced level.

The fact that visuals still obtain a higher score of about 0.1 seems to confirm the habit of students to use this type of format, in particular by capturing the large number of memes that have been produced, often very effective and consistent with the context of the project. It seems to us to be further proof that the possibility of inserting informal skills and daily consumption in a formal learning and in-depth reflection environment such as school, allows for an unprecedented but effective convergence between the learning of new digital skills and the confirmation of usual

communication practices.

The performance of video storytelling, which register an identical score in both two-year periods, denotes a great familiarity with this format by students.

The excellent outcome of both formats in the digital storytelling newsroom appears significant considering that they represent 44% of the overall products produced in the three years of the project.

If we analyze the individual indicators that make up PRODACT, further data emerge with respect to the digital competence performance in each communication format (Table 4).

Tab. 4. Scores by format

	Marketing Sociale	Video Storytelling	Visual Storytelling	Recensione	Inchiesta	Petizione	Wiki
A. Aspetti tecnici e strutturali	7,71	7,77	8,16	8,23	7,74	7,5	7,66
B. Aspetti tematici	8,21	8,33	8,34	8,37	8,07	7,6	7,89
C. Aspetti stilistici e narrativi	8,27	8,52	8,9	8,95	8,5	7,4	8,03
D. Aspetti socio-culturali	8,45	8,77	8,67	8,88	8,34	8,07	8,11
E. Generatività	8,45	9,07	9,1	9,27	8,97	8,21	8,28
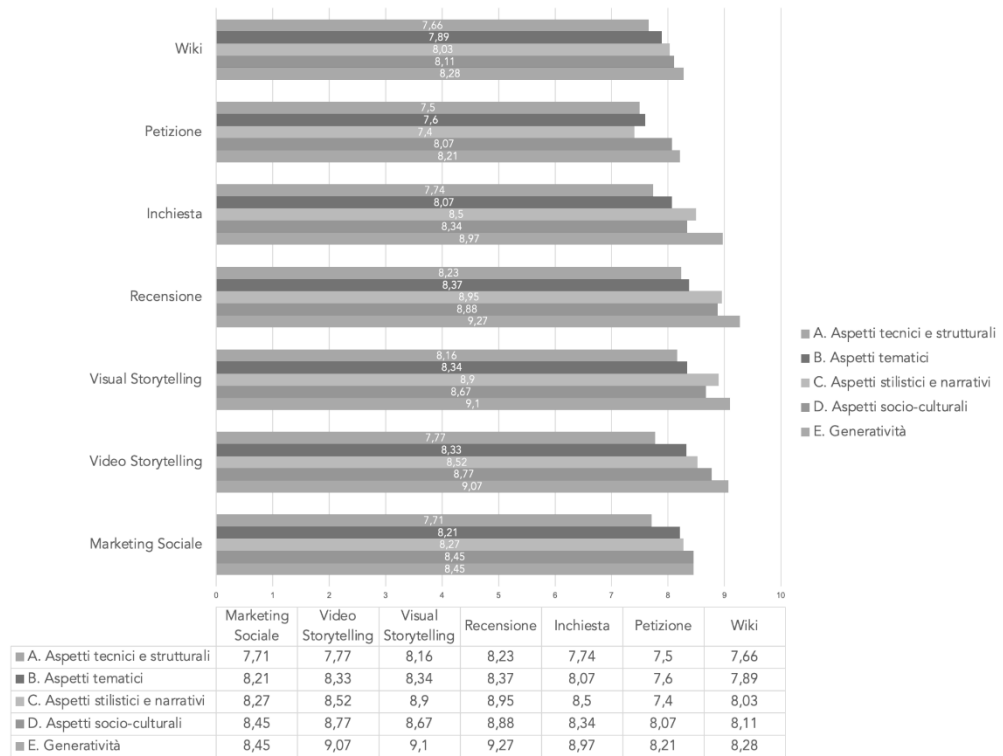
The highest values for all indicators are always in the review format, while the lowest values appear in the petition format. In a purely mathematical logic, both constants are consistent with what was seen previously: the review is the format that achieved the best votes overall and the petition is the one that stopped at the lowest level. This remarkable homogeneity, considering a sample of 350 products and three years of work in very heterogeneous schools, confirms some elements already seen previously and seems to attest to the great appreciation aroused by the review and the difficulty in building and structuring a petition.

In our opinion, the key element that was appreciated in the review and that allowed the achievement of the best values for each indicator, is the possibility of express-ing one's own view on very different themes and aspects, often connected to one's daily life, with consumption, with the preferences that characterize students.

Furthermore, the review seems to stimulate an unprecedented protagonism in being able to direct the production of original and personal artifacts, even in the formalized context of the school.

On the contrary, the petition probably presupposes a set of particularly complex elements that we are not very used to, from the preliminary documentation to the ability to identify the key elements, not only to describe, but also to involve people in making concrete gestures to finalize what is proposed. Furthermore, it seems quite evident that in many petitions the choice of the theme and the objectives that have been proposed are not completely attributable to the protagonism and preferences of the students.

4. PERSPECTIVES

From the analysis of the artefacts of "Digital Connections", both the complexity of the concept of digital competence and the need to equip oneself with multiple methodologies and teaching tools to place the creation of concrete media products and the design of communication strategies emerge.

The analysis shows that this type of production practices not only implements the digital skills of students but also develops teaching and educational methodologies that combine formal and informal skills and facilitate participation and protagonism, even in complex or problematic socio-cultural contexts (Marangi, 2004). From the qualitative analysis of the products and the data analysed in this article, some further research and study perspectives emerge, in particular with respect to five key points:

- Digital storytelling as a community technology. The relevance of collective creation.
- Belonging to the territory and testimony of the context of own's life. Citizenship as memory.
- An "alien" dimension: the gaze of the others, accessibility and not just inclusion, the right to self-expression.
- Creativity as an ethical and political dimension, not just aesthetic, beyond standardization.
- Engagement to universal values, interest in the rights of others people.

We intend to return to these aspects in the future, to develop them further, in the light of the frame and the logics of third parties of learning (Potter, McDougall, 2017) and in a perspective of digital citizenship that allows the development of updated and usable media educational skills (Buckingham, 2020) and to develop the ethical sense necessary to consciously inhabit the "mediapolis" (Silverstone, 2006).

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ENSEMBLE: A PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGY FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENT COLLABORATION WITHIN A BACHELOR'S DEGREE COURSE

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The contribution presents a participatory use-case tested in a Swiss University of Teacher Education. The use-case, tested within a teaching module of a Bachelor's degree course (101 students), was carried out in spring 2024, it involved several phases and was used to test some of the exploited participatory platform's functionalities. The goal of the use-case was to foster a participatory process for the creation and launch of thematic working groups for the final certification of the module, which consisted in the elaboration and presentation of groups' research projects. Quantitative data was collected regarding the use of Ensemble for the above-mentioned purposes and regarding Ensemble's potential to promote participation and collaboration within groups. Results show an improvement in student's perception of learning quality as a result of the facilitated peer collaboration and some possible adjustments regarding facilitation activities.

digital citizenship; participation; collaboration

INTRODUCTION

In the current global landscape, characterized by profound challenges such as climate change, social inequality, political polarization, economic instability, public health crises, and the rapid pace of technological change, innovative research and practice in the field of democracy and citizenship education has become increasingly central. International organizations have long pursued the idea that schools should become an example of democratic and inclusive decision-making processes (Council of Europe, 2018). Experimenting democracy within schools through interactions with community members and decision-making processes not only strengthens the sense of belonging to the community but also, and most importantly, develops transversal skills (like collaboration and communication skills) that are crucial for life in society (Nuzzaci, 2023; UNESCO, n.d.).

In this contribution, we present the experience of ENSEMBLE, a participatory platform developed within an academic setting, aimed precisely at achieving these

goals. ENSEMBLE is inspired by the concept of deliberation. Deliberation represents the highest form of public participation, as it goes beyond the stages of informing, consulting, or involving people – which Arnstein (1969), in her famous *Ladder of participation*, would categorize as forms of "tokenism". Instead, it fosters genuine collaboration and true empowerment of individuals in decision-making processes (IaP2, n.d.; OECD, 2021).

In the field of public deliberation, Decidim (n.d.) is one of the most well-known tools for involving social actors in policy co-production and, more broadly, in the co-creation of ideas.

Research suggests that inclusive public deliberation improves policy innovation and effectiveness and that integrating collective intelligence at all stages of policy-making, from agenda-setting to solution implementation, allows citizens to propose, support, and refine ideas on equal footing with officials (OECD, 2020). This helps governments identify hidden challenges, gather innovative solutions, and anticipate opposition, fostering legitimacy through diverse perspectives (Leal Garcia et al., 2023). Policies emerging from these processes often gain broader acceptance and are less controversial because they genuinely consider the opinions and suggestions of the people affected by the decisions.

Although often highly resource-intensive to implement (Fuji Johnson, 2015), participatory and deliberative processes are becoming some of the most widely practiced and innovative methods for actively engaging people in decision-making (OECD, 2020). The applied models are diverse and varied, and they are used not only in the realm of public policy but also in corporate and educational contexts. This contribution illustrates an example of a participatory process implemented within a university setting. The use-case presented here is the only one, among those tested through ENSEMBLE, applied in a classroom training context.

1. THE ENSEMBLE METHODOLOGY

The ENSEMBLE methodology was developed to promote the participation of communities – specifically students, staff, faculty, and researchers – in decision-making processes related to the co-definition and planning of activities and initiatives tied to public urban and academic spaces, with a vision for future expansion to urban settings. The project aims to create an ecosystem that blends participatory digital tools with offline actions, ensuring a collective and inclusive decision-making process.

ENSEMBLE is designed as a methodology that engages diverse stakeholders through a combination of traditional participatory processes, gamification, and digital approaches, tailored ad hoc to suit the specific context and target audience.

What sets ENSEMBLE apart from other approaches is its hybrid nature, which combines online participation with offline activities. Unlike traditional participation methodologies, which often rely solely on in-person meetings or online surveys, ENSEMBLE offers a continuous and dynamic approach. It alternates between phases of co-creation, deliberation, interaction in digital environments, and on-the-ground,

face-to-face activities.

ENSEMBLE is a methodology built on Decidim.org, a "free open-source platform that enables organizations and institutions to initiate participatory processes, such as deliberation, decision-making, collaboration, and co-design" (Decidim, n.d.). Decidim is widely used by numerous public and private institutions and organizations globally.

The platform supports a variety of participatory tools, including strategic planning, participatory budgeting, initiatives, consultations, surveys, and voting. This flexibility makes it adaptable to a wide range of contexts where community involvement and decision-making are essential.

Decidim is currently used by cities and organizations worldwide. Each of these applications leverages Decidim's core features of transparency, traceability, and integrity of information, enabling three key general types of dynamics of governance: top-down, bottom-up, and bottom-bottom.

2. CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The process presented here took place within a second-year bachelor's course designed for future primary school teachers. The course, aimed at introducing students to the methodology of educational research, was conducted during the 2023/24 academic year and involved 101 pre-service teachers. The process involved several steps that would allow the students, through individual and group assignments, to produce a final work which consisted in the elaboration of a research project.

Participation in the ENSEMBLE platform was offered to students on a voluntary basis, with an average of 80% of students engaging in the various phases of the process.

The process allowed for the testing of several platform functionalities, including surveys, feedback collection, collaborative drafts, and voting. To evaluate the process, both structural data provided by the platform (e.g., number of participants, contributions per phase, average individual contributions per process phase, quality of feedback, and quality of posted content) and data from a post-process online survey (n=65) were used.

The survey aimed to measure perceived benefits of using the platform, overall satisfaction, and the most and least appreciated aspects of the platform. The collected information provided insights into the platform's effectiveness as a tool for learning purposes.

3. THE IRE-USE CASE: FOSTERING STUDENTS' COLLABORATION IN AN EDUCATIONAL MODULE

3.1. Phases and structural results

In the *first phase*, students had to choose by vote how to form the groups (the course is divided between plenary lectures and seminars in small groups – so the question

was if they wanted to work between or within groups). They chose the latter.

In the *second phase*, each student individually had to publish a research question (RQ) falling under one of the given macro-themes. Each student was then asked to provide at least 3 comments to the peers' research questions. A total of 85 Research Questions (RQs) were submitted, along with 202 comments, which were slightly below the expected contributions from the students. Below is an example of a RQ submitted by a student and a corresponding comment provided by another student. The RQ was: "What strategies are most effective for integrating democracy education into school curricula and how do these strategies influence pupils' civic attitudes and involvement?". Below, the feedback:

> Very rich question, however it might be difficult to put into practice, because 'what strategies' is a very broad question. Taking the second part of the question as a starting point, one could investigate how strategies already known to the class influence their attitude towards citizenship education and what adjustments could be made to these to make the activities more interesting.

In the *third phase*, after having established the working groups, students were asked to publish a first group draft RQ proposal. All 26 groups participated in this phase, proposing clearer and more feasible Research Questions (RQs) compared to the individual ones from the previous phase.

In the *fourth phase*, students had 2 weeks to read the 26 group proposals and to post feedback on at least 2 of them. A total of 46 comments were submitted. However, nine RQs did not receive any feedback from peers, which caused some frustration among certain participants.

The *fifth stage* consisted of publishing the groups' final research proposals. These proposals were required to be the length of an abstract and include all necessary information to understand the project idea, from the Research Question (RQ) to the methodology and anticipated results. This phase was designed to help groups prepare effectively for the presentation and defense of their research projects before their peers.

After the public presentations of their respective works, the students entered the *sixth phase*, where they were given time to refine their drafts. They then had to publish the final version on the platform and vote for the best project using the participatory budgeting functionality.

Each student was allocated three vouchers worth CHF 30,000 each, which they had to assign to three different projects. Slightly less than half of the students participated in this voting phase. The results were not particularly encouraging, as the most-voted project exhibited significant theoretical and methodological weaknesses. During a plenary discussion, students admitted that they had not read all 26 group proposals and had cast their votes hastily.

3.2. Strengths and Limitations of the Process
At the end of the module, we administered an ad hoc questionnaire to the students

in which we asked them to evaluate the platform and its usefulness, also noting their degree of satisfaction with it.

The first set of questions focused on the benefits of using the platform for module participation.

Figure 1. Perceived Benefits

To what extent has the platform facilitated...? (n=65)
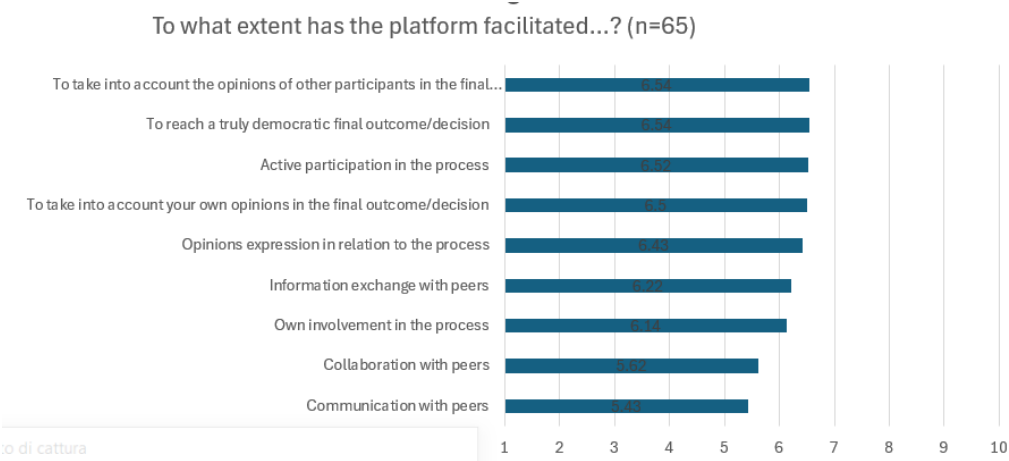
In general, there was no great variance in the answers, neither from the averages, which ranged from 6.50 to 5.40 on a scale from 1 to 10, nor from a standard deviation point of view (Figure 1).

The items that obtained the highest averages concerned deliberative aspects, while those that obtained lower averages concerned aspects of information, communication and collaboration.

The item that tested the utility of the platform shows slightly higher averages (Figure 2). Prominent among these is the fact of being able to view the projects of other groups and to improve one's own group work.

Figure 2: Platform utility assessment

To what extent has the platform enabled to...? (n=65)
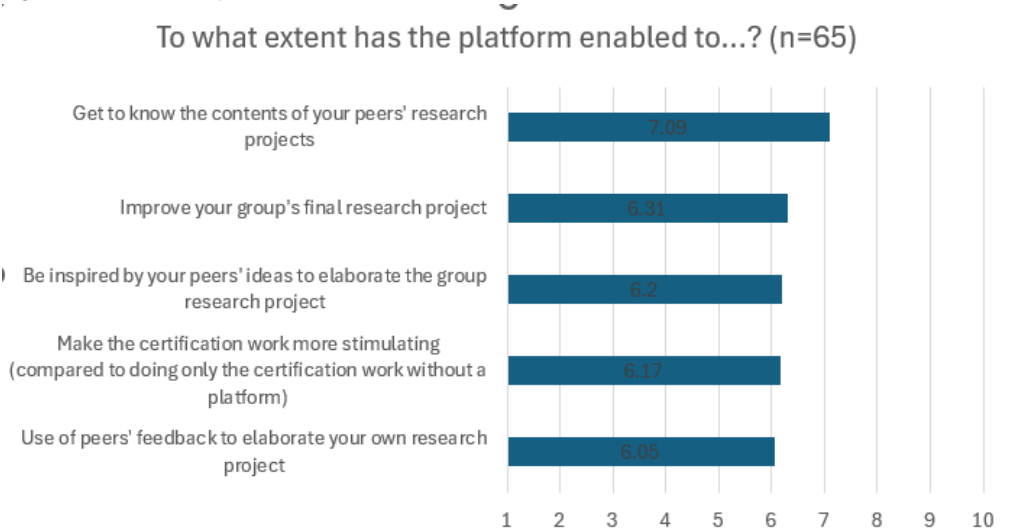
Of all these items, it is no coincidence that the last one concerns the use of peer feedback.

Figure 3 shows two more results of the short survey. On the right, the overall satisfaction with the use of the platform. On the left, the general attitude to participation, whether active or passive or disinterested, which allowed us to divide the sample between those who declare themselves active (44%) and those who declare themselves passive (55%).

Figure 3: Attitude to participation and overall satisfaction
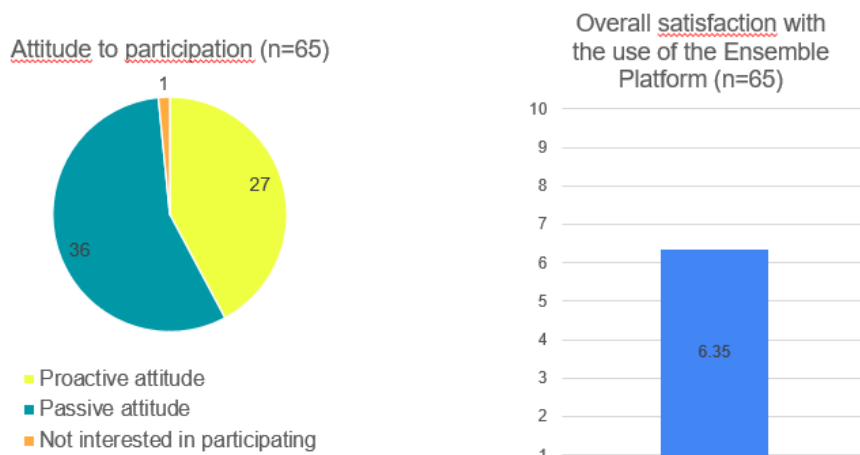
The interesting thing is that the average results of all the items do not differ with respect to attitude to participation. This probably means that the activated process succeeded in stimulating active participation, also and above all, of people who generally have a more passive attitude to participate, rather than those who are already accustomed to doing so.

Finally, we asked students to indicate the aspects they most appreciated and then those they least appreciated in open-ended questions.

Among the former, the most recurrent themes concerned the fact that they were able to compare their work with that of the other groups (n=10), as stated by one student: "Being able to look at the proposals of others, get a general overview and read the comments of peers on our proposals, so that we had ideas for improvement"; and that they were able to interact with the other groups remotely (n=10). This is followed by the theme of transparency, i.e. the fact that the whole process was documented on the site and was accessible even afterwards (n=5). Into the category "others" (n=6) fall comments on the course in general rather than on this process.

On the negative side, the most recurrent comments concern the IT technical aspects (layout, usability) of the platform (n=6), then the absence of anonymity since every post or comment on the platform is not anonymous (n=3). One student also pointed to the lack of feedback from the trainers. And he is right: the platform would

offer this space, but in this case, it was not used. As before, the category 'other' did not concern responses directly related to the platform (n=6).

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this contribution we presented a participatory use-case developed within a Bachelor's degree module in a University of Teacher Education, aimed at fostering co-creation and collaboration among students. The use case aimed to foster collaboration among students in developing research projects evaluated for the module's final certification. Results are encouraging, although there is room for improvement. Participation was voluntary and took place during the ongoing module. Despite these constraints, engagement was strong, with most students joining for learning purposes.

The structured process supported both inter- and intra-group collaboration through a mix of plenary sessions and smaller class activities. A satisfaction survey highlighted the ENSEMBLE platform's potential in teaching and learning, promoting both autonomous and collaborative learning. It also amplified students' voices in a democratic and transparent way, enabling decisions on work methods and encouraging participation from less proactive individuals. The methodology proved to be effective in extending decision-making processes, enhancing fairness, equity, and individual responsibility.

The main limitations of the process include uneven participation, with some students not fully engaging in key phases such as providing feedback or voting, and a lack of thoroughness in evaluating peers' work, leading to superficial outcomes. Additionally, the distribution of feedback was uneven, leaving some participants without the benefits of peer input, and the multi-phase structure risked fatigue and reduced motivation over time.

To address these issues, future iterations could incorporate structured facilitation to ensure equitable participation, such as assigning specific peer-review responsibilities. Introducing mandatory feedback requirements or incentives could improve engagement and feedback quality. Simplifying certain phases or incorporating more interactive elements could sustain motivation and ensure consistent involvement throughout the process.

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THE PERCEPTION OF CYBERBULLYING AND ITS IMPACT IN THE INFORMAL EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT: THE GUARD2 PROJECT

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Cyberbullying is a complex and evolving phenomenon, influenced by online interaction dynamics and rapid digital transformation. Characterized by power imbalances, perpetrators use digital platforms to control victims, often leveraging the anonymity of the internet. This form of aggression can be more harmful than traditional bullying, as victims face significant challenges in defending themselves against attackers in a virtual, intangible space. This paper investigates the outcomes of the Erasmus+ project GUARD2, which explores the emergence and development of cyberbullying, examining its roots in social relationships and informal educational contexts. The project aims to identify effective educational strategies for preventing and addressing cyberbullying

Cyberbulling; educational strategies; informal educational context

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying is a multilevel phenomenon that requires reflections and analysis as it involves social relationships and online interactions in continuous evolution, due to fast digital transformation. This aggressive behaviour reflects power dynamics, in which bullies seek to subdue and control victims through the use of digital means (López S. A., 2015).

Cyberbullying is a new form of aggressive behaviour, in some respects more harmful than traditional bullying, because it is difficult to control by the victims, who have an objective difficulty in defending themselves against a perpetrator who moves in a world marked by immateriality and infinite reproducibility and is often protected by the anonymity of the Web (Betts, 2016; Tokunaga, 2010). At a micro and macro levels, it always represents an asymmetry of power both in different social contexts and in society.

Sociology has consistently engaged with power dynamics, beginning with its founders (Marx, 1967; Weber 1922), and continuing through important sociologists and thinkers (Gramsci, 1935; Foucault, 1975; Bourdieu, 1979) who examined these dynamics as evolving social and conflictual processes. The feminist and anti-racist

movements have further centered public discourse on the struggles against patriarchy, colonialism, and gender-based violence (Butler, 1990; Guillaumin, 1992). Injustices linked to power dynamics continue to manifest in public protests, where individuals risk their lives to denounce abuses of power and systemic violence.

In addition to addressing the social conflicts of both the past and the present, sociology now faces a new challenge: the need to analyse phenomena that, while often hidden and imperceptible, wield significant force and violence within digital spaces.

Cyberviolence represents both a threat and a form of power that is increasingly accessible to all, progressively becoming uncontrollable and boundless. The irreversibility of virtual processes renders them particularly difficult to confront, underscoring the imperative for sociology to engage with this emerging issue (Beckman, L., Lööf, S., 2018, López, S. A. 2015, George, D. R. 2015).

Cyberbullying is part of what is called "cyberhumiliation", a term that encompasses all forms of harassment visible on the Web. The necessary effort seems to be to differentiate the forms of humiliation in order to know them better and thus combat them more effectively (Dilmac 2019; Coluccia 2021).

This paper aims to investigate the outcomes of a project focused on the phenomenon of cyberbullying, starting from its definition and perception, and leading to the identification of educational strategies to prevent and counter it.

The Erasmus+ project GUARD2 (*"Formazione e presidio nei luoghi del tempo libero dei bambini e degli adolescenti contro il cyberbullismo"*, i.e. "Training and garrisoning children and adolescents in places of entertainment against cyberbullying") aimed to investigate how cyberbullying raises, develops and how it is rooted in social relationships and informal educational contexts. The general objective of the project was to equip sports and socio/cultural operators with the key skills to identify the victims and agents of bullying and cyberbullying in leisure time contexts, contrasting, preventing, raising awareness against this phenomenon. The specific objective was to develop a training module addressed to educators in informal contexts. This aim reflects also on how the training can support educators in identifying methodologies and educational strategies to recognise and deal with the phenomenon of cyberbullying.

In particular, the intention was to co-develop a training module to be tested with the sport and cultural operators of the partner organisations, to rise the awareness and skills of sport and cultural educators who will take on the role of social antennas that intercept and prevent cases of cyberbullying in informal leisure time contexts among minors.

To achieve these goals, the network of project partners includes cultural and sport associations across Europe, and social science researchers, i.e., UISP Unione Italiana Sport Per tutti – Comitato Territoriale Ciriè Settimo Chivasso (Italy) as coordinator; the Research Institute on Sustainable Economic Growth of the National Research Council of Italy (CNR-IRCrES); Freedom Gate Greece; Youth Council Next Generation (Republic of North Macedonia).

1. THE ROLE OF CNR-IRCRES IN THE GUARD2 PROJECT

CNR-IRCrES played a key role in evaluating the project, overseeing the process from the phase of the analysis of needs through to the design and implementation of the training modules. Specifically, IRCrES was responsible for the following tasks: co-ordinating and analyzing the results of the focus groups, collecting national best practices, and evaluating the pilot tests of the training modules, utilizing participants' questionnaires to gather feedbacks.

The focus group discussions, conducted across multiple countries (Italy, Greece, North Macedonia), brought to light several critical issues. The diverse contexts of the partner countries and the broad spectrum of social actors involved—ranging from professionals and students to sports educators—provided valuable insights into the dynamics of bullying and cyberbullying. These discussions also revealed common themes regarding the perception of these phenomena. Across different settings, participants emphasized the importance of community and network education, the necessity for developing shared strategies, and the critical role of early prevention beginning in childhood.

Key priorities that emerged included raising awareness and fostering a sense of responsibility among both professionals, young people and children. Furthermore, there was a clear recognition of the need for targeted training programs for adults, such as families, teachers, and educators, to enhance their capacity to address these issues effectively.

The focus group findings also highlighted the various approaches adopted by each country in the prevention and combat of bullying and cyberbullying, particularly through the implementation of best practices. Methodologically, countries are employing a variety of effective tools, such as non-formal workshops, peer education, and mentoring programs, which have yielded promising results. Several common strategies for supporting young people were also identified, including the use of protected telephone lines and interactive online platforms, which offer safe spaces for communication and support.

1.1. Training Needs

The identification of training needs was fundamental to the development and design of the training modules. Key priorities that emerged from the analysis included: *Raising Awareness*, with a clear demand for initiatives aimed at educating adults, young people, and children about the risks associated with bullying and cyberbullying. These initiatives should adopt an intergenerational approach, highlighting both the opportunities and dangers of the digital world. *Prevention* was identified as a crucial aspect, with an emphasis on early intervention through affective education and workshops designed to cultivate soft skills in young people, enabling them to recognize and address bullying behavior. The *Involvement of Experts and Professionals* was also deemed essential, with a multidisciplinary approach necessary to fully understand the complex factors that contribute to both bullying and cyberbullying. *Engagement of Young People* through peer education and mentoring

programs was recognized as an effective strategy, empowering youth to play a pro-active role in preventing and addressing bullying. Finally, *Stakeholders' Engagement* was emphasized, with the need for broad participation from various stakeholders, including local authorities and community organizations, to ensure a comprehensive and coordinated response and the activation of the educating community in a broad sense.

In sum, the findings underscore the importance of a multifaceted approach—combining awareness-raising, early prevention, experts' involvement, and the active participation of young people and stakeholders—to effectively address and combat both bullying and cyberbullying.

2. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TRAINING MODULES IN PARTNER COUNTRIES: SURVEY RESULTS

Based on the identified training needs and other suggestions from the focus groups, the modules were co-developed by the partners' experts in three sections: 1. Identifying cyberbullying phenomena; 2. Psychological First Aid for the victims of cyberbullying; 3. Handle cases of cyberbullying. Learning materials were produced both in English and local languages, and then tested on local operators. Upon completion of the training modules, a questionnaire was administered to evaluate participants' ability to apply the knowledge and skills acquired, with particular emphasis on their effectiveness in addressing the issue of cyberbullying in practice.

2.1 Training sample and skill improvement

The training experimentation involved 25 beneficiaries in three countries: 11 educators from different sports in Italy, 8 cultural operators in North Macedonia, and 6 in Greece. The groups were quite heterogeneous in characteristics: two participants over three were female in Greece and North Macedonia, the opposite in Italy. Concerning age classes, Italy had the oldest group of participants, and North Macedonia the youngest (see fig. 1).

Figure 1 – Beneficiaries' age class by country. Source: authors' data.
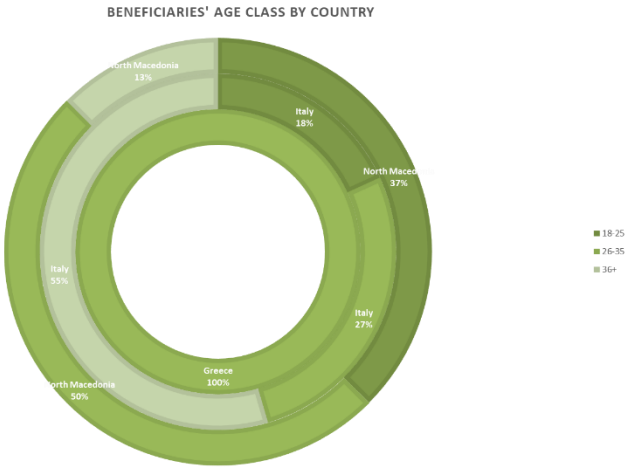
In the evaluation survey, participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 the improvement they perceived after the training in the ability to both recognize and intervene in situations of bullying and cyberbullying. In general, a good improvement was perceived on both dimensions, testifying the effectiveness of the training: the average rate is 8.3 on detection skills and 8.6 on action skills. On average, the Greece sample showed the highest perceived improvement (see Fig. 2 for country-specific results).

Figure 2 – Box-plot of after-training perceived skill improvement in detection (left part) and action (right part), by country.

Notwithstanding the training experiment involves just a small sample of 25 leisure time operators, the number of indirect beneficiaries is much larger: overall, GUARD2 trainees estimate to reach about 2,000 youngsters in their sport and cultural activities in a year. In particular, Greece operators declare to involve about 30 students per year on average, Italian sport operators about 45, and North Macedonian more than 150: these young people can highly benefit from the improvement in awareness and skills of their educators in preventing, recognizing and contrasting cyberbullying phenomena.

2.2 Respondents' words to describe cyberbullying

For our research, it was very important to collect the perception of cyberbullying from the adults involved. The follow-up survey asked to list up to five distinguishing characteristics of cyberbullying in less than 400 words.

Many words are common to all operators across countries. In particular, it emerges that one feature that makes cyberbullying particularly dangerous and insidious is its anonymous nature: the use of the web and social networks allows the bully to hide his/her identity. Other recurring words in all respondents are: threat, coercion,

permanence, violation, isolation and certain moods and psychological disorders inflicted on the victim such as anxiety, depression, exclusion. With the tool of word cloud, it is possible to show the chosen words and their frequency.

Figure 3 – Word cloud

2.3 Respondents' quotes to define cyberbullying

Another important aspect is that some respondents answered with an actual definition of cyberbullying:

> It is personal violence through insults, denigration, falsehood, discrimination, threats, violation of privacy through social networks in a continuous and recurrent way over time (R.1).

> In general, it is continued aggressive and damaging actions against a person using computer tools (e.g. social media) – Has the aim of causing harm, discomfort or fear in the victim – Can be physical, psychological, social – Leads to problems of a psycho-emotional nature. low self-esteem, – Leads to problems at school and at work, social isolation, self-harm (R.4).

> 1. Absence of spatial-temporal limits due to the use of technology as an offensive medium; 2. Repetition over Time with a potentially ever-increasing audience; 3. Possible anonymity of the bully; 4. Difficulty in finding "evidence" due to messages/photos that can be easily deleted immediately; 5. Diffusion of Responsibility (R.6).

> Unfortunately, it is a sometime invisible variant, which is spreading like wildfire in no time. A scourge of today's technology (R.2).

> Sneaky. Devastating. Makes the network take hold of you. It drains your self-esteem. It kills your confidence of those who use it against you (R.5).

> The words of the interviewees and their responses demonstrate not only their educational skills but also theoretical training in being able to understand the signs of this complex phenomenon.

2.3. The methodologies and educational strategies learned

The final questions of the survey focused on assessing the knowledge and skills acquired by the educators during the project. Specifically, participants were asked whether they learned useful methodologies and tools to counteract cyberbullying and whether they believed this training would enhance or enable them to implement additional strategies for preventing and addressing cyberbullying in their roles as trainers or educators.

In terms of educational strategies, respondents provided a comprehensive list of activities and tools they found beneficial, including:

- Active listening
- Psychological first aid for victims (PFA)
- Counseling services for both victims and perpetrators of bullying
- Observing behavioral changes and reporting incidents of bullying or cyberbullying as a responsible action
- Specialized training for educators and parents on monitoring and guiding children's online activities
- Educational programs in schools and communities
- Teaching empathy
- Role-playing exercises
- Collaboration with social groups, municipalities, schools, and families
- Strengthening group dynamics
- Creating a safe space to facilitate victim reporting

Additionally, the interviewees reflected on how the training they received within the project framework helped them identify effective methodologies and educational strategies to address the issue of cyberbullying.

In particular the respondents outline the importance of the empathy and a relationship that help the victims and the bullies in safe and non-judgmental space with a sensitive and creative approach:

> I learnt how crucial it is to talk about it, confront it and bring examples so that it does not happen again (R.3).

> During the training I learnt how important it is to have the right sensitivity in understanding situations, to create a safe relationship with the victim, to acquire the necessary information to help the person (R.7).

> I learnt above all the correct way to approach victims, avoiding blaming them; and at the same time how to communicate with bullies, without judging their actions, but making them understand the possible repercussions (R.8).
> Social media monitoring is necessary and helping the victim manage their social media privacy settings Preventing recidivism and promoting healthy behaviours Promoting rehabilitation of the bully and helping them develop empathy (R.2).

> During the training I learned about useful methods and tools for dealing with cyber-bullying incidents, such as using mindfulness techniques for trauma management, conflict management techniques and more (R.11).

> One of the elements common to the answers is the involvement of adult reference figures: educators, specialists, and above all families.

> It is important to turn to competent and professional people, teachers or otherwise educative figures to encourage open communication between parents, educators, and students to foster a supportive environment (R.9).

> In these quotes emerged how training the adults is perceived as a fundamental strategy to prevent and contrast cyberbullying.

SOME FINAL REMARKS

In summary, the analysis reveals several significant insights: First, there was a clear satisfaction among the training participants, indicating a positive reception of the program and a self-perceived improvement in detection skills and action abilities. Second, there was a notable increase in awareness regarding the phenomenon of cyberbullying, particularly in comparison to the initial phase of the project. Third, the practical experimentation with educational strategies and tools enabled participants to address cyberbullying effectively in both every day and educational contexts. Finally, the training of educators demonstrated a multiplicative effect, as it extended its impact to indirect beneficiaries, thus amplifying the overall effectiveness of the initiative. In conclusion, this case study, along with the findings from our research, highlights the growing recognition that cyberbullying constitutes a distinct form of bullying. The combination of the digital landscape, the power dynamics between victims and perpetrators, the multiple ways cyberbullying can be perpetuated, as well as its anonymous and relentless nature, all contribute to the unique characteristics of this phenomenon. It is clear that addressing cyberbullying requires targeted educational strategies and practices.

The GUARD2 project, through its activities and training modules, offers a valuable opportunity to raise awareness and enhance the ability of adults to combat and address this issue in everyday life. The feedback, perceptions, and learnings shared by social and sports operators have been instrumental in understanding the impact of cyberbullying in specific contexts and in identifying common approaches for developing practices and policies by stakeholders and policy makers.

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BEYOND INFORMATION: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CULTURAL HERITAGE ENGAGEMENT

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The contemporary museum, as outlined by the ICOM (International Council of Museums) last definition of 2022, assumes a crucial societal role in fostering shared spaces and dialogues, aiming to cultivate active citizenship through community involvement. At the heart of this mission lies the pivotal role of museum and heritage education, strategically deploying participatory and active methodologies (Hein, 1998) to establish nuanced relationships with, on, and for cultural heritage (Branchesi et al., 2020).

Museums, evolving into educational hubs within the tripartite framework of formal, non-formal, and informal learning, engage with diverse publics. This perspective aligns with the overarching concept of Lifelong Learning (Gibbs et al., 2007), fostering the emergence of "new" professional roles and innovative projects in education. Within this dynamic context, museum educators and heritage professionals assume a central role, currently under scrutiny for recognition by the first Italian professional association (AIEM, 2022).

Functioning as conduits between cultural heritage and audiences, these professionals orchestrate transformative dialogues, facilitating active audience participation with the intrinsic narratives of heritage objects. Their mandate extends beyond knowledge dissemination, encompassing the augmentation of motivation, the nurturing of interest, and the encouragement of personal expression, stemming from individualized encounters with cultural artifacts (Tamanini, 2015).

Heritage education professionals significantly contribute to interpreting reality by forging connections between diverse knowledge sources and the cultural context that surrounds all citizens. This intricate dialogue necessitates a grasp of research tools, allowing for continual reassessment and redefinition of professional skills and competences, particularly concerning younger visitors (Panciroli, 2016).

As part of the European project Erasmus+ Move your mind, representatives of the Italian Association of Museum Educators (AIEM) have designed and implemented the training Ludodidactics applied to heritage education, which consists of four workshops and is intended for AIEM members. It aimed at honing fundamental skills required for museum educators, addressing the multifaceted demands of this evolving educational landscape, designed through the lent of Ludodidactics approach (Renger and Hoogendoorn, 2019). This approach, proposed by HKU University of the Arts in Utrecht, focuses on the development of educational pathways that

operate across formal, non-formal, and informal educational settings and it stimulates the validation of educational practices through continuous feedback.

A central tenet of the Ludodidactics approach is its reverse application of the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) model (Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004), which prioritizes the aesthetic dimension as the starting point of the design process. By focusing first on participants' emotional and sensory experiences, the training emphasized the importance of creating meaningful and resonant connections with heritage education and learning basic skills. This approach not only guided the design of the sessions but also influenced the participants' perception of their professional practice. The aesthetic dimension proved to be a crucial element in rethinking educational strategies and methodologies. It encouraged educators to design experiences that evoke strong emotional connections, thus enhancing both audience engagement and the learning outcomes of their initiatives.

The training program, conducted three times with a total of 43 museum and heritage educators, concentrated on pivotal subjects essential for museum and heritage educators such as active listening, open-ended questions and educational design. The fourth and last workshop of the training culminated in a reflective examination of the competency profile inherent to the heritage educator profession, aligning with the broader European discourse (Corr et al., 2022). The Ludodidactics training combines art education, active learning and heritage education, resulting in a holistic learning experience and introducing participants to a novel framework for educational design that could be applied to diverse audiences and contexts. AIEM's training provided tailored resources to support this methodology, including goal cards that summarized key competencies for museum and heritage educators. These materials served as practical tools to help participants apply the training resources in their professional contexts, fostering deeper connections with diverse audiences and a reflective approach to their daily work. By leveraging this approach, AIEM enables participants to develop engaged, dynamic educational experiences tailored to the varied needs of the public they serve. The training also played a significant role in building and strengthening a community of practice among museum and heritage educators. AIEM's collaborative workshops provided a platform for participants to share experiences, tools, and strategies, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support. This professional network will continue to thrive, offering ongoing opportunities for shared learning and innovation among educators at different levels of experience. Evaluation was a key component of the training process, serving as a means of meta-reflection for both trainers and participants. Each session incorporated interactive evaluation methods, including reflective games and facilitated discussions. Participants engaged in continuous assessment of their learning experiences, while trainers used this feedback to refine and enhance subsequent sessions. The final evaluation survey combined quantitative and qualitative data, providing insights into the program's impact on professional competencies and identifying areas for further development. Participants reflected on how the training had shifted their perspectives and reported increased confidence in

applying the new tools and strategies in their work.

From the evaluations of the total of 43 participants involved in the three trainings we can identify some significant results:

- 80% of participants have gained greater awareness regarding their profession, but above all, concerning the necessary skills to be museum and heritage educator;
- 30% of professionals were inspired by the training experience and used some tools to design their own educational activities;
- 60% of participants had the opportunity do delve into the theory of some educational tools and enhance their knowledge and understanding;
- All participant would like to take part in a new training, designed as an active learning experience, to grow as professionals, to share experience and to increase their network.

In conclusion, the Ludodidactics training emphasized the transformative power of prioritizing the aesthetic dimension, fostering professional communities, and incorporating reflective evaluation into educational practice. By integrating these elements, the program not only enriched the professional competencies of museum and heritage educators but also advanced the broader mission of AIEM as a community of practice, in order to foster dialogue among museums and heritage educators at different stages of responsibilities, with different competences and who are working in different cultural institutions all over Italy.

The workshops served as catalysts, prompting metacognitive reflections among both participants and facilitators, fostering a heightened awareness of their professional roles. Consequently, this introspective process facilitated the development and acquisition of indispensable competencies vital for the effective execution of the museum educator profession.

This innovative approach offers a valuable framework for future initiatives to ensure that heritage education continues to evolve in response to the needs of contemporary society.

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LIFE IN NEPAL'S LHOTSHAMPA REFUGEE CAMP THROUGH THE LENS OF ITS YOUTH: CAPTURING MULTIPLICITY

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Out of the turmoil of statelessness, liminality, and political violence, the children of the Beldangi Refugee Camp in eastern Nepal have put into view the multidimensionality of refugee experiences often overlooked in a milieu of narratives on refugees as passive victims or threats to social cohesion. This research locates the multiplicity of child refugee experiences in the Bhutanese refugees' own photography and writings in the NGO-funded Voices in Exile project, which provides 3000 refugee youth in Nepalese camps with photography, journalism, and editorial resources to express themselves, as well as the children-run newspaper, *The Child Creation*, in which young camp residents produce and print their own newspaper on camp events, Bhutanese politics, and even their own art. Alongside this community's assertion of political agency, self-representation, and meaningful community projects, the residents' publications showcase individuated subjectivity, communality, and quotidian humanness. Paired with secondary literature on ""redignifyingrefugees (Ashley 2020) and dominant depiction of refugees as nonpolitical, nonagential subjects (Johnson 2011), this paper conducts a visual and discourse analysis of the published photographic and editorial material as examples of how refugee youth can leverage NGO-funded educational projects to self-empower via political action, self-representation, and community engagement.

refugees, youth agency, redignification, postcolonial studies, visual analysis

INTRODUCTION

In 1988, the Bhutanese government revoked the citizenship of the Hindu and Nepali-speaking Lhotshampas and reclassified them as "illegal immigrants" (Rizal, 2004). Under the 1989 "One Bhutan, One People" policy, Buddhist culture and religion were privileged over those of minorities—the elite social etiquette and dress were extended to the public, TV antennae were banned, Nepali language was banned in public schools, and citizenship was revoked for anyone shown to be "disloyal" to Bhutan (Hutt, 1996 p. 416). In response to a wave of protests, the government identified and arrested those involved in protests, conducted unfair trials or none at all, and reports say there were even instances of torture.

The result is what Amnesty dubs "one of the most protracted and neglected refugee crises in the world" (Amnesty International, 2024): more than 107k Bhutanese

refugees took shelter in 8 UNHCR-established camps in the Jhapa and Morang district of Nepal starting in 1992 (Kellett, 2009, p. 14). After two decades, in 2007, the UNHCR and IOM spearheaded a third-country resettlement process, and the vast majority of refugees have been relocated to the United States, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and United Kingdom (Rizal, 2015). However, group resettlement has since concluded (in 2016) and due to a lack of repatriation prospects and Nepal's refusal to extend citizenship, 6,365 Bhutanese refugees who did not voluntary resettle, approximately one-third of whom are children (UNHCR, 2023), remain suspended in the Jhapa district camps with no sign of alternative (Giri, 2017).

Out of the turmoil of statelessness, liminality, and political violence, the children of the Beldangi Refugee Camp in eastern Nepal have put into view the multidimensionality of refugee experiences often overlooked in a milieu of narratives on refugees as passive victims or threats to social cohesion (Johnson, 2011, p. 1023). This paper will locate the multiplicity of child refugee experiences in the Bhutanese refugees' own photography and writings in the Voices in Exile project, which provides 3000 refugee youth in Nepalese camps with photography, journalism, and writing resources to express themselves, as well as the children-run newspaper, *The Child Creation*, in which young camp residents produce and print their own newspaper on camp events, Bhutanese politics, and even their own art ("Voices in Exile", *PhotoVoice,* 1998-2009) ("The Child Creation Newspaper", 2024). Alongside this community's assertion of political agency, self-representation, and meaningful community projects, the residents' publications showcase individuated subjectivity, communality, and quotidian humanness.

1. PUBLICATION AS PROTEST: *THE CHILD CREATION* AND VOICES IN EXILE AS COUNTER-PUBLICS

My exploration will begin by tracing scholarship on the importance of print cultures as "publics"—convening spaces for challenging dominant logics via marginalized communities' self-articulation.

"Publics" articulate themselves into being. In contrast to the Habermasian "public sphere", a nebulous space between state and civil society but which refers to a bounded political system/institution, publics often organize around text external to the state or other mediating bodies and exist "by virtue of their address" (Warner, 2002, p. 417). Members may not know each other personally, but coalesce around this shared focus (Huber & Osterhammel, 2020, p. 17). A public deliberates and seeks to influence the trajectory of its own community without need for reference to or influence over a political system or institution (Fraser, 1992, p. 122). They can thus exist outside a national, citizenship-centric framework.

To that end, publics—or, as they are sometimes referred, "counter-publics"—are often forged by subordinated groups who challenge hegemonic discourse by circulating counter discourses, which "...formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, p. 123). For instance, Ouma and Krishnan

trace the genealogy of Pan-Africanism and diasporic print cultures of magazines on the African continent from the 1800s onward. These magazines consolidated counter-publics that renegotiated ways of being a citizen during the era of decolonization alongside pan-African affiliation (Krishnan & Ouma, 2021, p. 199).

In registering the conflicts surrounding politics, belonging, and identity, alternative publications can capture and contest both dominant and marginalized discourses of a moment. As will be shown in the proceeding analysis, the creation, circulation, and reception of young refugees' photographs and writings coalesce the agency and existence of this counter-public, granting visibility to individuals, meanings, and ways of life often overshadowed by state and hegemonic institutional projects.

2. ANALYSIS: CAPTURING THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY, POLITICAL IN PERSONAL (AND VICE VERSA)

The historical evolution of SEAs provides important context for understanding the ways in which their role has shifted over the past two decades and is likely to shift further in coming years. Until recently, SEAs were not deeply involved in K-12 education policymaking or school district oversight, and school districts and local school boards were the dominant decision makers for elementary and secondary schools. Beginning with the federal National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, however, national policymakers used the grant-in-aid system to push states to pursue federal goals in public education. In order to claim their share of a growing pot of federal education funds, states had to Voices in Exile began in 1998 when an anthropology student distributed cameras to 13 children living in Nepal's Beldangi Refugee Camp. When the Lutheran World Federation and nonprofit PhotoVoice began collaboratively funding and organizing with the original project ("Voices in Exile: Bhutanese youth", 2016, p. 52), Voices in Exile exploded to include 3000+ participants across multiple camps ("Voices in Exile", 2024).[1]

Beyond the project's existence representing the articulation of a counter-public, its content offers a new lens through which to view refugee life. It captures social contestation, community, daily life, camp sporting events, and political advocacy. In so doing, its creators "transcend stereotyped imagery" of a helpless or, alternatively, dangerous/invasive Other often depicted in publications about refugees (Carrijo, Fabricio et al, 2019, p. 119).

For instance, photographs of camp life taken by Yethi Raj show an elderly man squatting and smoking, presumably outside of his hut, commenting on the lack of prospect to return to Bhutan, followed by a critical caption that describes the subject as "...an old man who thinks life is like smoke that a puff of wind can disperse" (Raj, "untitled", n.d.). Yet life at the camp involves more than just contestation of

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[1] Future research should examine which photographs and writings are or are not exhibited in PhotoVoice and LWF's online publications and consider how such presentations/selections may reflect the organizations' dispositions toward, and where those understandings may differ from those of, their refugee contributors.

whether repatriation is possible: other photographs depict family units, boys playing football, men drinking while seated together, intertwining political commentary and quotidian life. Ndr Bdr's photo depicts three boys in colorful outfits, two standing back-to-back and one squatting, hands linked, with a caption describing them as three friends who embrace varying style and bond across their various castes: an image coalescing (extra)ordinary experiences of boyhood pride and friendship (Bdr, "the hidden style", n.d.). Yethi Raj's photo titled "my bed" shows a mat before a bamboo wall with disheveled sheets and a pillow piled in the corner (Raj, "my bed", n.d.). The image could depict the morning habits of any sleepy young person, speaking to the project's depiction of shared humanity.

Some of the photos combine the ordinary with political commentary: One photo, titled "supper in my hut", shows four right hands grabbing rice and lentils from a set of metal pots and plates. There appear to be two women, one man, and one boy (presumably the photographer), showing the communal, ordinary sharing of a meal among family (Raj, "supper in my hut", n.d.). However, the photograph also depicts an extraordinary context, whereby grains and lentils are, according to resident Aite Maya, rationed according to the number of family members, leading to the need for smaller family units to "eat little to make it last" or "borrow from others" who have small children (Maya, "Food", 2024). Another photo by Aite Maya shows two men drinking in front of what appears to be a wall of newspaper clippings with the caption, "In camps because we have no land and are unable to earn income we do not have lots of work to do so we joke with each other to pass time" (Maya, "untitled: Family and Friends", n.d.). The image and caption capture the multiplicity of camp life: the ordinariness of two unoccupied friends convening, and the extraordinary circumstances of doing so under forced statelessness and unemployment (Nepal has refused to allow refugees to work for pay, leaving them entirely dependent on international aid) (Minkow, 2011, p. 15). The extraordinary plight refugees face is made rote; the political nature of articulating a complaint about camp residents' mistreatment, boredom, and deprivation is interlocked with quotidian humaneness.

Other images, especially of residents repairing their huts, congeal the intended temporariness of the camps. Dhanapati's image depicts a man in shorts and a tank top atop a roof made of bamboo sticks and a tarp among lush vegetation. The caption describes: "During the rainy season huts get damaged easily by the weather. We have to do repairs often" (Dhanapati, "untitled: Huts", n.d.). As the man looks directly at the camera, he seems agential; his wide stance, grey hair, and musculature also make him appear powerful and patriarchal. In this way, the image defies dominant imagery of refugees since the 1970s as feminized and passive in dominant sources such as UNHCR publications (Johnson, 2011, p. 1016). Further, the caption contextualizes and politicizes the subject's actions, which are predicated on a system that treats statelessness as exceptional: the original UNHCR camps were built in 1991 to last just three years out of plastic sheeting and bamboo (Hutt, 1996, p. 412), and indeed, repairs are frequent. For instance, the Koshi river floods

of August 2008 decimated the Sunsari district huts, which, made of mud, bamboo frames, glass walls, and other non-permanent materials, "were either completely destroyed or seriously damaged" (Kellett, 2008, p. 14). The photo and caption speak to what the UNHCR dubs a "dilapidated" condition of shelters that were meant to be impermanent, but which Scott-Smith notes sometimes last for decades (Scott-Smith, 2020, p. 5).

The newspaper The Child Creation, 2000 copies of which were circulated monthly by youth of the camps between 2001 and 2009, also documents camp experiences in their multiplicity. It includes sections on camp events (including cricket and football tournaments), politics in Bhutan, and even creative writing in which young poets ruminate on topics ranging from mathematics to infinite love. In this way, joyful events—the winners of sporting matches, upcoming yoga classes, the successes or failures of nonprofit education activities—appear beside articles on politics in Bhutan (for example, one article states that "Bhutan has continued changing the Nepali names of its villages in the south") and commentary on unmet camp needs (one article discusses how girls in the camps face barriers to their education including expectations of "assisting her mom", romantic encounters, and a dearth of women teachers) ("The Child Creation Newspaper", 2024). In this way, the paper captures the "structure of a feeling" (Williams, 1961) within the camp community while contributors assert political agency vis a vis Bhutan, the international organizations and Nepalese government coordinating aid, and, most importantly, as individuals with various interests, ambitions, pains, and plentitudes.

CONCLUSION

In a context of state violence, displacement, and an uncertain future, the children of the Nepalese camps capture social relationships, subjectivities, political opinions, and a constellation of experiences and meanings derived from a space often configured by scholars and humanitarians alike as an exceptional, temporary holding place of masses of passive victims. While the existence of such projects in themselves is politically significant, reflecting the agency, shared humanity, and creativity of the refugees who lead it, the photography and writings spawned tell an even more profound story: that these youth are not simply robbed of their future. With experiences both ordinary and extraordinary, they have been and will continue building lives each day.

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EMPOWERING YOUTH THROUGH ENTRE-PRENEURSHIP EDUCATION: FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING AND LIFELONG LEARNING THROUGH THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

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Youth agency refers to the capacity of young people to claim autonomy and drive meaningful changes in their personal lives, communities, and society, enabling them to shape their own developmental paths. In this context, entrepreneurship competencies, aimed at ensuring equal opportunity, access to the labor market, and inclusion, can serve as a key facilitator of youth agency. New perspectives on entrepreneurship education emphasize fostering a sense of initiative, empowering learners to act on ideas and opportunities to generate financial, cultural, or social value for themselves and others. As a result, entrepreneurship education has expanded globally, offering inclusive, high-quality learning opportunities across formal, non-formal, and informal contexts. Moreover, it promotes self-reflection, which is essential for enhancing economic performance and social cohesion, particularly for individuals at risk of exclusion. Critical thinking, a core competence highlighted in European frameworks, involves recognizing limitations in knowledge and addressing biases while fostering creativity to generate new ideas. This study introduces a set of tools and instruments designed for assessing and self-assessing soft skills within entrepreneurship education environments characterized by informal learning and challenge-based pedagogical approaches. We argue that these tools can effectively support young individuals during transitional phases and help them define their individual developmental trajectories.

youth agency; entrepreneurship education; learning to learn; critical thinking; soft skills assessment

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Youth agency, defined as the capacity of adolescents and young adults to make autonomous decisions and initiate meaningful changes in personal and societal domains, constitutes a foundational pillar in their development as active participants in society. This construct is deeply rooted in theories of human agency and the capability approach. According to Bandura (2001), agency involves individuals'

capacity to set goals, act intentionally, and reflect on their actions to achieve desired outcomes. Similarly, the capability approach emphasizes that fostering agency is central to expanding individuals' freedoms and opportunities to pursue meaningful lives (Sen, 1999). Aligned with these perspectives, entrepreneurship competencies can play a significant role in facilitating youth agency by promoting skills that enable young individuals to navigate structural constraints and access socio-economic opportunities. In this context, the development of two key components of agency—self-efficacy and proactiveness—is strongly linked to entrepreneurial education (OECD, 2019).

The field of entrepreneurship education is constantly evolving, encompassing both the process of defining and redefining the meanings of entrepreneurship education and a significant growth in the number of programs dedicated to this area of education. This paragraph will briefly explore the conceptual development of entrepreneurship education, its spread through educational context worldwide and the main educational approaches to entrepreneurship.

From a conceptual standpoint, it can be said that entrepreneurship education has developed in parallel with the evolution of the very idea of entrepreneurship, which has shifted from a more traditional to a more progressive view (O'Brien & Hamburg, 2019).

The traditional perspective considers entrepreneurship as the capacity to perceive, create, and evaluate opportunities, and to exploit them through the creation of new ventures or their sale in markets (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). In this view, entrepreneurial traits are considered innate and, therefore, neither transferable nor teachable (Henry et al., 2005).

More recently, a progressive understanding of entrepreneurship has emerged, defining it as the active pursuit of opportunities for value creation. This involves identifying opportunities and creatively applying relevant resources to address needs or solve problems (O'Brien & Hamburg, 2019). From this viewpoint, entrepreneurship is seen as a lifelong process with broader implications for both society and the economy (Lackéus, 2015; Komarkova et al., 2015). It is understood as a mindset or competence inherent in all individuals that, when nurtured, can contribute to an entrepreneurial culture at the societal level. This culture fosters collective value creation not only financially but also culturally and socially (Bacigalupo et al., 2016).

The entrepreneurial mindset is dynamic and can be developed through education and life experiences (Henry et al., 2005). Indeed, entrepreneurship education focuses not only on promoting the creation and growth of businesses but also on cultivating entrepreneurial individuals (Gibb, 2002; Hoppe, 2016).

Being an entrepreneurial individual means moving beyond the idea of entrepreneurship confined solely to the private sector. On one hand, it entails expanding its scope to include the public and third sectors; on the other, it recognizes entrepreneurship as a *competence* applicable to all areas of life. Entrepreneurship education, therefore, aims to promote all the characteristics that enable individuals to be

enterprising across all aspects of life, to be citizens capable of nurturing their personal development, actively contributing to social development, entering the job market as employees or self-employed individuals, and starting or scaling ventures with cultural, social, or commercial purposes (Bacigalupo et al., 2016).

Within this broader perspective, entrepreneurship education plays a crucial role in achieving the European Union's ambitious goal of combining economic growth with social cohesion. To foster social cohesion, employability, and competitiveness, it has been essential to equip all citizens—particularly those at higher risk of exclusion—with: a) learning-to-learn skills, which are lifelong assets and significant drivers of transformation in adulthood (Sala et al., 2020); b) access to high-quality formal, non-formal, and informal learning experiences throughout their lives; and c) opportunities for self-reflection to enhance and improve their learning experiences.

In alignment with these goals, the European Commission has taken significant steps to promote entrepreneurship education at the policy level, integrating entrepreneurship competence into its *Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (Council of the European Union, 2018). From this European perspective, entrepreneurship is recognized as a competence encompassing the capacity to act upon opportunities and ideas, transforming them into value for others.

Beyond its conceptual aspects, the evolution of entrepreneurship education also refers to its widespread growth. Within the European context, policies supporting entrepreneurship development have been in place since the Treaty of Lisbon, with the aim of fostering job creation, economic growth, and a knowledge-based society (Hoppe, 2016). Initially, and for a considerable period, policies for entrepreneurship in education and those for small businesses remained separated domains (O'Brien, & Hamburg, 2019). Recently, educational programs on entrepreneurship have grown significantly, particularly in tertiary education, including business schools (Kuratko, 2005; Mohamad et al., 2015) and non-business faculties (Solomon et al., 2002).

The EU has emphasized the importance of entrepreneurial competence at all levels of education, supporting its introduction from the early stages of compulsory schooling to influence cultural development (Eurydice, 2016). In fact, entrepreneurship education has expanded to primary and secondary schools (Hoppe, 2016; Kyrö, 2015), as well as into non-formal (Debarliev et al., 2022) and informal educational contexts.

From a methodological perspective, this expansion requires a shift towards innovation from traditional didactic approaches. Transformative pedagogies—such as problem-based and inquiry-based learning, experiential learning (e.g., action learning, role modeling, project work), and collaborative approaches like service learning—offer authentic, practical, and interdisciplinary learning experiences that prepare students for complex professional contexts (Bolzani, 2024).

ASSESSMENT TOOLS FOR FOSTERING ENTREPRENEURSHIP COMPETENCES

This work presents a set of tools for assessing transversal competences within

entrepreneurship education environments characterized by informal learning and challenge-based pedagogical approaches. It aims to explore the role of critical thinking in guiding young individuals through transitions and in shaping their individual trajectories.

Critical thinking is a widely recognized educational goal (Hitchcock, 2024), and a strategic skill across various domains. It is possible to observe the presence of critical thinking in multiple international frameworks dedicated to transversal competences (Bianchi et al., 2022; Sala et al., 2020). Skills in creative thinking, including awareness of one's knowledge limitations and biases, are emphasized in the EntreComp, LifeComp, GreenComp, and DigiComp 2.2 frameworks.

Critical thinking is recognized as a core component of creativity within the "Ideas & Opportunities" domain of the EntreComp framework (Bacigalupo et al., 2016). It emphasizes the ability to critically assess challenges and generate innovative solutions, which are essential for entrepreneurial success and adaptability in dynamic economic environments. Furthermore, critical thinking is integrated into the "Personal" domain of the LifeComp framework (Sala et al., 2020), where it plays a key role in self-reflection, decision-making, and adaptability. It also emphasizes the critical evaluation of one's values, beliefs, and decisions to foster lifelong personal and professional development.

The GreenComp framework (Bianchi et al., 2022) incorporates critical thinking into the "Embracing Complexity in Sustainability" domain, highlighting that addressing sustainability challenges requires the ability to critically analyze complex information. Similarly, critical thinking is embedded within "Dimension 4" of the DigComp 2.2 framework (Vuorikari et al., 2022), emphasizing its role in evaluating the reliability, accuracy, and ethical implications of AI-generated content and systems.

Due to its transversality, critical thinking is particularly challenging to be assessed. Like other transversal competences, it is difficult to be defined, differentiated from disciplinary competences, and evaluated independently (Luppi & Bolzani, 2019).

The tools presented below are part of a broader assessment tool called EuroComPass, developed within the framework of the SOCCES project (SOCial Competences, Entrepreneurship, and Sense of Initiative) (Guilland, 2017). The proposal was developed through a multi-step methodology that began with the creation of an assessment framework for entrepreneurial competences. This framework was developed through a baseline analysis of educational environments, a review of relevant programs and literature, and pilot testing using virtually enabled real-life business cases. It represents an effort to assess specific entrepreneurial competences while simultaneously addressing the challenges associated with evaluating transversal competences.

EuroComPass aims to assess four macro-areas of competences at the individual level: positive attitude and initiative; communication and interaction; critical and analytical thinking; and creativity and innovation. The competences are assessed across three levels of expertise: low, medium, and high (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Competence levels for the competence area "Analytical and Critical Thinking"

Competency area: **Analytical and Critical Thinking** (Recognizing opportunities)		
Low level	**Medium level**	**High level**
Is poorly aware of data/information/research available to inform and develop areas of work; seldomly keeps up to date with information and its quality in order to make judgements; tends to treat information from different pieces of information as separate.	Is aware of data/information/research available to inform and develop areas of work; moderately keeps up to date with information and its quality in order to make judgements; is able to see some new connections and patterns from available data.	Is an avid information seeker, always carrying out activities of search for new information/data/research; is good at "connecting the dots", seeing links between seemingly unrelated pieces of information; has ideas about developing novel products, policies, and strategies for the future.

Figure 2. A selection of EuroComPass' assessment tools

Task 1	
Student	**Teacher**
Self-assessment questionnaire (4 items / 5-points Likert scale; Morris, 2013)	

Task 2	
Student	**Teacher**
Exercise: "From the creativity exercise on 'possible uses of a shoe' choose what you think is your best idea. **Prepare a short presentation** on how this 'creative way of using a shoe' could be marketed or be used by other people. You have 20 minutes to prepare your presentation. Your presentation should use a maximum of 50 words"	**Assessment** (assessment exercise) "After listening to the presentation, assess the skills shown in recognising opportunities using the following scale" (4 items / 5-points Likert scale)

Students' self-assessment*					
TEST N.1 Consider each of the following sentences and evaluate how much it describes you, indicating how much you agree with each one.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I often make novel connections and perceive new or emergent relationships between various pieces of information.					
2. I see links between seemingly unrelated pieces of information.					
3. I am good at "connecting dots".					
4- I often see connections between previously unconnected domains of information					

*Scores in the range 1.00-2.00 are considered low level of competence in recognizing opportunities scores in the range 2.01-3.00 as medium level; and scores in the range 3.01-5.00 as high level.

TEST N. 2
Now think about a shoe.
How many uses can you imagine for a shoe? Try to be as creative as possible and list them below. Produce one line for each use that you imagine. You have 15 minutes to list as many uses as possible.
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. ....

Referring to the potential uses for a shoe that you have listed, choose what you think is your best idea for "how to use a shoe".
Now prepare a short presentation about how this "original use of the shoe" could be commercialized to the market or used by other people. You have 20 minutes to prepare the presentation. Your presentation will have to use maximum 50 words.
_____
_____
_____

After listening to the presentation (TEST N.2), assess the skills shown in recognising opportunities using the following scale"

Teachers' assessment*					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. STUDENT NAME makes novel connections and perceives new or emergent relationships between various pieces of information.					
2. STUDENT NAME sees links between seemingly unrelated pieces of information.					
3. STUDENT NAME is good at "connecting dots".					
4. STUDENT NAME sees often connections between previously unconnected domains of information					

*Your assessment score is obtained by summing and averaging the raw scores on all scale items. Scores in the range 1.00-2.25 are considered low competence level; scores in the range 2.26-3.75 as medium level; and scores in the range 3.76-5.00 as high level.

EuroComPass employs multiple assessment tools, including questionnaires, brief presentations, and assessment rubrics (Figure 2). The assessment of transversal competences requires a holistic and integrated approach, combining various methods and tools (Luppi & Bolzani, 2019). Additionally, the tool incorporates self-assessment, a method that fosters reflection and metacognition among students—central elements for promoting the formative function of assessment, which is a fundamental aspect in evaluating transversal competences (Curtis, 2010; Gibb, 2014).

In conclusion, the use of a tool that promotes self-reflection can enhance key dimensions such as self-efficacy, proactivity, and motivation—strategic factors in supporting youth agency. Moreover, an assessment process designed to foster and develop young people's entrepreneurial competences, particularly critical thinking, can empower them to become active citizens, capable of making autonomous decisions and driving meaningful changes at both personal and societal levels.

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HABITUAL NUANCES AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE CAREER CHOICE PROCESS OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

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This study examines the significance of the habitus-field match for the career choice of those undertaking training to become primary school teachers. The study, which employed 23 semi-structured interviews and a novel hermeneutic method for habitus visualisation, demonstrates the pivotal role of habitus-field match in career choice. However, this match is not merely a reflection of social class or origin; rather, it illuminates the interplay between individual dispositions and the professional field. The findings demonstrate the existence of diverse nuances of habitus stability, encompassing both conservative and flexible orientations. Two case studies are presented for the purpose of illustrating the different forms of the reconstructed habitus and of analysing the associated implications for career choice research. The study conceptualises the career choice process as a search for a dual fit: between the individual habitus and the requirements of the field of origin, as well as between the habitus and the requirements of the desired occupational field.

Habitus; Field; Career Choice; Teacher Training; Habitus Transformation; Habitus-Field Match

INTRODUCTION

The decision to pursue a career in primary school teaching is a complex process that goes beyond simple social attributions. This study explores the significance of the correspondence between habitus and field for the career choice of student teachers at the primary level, addressing a research gap typically assessed through motivational surveys (Scharfenberg et al., 2022; See et al., 2022).

Using Bourdieu and Passeron's concept of cultural fit (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Holzmayer, 2023, pp. 84–89; Kramer, 2017) and a hermeneutic method for visualizing individualized habitus (Kramer, 2018, 2019), 23 semi-structured interviews with student teachers were analyzed. The findings reveal that the habitus-field match plays a central role in career choice, but cannot be reduced to social class or origin alone. Social background does not deterministically influence habitus and career choice processes, as not all first-generation students develop the same habitus or relationship to the teaching profession.

Interestingly, social mobility often plays no role in students' subjective views. The

study initially aimed to investigate the split habitus of first-generation students but found it absent, particularly in primary school teacher training (Miethe 2021). This could be attributed to the similarity between teacher training programs and school structures, allowing students to continue their long-developed school habitus.

The absence of a split habitus may be due to the 'study generation' phenomenon (Bathmaker et al. 2016), which normalises higher education, or the characteristics of the primary school teaching profession in Austria. The profession's less academic and more family-like nature may not force students to break out of their familiar environment.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the habitus-field match is crucial in the career choice of student teachers, but a nuanced approach is necessary to understand the complex interplay between individual habitus, field of origin, and intended occupational field.

1. RECONSTRUCTING HABITUS

In Bourdieu's (2001, pp. 18–21) view, an analysis of people's statements must consider their social context, the logic of the field in which they operate, and their belief in this game. The position in the field affects the way in which the field is perceived. The method of habitus reconstruction (Kramer, 2018, 2019) addresses this perspective and attempts to explicate the implicit regularity of practice. In this method, which is based on a strictly sequence-analytical approach, a step-by-step attempt is made to formulate hypotheses about the interviewee's habitus and to verify or falsify these on the basis of the following sequences (Kramer, 2019, p. 312). The procedure should, at various points in the interview, result in the formulation of a convincing and meaningful habitus hypothesis, which will enable the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the interviewee's patterns of perception, thought and action (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 123). The reconstruction of the habitus in conjunction with the interviewees' perspective on the field enables the identification and analysis of habitus-field fits.

2. RESULTS

The following section presents a selection of the study's findings. Initially, two concrete examples are provided to illustrate the respective manifestations of the reconstructed habitus, which demonstrate a range of possibilities and limitations. Subsequently, the various nuances of habitus stability are delineated. Finally, the fit between habitus and field and the resulting implications for career choice research are discussed.

2.1. Nuances of Habitus

In terms of subjectivation theory, students attempt to reinforce their narratives in order to align themselves with the profession in a more consistent manner. Two illustrative examples from the interviews will be presented here.

Firstly, we have Markus, who hails from a social milieu typified by hegemonic

masculinity (Connell, 2005). Despite his personal disillusionment with his technical profession, he has worked in the same role for years, following in his father's footsteps and fulfilling his father's expectations (Berweger et al., 2015). He aspires to pursue a career in primary school teaching, which means a significant departure from his current field and comes with a number of obstacles. In his social environment, this career aspiration is often met with derision and ridicule. As a result, he is constantly having to justify his career choice in everyday life.

From an intersectional perspective, as a man from a non-academic family in the countryside, this profession is incongruous with the social position ascribed to him. It is also incongruous with the possibilities that could be realised. Despite this rejection of the prevailing image of masculinity in his field of origin, he nevertheless reinforces stereotypically male narratives. He attempts to portray the job as very challenging and time-consuming to those from his field of origin. His portrayal of the teaching profession as challenging demonstrates his intention to serve the dominant standards, even if he simultaneously distances himself from them. This shows the tension between the 'moment of engagement with hegemonic masculinity' and the 'moment of separation', as Connell (2005, pp. 120–142) describes it.

Markus is exposed to a double social friction or two-front battle, as Magnus Persson (2024, p. 83) terms it. On the one hand, he is compelled to justify his career choice to family and friends, given its perceived lack of traditional masculinity (Connell, 2005, pp. 67–71). On the other hand, he is acutely aware of the inherent dissonance between his toxic masculine habits and the teaching profession. Rather than resigning, he is engaged in a process of learning the demands of the field, including how to navigate the proximity to children. He lacks experience of working with children; therefore, he enrolls as a childcare worker at a vacation camp to learn the requisite skills. This demonstrates a deliberate effort to alter his existing habitus. However, there is no clear evidence of a cleft habitus. He is not adrift between the two worlds; rather, he finds ways to cope and strives to adapt.

As a second example, I would like to introduce you to Nicole. She is also a first-grade student from a small village in the countryside. Upon completion of her secondary education, she pursued a brief career in the tourism sector. However, her aspirations led her to pursue further studies, with the goal of becoming a midwife. Despite her efforts, she was unsuccessful in the entrance examination. Ultimately, her aunts demonstrated a more appropriate course of action by encouraging her to pursue a career in education. As a female first-in-family female student in the countryside, it corresponds to her social position. This aligns with Bourdieu's concept of 'amor fati', or the choice of fate, which is believed to be a predetermined path that corresponds to one's destiny (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 173). This trajectory ultimately leads her to her designated position within the social hierarchy and gender roles.

Nicole appears to be an ideal candidate for a career in primary school teaching. However, this seemingly perfect match may prove problematic when she begins her professional journey. When asked about her career aspirations, Nicole responds:

I think I'm good with children and (.) I can empathize with them and that is (.) in my opinion one of the essential (1) things a teacher should be able to do (Nicole, Lines 240–242, Min. #00:16:10#)

The ability to interact well with children is the sole criterion by which she assesses teaching competence, thereby overlooking the necessity for professional qualifications and the associated responsibilities. Instead, she attempts ineffectively to adhere to the field-specific norms of an empathic and socially oriented primary school teacher. She considers herself to be highly proficient in the teaching profession, akin to a fish in water that 'takes the world about itself for granted' (Wacquant & Bourdieu, 1989, p. 43). Nevertheless, she fails to recognise the discrepancy between her skill set and the requirements of the field, and does not recognise that her professional profile is mismatched with the demands of the field.

The case studies of Markus and Nicole illustrate the complex dynamics between individual habitus, field of origin and aspired occupational field. They lead us to a deeper consideration of the reproduction and transformation of habitus, showing how students deal with the challenges of career choice and adaptation to new fields in different ways.

2.2. Reproduction vs. Transformation of Habitus

Bourdieu's habitus theory is occasionally interpreted as deterministic (Bourdieu, 1989; Rieger-Ladich, 2005). However, the analyses indicate that this interpretation is inaccurate. Rather, it can be demonstrated that students from similar social backgrounds can develop markedly disparate habitus.

With regard to habitual stability, different nuances in habitus can be observed among the interviewees. The results of the study suggest that some of the students have a remarkably conservative habitual attitude that leaves little room for adaptation and change. The students surveyed enter their studies with a set of preconceptions and a familiarity with the profession that is shaped by their everyday experiences. However, these preconceptions are not aligned with the specific demands and requirements of the profession (Holzmayer, 2024). The hysteresis effect, as described by Bourdieu (1984, p. 103) is clearly evident in these cases.

In contrast, however, there are also instances of highly flexible and adaptable habitual orientations, which suggest the potential for habitual transformation in order to facilitate more effective adaptation to the desired occupational field. This habitual openness is particularly evident in cases where individuals have experienced a disruption or challenge in the career-finding process. This is particularly the case for those who switch from another occupational sector to the teaching profession and for those for whom the career choice does not fit socially or gender-wise into their field of origin.

If we think back to our cases of Markus and Nicole: In contrast to Markus, for example, whose gender-specific maladaptation to the occupation provides the impetus for the adaptation of the occupational habitus, Nicole's seemingly perfect habitus adaptation indicates that she does not even recognise the need to learn the

requirements of the occupational field. This leads to the following conclusion, which has implications for future career choice research.

3. CONCLUSION: CAREER CHOICE AS THE SEARCH FOR A DOUBLE MATCH

The present study highlights that the fit between habitus and field is a crucial factor in the career choices of student teachers. The findings reveal the complex interplay between individual habitus, field of origin and intended career field. In particular, students from similar social backgrounds can develop different habitus, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach to understanding career choice.

The process of career choice can be conceptualised as a search for a double match: firstly, matching the individual's habitus with the demands and expectations of their field of origin; secondly, ensuring compatibility between their habitus and the requirements of their intended occupational field (Holzmayer, 2023, pp. 255–256). Discrepancies between the values and norms of an individual's social origins and those of the professional field can significantly influence their comfort level and the extent to which they feel compelled to justify their career choices (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). From this perspective, individuals perform a balancing act in which they are influenced by symbolic power, which limits their range of possibilities. Breaking away from established social orders requires a transformation of one's habitus. Conversely, remaining within socially prescribed roles can lead to unreflective teaching practice as individuals may not critically engage with their professional identity.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of these matching processes on teachers' career trajectories and professional development. In addition, findings from this study could inform the development of support programmes aimed at helping students to manage potential habitus-field conflicts and foster a robust professional teacher habitus. Such initiatives could ultimately enhance both personal fulfilment and professional effectiveness in teaching careers (Helsper, 2018).

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WHICH (PUBLIC) SPACE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN AREAS

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INTRODUCTION

The participation of young people in urban transformation processes is a growing topic of interest both in public policies and scientific research. From a pedagogical perspective, in an increasingly urbanised world, public spaces represent not only places of meeting and socialisation but also laboratories for continuous learning and democratic participation (Hart, 1997; Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006). These spaces are essential for the development of civic and reflective competencies, laying the foundations for active youth involvement in society (Ellsworth, 2005; Gruenewald, 2003; Lackovic, Popovic & Holland, 2020). Despite the centrality of young people in the daily use of urban spaces, they are often excluded from the decision-making processes that shape these places. Power dynamics and imbalances in access and influence (Fainstein, 2010; Lefebvre, 1991; Skelton, 2013) are reflected not only in urban planning but also in the educational opportunities offered to this population.

At the Third International Conference of Scuola Democratica on "Education and/for Social Justice", the panel *Which (Public) Space for Young People's Engagement in Contemporary Urban Areas* explored these dynamics. It addressed key questions: How can youth contribute to urban transformation? How can education enhance their agency in urban development? The panel united diverse perspectives to examine youth roles in urban regeneration and the reimagining of public spaces.

1. RECLAIMING PUBLIC SPACES: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Understanding the role of young people in transforming urban spaces requires a theoretical and methodological framework that captures the complexity of these contexts. The boundaries between public and private spaces and physical and virtual environments are increasingly blurred in modern cities, often obscuring how citizens navigate and relate to these spaces. Young people frequently face erosion of their rights to occupy, socialise, and participate in public life (Aitken, 2005), with "adultified" public spaces creating conflicts and restricting their mobility and growth.

Gert Biesta's concept of public pedagogy (2012), referenced by several panel contributions, views public spaces as educational contexts where democratic citizenship can be practised. However, power dynamics often limit youth participation,

and the structure and management of participatory processes—underdeveloped for minors—can either support or hinder their engagement (Cornwall, 2004). A key focus of the panel is the use of innovative, participatory, transdisciplinary, and intergenerational methodologies to study this complex phenomenon. This approach recognises that only a comprehensive body of knowledge, not fragmented, can help make sense of it. It encourages dialogue, reflecting diverse voices in defining problems and finding shared solutions. Within this vision, young people are encouraged to approach the spaces they inhabit with an inquisitive mindset driven by open questions and meaning-making (Appadurai, 2006). This framework underscores the educational value of urban spaces, uniting the panel's contributions to explore opportunities and challenges in youth participation.

2. WHICH (PUBLIC) SPACE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S ENGAGEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN AREAS

A central theme across the studies is the recognition of public spaces as educational environments shaping young people's citizenship and social belonging. Sander Van Thomme, Sven De Visscher, and Lieve Bradt's *A Need to Nurture Public Nature: Urban Public Space as a Co-educator for Youth* explores public space as a "fourth pedagogical province" (De Visscher et al., 2012). Their research in three Brussels neighbourhoods highlights how exclusion, privatisation, and insecurity undermine public spaces' educational and democratic potential (De Backer, 2016). They advocate for public pedagogy to restore urban spaces' public nature, fostering youth engagement and the common good (Biesta, 2012).

Similarly, Maria Grazia Proli's *Pedagogy of Urban Areas: From Crisis Spaces to Relationship Places for Youth* examines two art-based participatory projects. *CommUnity – Build CommUnity Create Peace!* used music and theatre to promote intercultural dialogue, while *The City in Three Minutes* involved students in Florence and Seville mapping urban spaces to foster critical awareness. Both projects employ video-based methods (Wang & Burris, 1997) and align with the SDGs and *learning cities* model (Boffo & Biagioli, 2023).

The transformative potential of participatory research is another key focus. Maria Ratotti and Chiara Buzzacchi's *The B-YOUth Forum Research Lab: Youth Emancipation Through Research* combines public pedagogy (Biesta, 2012) and Arendt's (1958) notion of multiple political acts to explore how young people navigate transforming public spaces in Milan. Their interdisciplinary, participatory methods emphasise research's role in fostering youth agency and inclusion.

In Northern Italy, Nicola Nasi, Rachele Antonini, and Federica Ceccoli's *Renovating School Spaces with Teachers, Children, and Parents* describe transforming an abandoned school basement into a functional learning space through participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) and co-creation principles (Call-Cummings, 2018). The project faced institutional constraints and competing expectations despite fostering community and belonging.

Alessia Trivigno's *Young People and Fondazione PInAC: Reappropriating Heritage to*

Transform the Museum highlights a participatory project where students curate exhibitions using digitised children's artwork. This initiative fosters transversal skills and cultural engagement (Colazzo & Del Gobbo, 2022) while encouraging youth to reimagine cultural heritage, aligning with the UNCRC.

Daniele Morciano and Diego Mesa's *A Research About Young People's Vision on the Future (and the Present) of Youth Participation Spaces* uses the e-Delphi method (Rowe & Wright, 2001) to examine youth perceptions of participation spaces across five countries. Their scenarios range from utopian collaboration between migrants and youth to dystopian fears of AI-driven social control, prompting critical reflection on the socio-political forces shaping public spaces.

Finally, Alessandro Pepe, Stefano De Francesco, and Eleonora Farina's *Sita and the Great Absence: Adolescents, Decision-making and Participation in Public Space* reveals how most youth participation is confined to private spheres, such as school or personal decisions. Using mixed methods and content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018; Brier & Hopp, 2011), they argue for creating meaningful opportunities for youth in public life.

Collectively, these studies reimagine public spaces as dynamic arenas for youth engagement, education, and emancipation, addressing inclusion, creativity, and structural barriers. They underscore the transformative potential of participatory research and design, highlighting the need to rethink public spaces for a more inclusive, democratic urban future.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Through the theoretical perspectives and empirical experiences presented in this panel, it is clear how public spaces can be reimagined as labs for active citizenship, continuous learning, and social innovation. However, their potential is constrained by structural, cultural, and political barriers. A central theme is addressing exclusion and inequality, with public spaces designed for accessibility and inclusivity, empowering young people as co-creators. Education plays a vital role in strengthening their agency to transform urban realities. Innovative methodologies, from participatory research to artistic approaches, amplify youth voices and foster intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, enriching education and promoting collaborative urban development.

However, there remain some challenges that require further exploration, some of which are:

- Public policies and governance: How can policymakers support authentic and lasting participatory processes? What governance models can facilitate dialogue between young people, institutions, and other urban actors?
- Technology and public spaces: What is the impact of digital technologies on youth participation? How can we balance the opportunities offered by technological innovation with the risk of digital exclusion?
- Interdisciplinary research: How can collaboration between disciplines—ranging from pedagogy to urban planning, sociology to art—contribute to a

more integrated understanding of public spaces as places of learning and participation?

Looking to the future, it is essential to promote greater integration between research, education, and public policies to address urban challenges sustainably and inclusively. In conclusion, this panel invites reflection not only on the opportunities offered by public spaces but also on the shared responsibilities of all involved actors in making them lively, democratic, and meaningful places for young people. The path to greater youth participation requires commitment, innovation, and a collective vision that places the educational and transformative value of the city as a public space at its centre.

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THE B-YOUTH FORUM RESEARCH LAB: YOUTH EMANCIPATION THROUGH RESEARCH. FIRST REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCH APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES

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This study intends to explore the initial phases of a research project focusing on youth participation and public spaces in Milan within the framework of MUSA (Multi-layered Urban Sustainability Action), and more specifically in the context of the B-YOUth forum, a research laboratory dedicated to young people inside the University of Milano-Bicocca. In line with theories of youth geographies and public pedagogy, urban spaces – and particularly public squares – are examined as hubs of democratic participation and continuous learning, as sites where young people's actions and narratives serve as political acts, contributing to democratic citizenship. The research – conducted as part of the B-YOUth Forum activities – has been implemented on youth engagement with the public squares in the Bicocca district. This research adopts a participatory, interdisciplinary, and intergenerational approach to explore how young people engage with urban transformations. Using qualitative methods such as observation, interviews, and audio recordings, enriched by artistic languages, the research allowed for authentic youth participation.

youth; participatory approach; urban squares; research

INTRODUCTION

Youth engagement in public spaces is a critical subject in contemporary social sciences, as it intersects with issues of democracy, urban sustainability, and citizenship (Rogers, 2022). Public spaces, particularly in urban areas, have historically served as arenas for civic expression and democratic participation (Felix de Souza, 2022): in this sense, it becomes particularly interesting to reassess the role of these spaces in the context of rapid urbanization and socio-political change, particularly in relation to younger generations (Smith & Mills, 2019).

This paper aims to present a multidisciplinary research conducted throughout 2024 with young participants, focusing on the theme of youth engagement in shared urban spaces and addressing their involvement and reflections on the theme of public squares as spaces for civic participation. The research was carried out within the

framework of the B-YOUth Forum, which operates as part of the broader MUSA project. MUSA is a multidisciplinary program aimed at fostering sustainable urban development and social innovation through participatory approaches.

The B-YOUth Forum is an interdisciplinary research laboratory for young people aged 14–25. It adopts participatory and research methods to help youth understand societal transitions and engage with urban transformations. Members include high school students, young people from educational services, university students, youth from the civil service, and researchers (PhD students, postdoctoral fellows, and professors). The B-YOUth Forum integrates youth into research processes, fostering collaboration across disciplines (pedagogy, psychology, geography, sociology, and philosophy). Participants co-designed research questions, engage in fieldwork, and contribute to the dissemination of results. This included managing social communication platforms as well as contributing in organizing public events.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Urban public spaces are increasingly recognized as critical arenas for youth engagement and democratic participation. Youth geographies (Jeffrey, 2012) investigate the unique ways young people inhabit and transform these spaces, while pedagogical reflection (Biffi, 2023) emphasizes their role in shaping urban transformations. Following the insights of public pedagogy (Biesta, 2012), public spaces are seen as dynamic contexts for formal, non-formal, and informal education. These spaces not only support the development of democratic citizenship but also position young people's actions and narratives as political acts (Arendt, 2017). This research contributes to understanding these processes by investigating the evolving squares of the Bicocca district as spaces of learning, participation, and transformation through the theoretical lens of Lefebvre's spatial triad (Lefebvre, 2018). By applying this triad, the research aims to examine the evolving squares of the Bicocca district as complex spaces of learning, participation, and transformation. These dimensions of space provide a multifaceted understanding of the urban environment, emphasizing both the intentional design of these spaces by planners (*conceived space*), the way they are experienced by users (*perceived space*), and the lived experiences of youth engaged with these spaces (*lived space*).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

The research employs a qualitative approach (Leavy, 2014), combining conventional methods such as observations, interviews, and audio recordings with arts-informed methods (Cahnmann-Taylor & Sanders-Bustle, 2019). Artistic languages enriched data collection and analysis, providing participants with creative avenues for expressing their experiences and perspectives.

The research team involved 50 young people, divided into three different main groups – affiliated with local educational services (n. 2) and high schools (n. 2) – from February 2024 to October 2024 in weekly research sessions at the University

of Milano-Bicocca. The groups from the educational services worked collaboratively throughout the project and the activities (group n. 1). In contrast, the high school groups (group n. 2 and group n. 3) engaged in the research at different times, following distinct schedules.

3.2 Research activities

The research process unfolds through a structured yet dynamic series of five phases designed to meaningfully engage young participants and foster their active involvement. The project begins with *Engagement and Orientation*, where participants were introduced to the university context and research processes.

Building on these premises, the focus shifted to *Research Object Exploration*, centering on the intersections of youth participation and public spaces. Within this framework, the group delved into the evolving nature of the Bicocca district's squares, exploring their significance as sites of social interaction, democratic engagement, and urban transformation. This phase encouraged participants to critically examine the spaces they inhabit and reflect on their roles within these environments.

The following stage, *Research Question Development*, involved a collaborative effort: together with the young participants, a central research question was formulated: *Are the squares of the Bicocca campus still an opportunity for young people?* This question served as a guiding framework for the subsequent phases of the study, anchoring the participants' reflections and investigative efforts.

With a clear research question, participants moved into *Data Collection*, using qualitative methods, such as interviews, observations, and audiovisual recordings, guided by Lefebvre's spatial triad (Lefebvre, 2018).

- Conceived Space: Semi-structured interviews with key informants – a professor of biology leading the MUSA regeneration project and a municipal councillor overseeing youth policies, CAM, CaG, housing, sport, and gender equality in Municipality 9, Milan – explored urban planners' and policymakers' intentions for Bicocca's squares. Prior workshops trained participants in interview techniques and ethics, contributing to draft the interview questions and organize the sessions. The interviews explored themes such as the relevance of urban squares for youth policies and the municipality's strategic vision for these spaces in the Bicocca district.
- Perceived Space: Linear transects (Buckland et al., 1993) analyzed public squares through micro-waste mapping, revealing activities like social gatherings and meals. Participants took roles in mapping, documenting, and observational tasks, combining individual efforts with collaborative learning to explore narratives and perceptions of these spaces, capturing insights into how users experienced and imagined them.
- Representational Space: Audiovisual interviews (Jacobs, 2016) captured user experiences and perceptions of the squares. Young researchers, organized in groups, conducted on-site interviews, exploring themes like public-

private interactions and aspirations for these spaces. This approach provided rich, user-centered narratives of urban life. The interview questions, collaboratively developed, probed issues such as the interplay between public and private dimensions, the temporal and spatial dynamics of square usage, and potential aspirations for these urban areas.

The final stage, *Preliminary Analysis*, involved the initial interpretation of the collected data. Participants engaged in identifying emerging themes and patterns, laying the groundwork for deeper insights and further analysis. This phase marks a critical step in transforming raw data into meaningful reflections, fostering participants' analytical skills and their capacity to contribute to academic and societal dialogues. Specifically, participants decided to present their findings through a video that illustrated Lefebvre's three dimensions, integrating the insights gained during the research. This strategy served as both a synthesis of the collected data and a creative platform, fostering participants' analytical abilities while enabling them to actively contribute to academic and societal discourse on the research object and topics.

The *Festival GenerAzioni 2024*[1], held in Milan on 10th and 11th October 2024, marked a significant milestone for the research group, serving as a major event to disseminate and discuss the findings of the ongoing study.

The Festival was designed as a platform for the involved young people to take center stage, sharing the insights they had developed through their participation in the research. By presenting their perspectives, they engaged directly with a wide spectrum of stakeholders, including experts and researchers from local, national, and European youth organizations and universities, fostering meaningful dialogue on critical issues such as youth participation, urban transformation, and public spaces.

In addition to the presentations and discussions, the Festival invited high school students and other young peers to actively participate in the event through hands-on activities and guided access to research labs.

During those days workshops and consultations emphasized collaborative reflection, enabling participants to collectively reimagine the role of youth in shaping democratic and inclusive urban environments. Artistic performances and creative exhibits further enriched the event, offering innovative ways to communicate complex ideas and bridging generational and cultural divides.

3.3 Reflections from the research field

As previously anticipated, this year's research examined the complex and multifaceted meanings of youth participation in public spaces, focusing particularly on the squares of the Bicocca district, which are currently undergoing significant transformation. These spaces were analyzed not only as physical locations but, more importantly, as socio-political arenas where young people actively engage with their

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[1] For further details, visit the official website: https://festivalgenerazioni.unimib.it/.

environments, shaping and reshaping narratives of belonging, agency, and citizenship (Biffi, 2023).

Findings reveal several key insights. Firstly, urban squares emerge as dynamic spaces for youth interactions and expressions of citizenship (Middleton, 2018; Amin, 2008). These areas function as informal yet crucial hubs where young people negotiate their identities, articulate their voices, and participate in democratic practices. Through casual gatherings, artistic performances, or spontaneous acts of solidarity, these interactions highlight the squares' potential to foster community and civic engagement. The evolving nature of these spaces further underscores their capacity to accommodate and reflect the shifting needs and aspirations of younger generations (Boccaletti, 2024; Bernini et al., 2019; Biesta, 2012).

Secondly, on a methodological level, the integration of artistic methodologies significantly enriched the research process, particularly by promoting inclusivity and self-expression. By incorporating creative tools such as visual arts, collages, photography, participants articulated their perspectives in ways that transcended traditional academic formats. These methodologies proved especially effective in bridging cultural and linguistic divides, enabling a diverse group of young individuals to contribute authentically to the research. The creative approaches also fostered deeper engagement, as participants connected both emotionally and intellectually with the themes under investigation, as reported by the young participants themselves. What emerged from the reflective activities with the young participants and their feedback at the end of the project is that, through their active participation, they not only developed a deeper understanding of urban spaces but also acquired the skills and confidence needed to propose innovative solutions to contemporary challenges.

This research lab became an educational setting where young participants experienced themselves as active contributors to urban planning and policy discussions, reinforcing their role as co-creators of the cities they inhabit.

These findings emphasize the vital interplay between youth, urban spaces, and participatory methodologies, highlighting the importance of engaging young people as key stakeholders in the ongoing transformation of public spaces. They also underscore the university's significant role in fostering this process. Building on these insights, the research continues to explore the potential of participatory and arts-informed approaches to create more inclusive and sustainable urban environments.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper highlights the potential of participatory approaches to enable young people into critical agents of change in urban spaces. By fostering their ability to read and question their contexts, the research within B-YOUth Forum not only deepened youth engagement but also contributed to creating inclusive urban environments. Furthermore, the Festival GenerAzioni 2024 served as a pivotal moment for sharing these insights and promoting youth voices within decision-making processes. The Festival not only showcased the outcomes of the research but also highlighted the

transformative potential of participatory and arts-informed methods. It empowered young attendees to become active contributors to public discourse, while also providing high school students with a firsthand introduction to the university and its commitment to addressing contemporary societal challenges. In doing so, Festival GenerAzioni 2024 reinforced the importance of co-creating knowledge, fostering youth agency, and inspiring the next generation to actively engage with issues of sustainability, citizenship, and urban innovation (Ratotti & Biffi, 2024).

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YOUNG PEOPLE AND FONDAZIONE PI-NAC: REAPPROPRIATING HERITAGE TO TRANSFORM THE MUSEUM

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This article highlights the innovative experience of engaging young people in the public space led by Fondazione PInAC in Rezzato, Italy. Dedicated to children's creative expression, the museum preserves and exhibits their drawings through thematic displays. In alignment with ICOM's latest definition of Museum, Fondazione PInAC embodies the principles of inclusivity and community engagement by actively involving young people in cultural heritage initiatives. This effort aligns also with the growing call in critical heritage studies to include underrepresented groups, such as children and youth, in shaping cultural narratives. Hence, for its 2024 exhibition, the museum initiated a participatory design process with two third-grade classes from a Human Sciences high school. Students were invited to explore the museum's archives, learn about the evolution of children's graphic expression, curate a reasoned selection of creative works and reorganize the exhibition space, bringing their perspectives into the process. This collaborative project, integrated into Italy's educational policies, empowers youth as active contributors to cultural heritage. By valuing young people's input, the initiative not only enhances civic engagement but also fosters a sense of care and responsibility for cultural preservation and underscores the potential of schools and museums to serve as platforms for dialogue and inclusion.

young people participation; children's drawing; children's heritage; museum; public space.

INTRODUCTION

This article will present and examine the virtuous experience of involving young people in public space carried out by Fondazione PInAC – Pinacoteca Internazionale dell'Età Evolutiva Aldo Cibaldi in Rezzato, Italy. This institution is a museum dedicated to children's expressiveness which collects, catalogues and promotes children's and young people's drawings by displaying them to the public through thematic exhibitions.

During the 26th ICOM General Conference held in Prague in 2022 the definition of museum was updated, highlighting, among other aspects, that it is a space open to the public, accessible and inclusive, operating with community participation. Indeed, the importance of Fondazione PInAC lies not only in the custodianship of the material cultural heritage produced by children and young people (Iuso, 2022), but

also in their continuous involvement in heritage work (Zuccoli, 2022). Today, in fact, critical heritage studies affirm the need to include more of the underrepresented groups in the cultural heritages of nations, among them the social group of youth (Harrison, Dias, & Kristiansen, 2023; Sparrman, 2022).

In the process of building the exhibition that inaugurated in the fall of 2024, Fondazione PInAC has chosen to undertake a participatory design process together with two third-grade secondary school classes, called upon to work on the heritage – fully digitalized – of drawings and propose a reasoned selection starting from their own knowledge, experiences and interests (Sparrman, 2019) with respect to the given theme. This project is part of the Pathways for Transversal Skills and Career Guidance (PCTO), as established by current Italian ministerial regulations.

Giving young people the chance to design a cultural proposal aimed at their peers but also at children and adults means recognizing their dignity of existence in an institutional context, highlighting the need to enhance the meanings they attribute (Colazzo, Del Gobbo, 2022) to an international and historical heritage, on which adults have worked over time, and on which adults have mainly contributed their point of view.

1. FONDAZIONE PINAC AND ITS CULTURAL HERITAGE

UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, was founded in Paris in 1945 in the aftermath of World War II, with the mission of promoting global peace, solidarity, and understanding among nations. With the adoption of the World Heritage Convention in 1972, member states committed for the first time at the international level to protect the world's cultural and natural heritage. This heritage encompasses all creations of humanity or nature that hold exceptional universal value, irrespective of their location. In 2003, this vision was expanded with the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which included cultural traditions, crafts, and expressions passed down within communities as assets to be protected and promoted.

With this legislative framework in place, this article shifts its focus to an unconventional form of heritage: children's drawings. Drawing, as a spontaneous activity shared by children worldwide, can be regarded as a significant testimony of human creativity and cultural identity. For instance, Fondazione PInAC, the house of world children's drawings, serves as an archive of international children's expressive works. Founded in the mid-20th century by school principal Aldo Cibaldi, the collection has grown to include over 8,000 drawings from 79 countries. Through thematic exhibitions and creative workshops, the museum not only preserves these works but also empowers children as active cultural contributors, highlighting their role as creators rather than mere reproducers of culture.

Although they are not particularly numerous, there are several museums internationally that, similarly to Fondazione PInAC, are concerned with enhancing the cultural heritage produced by children. However, it is usually adults (Sparrman & Aarsand, 2022) who deal with materials and objects that relate to the child's life in

society and make decisions about their preservation and enhancement. For this reason, heritage studies propose to differentiate between the cultural heritage of childhood (*Childhood heritage*) – in which the cultural objects that are collected tend to be materials used but not produced by children such as toys or school materials – and the cultural heritage of children (*Children's heritage*), which would include the authentic and spontaneous productions during childhood, such as drawings (Ibid.).

In contemporary critical heritage studies (Colazzo & Del Gobbo, 2022) affirm the need to include more subaltern groups in the cultural heritages of nations. One of these groups can be considered to be children:

> Children's heritage, for example, drawings and paintings made by children, are social, cultural, and political expressions enacted in and through situated practices (Sparrman 2014). The unique position in which children are placed, of being simultaneously social and cultural actors and yet dependent on the adult world for having a children's cultural heritage, provides an opportunity to reflect upon the archiving of any subordinated group (cf. Smith 2021), and even more so on the archiving of what we usually take for granted when the cultural heritage of subordinate groups is preserved for the future. Children highlight the complexity of constituting the past while simultaneously also being the present and the future (Deleuze 1989) (Sparrman & Aarsand, 2022, p. 203).

Inevitably, the adult dealing with children's heritage infuses his or her subjectivity into the management of the material itself (Sparrman & Aarsand, 2022): the adult decides, for example, what can be preserved in an archive or how to classify the material, and has power over the choice of involvement of actors who may have a say, such as archivists, researchers, policymakers and children or young people (Aggleton, 2018). It is particularly interesting to assess the voice of the latter within archives that relate to their cultures and also within the decision-making processes within the institution (Ibid.). According to Sparrman and Aarsand (2022), working on the archive of children's drawings is for the adult a political act that has repercussions on how the children's heritage can be accessed not only by researchers but also more generally by the citizenry. Since political choices about children's material can perpetuate subjective, adult-centered ideas about childhood, careful reflection on the adult's role in promoting a heritage that does not belong to him appears necessary. This issue is a central focus of the ongoing doctoral research "*Children's Drawing and the Heritagization of Childhood Cultures*" in cooperation between the University of Milan-Bicocca and Fondazione PInAC.

2. STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S HERITAGE

2.1. The collaborative development process of the new exhibition

For the reasons outlined above, for this project Fondazione PInAC opted to collaborate with two third-year classes from a Human Sciences high school in Romano di Lombardia, leveraging the institutional framework of the PCTO program.

The Pathways for Transversal Skills and Career Guidance (PCTO) is an educational

initiative aimed at higher secondary school students, with the primary objective to bridge the gap between academic learning and practical experience by introducing students to the world of work and higher education. The program fosters the development of essential transversal skills—such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving—through hands-on fieldwork and real-world engagement.

The collaboration with Fondazione PInAC provided students with an opportunity to actively participate in a structured, experiential learning process. This approach not only enhanced their understanding of the theoretical concepts studied in the classroom but also enabled them to apply these concepts in practical, meaningful contexts, ensuring a more holistic and well-rounded educational experience.

Firstly, students were invited to visit the museum and were provided with an immersive introduction to its unique collection and curatorial practices.

During their guided tour, they were encouraged not only to observe the drawings on display but also to critically analyze how these expressive works were arranged within the exhibition space: they explored how lighting, spatial design, and thematic organization contributed to the narrative and overall impact of the presentation.

Following this initial exploration, students were granted special access to the museum's archive—a restricted area typically closed to the public – to examine how the drawings were stored and preserved over the years.

To deepen their understanding, students were trained on the evolution of the graphic-expressive language, in order to provide useful tools to implement a selection not only guided by their own aesthetic taste. The session covered key concepts, tracing the stages of creative expression from early scribbles to more sophisticated forms of representation (Golomb, 2004) and highlighting the cultural and emotional significance of children's art as a reflection of their perspectives and experiences (Zuccoli, 2020). Through this combination of theoretical knowledge and hands-on exposure, students were equipped with a comprehensive understanding of the museum's collection, laying a strong foundation for their active involvement in the project.

The institutional mandate was the following:

- Investigate the theme of "exploration": through an initial brainstorming session led at school, students explored various dimensions of exploration—ranging from physical journeys and adventures to intellectual curiosity, emotional discovery, and cultural exchange.
- Select the drawings: from the museum's extensive digital archive of 8,000 children's drawings, students carefully curated a selection of approximately 40 pieces that best captured the essence of exploration. The chosen works reflected diverse perspectives, styles, and cultural contexts, offering a multifaceted view of how children around the world and in different historical times interpreted and expressed this theme.
- Submit a proposal: with the selected works in place, the next step was to prepare a draft presentation for the museum's Scientific Committee with a

detailed vision for the exhibition, highlighting the rationale behind the selection.

- Conduct bibliographical research: to complement the exhibition and its catalogue, students were tasked with curating a bibliography to enhance the audience's understanding of the theme at both adult and child levels.

Tab. 1. Summary of the main stages of the PCTO Project work in collaboration with Fondazione PInAC during the school year 2023/2024.

Time	Activity
January 2024	First visit to Fondazione PInAC: guided tour and theoretical lesson.
February 2024	Students submitted their first proposal.
March 2024	Fondazione PInAC held the first feedback session.
April 2024	Students submitted their second proposal.
May 2024	Fondazione PInAC held the second feedback session and provided a questionnaire.
September 2024	Inauguration of the new exhibition followed by the final feedback session.
September 2024 – May 2025	Duration of the new exhibition at Fondazione PInAC.

2.2. Results and future perspectives

As outlined in Table 1, Fondazione PInAC distributed a questionnaire to the students to gather insights into their level of engagement with the project, as well as their reflections on drawing as cultural heritage and their perspectives on the museum's future directions. The students' feedback presents a range of both positive and critical reflections on their involvement in the PCTO project. For example, one student expressed appreciation for the opportunity to engage with Fondazione PInAC, noting that it provided young people with a rare chance to explore cultural institutions they might not typically encounter. Another student reflected on the difficulty of asserting their own ideas while respecting the viewpoints of others, demonstrating an awareness of the complexities inherent in teamwork and collaboration. However, one student expressed uncertainty regarding the project's overall impact, suggesting that its success could only be determined upon the exhibition's completion. Lastly, one response highlighted the importance of enthusiasm, respect, and empathy within the group, emphasizing that finding common ground is essential for successful collaboration. Overall, the feedback provides valuable insights into the necessity of balancing engagement, clear communication, and collaborative efforts to enhance the project experience for all participants. In response to the students' feedback, the exhibition space was thoughtfully reimagined and reorganized. Based on the input gathered through the questionnaire, certain panels were removed, and the spacing between the displayed drawings was increased. This redesign aimed to improve the visitor experience, particularly for larger groups, such as schoolchildren, allowing them to engage more comfortably with the creative works and embark on their own discoveries through direct

interaction.

In September 2024, the exhibition "*Maps: Traces, Lines, and Paths Redraw the World*" was inaugurated at Fondazione PInAC. The collaborative work created with the students was featured in the exhibition catalogue, accompanied by commentary from the professors, and the names of the participating students were included. Of particular significance in this context is the participatory process (Colazzo, Del Gobbo, 2022) within a public institution, which serves to activate young people as engaged citizens and encourages them to take an active interest in cultural heritage. This approach underscores the crucial role of schools and cultural institutions, such as museums, in fostering dialogue with young people, enabling them to express their ideas and perspectives on the uses and functions of public space in the cultural sphere. This is in accordance with the principles outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Adolescent (United Nations, 1989), which Fondazione PInAC is committed to upholding and promoting.

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A NEED TO NURTURE PUBLIC NATURE: URBAN PUBLIC SPACE AS A CO-EDUCATOR FOR YOUTH

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Research on the relationship between young people and the city is often normative, as there is an implicit ideal pedagogical environment present. However, this disregards how the city acts as an everyday pedagogical context. By addressing the city as a co-educator, we open up this debate. Building on the results from a case study with young people in Brussels, we illuminate that the city as a co-educator emits various images of what constitutes a good society and of young people's place within society. We argue that this is related to three intertwined dynamics: the loss of a public, the loss of the public and the loss of publicness. To conclude, we advocate that there is a need to nurture public nature to address these dynamics and strengthen the social position of young people in the city.

 public pedagogy; democracy; public space; citizenship

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been growing interest in the experiences of young people living in urban contexts (Powell, 2024). Within this research, two main perspectives can generally be distinguished: the city as either a Big Bad Wolf or a Good Fairy. The first perspective views the city as an unfavourable context for the socialisation of young people, portraying it as a familiar but unpredictable threat (De Visscher & Sacré, 2017). In contrast, the second perspective sees the city as a source of opportunities and a supportive factor for a healthy development (Powell, 2024).

What both perspectives share, is a normative assessment of the urban environment as either negative or positive (De Visscher & De Bie, 2008). Both perspectives are rooted in an implicit pedagogical ideal based on notions of what constitutes good education. This in itself is not a problem. What is problematic, though, is that this ideal is rarely made explicit, leaving it intangible for critical debate.

To move beyond this dichotomy, this contribution focuses on how the city actually shapes the relationship between young people and society. Therefore, we will present a view on the city that defines it as an important socialising context (De Visscher & De Bie, 2008) within which urban neighbourhoods are regarded as co-

educators (De Visscher, 2008). To support this perspective, findings from fieldwork conducted in 2023 are presented. This research included observations, interviews and focus groups with 53 young people (18 girls and 35 boys), 4 youth workers and 5 policymakers in 3 neighbourhoods in Brussels.

1. THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AS A CO-EDUCATOR

The concept of the neighbourhood as a co-educator stems from a social-pedagogical understanding of the city, positioning the neighbourhood not merely as a background against which education takes place, but as a pedagogical agent in itself (De Visscher & De Bie, 2008). This perspective explores how and to what extent the urban environment organises the relationship between young people and society from an educational point of view (Hämäläinen, 2013). More specifically, it focuses on the conditions of citizenship and community into which young people are being socialised as a result of both the physical and social construction of the environment in which they grow up and their own actions within it (De Visscher & De Bie, 2008). This way, the city shapes the actual conditions of young people's citizenship (De Bie, 2015), as it both creates and restricts opportunities for individual, social and cultural development and expression. By engaging in daily interactions within the urban environment, young people can get to know the meanings, rules and values of their community and are able to influence them. As such, the urban environment emits to young people a certain idea of what constitutes a good society and what their own position within this society is (De Visscher & De Bie, 2008).

2. DISCUSSION

Adopting this perspective, the research in Brussels illustrates how the city acts as a co-educator in diverse ways towards a variety of young people. Through their daily interactions with others and societal institutions within the neighbourhood, young people gain insights into society and their own place within it. *What* they learn, however, varies depending on the neighbourhood and the young person. Nevertheless, a common thread seems to be the loss of *a public*, *the public* and *publicness*, all of which are intertwined and influence young people's relation to society.

1.1. Different neighbourhoods, different ideals of a good society

Within different neighbourhoods, distinct ways of living together seem to be prevailing. In some neighbourhoods, the private sphere seems to be dominant. Within this sphere, private networks and commercial and individual interests prevail (Lofland, 1989). One way this was evident, was in the way (young) people used public space for commercial use or as a means to travel between private islands. They could mainly be seen as *consumers* of public space (Biesta, 2012) and services. In contrast, in other neighbourhoods, the parochial sphere characterised by the community, it's interests and the prevailing norms and values seems to be dominant (Lofland, 1989). This was apparent, for example, in a strong identification with the neighbourhood:

> There is nevertheless a kind of group identity of "we from Peterbos". We have people here who left the neighbourhood, who moved out because the flats were too small and so on. And who still miss that. Those keep constantly coming to the neighbourhood.
> (Interview youth worker Peterbos, 6 December 2023)

It is important to relate to these distinct lifeworlds, but at the same time, the desirability of the related norms and values should also be questioned. For example, neighbourhoods with a strong parochial sphere are characterised by *warm solidarity*, delivered through personal contact, often in an informal way (Mostowska & Hermans, 2023). This is in some way a good value, yet it is also emblematic of the lack of *cold, formal solidarity* based on rights and grounded in legal procedures (Mostowska & Hermans, 2023). It is an expression of the failing welfare state (Cantillon, 2020) and as such, aligns with feelings of being left behind by the public services and of being stigmatised by the outer world. Feelings which are very much present in these neighbourhoods. On the other side, the individual focus characterising other neighbourhoods could also be questioned. This is often seen as neutral, as it aligns with the dominant neoliberal model in society. This way, it is often put forward as a standard for all youth. This is evident in the focus on active citizenship in youth work and in the way public space is designed and monitored to prevent non-commercialised 'hanging out' (de St Croix & Doherty, 2023). This, however, pushes out certain users and uses, as was evident for some young people in the study. It is thus important to keep questioning the apparent neutrality of ways of living together, even when there are no apparent issues.

1.2. Loss of a public and loss of the public

What was clear in our case study, is that for some young people, the neighbourhood brings with it mostly experiences of being-a-citizen. For others though, it serves as a constant reminder of inequality. Experiences of not-being-a-citizen prevail. These sensations are partly impacted by differing experiences regarding neighbourhood dynamics such as insecurity, spatial claims or stigmatisation and whether or not their ways of being present are in line with the ruling norms and values within the neighbourhood. Indeed, some young people experience restrictive actions on a daily basis, because they question acceptable ways of being present or because of stigmatisation:

> [...] or even, for example, when they go to Stockel, they get insulted or when they walk in the street or on the tram they make too much noise, whereas sometimes they tell me "we're young people, we have a laugh on public transport and we avoid it. People turn round and look at us just because we're either tanned, black or white and we have a group. We also have our own way of dressing". The fact that you're in training, you can quickly be misperceived.
> (Interview youth workers Stockel, 26 September 2023)

These sentiments are also affected by diverse experiences with and trust in public authorities and institutions, such as the police or the social welfare system. As mentioned before, some young people feel as if public authorities are failing them.

Some of the experiences of not-being-a-citizen can be related to 'being young':

> They have the perception that we are annoying them, we are no longer allowed to play in places in front of their door. We pose a disgrace because we play in front of their door, but the rules here are that we can make noise until 9pm or 10pm… but when it's only 6pm, sometimes complaints follow.
> (R2, focus group Stockel, 20 September 2023)

The resulting processes of exclusion indicate that the presence of some young people as *a public* is under pressure. This reflects their social position (Hill & Bessant, 1999), as established power relations are perpetuated. Furthermore, it also emits expectations of *good behaviour* and of a *good young person,* affirming the prevailing norms and values. Additionally, the results also indicate that it is especially challenging for (Muslim) girls as they do not have the same access- and activity rights as boys (De Backer, 2020). This is often related to spatial claims of men and resulting feelings of insecurity. Consequently, they feel as if they are pushed away and sometimes feel as if policy makers do not really care. Next to that, girls' position in public space is also under pressure due to gender-stereotyped expectations (Pyyri & Tani, 2016), social control and gossip (De Backer, 2019). All of this puts girls as *a public* under pressure and perpetuates their unequal social position. However, there is no clear-cut answer to this issue. After all, maintaining security and exercising control over other groups is in itself also an expression of power that can involve exclusionary dynamics (Crane & Dee, 2001). These actions should thus be used thoughtfully.

Furthermore, the results also indicate that often, feelings of not-being-a-citizen also relate to being part of a disadvantaged community. No matter how great the sense of belonging to a neighbourhood might be, growing up in a disadvantaged neighbourhood always seems to lead to at least some frustrations over not being respected by broader society. Several factors such as poor housing, lack of interest from policy makers and stigma impact on this. As a result, (young) people seem to lose faith in *the public institutions* and *responsibility*. All of this indicates that it remains important to make quality public space *available, accessible* and *usable* to a wide range of (young) people. Yet, it also shows the importance of not merely focusing on space and youth. An in-depth approach transcends the youth domain and requires structural interventions related to various social problems.

1.3. Loss of publicness
What all neighbourhoods share, is a certain consensus on *who* can be present and *in which way* they can do so, fed by expectations of *ideal behaviour* by *ideal citizens* in an *ideal public space*. There is thus always a clear dominant order, despite manifesting itself in various ways within and between neighbourhoods. This is propagated by ways of direct (e.g. police, infrastructure) and social control (e.g. spatial claims, gossip). This way, public space becomes a hegemonic arena which reproduces existing inequalities and manages the status quo (Davet, 2022). There is no space for *dissensus*, acts or events that are explicitly out of place (Biesta, 2012).

Therefore, in each of the neighbourhoods, the *publicness* of public space is under pressure. Indeed, as soon as public spaces are homogenised by prescribing and policing *who* can do *what*, the conditions under which action is possible and freedom can appear are eradicated (Biesta, 2012). Thus, the freedom to act, "to take an initiative, to begin, to set something in motion" (Arendt, 1958, p. 177), the foundation of publicness, is lost. This is also reflected in the way some participants look at institutionalised initiatives to act as a 'free space':

> [...] And a place where you can express yourself. That's not just in terms of noise, but I think, gosh... [...] but for example if you do graffiti that you can have a place where you can paint with young people. [...] So, to be able to have a context also that is more respectful to young people. Same also with skateboards. I think there really had to be a place where they can skate, the young people think that's cool to go there and be on the street. And the people on the street who usually find that inconvenient, so they're also going to like that they're not there anymore. Such places where they have the freedom... to express their hobbies and youth language.
> (R7, focus group Brabant District, 21 May 2023)

This confirms that this openness is not present within public space. In a way, you could argue that these settings act as *heterotopias*, places which enclose subjects or behaviours which do not comply with the prevailing social norm. These heterotopias are 'acceptable islands' for young people (Pitsikali & Parnell, 2019). As a result, however, young people grow up disconnected from the public sphere and democracy, as it is only at the moment of dissensus that democracy takes place (Biesta, 2012).

CONCLUSION

In general, this loss of a public, the public and publicness indicates that there is a *need to nurture public nature*. Whilst this will not solve the issues mentioned above, it can at least help to address the status quo. This does not mean that anything goes or that control measures are not an option, but rather that they cannot be separated from a debate on where people can, may and want to be present and the social conditions in which they live. Nurturing the public nature involves a public pedagogy concerned with reconnecting people to the public. On the one hand, this involves a concern for the publicness of public space and the possibility of actors and events to become public. To do so, educational agents should introduce dissensus in public space (Biesta, 2012). On the other hand, it also involves addressing structural inequalities. Therefore 'private troubles' should continuously be transformed into 'public issues' (Biesta, 2012). This is essential, not only for the feeling of being-a-citizen, but also for addressing many of the aforementioned issues such as unsafety, which are often tied to social inequality and social problems.

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INTEGRATING MULTIPLE SELVES: BRITISH-BANGLADESHI WOMEN'S CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'BEING MUSLIM'

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This paper explores the main themes in the constructions of Muslim identities of British-born women of Bangladeshi origins in UK Higher Education and the processes that shape them. Drawing on interviews with 21 women, I show how their multiple, intersecting positionings in terms of ethnic background, nationality and gender inform the meanings and value they attach to being Muslim. Identification as Muslim was presented, in contrast to Bangladeshi and British identification, as enabling the integration of multiple, valued aspects of identity. Islam was constructed as transcending and encompassing both ethnicity and nationality. Specific discourses of Islamic practices and norms were also used to contest and re-negotiate gendered expectations and affirm valued models of femininity.

Islam; Muslim; youth; women; identities.

INTRODUCTION

In the UK as in other European countries, policy and media representations of Muslim communities and identities have long portrayed them as problematic, which is reflected in widespread perceptions of Islamic values and practices as antithetic to those of so-called 'British society' (Casey 2016; Jones & Unsworth 2022). This paper draws on qualitative research with 21 young women of British-born Bangladeshi background attending university in London to explore the significance and meanings these women attributed to their Muslim identities. The research used in-depth interviews and photo-elicitation techniques, where participants were asked to select a picture which represented what it meant for them to be Bangladeshi, British and Muslim. The data were analysed through an intersectional lens, considering the multiple fields these women engaged in and how the mutual interplay of class, ethnicity, religion and gender informed their outlooks and practices.

Findings highlight that Islamic faith is integral to these women's conceptions of who they are, with its appeal resting on enabling a positive and coherent sense of self as Bangladeshi young women living in Britain. Islamic faith is presented as transcending the partiality and tensions between ethnicity and nationality as dimensions of identity. It also provides the discursive tools to contest and negotiate competing gender expectations expressed by 'mainstream British society' on the one hand and their 'Bangladeshi community' on the other, while affirming valued gender roles.

The analysis reveals that what it means to be Muslim is informed by participants' experiences and interactions such as those that take place through participation in Higher Education (HE), thus drawing attention to the diverse, dynamic and experientially informed character of Muslim identities.

1. TRANSCENDING ETHNICITY AND NATIONALITY

Except for the only participant who was brought up in a 'mixed religion' family and presented herself as not religious, all participants described being Muslim as what mostly defined them, above and beyond ethnicity and nationality (Archer 2002; Tyrer & Ahmad 2006). Shay, for example, describes her Muslim identity as a constant anchor throughout her life, providing stability amidst cultural and class-based challenges:

Figure 1. Picture selected by Shay to represent her Muslim identity.

> I wanted to take a picture of a shadow or of my back because it's just who I am, it's wherever I go. [...] I'm not that religious, it's just I'm Muslim and every part of me Muslim. [...] Muslim has been the thing that's been constant throughout my life, that's the only thing. So, without it I don't know what I would be. (Shay)

Shay moved with her family from the inner city to the suburbs, and from a primary school with most pupils of South-Asian Muslim, working-class background to a secondary school with very few. She mentioned changing 'a lot' to fit in, eventually disassociating from what she defined as 'the standard Bengali', which she constructed in racialised and classed terms. In contrast, and precisely because of these tensions and fractures, she presents being Muslim as 'the only constant throughout my life', to the point where she states that 'without it, I don't know what I would be'.

This understanding of Islamic faith as integral to one's identity resonated among participants, as it appeared to offer interpretative tools and discourses that enabled establishing a confident and coherent sense of self, by simultaneously reconciling and challenging multiple social distinctions. Sadia emphasises the distinction between Islamic values and cultural traditions, presenting Islam as universally applicable and shaping what it means to be British or Bangladeshi:

> Before I am either British or Bangladeshi, I would say I'm Muslim first. Because within Islam there shouldn't be a notion of culture, it's not built on a construction of cultural traditions or anything like that, so it's meant to be neutral from any of such factors. [...] Whether Moroccan or Turkish or white, being Muslim shouldn't be affected by any of those factors. (Sadia)

Labiba contrasts the inclusivity of Islam with the exclusivity of national and ethnic identity. While her faith consistently informs her practices, thus shaping 'everything else', ethnicity and nationality are perceived as contingent and divisive constructs:

> It shapes everything else. [...] The way I am as a person, as a Muslim, would shape what it means to be a British citizen, so being a good person, helping the community. [...] Your citizenship or your culture is something that means nothing to me personally. [...] It's just something that's been socially constructed anyway and decides how we all live in different nations. (Labiba)

Participants described being Muslim as a unifying framework, integrated into daily life, and transcending geographical and cultural boundaries, in contrast to the tensions they perceived in relation to their British and Bangladeshi identities. Sadia highlights the internal conflict that stems from not feeling fully accepted as British because of her Bangladeshi origins, despite her nationality. Her account reveals that identification in terms of ethnicity can also be problematic, as although it defies assimilation, it lacks symbolic currency among the younger generations of British-born Bangladeshis:

> My friend put up this statement, that if you embrace your Bangladeshi culture there's that stigma that you're like a fasci, you're backwards. But if you don't, you're then like a coconut. So, it's very hard to find that balance, because a lot of us are now British Bengalis so we have been born and brought up here. [...] My Bengali culture is inherited, it's something that I've accepted and it's always going to be there. But British it's a bit more hostile, sometimes it's not that accepting, sometimes I have to change in order to follow suit. (Sadia)

In pointing to the need to 'change' to be accepted by 'British society', Sadia draws attention to how 'either – or' discourses, where 'being British' is constructed as requiring assimilation and distancing from one's ethnic identity, make identification with 'Britishness' more difficult and fraught with emotional strain.

Similarly, the image that Kanta chose to represent what it meant for her to be British expresses the conflict she felt in relation to her British identity. She explains that this is due to constantly having to justify herself as a Muslim and prove her allegiance to Britain and British values, as if these were incompatible with Islamic faith:

Figure 2. Picture selected by Kanta to represent her British identity.
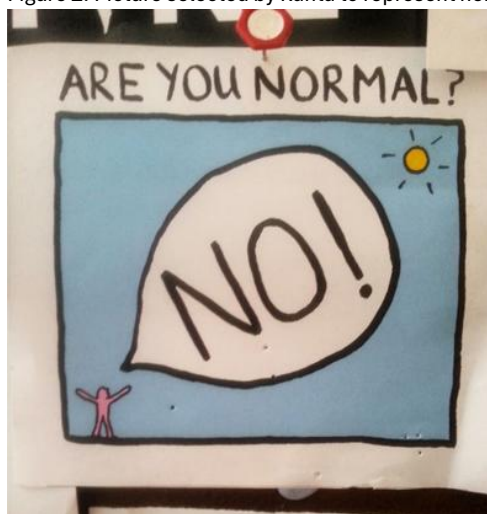
> There's that sort of constant conflict of having to justify myself and say I am British. [...] The reason why I chose that [picture] was partly to show the confusion that I'm going through and also sort of resistance to that question, 'are you British?', and I can essentially say 'no' back to their face and be like 'no, what do you want me to say'. [...] Like when David Cameron was talking about the supposedly British values of free speech, I thought that's very much a Muslim value as well, so why can't it be together? (Kanta)

Participants contrasted the divisiveness of ethnic and national identities with Islam's emphasis on unity and equality. Jamila and Labiba both draw on the idea of a global 'brotherhood' of believers, the Ummah, which unites all Muslims as part of a single community irrespective of where they are and where they are from (Hoque 2015). Labiba further describes this profession of solidarity and kindness as extending beyond the Muslim community to include all people:

Figure 3. Picture selected by Labiba to represent her Muslim identity.

> That circle represented unity. [...] It's one of the foundations of being a Muslim, being close to your Muslim brothers and sisters. Not just Muslim but being close to your community as well, so your neighbours and everyone. [...] That's one of the things that you see when you go to things like university, it's like you're unified as all these different people, different cultures, different religions. (Labiba)

Labiba's reflection evidences how participation in HE shapes her construction of what it means for her to be Muslim, testifying to the dynamic and experientially informed character of the meanings attached to categories of social identity such as religion, nationality and ethnicity.

2. NEGOTIATING GENDER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

Except from the only non-Muslim, all participants wore the hijab and presented this as a personal choice, which their parents did not influence, and which contrasted for some with their mothers' who did not wear the veil. Some explicitly mentioned being influenced by seeing others who embodied an image of what it meant to be a Muslim woman which they valued. Zainab spoke for example about the 'older girls' she used to see at the Mosque and who inspired her to wear the hijab, who were 'medics and dentists', highlighting how the material and symbolic position of those who wear it shape the connotations attached to the veil.

Sultana recounts how wearing the hijab enhances her self-respect and the respect she receives from others. She explained how her decision to wear the hijab in the summer before entering HE had been influenced by the recent passing of her grandmother, who would have always wanted her to wear the veil, and by seeing university as 'a new chapter' in her life, where she could start afresh and construct a different self. She associates her previous look with a specifically racialised construction of femininity ('like your typical white girl'), and contrasts this with the image of herself as a respectable and respected woman that is enabled by Islamic clothing:

> I used to dress like your typical white girl, showing skin for any occasion. I used to colour my hair constantly. [...] I do prefer wearing the headscarf a lot more because I am respected a lot more, by my family but also by strangers on the street. [...] The way I dress I think that's how I see myself, as a warm-hearted woman, and I am respected by any other people who walks down the street. (Sultana)

Similarly, Labiba presents being Muslim as entailing a particular kind of 'modest' femininity, in contrast to what is seen as the prevailing norm of 'going around showing everything'. Her account reveals the processes of identity negotiation these women engage in in relation to the competing demands that 'British society' and the 'Bangladeshi community' are perceived to express:

> If we go out covered up, I feel like that's showing my Muslim identity, and that is defying the status quo of going around showing everything. [...] Modesty is my Muslim identity. [...] Rather than on the one hand having your own community saying you're not covered up enough, and then on the other hand they are telling you you're covered up too much. (Labiba)

Participants often contrasted Islamic precepts with the restrictiveness of Bangladeshi 'culture' (Williams & Vashi 2007). Limitations to participation in education and employment, and in living and marriage arrangements, were presented as specifically 'cultural', while the teachings and principles of Islam were seen as enabling and encouraging autonomous and emancipated gender roles. Pavi reflects on how living in the UK allows her to participate in HE and have a career, as opposed to living in Bangladesh where she might be expected to be married and have children. She stresses however that this would be due to the 'Bangladeshi culture' rather than to religion, as in Islam women are in fact allowed to work:

> Even though in Islam, in our religion, us girls are allowed to work, but the Bengali culture deprives us from it. [...] So, if I was back in [Bangladesh], I would probably be married with kids right now. But being British allowed me to still study and still be single and think about my career rather than getting married and settling. (Pavi)

In a similar vein, Rani describes the difficulties she might face in pursuing a career in science communication that involved working in Bangladesh, which she was considering after university. She worries that, as a woman relating with men, 'they might not take her seriously', implying that in Bangladesh working is not seen as something that women do. She then refers to Islam as encouraging women to 'increase their education and careers', and to examples of Muslim women working in important fields, to contest these views and argue for the compatibility of her career aspirations with religious precepts:

> A woman working, it's not easy for her, especially when she has to interact with men. Like they might not take her seriously for one thing. [...] Muslim women have always, at least in history, they've always been encouraged to learn and to teach and to increase their education and their careers as well. Like there was a lady who, I think she used to make astronomical equipment, there were various examples of merchants, lawyers, judges, so I don't see why that should be a problem. (Rani)

Participants invoked the primacy of Islam over 'culture' to challenge existing gendered norms. Hamida, for instance, describes norms according to which women should not be living on their own or chose their husband as 'Asian cultural', while stressing that this is allowed by Islamic religion. She explains how her parents refer to the superiority of Islam over 'culture' to justify the possibility for her to live on her own while going to university:

> Culturally she might be doing something wrong like she's not living with her family, but Islamicly it's absolutely fine. [...] That's why I'm glad my parents bring that in to shut people up, because obviously for them it should be also Islam that is higher than their cultural stuff. [...] Another example about culture, say it's acceptable for a girl to have an arranged marriage but it's not for her to find someone herself. But in Islam it's acceptable to have both. [...] Hindus do the same, so it's not a religious thing, it's a cultural thing. (Hamida)

CONCLUSIONS

This paper explored how the British-born women of Bangladeshi origins who participated in this research articulated their understandings of Islam and its significance as a source of identity. In line with previous research with young people of minority ethnic origins and Islamic faith, findings confirm the importance of being Muslim to these women's sense of self (Archer 2002; Tyrer & Ahmad 2006). Their narratives show how Islamic faith can offer interpretative tools and discourses that enable managing some of the tensions they experience in relation to their racialised and gendered positionings, thereby constructing for themselves and presenting to others a coherent and valued identity. Islam is seen as a fundamental ethic promoting universal values and beliefs, which are associated with no national or ethnic 'culture' and are thus applicable to all. In contrast to the divisions and discrimination that ethnicity and nationality are viewed to engender, it is presented as promoting unity and equality. Being Muslim provides a source of identity that is alternative to, and critical of, identification as British where this is perceived to entail racialised hierarchies of power. Contrary to Bangladeshi 'culture', Islam is considered progressive and has a strong symbolic currency among Bangladeshi peers and elders. This enables these women to draw on its principles to challenge 'mainstream British' as well as 'Bangladeshi cultural' gender expectations, with the first being seen as excessively sexualised while the latter as too restrictive. Far from being monolithic and static, the meanings attached to Islamic faith, like those attributed to British nationality and Bangladeshi ethnicity, are shown to be dynamic, contextual and relational, as they are shaped through experiences taking place from specific gendered, classed and racialised social positionings.

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FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT: AWARENESS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF PREJUDICE AMONG YOUNG ROMA AND ADOLESCENTS THROUGH AN ACTION RESEARCH

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From an international project (TRACER) funded by the European Commission's Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values Programme, this paper presents reflections from an action-research study involving groups of Roma and non-Roma youth in Italy, Portugal and Poland, in the construction of a shared memory of the Holocaust of Roma minorities in Europe. Reconstructing this moment in history means recovering a part of the unknown events of the persecution of these populations in Europe. For young Roma and Sinti, being aware of the cultural process that led to the creation of the extermination camps and how the concept of diversity defined on the basis of 'race' spread throughout Europe, allows them to deconstruct the stereotypes of the present and contributes to rebuild a culture of respect and rights.

Youth; Roma communities; Holocaust; Prejudice

INTRODUCTION

In 1985, De Gregori, Italian singer-songwriter, launched a song with an emblematic title and contents: 'La storia siamo noi' ('We Are the History'). The song is also an appeal to responsibility, memory and civic awareness. De Gregori emphasises how 'no one should feel excluded', reiterating that history is not just a narrative of a few, but belongs to everyone, since everyone, contributes to writing it. The concept is not to be taken for granted. Indeed, the historical documentation we have today is affected by the dominant political power during the course of events, and also by the power relationships in place at the time of studying history.

What we call history is hardly ever a disinterested effort to narrate events, but it is a narrative based on conscious choices so that later generations can read past events with a specific point of view.

The construction of knowledge is not neutral, but political, based on values. Often the official, better-known history is flanked by a silent, sometimes unwritten history of people who do not belong to the majority groups and who have not had the power to narrow their own story and that of the community they belong to. This history not

only remains hidden, but also risks succumbing before a more shared collective narrative, because it is the majority culture that defines and uses the tools of meaning-making.

History has not only the function of storytelling but also that of supporting collective memory. Remembering, for any individual, means 're-actualising the memory of a social group to which he or she belongs or has belonged in the past' (Jedlowski 1987, 26), and constructing, over time, a group identity that is the result of a temporal construction in which the dimensions of the past, present and future are combined (Halbwachs, 1987). In our historical period, essentially focused on the present, the past helps to read the everyday experienced reality and to give a new orientation to future perspectives. This is even more important if the past concerns minority communities, as Roma and Sinti, whose history is the fruit of a denied narrative, since it is based on relations of hostility, exclusion, marginalisation and ghettoisation from majority societies and cultures.

1. LEAVING A TRACE

In the context of historical remembrance, TRACER[1], an international project funded by the European Commission (CERV-2021-CITIZENS-REM), aims to integrate historical knowledge with social change, with the aim of empowering a group of Roma and non-Roma young people.

A concise overview of the project will be provided, given the limitations of the presentation format.

The project takes place in three countries: Portugal (Braga, Figueira da Foz), Italy (Florence/Prato, Modena/Bologna, Naples) and Poland (Oswiecin/Kracow).

It aims to:

- mobilise groups of Roma and non-Roma youth and adolescents to collect information and narratives about the Holocaust and the Roma genocide;
- reconstruct history of the Holocaust through multiple sources, giving space to unpublished narratives such as those belonging to the Roma and Sinti communities;
- make young people aware of a history that links the Roma communities to Europe and re-evaluate Roma membership in the EU;
- activate teenagers (Roma and non-Roma) to be trainers/representatives through the construction of an artistic event on genocide aimed at a broad audience (graffiti, music, theatre, film/documentary, etc.);
- produce knowledge through training and educational workshops on genocide;
- promote reflection on the construction of prejudice and discrimination.

The methodological choice distinguishes Tracer from other projects. It is action research and promotes a process that combines together knowledge and planning for

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[1] For more information, please visit TRACER website at www.tracerproject.eu

change.

According to Besozzi and Colombo (2002, p. 112), the aim of action research is "a matter of leading the participants, through a series of stimulations and self-reflections, to change something in their own definition of the situation, to increase their own competences regarding the topic examined, to mature a new phase of growth".

The key actors of this process are Roma and non-Roma youths and adolescents who were involved through a sequence of actions in a process of co-construction of knowledge and implementation of change.

The target of the project is also subject of the research. The knowledge produced collectively by young people deconstructs the role of 'specialist', normally assigned to the scientist. A fundamental principle of action research is the promotion of autonomy and empowerment of social actors. It becomes more important when the protagonists are young people who live in situations of marginalisation. The Roma communities are still marked by the choice of being invisible from the outside, in order not to be recognised as Roma, as a result of the prejudices they suffer daily.

The project developed through a series of consequential actions that show the complexity of the project:

- the establishment of groups of young people, Roma and non-Roma, who act as leader groups and promote the various actions, involving other targets in the process of knowledge and change.
- the search for memories and the collection of informal historical documentation, the unifying element of the project, present at various stages. History is a tool for inclusion because doing historical research means building a listening space capable of enhancing cultural specificities. An important part of the historical research was the interviews with elderly members of the Roma community. This action had the task of highlighting unpublished accounts of the war, points of view, and collecting an oral memory in danger of being lost. Historically, the Roma and Sinti peoples have often been represented indirectly, rather than through the testimonies of their own members.
- The training provided to different subjects during the action research process: leader groups; teachers; students.
- The visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum for leader groups from different countries.
- Performance and artistic events, a tool chosen to disseminate a message on history, genocide, racism and prejudice.
- The multiple dissemination of the project's outputs through conferences, meetings, informal events.

2. WHY HOLOCAUST?

TRACER investigated a precise historical period, characterised by the mass violence that generated the holocaust during World War II. The reasons behind this choice are several. The holocaust is still an event that is difficult to understand. As

Bauman (1992) emphasises, it was not the result of a momentary madness but was conceived and enacted within a rational modern society, in the advanced stage of development of a civilisation.

That is why it is a problem of this society and this culture, and it is a problem for everyone. Dealing with the subject of the Holocaust means reasoning about the way institutions and members of contemporary society act, in which 'evil', according to Arendt (1991), takes the ordinary form of everyday life.

The genocides were made possible by a network of complicity and omertà that covered much of Europe. There were millions of European citizens who actively contributed to the process of isolation, identification and segregation of Jews, Roma, homosexuals, political opponents and millions of citizens who, through their indifference, unconditionally accepted that racial laws were ratified, ending up considering them right and fair.

According to Bauman (1992, p. 211), the holocaust did not result from "an infraction of order but from an impeccable, perfect and unchallengeable domination of order" in which one group, fighting for the acquisition of power, prestige and wealth (using Weber's thought), used a powerful educational and communication system to rationalise racism, and define those who are 'different' as pathological, dangerous and worthy of elimination.

The racial doctrine formulated by Nazi ideology advocated the stigmatisation of 'foreign races', considered genetically subordinate, and marginalised specific groups as 'inferior' by genetic heritage within that same race (Bortone and Pistecchia 2020).

And also fitting into this idea of the 'different' as being 'pathological' is the history of the Roma and Sinti people, who have always embodied the symbol of diversity and for this reason have been subject to a process of stigmatisation. The Roma people suffered discrimination long before the Nazi persecutions of the last century.

Their history is a history of institutionalised segregation, as it is based on laws in Europe that have always attempted to limit the freedom of movement of this people and to lead them, through assimilationist policies and educational systems created ad hoc, to be socialised into majority societies (Bravi 2009). One of the reasons why the Roma were interned in concentration camps is their presupposed asociality.

The Nazi regime, as it was structured before and during World War II, finished long ago, but its heritage is not dead.

What took place in the concentration camps was the result of a process on which indifference, intolerance, hatred, prejudice and discrimination acted, all of which are still present in our society, evident even in the never exhausted anti-gypsyism.

For this reason, TRACER becomes a tool for analysing the cultural process that led to the concentration camps and for decoding current discrimination. In Italy, the most evident discriminations are linked to the presence of Roma camps, real ghettos where Roma and Sinti populations reside, made institutional since the war in the former Yugoslavia.

3. SOME OUTCOMES FROM COLLECTIVE REFLECTION

The results presented here represent only a portion of the findings from the project. This analysis will focus on the perceived significance of participation by young Roma leaders and the awareness gains they reported. The leader groups consisted of 42 youth of Roma and Sinti origin, aged between 17 and 24, with a slight female predominance.

Three key themes will be highlighted: collective identity, prejudice, and commitment to reshaping society. The analysis was conducted using a combination of interviews, written materials, workshop discussions, and performance art materials.

Roma and Sinti youth involved are representatives of different groups, living conditions, cultures, histories and school levels, because the reality is extremely heterogeneous and varied and the greater or lesser inclusion status of the different communities also depends on the social policies implemented in the different countries of residence (Poland, Portugal and Italy).

3.1. Memory as a tool for building a common identity

One of the outcomes of the action research was the fostering of a sense of belonging to a unified community among young Roma and Sinti individuals across Europe, despite their dispersed presence in different national contexts. The knowledge of the porrajmos facilitated the reconstruction of individual and social identities. Individuals were able to benefit from a shared memory, constructed through a dialogic relationship between subjects and groups.

As highlighted in the project publication (Bravi et all, 2024), being in a group of Roma young people from three European countries that shared communalities, but also desires, expectations, and hopes, along with an awareness of a common history and culture, brought about a heightened sense of four different aspects of Roma identity: cultural (substance), social (relation), historical (process), and individual (choice). Creating a common memory of the genocide of Roma may become the 'foundational trauma' of their new identity, helping unite the Roma communities into a common political project of recognition and acceptance. The following contributions are an example:

> Enriching discussions emerged about the importance of Sinti and other Roma groups recognizing each other as Roma, challenging distinctions solely based on historical experience. The consensus on such a topic reflected how those days helped consolidate a common Roma identity among Roma youth. Even though broader Roma groups, such as the Portuguese Calon, may not have experienced the Samudaripen as the Sinti and Rom groups did, the prejudice, persecution, and genocide that it represents serves as a common memory and an historical milestone for Roma identity. (A., Portuguese group)

> Focusing on Roma people's experience and history, our journey aimed to uncover these "invisible" stories and records [...].We were challenged to set aside boundaries we are often trained to see and act upon – boundaries based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, and nationality – and give way to communication. And communication was the cornerstone of this experience. We discussed the past, the present, and

the future. We talked about the dangers of what we had learned and witnessed, exchanged worldviews and life experiences, shared local and national political knowledge, but, most importantly, we explored our similarities and differences as equals (C., Portuguese group)

3.2. Prejudice between past and present

Roma are among the people who are most vulnerable to human rights violations in the European Union (EU). From a survey carried out by the Pew Research Centre in 2019 on the opinions of European citizens towards minority groups (Muslims, Jews, Roma, homosexuals, etc.), Roma stand out for the negative sentiments expressed toward them. In 10 of the 16 countries polled, half or more have an unfavourable view of Roma. The strongest such anti-Roma sentiment is in Italy, where roughly eight-in-ten (83%) say they have unfavourable views of Roma.

Prejudice against the Roma people, which has its roots in a past of persecution, raises questions about the Roma's right to citizenship today, legitimises actions that have led to forms of institutional segregation at the local level, and affects socialisation paths. The project supported reflections on the construction of prejudice and gave space to the narratives of their own experiences, in order to broaden a collective debate. The testimonies of two girls are of particular interest:

> Auschwitz, to a 20-year-old girl like me who lives in a Roma [informal] settlement, increases the desire and motivation to recount, to be a bit of a spokesperson for what happened to us Roma and Sinti, who are often not talked about. There are many unknown aspects of our history. In particular, I personally was really impacted, because I had associated the Roma settlement where I live with a concentration camp. That's how I saw it, in part because of the dynamics of a Roma settlement, the fact that most of the settlements we have in Naples are on the outskirts. Even the appearance of Roma settlements (in Italy): the shacks or the barbed wire around them make them look like a concentration camp. (M., Italian group)

> I went to school, I had the same life as everyone else. Basically I didn't look like a Roma person, so for me it was much easier to hide and therefore not state my identity. Not stating my identity comes from the fact that I was simply very afraid of the prejudice that I heard every day in class, outside of class, on television, on social media, in short, this prejudice has always been very intense, a heavy weight to bear for me so I decided to hide my identity. (S. Italian group)

3.3. Contribute to reshaping society

The history of the Roma people is not only a history of persecution and discrimination, but also a history of resistance and activism, as illustrated by the women's rebellion against the liquidation of the Zigeunerlager on 16 May 1944. Thus, one result of the project was an acquisition of individual and collective awareness that promoted personal reflection and public action.

The words of a young leader woman are clear:

> Marian Turski the Polish Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, said one thing, I don't know

how to say it in English. Can I say it in Polish? "XI – Nie bądź obojętny". It means that we cannot give away the topic we need to really say about, we need to talk loudly, say no to racism and anti-Semitism, homophobia, every phobia, every xenophobia. And I, as a Polish Roma and Polish woman, I will educate my kids. I will do everything to my kids never, never forget. They need to remember the history. They need to know what happened. (S, Polish group)

The various artistic expressions used by the young people (murals, video clips, theatrical performances, a book) aimed to communicate social messages to stimulate reflection and promote greater collective awareness against discrimination have been a tangible example of the will to re-found a different society. They also represented Roma community identities and strengths. Through its evocative and symbolic power, art succeeds in involving and reaching a wider audience and permanence over time.

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Stream L
ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE IN/AND EDUCATION

ADOLESCENTS, INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: THE ROLE OF SCHOOL AND EDUCATION

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The panel explores the relationship between adolescence, moral development, environmental justice, and sustainability. Adolescents are seen as active agents in shaping their values and commitments, particularly concerning environmental issues. Education is crucial in this process, providing spaces for young people to express themselves and translate their values into concrete actions. It is essential that adolescents' creative energy, critical and divergent thinking, and the ability to embrace challenges can help find vital and transformative space in society. How can adults, through educational situations and experiences, accompany adolescents in defining and realizing their environmental justice values? The panel included contributions that explored theoretical analyses and reflections, empirical research findings, and the experiences of educators and school teachers.

adolescence; sustainability; moral development; intergenerational relationships; education

MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

> We believe in integral humanism, which implies a lifestyle that respects the dignity of all. We commit to educating our consumption standards, taking care of Creation, impacting positively our local environment, and working together with active civil society, science, and institutions, towards the development of the common good (EoF, 2022).

Moral development is a process that extends from childhood to adulthood and involves changes in thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and knowledge. During adolescence, the desire for autonomy, the search for coherence, and the sensitivity to relationships with others contribute to defining oneself from a moral perspective. Building one's morality means defining the criteria to distinguish right from wrong, accepting certain values to guide one's life, and committing oneself to making them concrete (Ammaniti & Ammaniti, 1995; Andreoli, 2004; Bortolotto, 2013; Lancini et al., 2020; Pietropolli Charmet & Cirillo, 2010; Siegel, 2013).

The process of building identity, the common thread of developmental tasks in adolescence, enhances the person's active role in the face of change, the search for one's paths, and commitment, the choice of a direction to remain faithful and

against which to verify, over time, one's autonomy and coherence.

One of the areas in which adolescents define themselves as moral subjects is that of respect for the environment and, more generally, sustainability. National and international surveys have found that adolescents are increasingly informed and sensitive towards the issues of environmental justice, also considered from a social and nutritional point of view, and are reclaiming their role as protagonists in the debate on sustainability (Bandura & Cherry, 2020; Fisher, 2019; Lee et al., 2022; Thomaes et al., 2023). Therefore, it is essential to provide places and structured ways of listening to young people, so that they can make their voices heard, talk about their present experience, and plan the vision of the future.

Schools and educational contexts have a great responsibility and opportunity to support adolescents' growth and construction of values, create the appropriate conditions for them to express themselves, and translate their moral choices into concrete behaviors and actions. It is essential that adolescents' creative energy, critical and divergent thinking, and the ability to embrace the challenges can find vital and transformative space in society.

The research question that oriented the discussions within the panel is the following: How can adults, through educational situations and experiences, accompany adolescents in the process of defining and realizing their environmental justice values?

1. RESEARCH, STUDIES, REFLECTIONS, AND EXPERIENCES

From the perspective of integral ecology, humans are a part of nature (EU, 2022). The analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from that of human, family, work, or urban contexts, nor from each person's relationship with herself, which generates a particular way of relating to others and the environment (Bergoglio, 2015). This assumption has been the guiding thread of the works presented.

The panel *Adolescents, Intergenerational Relationships and Sustainable Future: The Role of School and Education* focused specifically on adolescents and their role in developing sustainable thinking and behaviors. It also included reflections and experiences on the training of adult teachers and educators who are responsible for fostering change and young people's agency.

The presented works highlighted the importance of sustainability education, with a focus on the role of schools in fostering a commitment to social justice. In particular, schools, and more generally education, promote the development of critical, creative, and responsible thinking. Critical thinking allows to analyze the causes and consequences of environmental problems, evaluate different perspectives and solutions, and question dominant consumption patterns. Creative thinking stimulates the search for innovative and sustainable solutions, encouraging imagination and the development of new ideas. Responsible thinking promotes awareness of one's actions and their impact on the environment and society, encouraging ethical and sustainable choices.

Three contributions, in particular, focused on the effectiveness of specific pedagogical approaches, namely Philosophy for Children (Lipman & Sharp, 2023), outdoor education (Farné, Bortolotti, Terrusi, 2018), and sustainable assessment (Boud & Soler, 2015), in promoting awareness and the skills necessary to build a sustainable future. Philosophy for Children, for example, is based on open and respectful dialogue between students and teachers, fostering critical reflection and sharing different perspectives. Collaborative learning stimulates students' active participation and the construction of collective knowledge, enriched by everyone's experiences and ideas. This approach encourages students to speak up, express their opinions, and actively participate in decisions that affect them, promoting a sense of responsibility and active citizenship.

Other presentations have showcased concrete examples of workshops designed to cultivate sustainability literacy among young people. One particular focus is on fashion and textile production, a sector where issues of labor, gender equality, and environmental concerns converge, bringing to the forefront crucial questions of social justice often overlooked by mass consumer culture.

Examples and reflections were shared on teacher training for sustainability, highlighting the importance of a holistic and transformative approach. It is crucial for teachers to be actively involved in the learning process, reflecting on their conceptions and preconceptions about sustainability, and developing innovative teaching strategies to promote global competence among their students.

The pedagogical reflection and educational action must embrace a multidisciplinary approach to integral ecology, involving education about limits, respect for the rhythms and processes of biodiversity, and the promotion of creative solutions in economic, commercial, and productive activities (Latouche, 2012; Rifkin, 2019). The guiding principle is educating for an alliance between humanity and the environment, starting from early childhood (Capra & Luisi, 2020).

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SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION: A PEDAGOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY THAT AIMS TO CREATE INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTS

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Regarding education for sustainability, education is increasingly being called upon to enter into dialogue with European policies. Several international and national school programmes, such as the Eco (Green) Schools programme and the UNESCO network of schools, seem to be moving in this direction. These programmes place responsibility towards oneself, others and the planet as a fundamental factor in the acquisition of a sustainable way of acting. This is evident in a number of European documents, such as the *Learning for the Green Transition and Sustainable Development*, which emphasises the need, particularly for school education, to place the development of sustainability knowledge, skills and competencies within a dimension of learning time and space for carrying out activities that relate to sustainability. This contribution aims to reflect on sustainability education for students in secondary schools, to enhance the creation of community networks, understood as those contexts dedicated to the promotion of educational practices, inside and/or outside the school, focused on the green transition.

space and time of education; Agenda 2030; sustainability education; secondary schools

INTRODUCTION

Central to studies on the green transition is the principle of direct engagement with nature, which aims to foster a mature awareness of the inseparable bond between humans and biological life. Pedagogy, along with other human and social sciences, has long been dedicated to finding solutions – both educational and training-related – to overcome the still prevalent anti-social conception of economic power, in order to promote, through the education of both current and future generations of students, a sustainable, resilient, and transformative approach to environmental development (Malavasi, 2016, p. 60; Riva, 2018, pp. 33-50).

Speaking of sustainable development does not refer exclusively to environmental issues; Rather, sustainable thinking encompasses the concept of development that meets the needs of present-day humans without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. The international community made a decisive breakthrough in this regard with the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015). The Agenda

distinctiveness lies primarily in recognizing that issues such as poverty, hunger, human rights, education, and peace among peoples are not separate from each other but, on the contrary, are interconnected aspects within an intertwined system, where intervention in one area will inevitably influence the outcomes in others, aiming for a balanced relationship between social, economic, and environmental factors. The challenge of the 2030 Agenda is to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the timeframe of 2016 and 2030.

Recognizing the close interconnection between the 17 Goals of the 2030 Agenda, Goal 4, which aims to "provide equitable and inclusive quality education for all", primarily focuses on education and training systems. The wording of this Goal outlines four main objectives: 1) Ensuring equal access to education and learning opportunities for all, regardless of background; 2) Developing skills, competencies, and knowledge to foster active participation in society, aligned with the Lifelong Learning framework (Brandt, Bürgener, Barth, Redman, 2019, pp. 630-653; Kwauk, Casey, 2022, p. 4); and 3) prioritizing the quality of education over the sheer quantity of content delivered. Therefore, the message of the 2030 Agenda, especially through Goal 4, is to incorporate environmental sustainability education at every school level and grade, with an emphasis on developing critical thinking on environmental issues. This should involve not only schools but also the Third Sector organizations, including associations, and families, to encourage active participation.

1. ADOLESCENTS TODAY: BETWEEN DISORIENTATION AND THE DESIRE FOR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Several international and national school programs, such as the Eco (Green) Schools program and the UNESCO network of schools, already appear to be moving in this direction. These initiatives emphasize responsibility towards oneself, others, and the commons as a key factor in fostering sustainable ways of thinking and acting (Wals and Lenglet, 2016).

In addition to the responsibility that sustainability demands from schools and the wider community, educational and school institutions must be provided with adequate economic resources to design and implement initiatives for environmental sustainability as highlighted in the European Commission's 2022 document titled *Learning for Green Transition and Sustainable Development*. Based on the recommendations of this document, the education of secondary school students in sustainability – particularly on green transition issues – should focus on developing knowledge, skills, and competencies in sustainability. This process must occur within a structured *timeframe for learning* and, importantly, in a possible *space of implementation* and exchange of green transition-related activities (Cebrián, Junyent, and Mulà, 2020; Winter, Kranz, and Möller, 2022).

Building on the discussion so far regarding the responsibility of schools in fostering participatory and cooperative education aimed at cultivating sustainable ways of thinking and acting, a specific image emerges when considering adolescence and, particularly, the post-adolescent period. This image is characterized by individuals

often described as "opaque, hesitant, and/or disillusioned" (Rosina, ed., 2018, pp. 7-16). These individuals are often depicted as disoriented and occasionally unable to establish their place in society (Cornacchia & Tramma, 2019). What appears to dominate among these young people is the development of non-linear life paths, characterized by decoupled and non-sequential events across different stages of growth, with negative effects on their understanding of the world and its economic interdependencies (Silvaggi, 2022). The profound uncertainty experienced by many, including the large group of NEETs (young people "Not in Education, Employment, or Training"), is further exacerbated by the economic inequalities of our time and it is reflected in the precariousness and indeterminacy of numerous life choices.

Although young people are often described as disoriented and disillusioned when it comes to life choices, there is, at the same time, a growing interest among Italians aged 18 to 34 in various forms of participation in civil and social life and this is evident in their involvement in networks such as *FridaysForFuture*, *Extinction Rebellion*, and *Last Generation* (Francesconi, Symeonidis, Agostini, 2021, pp. 1-10). Furthermore, as highlighted in the ISTAT BES Report 2022, a noteworthy trend is the increasing engagement of young people aged 14 to 24 in activities related to green transition issues, through the participation in meetings addressing environmental sustainability, civil rights, and the promotion of global peace[2].

Regarding the various forms of participation in political, civic, and community life, these data largely challenge the rhetoric of young people's alleged apathy and disinterest in politics – understood here as a form of civic engagement contributing to community growth. What emerges from these studies is the distinctive nature of youth participation, which often takes place in the digital realm, that provides spaces for many young people to share and engage, in contrast to the physical world, which appears to offer few opportunities for them to voice their concerns on issues such as the environment, peace, and human rights. From a pedagogical perspective, a pressing issue is the lack of physical spaces where younger generations can appear and express themselves publicly (Butler, 2017, pp. 109-157). It becomes evident that the authentic space for young people to appear and make their voices heard is among the people in public settings. Action, in this context, is inherently tied to bodies that ally, publicly expose themselves, and express solidarity and resistance against those who seek to silence them or take away their right to speak.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION THROUGH THE ENHANCEMENT OF SUSTAINABILITY CENTERS

It is now possible to understand that addressing Green Transition issues is not merely about transmitting notions on environmental topics and respect for creation

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[2] In 2022, social participation is highest among young people aged 14-19, among whom it is close to 40%, it remains constant at around 27-30% between 20 and 54 years, and then gradually decreases and reaches the value lowest among the population aged 75 and over (13.2%). https://asvis.it/public/asvis2/files/PolicyBrief/2024/PolicyBriefASviS_Partecipazione_giovanile_democratica_Febbraio_2024_FINAL.pdf

to students. Guidance becomes participatory when it can value the subjective and intersubjective experiences that young people live *outside of school* through various forms of participation (Thomsen, 2017). Starting from the forms of participation of young people in social life already present in both physical and virtual communities, secondary schools should leverage education for sustainability to promote, through training actions, values centered on respect for the environment and human rights. In this way, they can pass on to current and future generations enduring principles that enable them to navigate the world with awareness.

What today's young people seek from schools and political institutions is to have educational spaces where they can express their civic participation, even through physical engagement. In my view, this is where the ethical and pedagogical value of education for environmental sustainability lies, because it could provide schools, especially secondary schools, with a space for *storytelling* and *participation* – where students can share their life experiences, engage in concrete situations involving the community and the respect for human rights, and personalize their learning experience by giving it an ethical meaning that resonates with all of humanity.

To understand the theoretical and practical aspects of environmental sustainability and to foster in students a sense of informed and responsible citizenship that enables them to recognize and address the challenges of climate change, it is essential to provide training that is closely linked to the community and geographical context in which the school operates (European Commission, 2024). When educating secondary school students on sustainability issues, it is essential to: 1) encourage the development of participatory community networks; 2) implement educational and participatory practices, both within and beyond the school environment, centered on sustainability. This entails promoting participatory pathways in sustainability education, where learning takes place both inside and outside the school, contributing to the development of innovative methodologies to incorporate sustainability into the curriculum through Civic Education, conceptualized as Education for Global Citizenship (ECG) (Barton & Ho, 2022).

From an educational and training perspective on sustainability issues requires strengthening community networks through the establishment of sustainability centres. Sustainability centres refer to contexts dedicated to promoting educational practices, both within and beyond the school, focused on sustainability. The distinctive feature of sustainability centres is their role in advancing environmental education and providing training for teachers, educators, and students (European Commission/EURYDICE, 2024, pp. 51-66). This is achieved through the participation of various external agencies, including families, in joint co-planning aimed at implementing sustainability initiatives. In this sense, school, as a learning environment, becomes a place of participation – a shared space for fostering life skills essential for genuinely civic and sustainable actions, while enhancing resources, unlocking potential, and encouraging active engagement (D'Alonzo, 2020). To encourage sustainability education courses, in which students can first-person experience activities that concern respect for common goods, involving themselves mentally

and physically, it is necessary to create spaces for planning and active participation in which the main protagonist is the school.

In this direction, education for sustainability, viewed from a participatory perspective, emphasizes the centrality of experience, shared planning, and the opportunity it offers to students, teachers, and families to develop an awareness of environmental issues that is primarily practical rather than merely theoretical. This awareness is cultivated through activities that actively engage participants, ranging from the development of projects on responsible consumption to involvement in awareness campaigns addressing the challenges of climate change. Moreover, environmental sustainability education requires new avenues of research, grounded in the lived experiences of students and teachers (Birbes, ed., 2017).

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THE SIX ITALYS: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS OF YOUTH ITALIAN POPULATION

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Climate change is one of the key issues that directly affects youth population: several scholars highlighted that young people are increasingly informed and sensitive towards the issues of sustainability and environmental justice. The dimension of young people's awareness on environmental issues was investigated in this paper through a survey conducted among secondary school students in Italy, which collected 12,658 responses. In particular, the paper explores the adaptability of the Sassy – Six Americas Super Short SurveY, developed by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, to a context such as Italy: can the proposed typology – which distinguishes unique groups that perceive and respond to global warming in different ways – be applied to the analysis of the Italian youth population? To examine the possible adaptability of this survey, the main characteristics of students belonging to the different categories identified are highlighted, with particular attention to students' social and educational background as a possible predictor of youth commitment.

environmental awareness; youth Italian population; SASSY.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike their peers of the 1980s and 1990s, who were mostly characterized by a sort of "retreat" into the private sphere – so much so that scholars have referred to that generation as the invisible generation (Ginsborg, 1998) -, today's young people would be characterized by more fluid forms of engagement, through several practices and oriented towards specific causes that are closely linked to the individual's personal interest in a particular issue or problem (Pitti, 2018).

Not unlike in the past, albeit with new focuses, specific goals, and a more intersectional approach, environmental issues are attracting the largest following among the youth population. Phenomena of eco-anxiety, eco-phobia and climate depression, linked to feelings of powerlessness, are increasingly present among young people in the face of the climate crisis.

Climate change is one of the key issues that, from an intergenerational justice perspective, directly affects the youngest generation: green and climate-friendly youth movements have spread around the world, driven by a shared vision of the key role

that young people could play in protecting the environment (Martiskainen et al., 2020).

A clear example is provided by movements such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion: although rather vague in terms of concrete solutions (Svensson & Wahlström, 2021), for some scholars (see de Moor et al., 2021), they represent an innovative form of engagement, not only from a demographic perspective, as youth-led movements, but also because of the practices implemented, the internal organization, the coordination and the and the international spread.

Several scholars highlighted that young people – especially when compared to the adult world – are increasingly informed and sensitive towards the issues of sustainability and environmental justice, reclaiming their role as protagonists in this debate (Neas et al., 2022). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the possible adoption of a specific tool – Six Americas Super Short SurveY (SASSY) -, developed in another territorial context and addressed to the entire population, within the Italian context, with a particular focus on the youth population.

1. THE SIX AMERICAS SUPER SHORT SURVEY (SASSY)

Among the tools used to study people's attitudes toward environmental issues is one developed by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication called Global Warming's Six Americas. The original goal of this tool was to segment the population, American population in particular, based on their climate change beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in order to target different messages to different segments. The original Six Americas model required a 36 question-screener (Maibach et al., 2011).

Such many items, especially when placed within larger surveys such as the one presented in this paper, are likely to be a deterrent. For this reason, using several national samples, machine learning techniques and a cross-validation process, Yale researchers identified a subset of four questions from the original 36, namely the Six Americas Super Short SurveY (Chryst et al., 2018), that accurately segment survey respondents. To obtain group's scores, survey participants must specifically answer the following four questions:

- How important is the issue of global warming to you personally?
- How worried are you about global warming?
- How much do you think global warming will harm you personally?
- How much do you think global warming will harm future generations?

Risk perception, worry, and personal importance have long been identified as important predictors of climate change engagement and policy support by several scholars (Malka et al., 2009; Ding et al., 2011).

Starting from these questions, the Yale researchers identified the following typology (Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2024): each segment differs in their beliefs, attitudes, issue involvement, behaviours, and policy-preferences about climate change.

- *Alarmed*: they are certain that global warming is happening, that it is human-caused, and that it is harmful; they strongly support climate policies and are more likely to be politically active.
- *Concerned*: moderately certain that global warming is happening, that it is human-caused, and that it is harmful; but they see the problem primarily as a distant threat, especially harmful to other nations and future generations; they support action on climate change but are unlikely to engage in political activism.
- *Cautious*: uncertain about whether global warming is happening and whether it is human caused; global warming seems like a distant threat; they no have strong opinion about what should be done, assuming something should be done.
- *Disengaged*: they rarely hear about global warming and know very little about it; they need basic information about climate change.
- *Doubtful*: they are not sure about global warming; if it is happening, it is probably not caused by humans; they tend to be politically conservative and have a traditional religious view.
- *Dismissive*: they believe that global warming is not occurring or that if it is occurring, it is not caused by humans; they strongly oppose policies and actions to reduce the threat; and may have contacted a representative to support opposition to action on global warming. Thus, taking concrete action against those who oppose climate change.

Recently, a growing interest in this tool has led to the development of this segmentation study around the world, albeit with some differences as to the populations investigated or the segments identified (see, for example, Ashworth et al., 2011; Detenber et al., 2016).

2. DATA, VARIABLES AND METHODS

The analyses presented in this paper are based on data collected through the "Practices and cultures of sustainability in ecological transition" survey conducted through the administration of an online questionnaire to students in secondary schools in Italy: an e-mail was sent to all secondary schools in Italy and, based on the availability collected, 12,658 responses were obtained between November 2022 and February 2023. The questionnaire, filled out in class so as to ensure a good quality of the answers, investigated different dimensions – from the students' knowledge of the environment, to the sustainable practices they put into practice on a daily basis, to their adherence to environmental movements -, and included the four questions listed above, useful for probing the adaptability of this survey to a context such as Italy and to the analysis of the Italian youth population. The analyses proposed in this paper refer only to higher secondary school students, to ensure greater uniformity of the sample and the possibility of considering the secondary education path chosen as a possible driver of environmental engagement.

3. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

A first research interest was to understand how Italian students fit into the segmentation proposed by Yale scholars, to compare it with results obtained in other contexts. As shown in Tab. 1, with reference to the US population (Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2024) one can note a majority of those who are *Alarmed* or *Concerned* about climate change, but both the percentages of those who are cautious and those who are opposed to the idea of climate change are significant (at least 22%, considering only the last two categories). A Facebook study across 31 countries (Leiserowitz et al., 2021) applied the same segmentation approach and identified, in a sample of more than 2,500 Italian people, 49% of participants as *Alarmed*, 33% as *Concerned*, highlighting that 81% of respondents are very worried about climate change issues. In contrast, the percentages for the last three categories are residual and extremely low if compared to the American population. Focusing only on the *Alarmed* segment, Italy ranked 10th of the 31 countries surveyed, but second among European countries, after Turkey. The countries ranked highest were countries that are particularly vulnerable to climate change, such as Costa Rica (64% of respondents *Alarmed*), Colombia (63%), Mexico (62%), and Brazil (59%). Similarly, but with a higher percentage of *Cautious* people, are the percentages found in another recent survey with a focus on the Italian population (Richardson, 2023): that of the *Alarmed* is the most numerous segment, while the percentages of those in the most oppositional categories to the idea of climate change remain extremely low.

As shown in Tab. 1, the respondents to the questionnaire presented in this paper show no significant differences in the distribution between the different segments compared to other surveys conducted in the Italian context, beyond a prevalence of the *Concerned* over the *Alarmed*: the percentage of those within the least concerned and aware segments with respect to climate change is very minimal. Once again, the alarmed and concerned gather about 80 percent of the responses.

To explore these different categories further, the main characteristics of students belonging to the different segments have been deepened, with particular attention to students' social and educational background as a possible predictor of youth commitment.

According to much of the research, family background plays a relevant role: parents exert influence on the enactment of pro-social behaviors – from adopting sustainable consumption styles to adhering to certain ideals. A number of studies (Olcese et al., 2014; Wallis and Loy, 2021) have pointed out that youth climate activism sees a large presence of well-educated people and with a high educational family background

At the same time schools would be a highly relevant context for supporting the skills that foster engagement from an early age. Understanding the role of the educational path may be useful to understand any differences related to the possibilities offered by the path: one can ask whether a more pronounced involvement affects some school tracks more than others.

Tab. 1. Segmentation of different populations based on SASSY typology. Sources specified in the table.

Surveys	Alarmed	Concerned	Cautious	Disengaged	Doubtful	Dismissive
US population (Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 2024)	28%	29%	15%	6%	11%	11%
Italian population (Leiserowitz et al., 2022)	49%	33%	10%	4%	3%	1%
Italian population (Richardson, 2023)	40%	31%	24%	1%	2%	2%
Italian student population ("Practices and cultures of sustainability in ecological transition", 2023)	37%	42%	15%	2%	1%	3%

Tab. 2. Parameters (β) and respective standard errors (σ (β)) of the logistic regression model aimed at determining the main characteristics of the SASSY typology (Cautious as reference category).

		β	σ(β)
Alarmed (vs. Cautious)	Sex (ref. M)		
	F	+0.461***	0.072
	Parental Education (rif. Low)		
	Medium	+0.233**	0.089
	High	+0.257**	0.097
	Educational Path (ref. Vocational)		
	Lyceum	+0.704***	0.102
	Technical	-0.033	0.105
	Average Grade (ref. Less than 7)		
	Between 7 and 8	+0.491***	0.086
	Greater than or equal to 8	+0.762***	0.087
	Constant	-0.299***	0.109
Concerned (vs. Cautious)	Sex (ref. M)		
	F	+0.321***	0.071
	Parental Education (rif. Low)		
	Medium	+0.096	0.085
	High	+0.079	0.093
	Educational Path (ref. Vocational)		
	Lyceum	+0.345***	0.097
	Technical	+0.056	0.097
	Average Grade (ref. Less than 7)		
	Between 7 and 8	+0.325***	0.082
	Greater than or equal to 8	+0.410***	0.085
	Constant	+0.373***	0.101
Disengaged - Dismissive - Doubtful (vs. Cautious)	Sex (ref. M)		
	F	-0.617***	0.072
	Parental Education (rif. Low)		
	Medium	+0.092	0.089
	High	+0.067	0.097
	Educational Path (ref. Vocational)		
	Lyceum	+0.003	0.102
	Technical	+0.010	0.105
	Average Grade (ref. Less than 7)		
	Between 7 and 8	-0.160	0.086
	Greater than or equal to 8	-0.264*	0.087
	Constant	-1.034***	0.109
N		8,347	
Pseudo R2		0,030	

*** $\alpha < 0.001$; ** $\alpha < 0.01$; * $\alpha < 0.05$; · $\alpha < 0.1$

In other words, given the heterogeneity of the youth condition, the paper asks whether belonging to a lower social class and having followed a short-term educational path (such as vocational training) can be a constraint on young people's commitment, or whether, on the contrary, mass access to secondary education (Bourdieu, 1979) has blurred these possible differences. If the forms of environmental awareness of school-age youth depend on the capital with which young people are endowed, do educational institutions encourage or repress them? The question of how class and educational background (but also gender and origin) structure youth commitment is relevant for defining the ways in which this commitment is articulated and the dimensions it addresses.

In the logistic regression model presented in Tab. 2, the *Cautious* category, which is considered intermediate between those who are highly alarmed and those who, on the contrary, do not seem to be concerned about the climate change, was chosen as the reference category. The categories of the *Disengaged*, the *Doubtful* and the *Dismissive* were merged because of their small numbers. As can be noted, students enrolled in Lyceums, female students, students with higher parental education, and students with higher grade averages are more likely to be *Alarmed*. The differences tend to affect only those who are *Alarmed* and are not as significant for the other categories.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper highlights that the distribution within the different segments identified by the Six Americas Super Short SurveY (SASSY) of the students surveyed in the research analyzed in this paper does not differ too much from the results obtained by studying the Italian population in general, while it is different with respect to the US population. Several socio-demographic variables that seem to characterize the different segments identified were then highlighted: they make clear the impact of gender, parental education and the educational path undertaken, especially for *Alarmed* students. Other analyses, not presented in this paper for reasons of space but available upon request to the author, showed that, on the one hand, the *Alarmed* category seems to capture the peculiarities associated with this specific group: higher levels of activism (i.e., participation in student and environmental protests and volunteer activities), greater exposure to climate change news, greater adherence to post-materialist values, higher levels of an affliction index linked to feelings such as depression, unhappiness, anxiety, fear, anger, frustration. On the other hand, however, the peculiarities of the other categories do not seem to emerge strongly. Therefore, it seems necessary to question the specificity of the context and of the populations studied, and to carry out surveys that are updated over time: longitudinal research has measured how the proportions of the Six Americas have changed over time, with a significant increase between 2008 and 2020 in the Alarmed category and a sharp decrease in the Disengaged segment (Yale Program on Climate Change Communication 2024). Thus, these trends vary greatly over time and space and need to be studied with accurate and highly contextualized tools.

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GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION: A RE-SEARCH TRAINING IN PIEDMONT

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The actions of teachers are crucial for transforming schools into spaces that prepare students to address global challenges (Bourn, 2022). Specifically, teachers must promote global competence in students, as emphasized in Goal 4.7 of the 2030 Agenda, which integrates Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship Education (GCED). To achieve this, teacher training programs are needed to recognize the transformative nature of these approaches and the necessity for a change in practices. A UNESCO systematic review identifies key factors for effective teacher education: integration of ESD and GCED, teachers' active involvement, use of constructivist teaching strategies based on teachers' existing ideas and misconceptions (Bourn et al., 2017). The University of Turin's "Region 4.7 – Territories for Global Citizenship Education" project followed these principles. The program trained 282 teachers and indirectly impacted over 4,000 students (primary, secondary, and high school levels). Teacher training included reflecting on GCED and ESD models, assessing students' starting levels, and considering classroom intervention strategies. It also focused on developing knowledge, cognitive skills, and affective dispositions (empathy, motivation, and self-efficacy), leading to behaviours aligned with global citizenship values. The paper discusses the research-training model, the components of global competence addressed, and the initial outcomes.

education for sustainable development; global citizenship education; teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Training teachers to promote global competence is essential for preparing students to face the challenges of an increasingly interconnected world. Teachers' actions at all educational levels play a central role in transforming schools into spaces that foster the skills, attitudes, and values necessary for global citizenship (Bourn, 2022). The importance of teachers in promoting global competence for all students is emphasized in Goal 4.7 of the 2030 Agenda, which integrates Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship Education (GCED) to form future citizens capable of addressing global challenges (Yemini, Tibbitts & Goren, 2019).

To achieve this, it is crucial to implement teacher training programs that recognize the transformative nature of these educational approaches. These programs should focus on supporting teachers through a change in mindset and practice, ensuring they are equipped to integrate global competence into their teaching (Rapporto ASVIS, 2022, p. 16).

A UNESCO systematic review (Bourn, Hunt, & Bamber, 2017) identifies the main factors contributing to the effectiveness of teacher's education pathways in this area. These include: the organic integration of GCED and ESD into the curriculum, the active involvement of teachers in recognizing and enhancing global competence within their specific contexts, and the use of constructivist teaching strategies. These strategies should begin with teachers' existing conceptions and misconceptions, allowing for a reflective process that supports their own growth as educators (Bourn et al., 2017). Ultimately, training programs must empower teachers to effectively promote global competence and foster a classroom environment where students develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become responsible global citizens.

On this basis, the research-training intervention was planned and implemented.

1. THE PROJECT

The research-training project *Region 4.7. Territories for Global Citizenship Education and Sustainable Development* is funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (call 2021) and coordinated by the Piedmont Region, has the following partners: University of Turin, USR, IRES Piemonte, COP, CO.CO.PA, Anci, Acmos, Codiasco[1].

The theoretical model is presented in Figure 1.

Fig. 1. The Model

Global Competence (PISA, 2018)	Sustainability competences (Green Comp, 2022)	Model - Project Region 4.7
Knowledge		Knowledge (global phenomena, migration, environmental, social, economic sustainability)
Skills (cognitive)	Embracing complexity in sustainability (systemic thinking, critical thinking, problem framing) Vision of futures (future literacy, adaptability, exploratory thinking)	Cognitive skills: systemic thinking, critical thinking, creativity
Attitudes	Vision of futures (adaptability)	Affective aspects: empathy, motivation, sense of efficacy
Values	Incorporating sustainability values (value sustainability, support equity, promote nature)	Universal values (belonging to a common humanity, sustainability, fairness, international solidarity, inclusion, peace), which then find their local expression (Burn, 2022)
Skills in action	Acting for sustainability (political action, collective action, individual initiative)	Behaviour to help achieve a fairer and more sustainable world

The model was developed from a comparison between the PISA 2018 framework (OECD, 2020) and the European Competence Framework for Sustainability (Green Comp, 2022). The former model identified the following as components of Global Competence: knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills which include both cognitive skills (to be able to understand and analyze) and skills to be able to act. On the other hand, GreenComp (Bianchi, Pisiotis, & Cabrera Giraldez, 2022), which emphasizes environmental sustainability, defines 12 sub-competences (divided into 4 areas) and integrates innovative aspects related to representations of the future.

The first area identified by GreenComp concerns the value area: Embracing the value of sustainability. The second and third (Embracing Complexity in Sustainability and Vision of Futures) are related to the cognitive skills needed to be able to understand the complexity of global phenomena and prefigure alternative future scenarios (e.g. systemic thinking, critical thinking, creativity, etc.). The last dimension concerns the transition to action (Acting for Sustainability). On the other hand, the knowledge dimension is assumed.

Therefore, on the basis of the two frameworks considered, the research team developed the following model that synthesizes the components simultaneously stimulated by GCED and ESD.

According to the model developed, a global citizen must:

- possess adequate basic knowledge of global phenomena and sustainability
- be able to activate higher cognitive processes, such as systemic thinking to understand global phenomena, critical capacity to discriminate correct information, and creativity to find solutions to complex problems
- have internalized universal values, such as belonging to a common planet and humanity, sustainability, equity, international solidarity, inclusion, and peace
- possess motivation and a sense of efficacy to take action and realize values of equity and citizenship in their daily lives
- nurture empathy towards the others, the defenseless, and humans and non-humans
- know how to take concrete actions to contribute to a fairer and more sustainable world.

The project involved 280 teachers belonging to 48 school autonomies (252 classes), from primary to secondary schools. The training process included an initial phase of surveying and reflecting on the conceptions shown by the group of teachers with regard to GCED and ESD and the relationships between the two types of education. The training then continued with an in-depth examination of the central themes of GCED and ESD in a historical but above all integrating perspective, with the contribution of experts from various fields (academic and non-academic) as well as of that of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) participating in the project.

The teachers were also involved in surveying their pupils' GCED and ESD skills (later

extended to the control groups) and in reflecting on the outcomes. The training then focused on effective teaching strategies to stimulate students' learning in these areas. The training concluded with the co-design of the paths to be implemented in the classroom, which saw an active collaboration between teachers and CSOs in the area. This was followed by the implementation of an intervention with constant supervision and a final survey to assess the impact of the interventions.

2. THE RESULTS

2.1. Teachers

We collected teachers' conceptions of GCED and ESD and possible interactions at the beginning and the conclusion of the research-training process (Figure 2).

Fig. 2. Teachers' conceptions of GCED and ESD
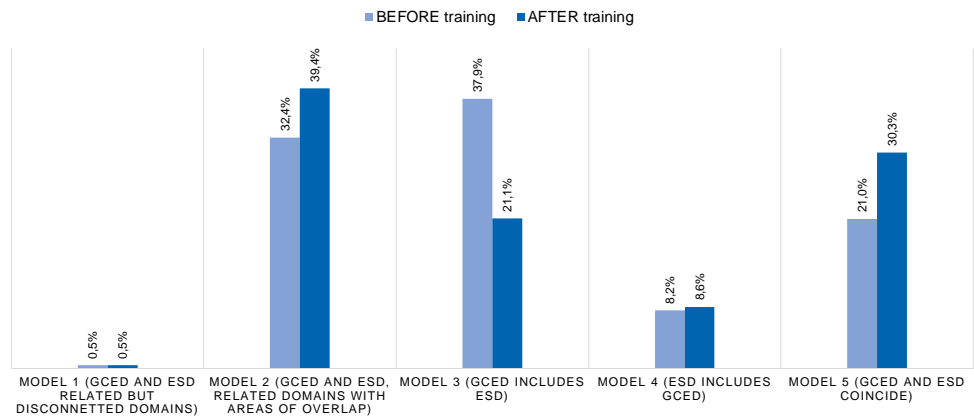
At the beginning of the training, most teachers chose models 2 and 3, which consider the two domains to be related and with areas of overlap (model 2) or that GCDE includes ESD (model 3). At the end of the training, 39,4% of teachers choose model 2 and 30,3% choose model 5, according to which the two domains basically coincide.

2.2. Students

In Figure 3 the number of participants and the details of the overall scores achieved in the test (baseline) for each school level involved in the research are indicated. In general, it can be observed that all groups are placed at an average level, answering correctly to at least 50% of the test, without exceeding the 60% threshold, with a wide variability.

The tests that were offered in the classes aimed to detect the aspects presented in the model. In this contribution we present a selection of the data[2].

The first area detected is knowledge, in particular the basic concepts of sustainability and global citizenship (meaning and main constituent elements of the constructs) was surveyed in all classes, as this is conducive to building subsequent knowledge on specific topics and to identifying misconceptions which can

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[2] Additional results of the project can be found in Perazzone et al., 2024.

contribute to targeting subsequent educational activities. Students were also asked to self-assess their knowledge on these topics in order to better identify their educational needs. Results show a more secure knowledge of the concept of sustainability (with percentages of correct answers close to 60%) than that of global citizenship (below the 50% threshold in the lower classes) at all school levels. This discrepancy may be linked to the frequency with which the topic is addressed, particularly in the early school years. With regard to sustainability, the students who failed to identify the correct answer, and without substantial differences between the two secondary school levels, polarized themselves on alternatives that propose a vision of it oriented mainly towards ways of exploiting environmental resources, which is still far from the idea of ecological identity put forward in the literature. With regard to the concept of global citizenship, the incorrect choices gravitated around answers that limit the meaning of "global" to merely economic aspects or delegate "respect for the rights of all" to regulatory constraints or experts.

Fig. 3. Initial scores

School level	Participants	Max score	Mean and Standard Deviation	Correct answer (%)
Primary school – 1y	N = 142	28	M=15,08 SD=2.9 min=5; max=21	53.9%
Primary school – 2y	N = 263	26	M=13,49 SD=6.97 min=5; max=24	51.9%
Primary school – 3y	N = 307	42	M=21,75 SD=3.60 min=0; max=42	51.8%
Primary school – 4 and 5y	N = 566	39	M=23,93 SD=4,75 min=2; max=35.5	58.8%
Secondary school	N = 1.776 14.2% I; 38.2% II, 47.6% III	62	M=34,93 SD=7.16 min=10; max=48	56.4%
High school	N = 1.372 8.1% I, 25.4% II, 40% III, 21% IV, 5.5% V	73	M=41,64 SD = 8.10 min=11; max=58	57.0%

The cognitive skills included in the model used in this research include critical thinking, an indispensable tool to gain awareness; in fact, it can also be identified with the ability to analyze and evaluate information. Those who think critically are able to examine arguments in a relevant manner, are able to raise questions and issues, and are able to communicate effectively with others. Those who, on the other hand, do not exercise critical thinking may be passive and victims of a limited, self-centered world view, seeing their own point of view as the only sensible one, avoiding doubt, uncertainty and taking responsibility. In general (Figure 4), critical thinking appears to be more present in secondary school participants than in primary school participants, probably because the themes of sustainability and global citizenship have been investigated in the school curriculum. In particular, awareness emerges on the issue of labour exploitation in the clothing sector, as well as on the phenomenon of migration, even if in secondary school the ability to critically read the issue in terms of implications and difficulties is less.

Fig. 4. Critical thinking

Fig. 4. Critical thinking
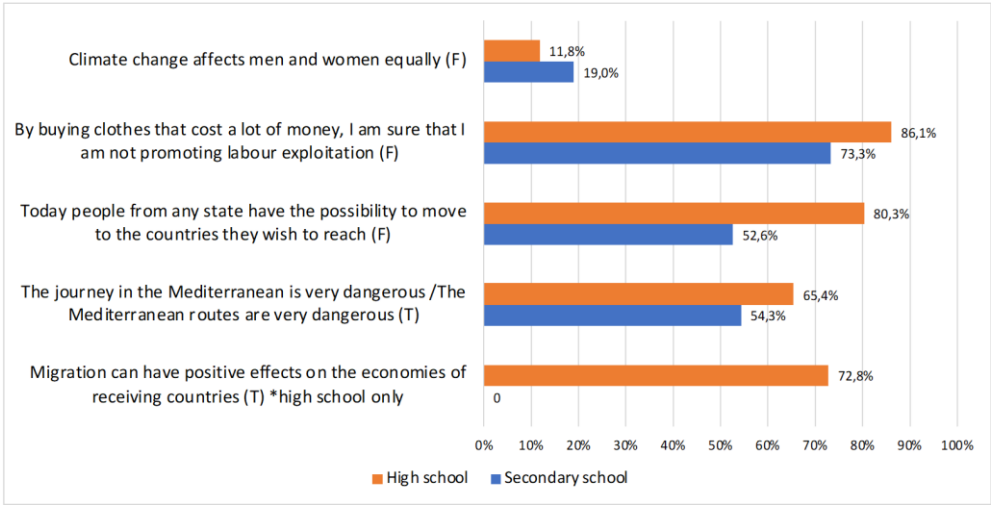
The tests also detected the affective dimension, because working on emotions allows us to get to know them, recognize them and regulate them, but also to transform emotions into actions: stimulating curiosity and interest in complex issues that are sometimes considered distant allows us to generate empathy, facilitate the passage from the individual to the collective (and from the local to the global) and build the foundations from which it is possible to work on reasoning.

In all the tests at each school level, the detection of emotions took place through the introduction of a short video with a high emotional impact within the tests. On their basis the participants were required to answer some questions on aspects linked to fairness and social justice (e.g. respect, injustice, indifference, empathy). Empathy in general is at an average level, although with lower percentages in the initial classes of primary school. With regard to learned helplessness, in primary school we find a percentage of around 50% and negative behavior, such as exclusion, is considered habitual and normal. In secondary school, too, choices showing a sense of powerlessness in the face of problematic situations are confirmed and difficulties emerge in identifying possibilities for action to improve the conditions of people in remote areas, albeit with lower percentages. The attribution of internal responsibility, referring to the fact that everyone can act in first person, obtains not such homogeneous percentages in terms of choices, which could also be linked to the difficulty in identifying a possibility of personal action to guarantee and support the values of global citizenship. In fact, the responsibility to act is very much delegated to the outside world, to the adult world and to politics. Adults, especially for respondents in the first primary classes, are seen as subjects who can readily act to uphold the values of respect and solidarity, a fact consistent with the children's age of development. Although the results show some differences in affective aspects between different age groups there is a progressive increase in empathy, alongside a decrease in learned helplessness and external responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

The research-education project, which we presented, is characterized by the active involvement of teachers in the construction of knowledge and action with their pupils, in line with the transformative character of the two types of education, thanks also to the collaboration with CSO experts. The co-design work was therefore based on two central elements: the teachers' perceptions of ESD and GCED, in order to start a collective reflection on the expected goals of the interventions to be designed (and on how the idea of ESD and GCED can in fact orient them differently), and the initial global competence level of the students targeted by the interventions.

The evidence gathered sheds light on the resources and elements of fragility conducive to the construction of interventions that can consolidate knowledge and strengthen the various dimensions of global competence in a targeted manner, and hopefully, will also make it possible to appreciate the change produced by such actions.

The final surveys and evaluation of the effectiveness of the training are underway, which will allow us to understand the impact of the initiative on institutions, teachers, and students.

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PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE ASSESSMENT AMONG FUTURE PRIMARY EDUCATION TEACHERS

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Contemporary socioeconomic and cultural transformations require a profound renewal of educational systems towards sustainability and inclusion. In this context, the school plays a crucial role in promoting the development of transversal skills that allow individuals to face the challenges of the future in a responsible and conscious way (Boffo et al., 2023), as foreseen by GreenComp. Sustainable Assessment (SA) (Boud and Soler, 2015) is an innovative tool to support this process. It integrates with Assessment as Learning (AaL). In fact, SA does not only measure learning outcomes, but it also aims to develop in students the ability to self-assess their performance and reflect on their actions, with a view to continuous improvement. Empirical research has been launched at the University of Salerno to investigate the level of awareness and opinions of future nursery and primary school teachers on SA. The preliminary results, shared in this paper, highlight the need to promote a greater diffusion of these assessment practices within initial training courses, to prepare teachers who can accompany their students towards active and responsible citizenship.

transitions; sustainability; Sustainable Assessment; descriptive analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary socio-cultural context is characterized by profound changes. This requires a radical renewal of educational systems, from school to lifelong learning. The GreenComp, a reference framework of the European Union (2022), is a fundamental point of reference for lifelong learning and the development of competence in sustainability. Within this context, we are witnessing a growing diffusion of the SA approach (Boud and Soler, 2015) in the context of school assessment. Placed within the broader framework of Assessment as Learning (AaL), SA focuses on the impact of assessment processes on future contexts, going beyond a perspective that is merely focused on immediate results. SA not only meets current formative and summative needs but prepares students to face future formative challenges.

SA promotes the development of meta-learning. This is understood as the ability of students to formulate critical judgments on their own performance and that of their

peers (Boud, 2000), going beyond the simple execution of a task. This approach, in line with the indications of GreenComp, contributes to forming active and aware citizens, able to face the complexities of the contemporary world and contribute to the construction of a more sustainable future.

Furthermore, sustainable assessment is characterized using a variety of tools and methodologies that allow for the complete and authentic assessment of the different dimensions of learning. Feedback, in this context, plays a crucial role. It provides students with clear and timely information to improve their performance.

Finally, SA places a strong emphasis on equity and inclusion, recognizing the diversity of learning and valuing the individual characteristics of each student. In this way, a more inclusive and stimulating learning environment is created, which promotes the development of all students.

From this perspective, the AaL and SA approaches aim to develop in students the ability to manage, self-regulate and evaluate the quality of their own and others' learning products and processes, preparing them to be lifelong, wide and deep learners (EU, 1995).

1. THE DESIGN OF A RESEARCH ON THE ASSESSMENT CONCEPTIONS OF FUTURE TEACHERS

Based on the theoretical framework, action research was started during the month of September 2023 at the University of Salerno (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982). It is aimed at an in-depth investigation of assessment conceptions.

The primary objective of the study is to explore and map the mental representations that future teachers, still in the initial training phase, have on assessment processes. Subsequently, we will design and implement training interventions to transform unfounded assessment conceptions and promote the adoption of more rigorous and scientifically supported models.

To achieve these objectives, the research answers the following research questions: what are the conceptions that future teachers have on assessment? How can we intervene to develop conceptions in line with the literature?

Based on the reference literature (Brown, 2006; Vannini, 2012; Brown, Gebril and Michaelides, 2019; Ciani and Rosa, 2022), we hypothesize to detect evaluative conceptions regarding the times, functions and objects of assessment. The research involves a non-probabilistic convenience sample. It is composed of students attending the course of "Models and tools for assessment". It lasts 48 hours and it is a course foreseen in the master's degree in Primary Education Sciences. The choice to involve future teachers in initial training is justified by empirical evidence. They indicate the influence of factors, such as personal and school experiences, on evaluative conceptions. These experiences can hinder the acquisition of professional skills and make attention to this aspect fundamental in initial training paths.

The research is divided into five phases. The first phase involved the detection of initial evaluative conceptions through the administration of a structured

questionnaire: Teachers' Conceptions of Assessment – Abridged version (TCoA-IIIA) (Brown, 2006). The questionnaire, translated and adapted from the literature, was administered to students on the first day of class to collect their initial conceptions: their conceptions before lessons influence their way of thinking about assessment. The questionnaire represents the abbreviated version of the TCoA-III. It was built to explore teachers' evaluative conceptions through an inventory of 50 statements. The questionnaire investigates teachers' opinion on four types of conceptions: improvement; school accountability; student accountability; irrelevant (Tammaro and Gragnaniello, 2024).

The second phase focuses on the descriptive analysis of the collected data, to collect the naive conceptions of students on school assessment. Based on the results, the third phase involves the start, in the classroom during lessons, of guided discussions on the naive conceptions of students regarding the timing and functions of assessment, the complementarity between the logic of improvement and the logic of accountability, the objects of assessment (product, process and system) and the assessment tools (proficiency tests and authentic task).

The fourth phase involves the implementation of teaching activities useful for learning effective assessment models and tools. Two types of activities have been proposed: teaching laboratories and peer review activities (Liu and Carless, 2006; Cartney, 2010). These are activities that follow a practical and experiential approach, useful for developing greater critical and reflective awareness regarding the assessment process (Schön, 1987).

The teaching laboratories are divided into: small group activities to become familiar with the different types of tests (unstructured, semi-structured, structured, authentic task) and learn to select the most suitable assessment tools for the different disciplines/fields of experience and teaching contexts; case study analysis, which allows students to examine different assessment experiences in real contexts.

Peer review activities are based on the principle of peer assessment. Furthermore, they promote the exchange of feedback and mutual review of the work done. The planned activities are the following:

- cross-assessment of profit tests carried out by one's classmates;
- review of profit tests already carried out;
- analysis of tests already assessed by other teachers (Tammaro and Gragnaniello, 2024).

The fifth phase involves the re-administration of the questionnaire on the last day of class. The data will be subjected to descriptive analysis to evaluate any change in students' conceptions following the training course (Gragnaniello and Tammaro, 2024).

2. THE PERSPECTIVE OF FUTURE TEACHERS: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

This paper presents part of the descriptive analysis of the data collected with the questionnaire administered at the beginning of the first lesson of the university

course.

The questions included in the first part of the questionnaire aimed to detect information on some background variables (gender, age), previous teaching experiences and perceived level of competence regarding school assessment.

The questionnaire was filled out anonymously and on a voluntary basis by a total of 94 respondents, of whom 97.9% were female, 2.1% preferred not to specify it and the male gender did not find any respondent: data that reflects the female prevalence in the student body of the Degree Course in SFP.

The most represented age group is between 20-29 years (92.6%), in line with the average age of enrollment in the Course. The following age groups are between 30-39 years (6.4%) and 40-49 years (1.1%).

As regards any teaching experience, most respondents (93.6%) have never had any. Only 6.4% declared having done substitute teaching: monthly (3.2%); daily (2.1%); annual (1.1%).

Fig. 1. Item 4 – "How do you rate your assessment skills?"
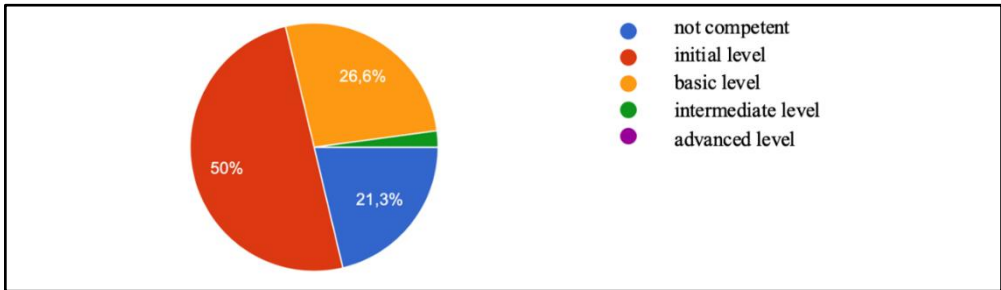
Regarding the level of perceived competence in school assessment (Fig. 1), 21.3% of respondents declared to have no competence, 50% an initial level, 26.6% a basic level and 2.1% an intermediate level. No respondent declared an advanced level. The results highlight a heterogeneous picture, despite the sample being composed of aspiring teachers without specific training or work experience in the field. This suggests that some of the respondents may have based their response on personal experiences as students, rather than on specific professional training.

The paper presents some results regarding items that investigate the opinions that future teachers have on SA practices, and more generally on formative assessment practices. The following analysis summarizes the percentages relating to the negative steps of the scale (1 = not at all in agreement, 2 = slightly in agreement) and the positive ones (3 = somewhat in agreement, 4 = strongly in agreement).

For item 8, "Assessment classifies students", only 13.8% of student-future teachers declare that they fully agree with this statement. On the contrary, the majority (86.2%) express disagreement (Fig. 2). This suggests a vision of assessment that goes beyond mere classification and recognizes multiple functions, such as the formative one (Falcinelli, 2015).

Item 9 highlights that a minority, but still significant, of teachers (44.5%) believes that assessment consists in the mere assignment of a grade or a level to the student's performance. This data underlines the persistence of a traditional vision of assessment. It is therefore essential to promote a broader and more articulated conception of assessment, which recognizes it as a complex and multifaceted tool at the service of learning.

Fig. 2. Item 8 – "The assessment classifies students"
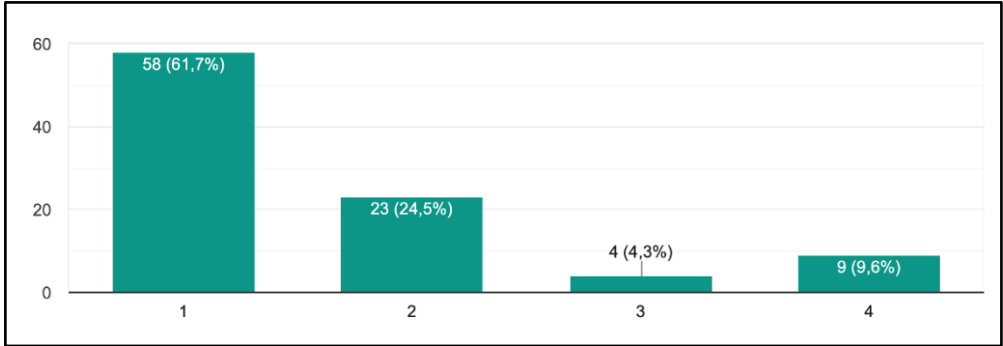
Similarly, for item 14, "Assessment provides feedback to students on their performance", 93.7% of respondents are on the positive steps of the scale: 51.1% "strongly agree" and 42.6% "somewhat agree", only 6.4% "slightly disagree". This demonstrates that future teachers recognize the formative function of assessment and the ability of teacher feedback on a student's performance to trigger an improvement in their learning process. Likewise, they recognize the SA that focuses on the impact of assessment on future reality, rather than just immediate learning outcomes.

With the analysis of item 15, a significant awareness of the diagnostic function of assessment emerges. In fact, a significant majority of participants (70.5%) recognize the role of assessment in identifying students' learning needs and adapting teaching design. However, 29.5% do not agree (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Item 15 – "Assessment provides students with information about their learning needs"
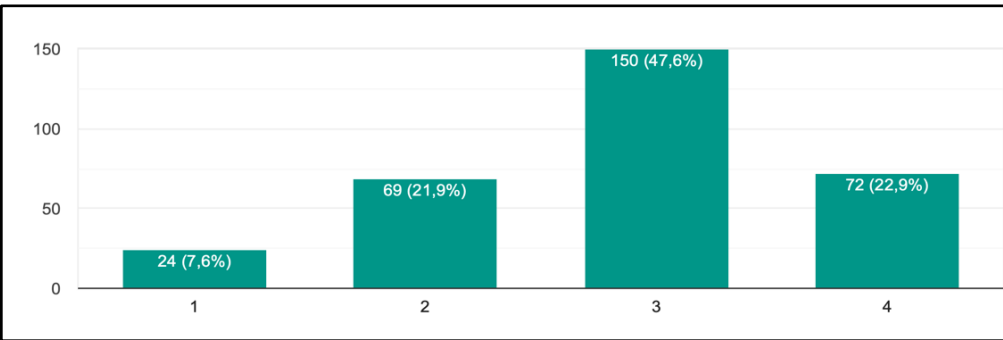
Similarly, in item 12, 75.5% believe that assessment and student feedback can provide teachers with useful information to improve their teaching process.

Item 19 shows a fair awareness of the diagnostic function of assessment. 44.8% partially agree and 35.6% fully agree with the concept that assessment allows for adapting teaching to individual differences. However, 19.6% express a dissenting opinion. This could suggest the need for further study on the informative value of assessment and its potential applications for individualized teaching design (Besozzi, 2009; Hattie, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

The dichotomy between theory and practice highlights the need to continue to question future teachers' conceptions of assessment. It is essential to understand the deep reasons that push them to favor a summative approach, often linked to external pressures and the culture of the exam. In this context, initial training plays a crucial role. Through targeted training courses, it is possible to overcome misconceptions about assessment and promote a formative and sustainable approach, in line with the principles of innovative teaching (Grion, 2008; Pastore and Pentassuglia, 2015). In this perspective, SA (Boud, 2000) allows monitoring students' progress and providing useful feedback for improvement. This approach encourages self-assessment and student accountability, promoting student-centered teaching with a significant impact on students' citizenship education (Dann, 2002). Through formative and sustainable assessment, students are encouraged to develop skills such as critical thinking, collaboration and communication: essential elements for active and responsible citizenship.

In conclusion, critical reflection on the concepts of future teachers in the field of assessment, combined with training on innovative assessment models such as SA, represents a fundamental step to promote quality teaching and to foster citizenship education for students. Through a profound rethinking of assessment, schools can fully fulfill their role in the formation of aware citizens who are prepared to face the challenges of the contemporary world.

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ECOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN: ACCOMPANYING MODELS FOR THE PLANNING OF POSSIBLE FUTURES

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Pope Francesco, in Laudato Si' and in Laudate Deum, asks the community community to respond to the ecological crisis, demanding attention to the need for radical change for the common good. Intergenerational education is crucial for the custody of the Earth and the Philosophy for Children promotes a democratic and complex thought, as demonstrated by the Laboratorio di Ecologia Integrale in Padova in 2023.

Community; Ecosophy; Integral Ecology; Philosophy for children; Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

The transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene highlights an acceleration of uncertainty and change in ecological conditions that have resulted in the instability of knowing how to live together (Delors, 2021) due to the complexity generated. It is this last dimension that must lead us to rethink our inhabiting the Earth starting from the appeal made by Pope Francis for an ecological conversion that requires not only a dynamism of lasting change, but also an aspect of community conversion (Francesco, 2015). Overcoming the vision of man as a consumer allows us to understand that working for the common good is first of all a return to giving value to the human species as a co-inhabitant (together with all existing species) of the Earth, neither subject nor sovereign because the life, intelligence and freedom of man are inserted into the nature that enriches our planet and are part of its internal forces and its balance (Bianchi et al. 2022, 26). That Francesco himself had to call on all men of good will (Francesco, 2023) not to let his appeal of about ten years earlier fall on deaf ears, makes us understand how little has been done in the ecological field to determine a decisive change of direction. It should be emphasized that the words expressed by Francesco in 2015 were consistent with what in the same year the 193 member countries of the United Nations established as a global reference framework for sustainable development, namely the seventeen objectives of Agenda 2030.

What we consider an emergency in the contemporary era is actually the result of non-choices in the past or choices not to listen to appeals that with foresight have

placed at the center the possibility of incurring an ecological catastrophe (Jonas, 2009) if radical changes in behavior, attitudes and thoughts were not implemented. The ecological priority can only be accepted within a rethinking that involves the role that the human being plays within the Planet: a relational being that lives and feeds on the interdependence with the other inhabitants of the Earth or a being that governs the relationships with the exercise of power over the other inhabitants. Clarifying what posture each one must have towards others also allows us to understand the role we have towards the younger generations. Intergenerationality becomes one of the elements of the planning of sustainable development.

1. ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE IN THE HISTORICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

From the first industrial revolution onwards, the relationship between man and nature has been invested by a utilitarian perspective according to which the resources present on Earth are functional to the satisfaction of human needs, therefore at his disposal. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did we begin to rethink the environmental issue, overcoming the positivist vision and focusing on the possible relationship between new scientific discoveries and the very idea of nature and society, to overcome that image typical of Western culture according to which the human being is separated from the natural world (Birbes, 2016, 30). Another fundamental stage that marks the transition from the ecological vision as purely environmental to that linked to the sustainable perspective is with A. Naess when in the article The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement he uses the term deep to underline the new relationship that is intended to be created between nature and man with the definitive transition from the anthropocentric to the biocentric perspective (Devall and Sessions, 2022), where the human being does not hold power in a position of supremacy over the other beings that inhabit the Earth, but shares places and existence with them. Maturing the awareness of the need for interdependence between man and nature according to which the earth needs man and, reciprocally, man also needs the earth allows us to open up to the ecosophical model. Generativity becomes a key to understanding the human-nature bond (Arendt, 2017) if we start from the idea that being born presupposes not only an inter-subjective and therefore symbolic space but also a physical, earthly context (Birbes, 2016, 35). Care becomes the new paradigmatic model for rethinking the contemporary environmental issue, capable of changing the reference model from taking care to caring. In this way, the man-nature relationship overcomes the utilitarian vision in favor of a symmetrical relational dimension, because no one is in a privileged position compared to the other, and circular, because the exchange occurs in a bidirectional way, between the factors in the field.

2. THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTION IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

We cannot talk about generational exchange without invoking education as a model to accompany change. It is true that education in turn requires having visions that can read the future (we will see later that future in the singular does not restore the

vision of sustainability in the times of the Anthropocene) in order to orient the present, but this is only possible in the exchange between those who have already lived the past and now find themselves living the present with younger people who have a temporally shorter past behind them. Education and accompaniment between generations is situated within the discernment between visions, where the adult and the young person both recognize themselves as part of an Earth that is Mother (or stepmother) and consequently together create and attempt actions of change (or exploitation) in the present time which is the only time of concrete exercise of thought and possibility of action. Being able to respond to emergencies with the posture of children-inhabitants in relation to Mother-Earth allows us to build common good within a reciprocal affectivity, because the mother-child relationship speaks of caresses, smells of loving kindness, many times instead it cultivates suffering, judgments, comparisons within us (Tiozzo Brasiola, 2023, 119). It is different to build change starting from the citizen-Planet relationship because the latter recalls the dimension of the Globe, therefore to a perspective immersed in globalization and the global market where necessarily the paradigm of reference in the educational field is that of Human Capital to which is associated the ability to produce, accumulate and exchange knowledge, that knowledge that generates innovation and plays a central role in fueling the competitiveness of a country system (Bramanti and Odifreddi, 2006, 17). Being able to face ecological challenges requires sustainable foresight and taking a stand with respect to theoretical models of reference capable of building visions and actions of change in one direction or another. In giving oneself the possibility of inhabiting uncertainty, each person is asked to enter into a relationship with responsibility towards the common good as an educational approach that builds multifaceted sustainability (environmental, social, economic).

Responsibility then emerges in its etymological sense (*responsus* and *habilis*, therefore capable of giving an answer) as a pressing need in the face of the reality that asks. What does it ask and where does it 'send' the question? What to answer and where does it 'move' the answer?[1] Therefore, the place of accompaniment seems to be this sometimes confused and unresolved oscillation between question and answer, between the appeal of Mother Earth (in a broad sense: the cry of the poor, of nature, of young people) and the search for solutions that are always provisional, albeit sustainable. It is therefore not possible to assume any practice of investigation and political participation that has the characteristics of methodological rigidity, of the mere vertical transmission of knowledge, of intellectual asymmetry. Such a practice would not be successful in a world marked by perpetual, disorderly and rapid change. The sustainable vision as contamination of sectoral economic, social and environmental boundaries towards the flourishing of fair and free communities promotes new questions and new challenges, one among all: What is sustainable for us today can be sustainable for others tomorrow? What are the

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[1] Translation into Italian: "Cosa domanda e dove 'manda' la domanda? Cosa rispondere e dove 'sposta' la risposta?"

criteria, if they exist, of sustainability and by whom are they established? (Tiozzo Brasiola et al., 2022, 108).

3. PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AS A GENERATIVE MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

In order to offer possible suggestions, we tried to propose a new way of addressing the issue of sustainability no longer according to the problem solving model, but through problem posing (Freire, 2022) with the problematization activity through Philosophy for Children sessions. It could represent that innovative, risky (in a virtuous sense) and revolutionary approach useful for the development of that complex thought (Lipman, 2005) at the same time critical, creative, caring that only communally finds its raison d'être, in a progressive democracy that knows no hierarchies other than that of free thought. The Philosophy for Children movement has inspired laboratory and practical experiences of active citizenship, such as the Integral Ecology Laboratory of Padua born in 2023. A group of teenagers and two secondary school teachers questioned themselves on topics such as sustainability, ecology, responsibility, commitment, citizenship starting from some Philosophy for Children sessions that generated actions recognized within the Sustainable Development Festival promoted by AsVIS (Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development). The posture of the adult in this specific practice is entirely dedicated to listening and facilitation, within a context, the community one, where each member is free and sure of being able to give their own specific contribution knowing that an entire community will value their point of view and will be able to translate into action what they set out to do, perceiving their personal and collective responsibility, within a process that is always open to novelty, change and overcoming the objectives achieved.

CONCLUSIONS

Desiring to build possible futures becomes the precondition for approaching a sustainable sustainability model. To do this, environmental education cannot be reduced to practices of transmitting the notional knowledge of natural sciences, but must rethink itself as an opportunity for sustainable planning starting from asking questions rather than seeking solutions-answers. The risk is that of promoting learning by discovery promoted by twentieth-century pedagogical activism. We call it 'risk' because this perspective could also be reduced to a laissez-faire in order to discover. This would not be able to build community thinking to promote the common good, but would reduce everything to a mere doing without a value-based dimension. Formal, informal and non-formal education can draw from educational practices and models (such as Philosophy for Children) to promote the construction of complex thinking in order to look at sustainability according to the relational-circular perspective between man and nature. Co-constructing thinking within the research community is already acting for sustainability because thinking in favor of sustainability is sustainable action and acting for sustainability is sustainable

thinking. Sustainable design understood in this way becomes a common good itself because thoughts are generated within a research community. A community that transforms the generated thinking into sustainable actions carried out with and for the territory, in this sense it is possible to define the research community as an educating community.

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ADOLESCENTS AND SUSTAINABLE LEARNING. THE PRACTICE OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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This contribution aims to explore the importance of Outdoor Education (OE) as an educational tool to promote sustainable development and address the challenges of contemporary learning. OE stands out from traditional teaching methods due to its approach focused on blending indoor and outdoor environments, fostering concrete experiences and authentic contexts. This method, rooted in the reflections of thinkers such as Rousseau and Fröbel, goes beyond outdoor educational practices to provide opportunities for developing autonomy, critical thinking, and active participation among students. The article highlights how OE meets the need to reconnect adolescents with the external environment, overcoming the phenomenon of "indoorization" and the alienation typical of the contemporary era. Through approaches like Outdoor Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning, OE facilitates the acquisition of transversal and disciplinary skills, creating a balance between cognitive, social, and emotional development. The contribution concludes by emphasizing the need to transform learning spaces into dynamic and relational environments capable of reflecting the complexity of the relationship between individuals and their surroundings.

sustainability; outdoor education; adolescents

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development has changed considerably in recent years, taking on increasingly complex meanings over time. A document that contributed to its definition is *the Global Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the related 17 Goals to be achieved by 2030, approved in 2015 by the United Nations. The concept of sustainability, as defined in the document, is characterized by three meanings: economic, environmental and social. Three concepts that should allow us to transition from an anthropocentric ethics, which attributes an instrumental value to nature that can be measured in economic terms, to an ecocentric ethics which recognizes it as having an intrinsic value (Dozza, 2019, p. 195). Over time, a more complex construct of sustainability has emerged, in fact today we talk about transversal sustainability which extends to all areas of society and knowledge, going beyond the traditional boundaries of the economy, environment and society, to favor

of a systemic and interdisciplinary approach (Morin, 1999; Barth, 2015). This new perspective allows individuals to evaluate the impact that each of their decisions has on the surrounding context, on relationships and on the entire organizational and social structure. The territory is no longer other than itself.

In the educational field, all this has translated into the promotion of real education for sustainable development, to act, even in everyday school life, a repositioning of new themes, but also of existing ones, with the aim of illustrating and developing skills for a socially correct, ecologically compatible and economically effective life, in a lasting perspective (Chassot, 2017, p. 12). To promote training capable of developing awareness and critical thinking, it is necessary that the correlation between education and sustainability is based on a real investment in training processes to promote inclusive and sustainable practices, without neglecting the value and uniqueness of the human person.

All this is possible if we promote a real cultural change capable of supporting a sustainability mindset, (Kassel et al., 2016; Hermes, Rimanoczy, 2018; Rimanoczy, 2021), therefore a radical change of views, attitudes and behaviours in relationship to the ecosystem. The promotion of this new perspective by teachers requires the initiation of learning that responds to the criteria of *lifelong*, *lifewide* and *lifedeep* learning, to develop strategies and offer adequate educational responses to current problems, adopting paths capable of directing behaviour of learners towards a personal and collective commitment (Bornatici, 2021). The development of a sustainability mindset therefore requires action that is able to go beyond the purely scholastic context, which can involve many of the environments with which students interface during their extracurricular activities. The importance of this process is also clarified by the *Guidelines for environmental education and sustainable development* (Miur & Mattm, 2009, 2014), through which all educational contexts are asked to review approaches and methodologies, in order to promote the relationship between children and young people with that part of themselves represented by the territory, understood in its many meanings, primarily the natural one.

To achieve these objectives, it is appropriate that the environment becomes a shared space of lifelong learning in which formal and informal experiences become conditions for well-being (Pignalberi, 2021). For these reasons it is necessary to first deconstruct, and then reconstruct, the place in which to learn; it is about promoting an ecological awareness capable of reflecting on the indissoluble bond that exists between the identity of the individual and the surrounding environment. Among the methodologies that can favor this vision are *Student-Centred-Learning* (SCL) (Mezirov, 1991, 2003) which allow, unlike passive ones, the activation of new modes of action and therefore the start of cognitive processes higher such as, for example, the development of critical thinking, the ability to observe situations from different angles, to get involved, to experiment and so on. These methodologies give learners a high sense of responsibility and active participation in their learning path; one of the methodologies that is able to perform this function is certainly Outdoor Education (OE) which will be explored in depth in the following paragraph.

1. THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION

For years the outdoor, which is not simply open-air teaching, but a practice for producing new relationships, has not been considered; in its place an indoor modality has always been favored, thus denying its high educational value (Xodo, 2019). However, the importance of the external environment, the centrality of the learning individual and the growing need to promote health and well-being in an increasingly sedentary society, constitute only some of the fundamental factors that have given rise to OE paths which, although may appear to be an innovative methodology in the pedagogical field, it has its roots in the concept of outdoor education, so dear to thinkers such as Comenius, Rousseau and Fröbel (Farné et al., 2018).

The term outdoor, already in its etymological origin, recalls the idea of fully using the benefits deriving from time spent outside. This concept is accompanied by a change of perspective in the educational approach, shifting the attention from the centrality of closed spaces to the integration between the internal and external environment, thus restoring a balance between the indoor and outdoor dimensions. The external environment is not perceived exclusively as a place dedicated to play or distraction, this methodology proposes an educational approach that takes place outside the traditional school spaces which, although they have been designed and equipped in a functional way, remain artificial contexts, created for a specific purpose, where environmental variables are often neglected or managed in a limited way. On the contrary, OE promotes an openness towards diversified experiences and real environments, in which students have the opportunity to interact with natural and concrete contexts, an experience that stimulates the development of autonomy and the adoption of personal strategies to achieve shared objectives in a collaborative climate. The OE identifies the place of learning elsewhere,

> so as to leave the ordinary environments of education and with them also traditional teaching, to move outside of all this, to places where learning occurs through the practices of experimenting and through experiences that are specific and situated (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1998, p. 27).

This approach was born as a response to the phenomenon called *indoorization* (Van Bottenburg & Lotte, 2010) characterized by a disconnect between the teaching and learning process, the use of only frontal lessons and an attitude of disinterest on the part of the learners. OE, instead, develops as an educational approach that aims to counteract the progressive distancing from direct and significant experience with the external environment. A process that has reason to exist today also considering the impact of industrialization and the pervasiveness of the media in contemporary society.

From this perspective, learning is enriched by a wide range of experiences, offering students the opportunity to engage with real and authentic contexts. This approach promotes the development of a sense of participation and autonomy, proving particularly useful for adolescents who, today more than ever, need greater contact with the reality of their time (Giunti et al., 2021).

OE represents a broad and inclusive concept, which includes a multiplicity of training proposals; the distinctive feature that these experiences have in common is the attention paid to external spaces and the use of active and participatory methodologies (Higgins et al., 2006). On the basis of the theoretical framework of reference, the established educational objectives and the operational contexts, outdoor teaching can be declined into more structured models, taking on specific connotations and names. In the educational field, two main dimensions can be identified: Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE) and Outdoor Learning (OL), each of these declinations offers a distinctive approach to promote the educational experience in relation to the external environment, promoting different ways of learning. OAE is an educational approach that uses the territory as the main context to promote the global development of the individual, integrating cognitive, social, emotional and physical aspects, acting mainly in the non-formal field. On the other hand, OL is a learning method that takes place outdoors, uses the external environment as a resource to acquire specific knowledge, skills or competences, often linked to a disciplinary or educational objective that acts in the formal field (Farnè, Bortolotti & Terrusi, 2018). In both models, the external space is the main educational setting, as it allows you to come into direct contact with the world by experiencing elements that could not be done in the classroom.

CONCLUSIONS

OE is the method through which, in the international panorama, educational theories and practices have been introduced that recognize the centrality of the external environment, understood as a privileged place for training (Farné & Agostini, 2014). As specified in the previous pages, the activities carried out in outdoor spaces are not conceived with recreational purposes, on the contrary, they aim to develop innovative educational paths, capable of promoting learning through original approaches. OE enhances the opportunities offered by the outside, using them as resources to promote transversal and interdisciplinary knowledge. This approach not only involves students, but it is also inclusive and, thanks to its flexibility, able to respond to the different needs of students (Bortolotti, 2019).

The environment is never a secondary issue or a simple framework in the educational process, because it represents the pivotal dimension of the relationship between educator and student, so as to act in a subtle and pervasive way on every fiber of character and mind (Dewey, 1972, p. 23). The environment, therefore, is a connector between objective external reality and subjective internal reality; thanks to it, each individual becomes aware of the fact that he or she is made up of an inside and an outside. These considerations are valid for all subjects in developmental age, but especially for adolescents since the use of OE tends to decrease sharply as the age of the subjects in training increases. The general tendency is not to recognize adequate interest and pedagogical value in these practices, consequently the outdoors is prematurely excluded from the educational path of adolescents (Bortolotto, 2020), unlike what happens in the European context (Knight, 2013,

2016).

Learning in an environment that is outside of what is known and usual, the going out of the adolescents, also pushes us towards another type of reading of the OE, that is, an evident reference to the process of opening up of young people towards the outside world,

> the entire adolescent process can be read through this way of thinking, feeling and acting that speaks of movement, exploration of new spaces, search for boundaries and coordinates to design one's place in the world, but also of separation, confusion, stasis. It is a universally valid dimension, from an anthropological point of view, because it records the passage from heteronomy to autonomy, genetic code of every growth process that here finds a crucial phase, associated with a new way of educating (Bortolotto, 2020, p. 115).

The attempt of adolescents to "get out" can be interpreted symbolically as the expression of their difficulty in defining a personal space, their own identity and an autonomous range of action; in this phase of growth, they directly experience the complexity of the "inside/outside" dualism. On the one hand, they find comfort and security within the confines of the "inside", but they also experience the sense of dissatisfaction and limitation that it can generate; on the other, the "outside" represents a desire for discovery and autonomy, often accompanied by the fear of misunderstanding and vulnerability. In this scenario, a truly inclusive school cannot ignore the understanding of the "inside" of students, that is, their inner world, made up of emotions, insecurities and aspirations. This knowledge, fundamental for the educational process, frequently manifests itself in poorly structured contexts.

> The teacher's action can no longer be an expression of certainties, of unidirectionality or predictability, nor even of providing answers to questions never formulated; on the contrary, it must be able to embrace the uncertain by promoting silences that can be filled by the critical and creative uniqueness of individual students (Tammaro, Ferrantino & Tiso, 2024, p. 17).

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AGAINST TEENAGERS ETHNICIZATION. THE POLITICAL ROLE OF PEDAGOGY IN THE ITALIAN CASE STUDY

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Adolescents have paid the highest price, in socio-relational and psychological terms, for the pandemic restriction policies in every European country. After the pandemic crisis many scholars have underlined the consequences that at psychological as well as social level have affected the Z generation people. The evidence of a state of disease of such generation provokes a reaction by the adult generation. The hypothesis sustained on this paper is that adult society is starting to look at adolescents as a new minor ethnic group in competition with adults. We can call this process "ethnicization of adolescence".

adolescence; ethnicization; education; pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

In the post-pandemic period, many data highlight the difficulties of adolescents in reintegrating into social life in person (Roffey, 2023). In short and in a general sense, we can say that the most widespread behaviours in response to these difficulties have been oriented according to two main trends (Meherali et al., 2021, Panda et. al, 2021, Oosterhof et. al, 2020). The first refers to depressive phenomena (hikikomori, early school dropout, psychiatric episodes, eating disorders); the second refers to a tendency towards antisocial reaction modes (baby ganging, peer violence, conflicts with adults). These phenomena are directly linked to the experience of alienation from social relationships at an age, adolescence, in which the emotional-relational function of social interaction has a precise evolutionary function (Le Breton, 2016). We can therefore argue that the cause of the increase in the antisocial phenomena described above lies precisely in the inability of policy makers to respond to the psychological and relational needs of adolescents during the acute phase of the pandemic. By thinking that the rules should apply to everyone in the same way, those who need more and who are "less equal" than others are even more, and automatically, penalized.

PARADIGM OF CONTROL VERSUS EDUCATIONAL PARADIGM

To address dysfunctional behaviours of adolescents, in the media debate and in the institutional policies of the Italian context, one can notice the development of a

binary attitude in the years following the pandemic. On the one hand, the dominant idea that emerges especially from the media of the left wings political area is that adolescence is a disease that requires a therapeutic approach. On the other hand, institutional decisions seem to be oriented according to the danger-control dyad towards adolescents perceived as subjects without values, at the mercy of drugs and violent instincts and therefore disturbing and to be repressed.

According to a pathological and pathologizing principle, adolescents in this perspective have been labelled as sick subjects in need of treatment. Consequently, the cultural and advertising market has multiplied the dispensers of good advice, parental rules and *prêt-à-porter* therapies to be applied to young and very young people. Even today there is no television schedule, media column, podcast or influencer that does not deal with proposing a cure for adolescence based only on their own beliefs and tautologies.

On the other hand, in a sort of cultural anthropological retaliation, another image of the adolescent has spread, perceived as a violent bully, as a danger to one's children, as a subject prey to relational modalities often oriented towards verbal or physical violence. This second stereotype has generated a demand for security by public opinion. In both stereotyped perspectives of categorization of the adult world towards adolescents, although the approaches appear to be opposite (the first based on health care, the second oriented towards judgment and punishment), we can detect a common background determined by the idea that adolescence is a separate reality in society, a sort of heterogeneous minority, wrong and to be corrected. We can therefore notice a correctional paradigm that unites the two alternative positions. The adult community, which obviously has greater power within our society, considers adolescents in an asymmetrical way, a perspective in which there is no reciprocity, but rather a view based on the projections of expectations and requests of conformity to a predefined model.

Moreover, an educational approach by adults that do not encounter obstacles in public opinion to be unanimously recognized as logical and legitimate when applied to the world of childhood, are instead strangely alien when approaching adolescents. It happens, in fact, that while children are granted a credit of tolerance, indulgence and patience by adults legitimizing their behavioural and relational modes that are not completely in line with the rules of civil life or simply with the expectations of the adult world, when it comes to adolescents this necessary mediation between the desires of the adult world and the actual reality of the attitudes of the kids has no value or space.

THE RISK OF ETHNICIZATION OF ADOLESCENCE

Ethnicization is a concept used to describe a political process of attributing an ethnic identity to a social group that has not identified as such, or the infusion of race into a society's understanding of human behaviour. Ethnicization often arises from the interaction of a group with a group that dominates and attributes a racial identity in order to distinguish the dominant group's identity as relatively different from the

non-dominant group and to continue/reproduce social domination and exclusion (Burgio, 2022). Over time, the racialized and ethnicized group develops the socially imposed construct (internalized oppression) that races are real, different, and unequal in ways that matter to economic, political, and social life, an unhealthy norm that deprives them of their dignity as full humanity. This systemic tool in varying flexibility has been commonly used throughout the history of imperialism, nationalism, racial and ethnic hierarchies (Ibidem).

The hypothesis is that the way of thinking of adult society is starting to look at adolescents as a new minor ethnic group in competition with adults. Driven by disvalues such as competition, education aimed at developing skills useful only for the job market, the misunderstanding of the concept of merit, social and cultural devices are working to build an image of adolescents as weak, dangerous and non-homologated. In this scenario, even the role of education is being questioned. If the long process lasting almost a century of democratization of education and its support with a scientific framework represented by educational sciences, have forged a consolidated idea of separation between education and political power over change, today this epistemological awareness is under attack. "Black pedagogy" (Miller, 1990) seems to be resurfacing from the past, which admits repression and punishment as ways to keep deviant adolescence under control. Furthermore, education seems to return to the role of an institution aimed at transferring knowledge and confirming the social status quo and no longer as a pedagogical agency to reduce social and cultural disadvantage and as a democratic laboratory. To avoid the affirmation of this dystopia, it is important to strengthen the epistemological basis and the scientific vision of education (Tolomelli, 2019).

Going into more detail about the dimensions that constitute the scenario of the ethnicization of adolescence, we can begin by saying that the experience of the pandemic, in which the various categories of citizens (children, the elderly, subjects at risk, etc.) were emphasized and placed in opposition to the risk factors and the potential for contagion, has generated a fracture. One of the victims of the pandemic experience was the solidarity between the different types of citizens placed in a condition of dispute for access to the most precious good at that time: freedom of movement and contact. In this context, it seemed clearly evident that society is still highly stratified and other discriminating characteristics such as geographical-cultural origin and generational belonging have been added to social classes. I take up what was stated above on the stereotyping of the adult world towards adolescents and by intertwining this factor with the ethnicization that tends to amplify and stigmatize the characteristics of a given group, we can see how even adolescent culture (or subcultures) becomes a useful target to strengthen the separation process. We are therefore witnessing a progressive estrangement between adults and adolescents in which, however, adults hide behind incomprehension so as not to want to make the effort to understand a context before judging it.

The reference to ethnicization is evident here, a process in which the subordinate part is oppressed by the privileged one that labels as devoid of cultural value (wild)

everything it does not understand about its interlocutor.

Moral panic is a collective phenomenon in which an unjustified alarm is spread about a category of people considered a threat or a danger. This results in an over-estimated evaluation of the social impact of the phenomenon that is the object of moral panic and consequent stigmatization of the categories considered responsible. It is therefore a distortion of perception and a misalignment between reality and its representation often caused by news and media narratives that confuse causes with effects, generalize or amplify the specific phenomenology, shift attention or distort the facts for sensational purposes (Cohen, 2019). In cases of moral panic, the mass media amplify social problems compared to their real dimension and consider the scapegoats of panic as a threat to the values of society, highlight predominantly negative aspects and demonize the different, thus increasing the xenophobia that leads the ingroup to exclude the outgroup and generating that fear for the different that leads to the exclusion of the latter.

We have an overall picture in which cultural dimensions (generational bias and alienation), generational dimensions and a misunderstood educational function influence the interpretation of adolescence no longer seen only as an age of life with potential and critical issues, like the others, but as a perfect entity to convey the need for a "scapegoat" (Girad, 1982) of society. This trend is also reflected in the hypothesis of de-juvenization of adolescence. This term refers to the process of attributing full responsibility to the adolescent and, consequently, of losing the benefit of young age as a variable that must mitigate the jurisprudential approach and social judgment, more generally, which should be based on the educational function and not on the punitive one. If the law provides for the principle of child-friendly justice (2015) which guides all legal decisions regarding minors, the latest government decisions and positions in the educational field in response to a presumed adolescent emergency have a punitive slant and are based on the idea of punishment as an educational methodology. The positions taken by many opinion makers in full paternalistic style who praise and invoke a punitive attitude towards adolescents who make mistakes, forgetting the principle that behind deviance there is a discomfort to which society has failed to respond, are echoed in the "pedagogy of humiliation", in the conduct grade that returns to have weight in the didactic evaluation (Minister Valditara, 23 September 2024), in the Caivano decree (legislative decree no. 123 of 15 September 2023 which "aims to repress the violent phenomena of baby gangs and school dropouts, introducing harsher sanctions in cases of drug dealing and arrest "in flagrante delicto" and in which the concept of "school dropout" is replaced by the more disturbing concept of "school evasion"). A general picture is therefore emerging that denotes the fall of a pedagogically oriented view even in the face of "deviant" behaviour to accommodate public opinion's need for reassurance towards a generation that does not know how to approach except through opposition. What is being called into question is the renunciation of understanding the factors and key perspectives that lead to deviance in order to rebuild a meaningful relationship with adolescents, immediately activating a judgment-

punishment mechanism without the mediation of pedagogical knowledge as is done with other subjects in developmental age or on whom physical, psychological or social difficulties weigh. De-juvenization and the racialization of adolescence are hypotheses presented here in a preliminary phase that require further study and research to be more substantiated with empirical and experimental data.

DE-JUVENILIZATION (LAW AND POLICY)

RE-EMERGING OF BLACK PEDAGOGY

SCAPE GOAT SYNDROME

ADOLESCENCE AS HILLNESS

ETHNICIZATION OF ADOLESCENCE

ADOLESCENCE AS SOCIAL DANGER

PATERNALISM APPROACH (SUBALTERN BIAS)

CULTURAL ALIENATION
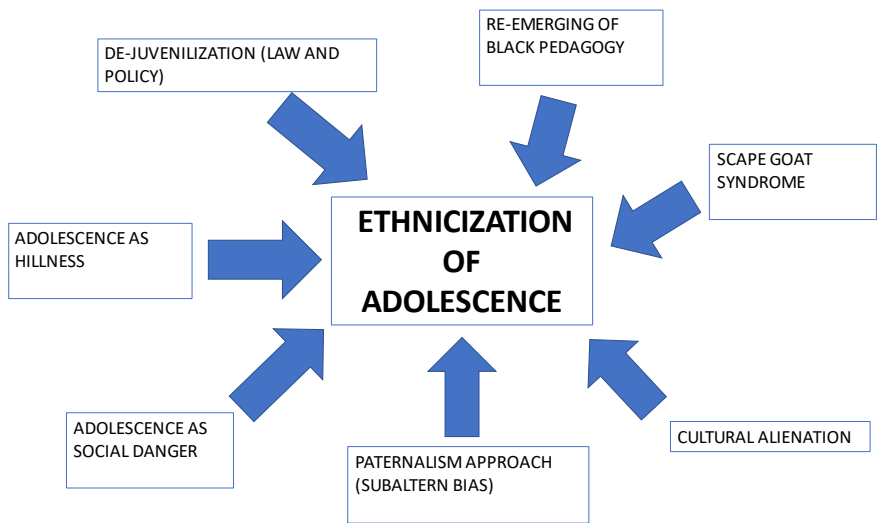
PEDAGOGICAL PATHS OF RESISTANCE

A community must base its coexistence not on the vain search for defining essentialist principles of identity, but rather on the ability to "remove the obstacles that prevent real equality between citizens" (art. 3, paragraph 2, Constitution of the Italian Republic) and on the sharing of responsibility with respect to the common goods essential to civil life such as the protection and education of new generations. Around these priorities, a community must be able to mobilize mutual responsibilities between individuals. For this reason, attention to the rights, citizenship and education, of adolescents must not be seen with a sentimental or pitying inspiration, but rather as a civic duty. One of the cardinal principles of democracies is that rights must be recognized and not granted.

In this regard, the awareness that only by protecting the most fragile and those who represent the future of the community itself can a generational interconnection be guaranteed, in a society that considers itself a complete democracy, represents something more than the struggle between divergent interests of specific groups, but should be a shared and obvious cultural heritage.

If the Constitutions of the European States and the UN Conventions are not just a rhetorical reference to values and principles far from daily practice and the possibility of being respected, then it is precisely in times of crisis that political decisions must be consistent with such declarations.

This removal of the rights of childhood and adolescence from public discourse is a

sign of the loss of a widespread pedagogical culture in the majority of the population. It is no coincidence that in Italy the economic investment in the state budget in schools and educational services is among the lowest in Europe and that the social and economic recognition and prestige of education professionals are very low and not comparable to those found in almost all other European countries (OECD, 2024).

The pandemic experience has shown us how interconnected and interdependent we are on a planetary level and how much we need to change paradigm to face the challenges that this complexity imposes on us. Unfortunately, our past, both national and European, has shown us that to control the masses the best strategy is to spread fear and anxiety. In the face of fear, rational thought collapses and hatred for others and the search for a scapegoat grows. We must regenerate a principle of rationality that makes us understand that even the most challenging crisis can be overcome if faced as a community (Morin, 1977). The point is how and if we will be able to develop practices of justice for all those who must have more because they start from disadvantaged conditions.

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I AM WHAT I EAT. EDUCATION MUST SUPPORT ADOLESCENTS' SUSTAINABLE FOOD CHOICES

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Adolescence is a critical developmental period characterized by transitioning from a diet controlled primarily by parents towards a more self-directed diet. Food choices allow adolescents to assert themselves, build their identity, and form their values. One of the areas in which adolescents define themselves as moral subjects is respect for the environment and, more generally, sustainability. Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between vegetarian nutrition and health in developmental age, demonstrating that if the diet is well monitored and managed in a balanced way, there is no risk associated with vegetarian regimes. Several studies have shown benefits such as reduced risk of being overweight, diabetes onset, cardiovascular diseases, and some cancers. On the other hand, concerns have surfaced regarding potential nutritional deficiencies in vegetarian diets. In response to these concerns, numerous scientific paediatric associations warned that the successful provision of a completely vegetarian diet for young people requires expert guidance, planning, and supplementation. Adolescents adopting a vegetarian diet must be guided and supported by adult reference figures. Education can contribute to developing well-informed and empowered adolescents who can make sustainable and healthy dietary choices.

vegetarianism; sustainability; adolescence; food choices; education.

INTRODUCTION

In industrialized countries, interest in plant-based diets has grown among various age groups, including adolescents (Cramer et al., 2017; Eurispes, 2019; Mensink et al., 2016; Ponzio et al., 2015). These dietary regimes often represent a philosophy of life: ethical vegetarians are mainly supported by moral reasons, such as animal welfare, non-violence, equality, respect for differences, or the idea that they can contribute to reducing environmental pollution or world hunger.

Despite the increasing rates of vegetarianism in industrialized countries, few studies analyze the phenomenon with specific reference to adolescents (Del Ciampo & Lopes Del Ciampo, 2019; Orlich et al., 2019; Patelakis et al., 2019). One of the first studies on this topic (Wright & Howcroft, 1992) found that emotional reasons associated with animal welfare, rather than health, are the basis of being vegetarian among adolescents.

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Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between vegetarian nutrition and health in developmental age, demonstrating that if the diet is well monitored and managed in a balanced way, there is no risk associated with vegetarian regimes (Eurispes, 2019; Tosatti & Doria, 2021). Several studies showed benefits such as reduced overweight risks, diabetes onset, cardiovascular diseases, and some cancers (Lee & Park, 2017; Matthews et al., 2011; Sabaté & Wien, 2010; American Dietetic Association, 2003). Moreover, findings suggest that adopting a vegetarian lifestyle during adolescence, characterized by a diet abundant in fruits, vegetables, legumes, eggs, and milk, can yield lasting benefits for bone health in adulthood (Movassagh et al., 2018).

On the other hand, concerns have surfaced regarding potential nutritional deficiencies in vegetarian diets (Lemale et al., 2019; Ferrara et al., 2017). In response to these concerns, numerous scientific paediatric associations warned that successfully providing young people with an entirely vegetarian/vegan diet requires substantial commitment, expert guidance, planning, resources, and supplementation (McEvoy et al., 2012; Kiely, 2021).

Everything explained so far implies that adolescents who adopt a vegetarian diet must be guided and supported by their adult reference figures. Supporting adolescents who choose to be vegetarian involves understanding and respecting their decisions, providing information, addressing nutritional concerns, and creating an environment that respects and accommodates their dietary preferences.

Education can contribute to the development of well-informed and empowered adolescents who are capable of making environmentally sustainable and healthy dietary choices, including vegetarianism.

This paper focuses, in particular, on the potential role of education to accompany adolescents in making conscious choices regarding nutrition, respecting their health, the environment, and living beings.

1. MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND FOOD CHOICES

The process of building identity is the common thread of the developmental tasks in adolescence (Ammaniti & Ammaniti, 1995; Andreoli, 2004; Bortolotto, 2013; Lancini et al., 2020; Pietropolli Charmet & Cirillo, 2010; Siegel, 2013). We can see adolescence as the search for a path, choices, and commitment. Moral development implies defining values, respecting them (coherence), and finding recognition from others (relationships).

One of the areas in which adolescents define themselves as moral subjects is that of environmental justice. Food choices can be a way for adolescents to take a stand

when transitioning from a diet controlled primarily by parents towards a more self-directed diet.

1.1. Research questions and design

This paper presents the preliminary results of a phenomenological research conducted to investigate the topic of vegetarian food choices in adolescence, delving into the motivations that lead adolescents to prefer plant-based diets, the conditions in which they make their choices, the support needs that derive from them at an informational, organizational, emotional and communicative level.

The research, which has received approval from the Ethics Committee for Research of the Department of Humanities at the University of Ferrara, seeks to develop educational settings and prepare educators to guide adolescents in their process of self-discovery, empowering them to make conscious decisions about their future.

It is based on semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of adolescents (18-22 years old), and it focuses on the role of adults (school teachers, families, educators) and the relationship between teenagers and adults. So far, six interviews were conducted with vegetarian female participants aged 18 to 20. Five participants were in their final year of secondary school, while one had taken a gap year to volunteer. All interviewees chose to become vegetarian for ethical reasons: respect for animals and the environment. Three interviewees consented to audio recording of the interview, while the content of the others was manually transcribed during the interview itself. The transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012) to identify recurring categories.

After collecting general data (name, age, qualification and/or educational background, housing situation, employment status), the questions posed to the interviewees are as follows:

1. Describe your current diet.
2. What are the reasons for your choices regarding nutrition?
3. Do you usually communicate your food choices and the reasons related to them to others?
4. Think about *school*. Did it provide you with opportunities to learn and reflect on food choices?
5. Think about your *extracurricular* activities and the environments you frequent. Did they provide you with opportunities to learn and reflect on food choices?
6. Think about your *family life*. Thanks to your family members and the time you spend together, did you have opportunities to learn and reflect on food choices?
7. Think about your relationships with your *peers*. Thanks to them and the time you spent together, did you have opportunities to learn and reflect on food choices?
8. Did you encounter, or are you experiencing, *obstacles* in respecting the choices made regarding your diet?

9. What would you *need* to make your food choices peacefully and consciously?
10. How could *adults* help you in carrying out your food choices consciously?

1.2 Preliminary results

This section will present the findings from the initial six interviews conducted in the first half of 2024, highlighting common themes.

A significant finding was the limited opportunities for adolescents to discuss their food choices. When asked about school, none reported meaningful experiences related to food choices, and three explicitly stated that "food is not a school subject".

All participants continue to live with their families. While two reported family conflict and the need to conceal their dietary choices, the others described family acceptance but limited understanding of their motivations and lack of knowledge about the subject. As one participant put it, "[...] my parents insist that as I am growing, I need to eat meat, but I know this is not necessary". One participant's mother dismissed her daughter's choice as a temporary phase, stating: "Do as you please, this too shall pass".

Regarding extracurricular activities, one interviewee described her participation in a student collective where she feels she can express her political and social ideas, including her dietary choices. Another reported attending a yoga course and meeting an older person there who inspired her to become a vegetarian. In the other interviews, no significant extracurricular environments were mentioned.

Four individuals stated that they prefer not to share their choice to be vegetarian with their peers for fear of being ridiculed. One of them said: "I am not yet able to explain well to others why one should be vegetarian. I should be more informed and assertive myself". The other two interviewees do not hide their choice from their peers but, at the same time, do not make it a topic of discussion, considering that there is no fertile ground.

The second recurring concept is the abundance of information available on the internet and, at the same time, the difficulty of selecting reliable sources. All interviewees reported conducting independent research, finding articles and other sources that sometimes reported contradictory evaluations. As a result, they need help understanding how vegetarian choices impact their health and what kind of supplements are necessary. Only one of the interviewees stated that she had relied on a dietitian. During the interview, she mentioned having suffered from eating disorders, and therefore her family deemed it appropriate to consult a specialist.

Another common theme among the participants was concern about their diet. Three participants dwelled on their eating habits, emphasizing that being vegetarian does not necessarily mean "eating healthy". They expressed concern about consuming too much "junk food" and not enough nutritious foods. One participant addressed the issue of the high costs of healthy vegetarian foods, stating that she did not feel comfortable asking her parents to spend more money "to please her".

2. CONSTRUCTIVE REFLECTIONS

The preliminary results of this study indicate significant areas for improvement in the educational context. Neither schools nor families provide adequate support, and for four out of six interviewees, there seem to be no other settings where they can express themselves and receive recognition, feedback, and help in pursuing their choices.

In school, the traditional organization of teaching by disciplines leads to underestimating crucial topics for the well-being of the person and the planet, such as nutrition. Time has come to introduce transdisciplinary teaching for "global rights", and "common concerns" (Booth & Ainscow, 2014; Nicolescu et al., 1994).

Schools should offer inclusive teaching that leads every student to academic success by exposing them to learning experiences and opportunities for interaction that are meaningful to them, based on their experiences, aspirations, and values.

The ability to source information, critically assess it, and articulate one's own perspective through dialogue is fundamental to adolescent development. Adult guidance is crucial in supporting young people as they navigate their moral and personal identities. Without such support, their choices may be influenced by superficial or ideological factors.

Adolescence should be recognized as a valuable period of growth (Siegel, 2013). Rather than viewing it as a transitional phase, we should foster a cultural environment that supports young people's development into integrated individuals who are self-aware and socially engaged.

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CLIMATE CHANGE, EDUCATION, SOCIAL JUSTICE: MAIN CHARACTERS, PROCESSES, EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

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This article explores the role of education in promoting climate justice in the Anthropocene era, where human activities are significantly shaping Earth's systems, contributing to climate change and disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable communities. Through a climate justice lens, the article examines the inequalities associated with the environmental crisis and highlights the need for a fair redistribution of climate-related risks and benefits. Education emerges as a crucial tool to raise awareness among new generations, addressing not only the scientific but also the social and ethical dimensions of climate change. In particular, global citizenship education is proposed as a means to cultivate critical awareness and collective responsibility in order to build a just and sustainable society. Through transformative pedagogical approaches, the article argues that climate justice education can empower young people to face contemporary challenges with resilience and foster a commitment to responsible and informed global citizenship.

global citizenship education, climate change, climate justice

INTRODUCTION: ANTHROPOCENE AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

In their 2000 paper, Crutzen and Stoermer define the Anthropocene as a period during which human activity has become a dominant force affecting Earth's systems, including climate, biodiversity, and natural resources. This concept prompts a significant re-evaluation of the relationship between humanity and the environment. It shifts the focus from nature as a resource to be exploited to nature as a complex network of interactions on which humans depend and of which they are an active part. Among the most critical manifestations of the Anthropocene, climate change stands out in particular because it generates uneven effects and has a more severe impact on already vulnerable countries and people (IPCC, 2023).

Climate justice represents a response to the inequalities that have been exacerbated by the environmental crisis, and it demands that industrialised countries take responsibility for their actions. Higher-income nations have historically been the primary contributors to the emissions driving climate change. Meanwhile, communities in the global South continue to bear the brunt of its consequences, often

without access to the economic benefits derived from environmental exploitation (Beck, 2008; Hickett, 2020). Consequently, climate justice represents a struggle for equity and sustainability, grounded in the notion that climate change is a social phenomenon intertwined with economic disparities, prejudice, and the neglect to incorporate all members of the global community in decisions that are vital to their well-being.

The impact of climate change is therefore felt most acutely by those who are already disadvantaged, including women, minorities and populations in low-income countries, who bear the highest costs in terms of health, security and stability. It can thus be regarded as a form of 'slow violence' that affects regions in the Global South, with consequences such as droughts, floods, hurricanes and fires that give rise to significant humanitarian and social crises (Nixon, 2013). It is possible that environmental migration, which is already a significant phenomenon, will become one of the most conspicuous consequences of the climate crisis. This could result in the movement of millions of people to areas that are safer in terms of their environment, both within their own countries and across national borders (UNEP, 2024). In light of this multifaceted nature of the issue, the climate justice approach strives to tackle the various dimensions of inequity, encompassing distributive justice, which emphasises a more equitable distribution of environmental benefits and risks, and procedural equity, which upholds the right to participate in decision-making processes. Furthermore, climate justice encompasses a focus on social justice, acknowledging the manner in which environmental degradation frequently coincides with forms of exclusion and discrimination based on race, gender, and class (Sultana, 2022). It is therefore evident that the relationship between the environment and justice is inextricably linked and necessitates the implementation of inclusive and transformative policies that engage all global stakeholders, from governmental institutions to local communities, to guarantee that no individual is left behind (UN, 2015).

1. INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND CLIMATE JUSTICE: TOWARD GLOBAL AWARENESS

Education can play an invaluable role in enabling new generations to comprehend climate change as a phenomenon that is not solely scientific, but also social and moral in nature. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goals 4 (quality education) and 13 (combating climate change), emphasise the importance of an education that combines scientific and technical knowledge with ethical awareness. This aims to prepare young people to confront the challenges of today with a vision for the future. Nevertheless, climate justice education remains a nascent field and is inadequately represented in curricula, with a paucity of educational pathways integrating the environmental and social dimensions of the climate crisis (Stevenson et al., 2017; Rousell et al., 2017).

Consequently, integrating climate justice into the curricula is vital to facilitate students' comprehension of the climate crisis as an issue necessitating a systemic

and collaborative response. The examination of the social, economic and cultural causes of climate change enables students to develop a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the problem. This not only cultivates awareness but also instils a sense of responsibility and motivation to contribute to change and to the emergence of more just and cohesive societies, which are founded upon the principles of human dignity and environmental stewardship.

Global citizenship education has been demonstrated to be an efficacious methodology for fostering young people's awareness of climate justice. It prompts students to engage in introspective reflection on their individual and collective responsibilities, and to comprehend the interconnections between their own actions and the global impact they can potentially generate. The promotion of values such as equality, sustainability and solidarity through global citizenship education serves to foster awareness of the interdependent relationships that characterise the planet (Cambi, 2009; Tarozzi, 2017).

The implementation of global citizenship education is of particular benefit in fostering a sense of belonging to the global community and in promoting respect and cooperation between diverse cultures. Learning environments that encourage participation and dialogue have been demonstrated to enhance young people's resilience in the context of environmental challenges, providing them with the hope and tools necessary to navigate an uncertain future (Kasgaard & Davidson, 2021). In this sense, global citizenship education serves as a nexus between the social, environmental, and political dimensions of the climate crisis, affording students the chance to contemplate their own obligations and position within the global community.

In order for education to play a meaningful role in addressing the climate crisis, it is essential to adopt transformative pedagogical approaches that foster ethical engagement with social and civic issues. Such pedagogical approaches must be capable of encouraging critical thinking, reflection and the ability to recognise and challenge the power dynamics that perpetuate inequalities. In other words, educational practices must be implemented which encourage individuals to gain a profound understanding of the world and to engage in social transformation (Freire, 2018). Pedagogical approaches that include critical reflection on justice and sustainability can equip young people with the resilience and competence to navigate the complex challenges of our time and become agents of social transformation (Stapleton, 2019).

2. CONCLUSIONS

Effectively addressing the climate crisis requires a radical rethinking of education. Education must become an instrument of social, cultural and human transformation. It must foster a critical and systemic understanding of reality, capable of transcending the prevailing economic paradigm and prioritising the values of equity and sustainability (Orr, 1994). The realisation of the 2030 Agenda, with its sustainable development goals, is contingent upon the capacity of education systems to

equip learners with the requisite tools to understand and address the inherent complexity of the present era, including the climate crisis.

It is only through an education system that promotes global, responsible and inclusive citizenship that a resilient and sustainable society can be built. This will equip younger generations with the awareness and confidence they need to navigate the challenges of an unpredictable future. We hope for a future characterized by a fair and just society, united by a collective pursuit of shared values.

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TOWARDS GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP: REWRITING ITALIAN HISTORY?

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INTRODUCTION

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship Education (GCED) are jointly promoted under Objective 4.7 of Agenda 2030 (UN, 2015), with a subsequent UNESCO document (2017) highlighting their complementarity. Integrating these two educational frameworks is particularly key if we believe that addressing the current socio-environmental crisis requires fostering a "planetary humanism" (Simonigh, 2012) that respects both human and non-human life. Such an approach would promote a sense of limits, inclusion, and responsibility for our planet – the shared home of all forms of life.

From an educational perspective, it is essential to strengthen individuals' ecological identity – in terms of awareness of one's connection to Earth's rhythms and the ecologically productive ecosystems upon which we depend (Thomashow, 1996; Morin, 2001). Cultivating such an identity can help foster a broad understanding of global citizenship, characterized by responsible individuals who actively engage with socio-environmental challenges rather than delegating decisions about the future of life on Earth solely to science and politics (Bertolino & Perazzone, 2018).

In practice, however, these two educational areas – sustainability and citizenship – are still all too often treated as separate domains. ESD is largely framed as knowledge about environmental issues, focusing generically on the need to respect and conserved the natural environment, often seen as in competition with the human environment. In contrast, GCED focuses on values such as solidarity and international cooperation, predominantly addressing cultural issues, lifestyles, and models for the development of human societies, although with insufficient consideration for local conditions, climate factors, or differential access to natural resources (Perazzone et al., 2024).

In this paper, we examine how Italian schools legislation has interpreted and provided for the integration of ESD and GCED over time.

1. THE HISTORIC ROOTS OF CIVIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN ITALY

The history of environmental education (EE) in Italy has followed a different trajectory to that of civic education. From a regulatory perspective, EE dates back to 1989, when funds were allocated for a Three-Year Program for Environmental Protection (L. 305/89). This initiative enabled the Ministry of the Environment to develop and finance what would soon become the national Environmental Education

Information system (InFEA). In 1991, the first joint education agreement was signed by the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Public Education, with the aim of coordinating the numerous research bodies and documented projects in the field of environmental education under the three-year plan.

A second agreement between the ministries was signed in 1995, followed in 1996 by the Ministry of Public Education's memorandum "Italian schools for environmental education" (Ministerial Memorandum, No. 149/1996), authored by the minister's advisor on environmental education, Franco La Ferla. The issue of interest to us here, namely the integration of citizenship and sustainability, is thoughtfully articulated throughout the document. One particularly relevant passage invokes what La Ferla describes as a "new sense of citizenship":

> Humanity today faces a formidable challenge: ensuring a better quality of life for people worldwide while simultaneously preserving the quality of the global environment. This challenge involves every country on Earth, [...] all citizens in their varied and interdependent roles, the current generations – mindful of those to come – and all dimensions of human experience, united in a renewed and indispensable ethical commitment.

Subsequent laws introduced in 1997 and 1998, respectively, reaffirmed the Ministry of the Environment's support for the projects being conducted under the InFEA program. In October 1997, during the "*A scuola d'Ambiente*" ["At School with the Environment"] conference jointly organized by the two ministries, the Charter of Principles for environmental education, based on sustainable and critical development, was presented:

Environmental education fosters active citizenship and helps us understand the complexity of the relationships between nature and human activities, between inherited resources that must be preserved and passed on, and the dynamics of production, consumption, and solidarity (MA&MPI, 1997).

In 2000, the National Conference on Environmental Education, held in Genoa, produced guidelines for a new program to be coordinated between the central state and the regional authorities, key partners in the InFEA System.

From that point onwards, enthusiasm appeared to wane rather quickly, and eventually, environmental education was absorbed into the new legislation on 'Citizenship and Constitution.' However, it maintained some autonomy, as demonstrated by the 'Guidelines for Environmental Education and Sustainable Development,' which were presented in 2009 by the Ministry of Education, University and Research and the Ministry of the Environment and Protection of Land and Sea. These guidelines built on the provisions of the 'Guideline Document for Experimentation in Citizenship and the Constitution' (MATT-MIUR, 2009) and included many references to international conferences, documents on sustainable development, curriculum recommendations, individual school programs, and the European key competencies framework. However, the legacy of the past seemed to have dissipated, with only a brief reference to the InFEA system. Much of the document consisted of

technical briefs for the in-depth study of key environmental issues and initiatives (e.g., wildlife protection, water management, climate change), structured around facts, problems, pressures, and solutions. There was little mention of ecological identity or planetary citizenship. Stripped of a pedagogical focus on competency development and experiential teaching methods, environmental education appeared to have reverted to its origins – back to the 1960s and 1970s, when it primarily emphasized ecological and technical-scientific learning. No significant changes were introduced in the subsequent 'Guidelines on Environmental Education,' published by the Ministry of Education, University and Research in 2014. This document outlined interdisciplinary teaching and learning pathways but remained firmly anchored to specific environmental issues (MATT-MIUR, 2014).

2. CURRENT LEGISLATION ON CIVIC EDUCATION

In 2015, the 2030 Agenda and subsequent UNESCO documents on education issues prompted changes in Italy. Law no. 92/2019 replaced the teaching of 'Citizenship and Constitution' with 'Civic Education.' Although the internationally recognized labels ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) and GCED (Global Citizenship Education) were not explicitly included in this more recent legislation, the educational concerns that inform these two domains were clearly articulated:

Civic education in schools cultivates an understanding of the Italian Constitution and European Union institutions, with the primary aim of fostering and promoting fundamental principles such as legality, active and digital citizenship, environmental sustainability, and the fundamental right of the person to health and well-being (Art. 1).

This law introduced the principle of transversality, given that civic education's broad range of learning objectives and target competences cannot be adequately covered within any one subject area (Art. 2). At least 33 hours per year must be dedicated to this "cross-cutting discipline", to be jointly owned by multiple teachers (for the first cycle of education) and coordinated by a designated teacher (Art. 2).

The topics covered by Civic Education (CE), which include environmental education, are outlined in Article 3. However, Articles 4 and 5 focus on "Citizenship and Constitution" and "Education for Digital Citizenship", respectively, without referencing any expanded concept of citizenship that encompasses ecological systems.

The Guidelines issued the following year (2020) were structured around three core themes grouping different topics: 1. Constitution, Law (National and International), Legality, and Solidarity; 2. Sustainable Development, Environmental Education, and Knowledge and Safeguarding of Heritage and Territory; 3. Digital Citizenship.

It is within the core theme of sustainable development that the concept of citizenship is integrated with the principle of sustainability:

> The objectives extend beyond the protection of the environment and natural resources to include the creation of living environments, urban plans, and lifestyle choices that are inclusive and respectful of fundamental human rights. These

rights span health, psycho-physical well-being, food security, equality, dignified work, quality education, and the preservation of communities' tangible and intangible heritage. [Annex A, p. 2].

This is not to say that the text fully reflects our aspirations, but it does suggest that the concept of sustainability is expanding beyond the environmental dimension to include the social one.

A recent exploratory study we conducted at schools in the Aosta Valley[1] reveals how schools have responded to the new legislation on civic education, indicating that they have fleshed it out with contents and teaching methods that are far from innovative. Even the forms of interdisciplinarity and the "connection between disciplines" advocated in the *Guidelines* (2020, p. 1) have rarely been implemented in meaningful ways. Without a genuinely cross-disciplinary approach, it seems unrealistic to expect the concept of global citizenship, as envisioned in Goal 4.7 of the 2030 Agenda, to gain significant traction within the education system.

3. STARTING OVER? THE NEW GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING CIVIC EDUCATION

In September 2024, new Guidelines for the Teaching of Civic Education (Ministerial Decree 183/2024) were issued, replacing the previous ones. This new framework was introduced despite the register of good practices in civic education (as stipulated in Art. 9, Law 92/2019) not yet being established, the national competition to promote best practices never being launched (as stipulated in Art. 10, Law 92/2019), and the monitoring of civic education activities conducted by schools remaining incomplete (as stipulated in Art. 4, Ministerial Decree 35/2020).

Returning to the main focus of our discussion here – namely, the interplay between ESD and GCED in Italian legislation – it seems clear that this new document reflects a significant regression at the conceptual level, particularly with the redefinition of the second core theme as "Economic Development and Sustainability".

Departing from the themes addressed by the 'parent' law of 2019, the text begins by highlighting the importance of "educating young people about the concepts of development and growth", the value of work and "private economic initiative" as fundamental components of citizenship education. Economic development, it states, "must be consistent" with various kinds of values, including "environmental protection".

Environmental issues are subsequently presented in a secondary role as a jumbled list of terms (nature, animal species, biodiversity, ecosystems, bioeconomy), which "may be included" under this core theme. The text goes on to reference "respect for public assets, starting from school facilities and the safeguarding of urban aesthetics" as well as the "fight against addictions caused by drugs, smoking, alcohol, doping, pathological internet use, gaming, and gambling".

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[1] The study was conducted by Dr. Lorena Palmieri in the context of the research grant *Citizenship Education: Role, Projects, and Actions of Schools for a Sustainable Society,* co-funded by the University of Valle d'Aosta and the Regional Education Office.

The concepts of participation, active citizenship, and inclusive decision-making processes appear distant from this perspective. In contrast, financial education – defined as "a push to value and protect private assets" – is accorded significant prominence.

Overall, the document portrays our school system as incapable of envisioning shared futures – an issue flagged in a recent UNESCO report that unreservedly criticized education systems for emphasizing "values of individual success, national competition, and economic development, to the detriment of solidarity, understanding our interdependencies, and caring for each other and the planet" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 11).

In Italian schools legislation, the significant legacy of late twentieth-century experiences and research in environmental education appears to have gradually faded, giving way to a reactionary model of civic education. This model seems inadequate for the task of delivering new ways of thinking and teaching that might facilitate the so-called ecological transition.

We have lost our way, even though the path we should have followed was clearly outlined nearly 30 years ago in the "La Ferla memorandum":

> Over the years, a series of projects have been spearheaded by dedicated teachers with great civic fervour aiming to educate a new generation of global citizens. These efforts have focused on fostering, first within individuals and then in wider contexts, a new way of perceiving the environment and adopting a more meaningful role within it. [...] Participation in driving change has been explored in these contexts, uncovering the strong link between environmental education and civic education, and contributing to a broader understanding of "citizenship" (Ministerial Memorandum No.149/1996).

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A REFLECTION FOR AN ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION: LOOKING FOR NEW EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES

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This study is unique in its approach, as it recognizes the active role of children in their learning processes and, above all, their innate systemic thinking. The study, conducted using the ethnographic qualitative research model, focused on a group of fourth-year students at a public primary school in Italy in 2022-2023. Data was collected through group interviews and activities with picture books, where children shared their ideas on the environment, asked questions, and discussed sustainable behavior for the planet. The data were then analyzed using content analysis. The research results confirmed that children possess an innate understanding of ecological connections. These findings underscore the importance for schools to develop targeted educational scenarios and train competent teachers to guide the next generation towards ecological awareness.

Ecological education; Systemic thinking; Sustainability; Environment; Competent teachers

INTRODUCTION

In education, it is essential to integrate the concept of nature, understood, as defined by Timothy Morton (2020), to be an intricate and interconnected vision of all beings on the planet, including human beings, who are an integral part of it and responsible for their actions within this web of life. In educational contexts, it is essential to create space for discussion and open questioning on issues related to nature in order to educate people who are sensitive and aware of ecological issues. This process contributes to innovative education and promotes an ecological perspective on the relationship with the environment (Mortari, 2020). This paradigm shift challenges the traditional notion of nature as an entity separate from humans, forcing humanity to recognise its intrinsic connection to the natural world and the profound consequences of our actions on the global ecosystem.

Monica Guerra (2021) highlights the central role of education in fostering students' ecological thinking. Based on an analysis of the 2012 National Indicators (MIUR, 2012), Guerra (2021) delves into ecological education, highlighting its relevance in schools. According to Guerra, the National Indicators emphasize the crucial role of meaningful experiences in learning, highlighting the importance of experimenting

with forms of participation in shared decision-making processes with an interdisciplinary approach. This approach supports competent perspectives as a way to deal with complexity. In the New Scenarios 2018 (MIUR, 2018) Education for Citizenship and Sustainability and Agenda 2030 (SDG, 2019), the integration of ecology in everyday teaching practices reconfigures the concept of humans on the planet. This perspective suggests abandoning the idea of humans as supreme and distant, considering them instead an integral part of the ecosystem. It emphasizes the importance of understanding humans as an element of a system in which every action is relevant to human actions, other life forms, and the whole planet. This paradigm draws attention to the responsibility of human beings towards the ecosystem and the awareness of the connections and interactions that characterize life on Earth. A life composed of, inhabited by and surrounded by both human and non-human forces and presences (Favole, 2024). The development of meaningful educational pathways is fundamental to fostering harmonious and respectful growth in reciprocal relationships, encouraging deep awareness of the elements of the world and stimulating observation of their unique characteristics, even in minor details. This approach promotes the recognition of the intrinsic value of each entity and enhances our understanding of the complex interdependencies that sustain life (Guerra, 2021).

As Sandrine Gallois and Victoria Reyes-García write in "Children and Ethnobiology" (2018), it is crucial to consider children not as adults in the making but as active members of a specific group that interacts with others and their environment in a unique way. At school, in order to foster a process of cognitive growth and transformation, it is essential to recognise, value, support and deepen children's knowledge. The European Commission 2022 proposed the Green Comp (Bianchi, 2022), an educational plan to promote sustainability issues, which identifies and emphasizes the importance of equipping each individual with specific skills on the subject. The underlying hypothesis is the formation of active sensitivities and practical consciences, capable of supporting future citizens in developing critical observation and awareness of the damage that humans have caused and continues to cause to the planet. The aim is to outline future scenarios for the planet and all living beings that radically differ from those of today and in recent decades. The four macro-themes of the plan emphasize the intention to promote a more conscious approach to nature, understand the importance of different living beings in all their aspects and seek a more ecosystemic vision that takes into account the complex interdependencies between human and non-human beings than is currently the case. It emphasises the importance of helping people develop critical thinking to make appropriate decisions when faced with problems: thinking that is systemic and not fragmentary, considering everyone on the planet. It also aims at training attentive and competent people in the school environment who are capable of orienting and guiding the new generations towards conscious and sustainable choices for the planet.

Schools play a pivotal and essential role in promoting environmental awareness

among children, with school environmental ethics at the heart of this effort. By engaging students regarding targeted environmental topics, schools can foster a deeper understanding of the natural world and encourage positive attitudes towards the environment. This educational approach not only informs, but also inspires children to become more responsible stewards of their environment (Barraza, Cuarón, 2010).

In this study, conducted in an Italian primary school, children were actively involved in research to find out whether they had already developed systemic thinking. The idea was to understand how well the children were already able to visualize the complex interdependencies and interweavings in the environment around them.

This study is based on the following research questions: What knowledge do the children have about the environment? How have they interpreted the environment at this stage of their lives? And what educational scenarios can be devised to nurture and bring out this innate ecological mindset in children?

1. METHODOLOGY

The school context is a complex environment, characterized by different people and cultures, whose learning is crucial for developing new pedagogical perspectives (Leoncini, 2011). It is important to adopt a dialogical approach when encountering schools. This means that ethnography does not aim to provide a one-sided account of everyone's experience, but rather seeks to actively integrate the voices of the people involved (Simonicca, 2013). The study was conducted at a primary school. The study sample consisted of 21 primary school students (eleven males and twelve females) with an; the average age of 10. They were asked to explain the first thing that came to their minds when they heard the word "environment" (Table 1). This method of data collection enables us to explore the participants' perspectives (Koskinas, 2000; Sato & James, 1999; Torkar & Bajd, 2006). Participating students made associations and created open-ended questions during meetings with researchers and teachers in large groups. In this study, we collected semi-structured interviews in groups and with groups of children. By involving children in the process of formulating questions through the use of the picture book "The Seedling That Wouldn't Grow" (Teckentrup, 2020), we empowerd them to take an active role in their learning, making them aware that every question and every doubt is fundamental to the construction of scientific knowledge. This approach, which gives voice to the perspectives and experiences of the people involved, is characterised by the intention to actively integrate the different voices of the participants rather than provide a one-sided account of their experiences.

Table 1 Children's interview questions

What comes to mind when you hear the word environment?
What is the environment for you?

2. RESULTS

Table 2 represents the students' associations with the word environment, divided into three categories: Living beings, Caring, Space. Each category is briefly described in the second column, and examples of their associations are given in the third. Twenty-one students provided 77 associations: 4-four for color, 28 for food, 10 for function and 35 for memories about plants. The data from these word associations and the open questions were analyzed using content analysis (Pagani, 2020). Word associations with the same meaning were coded together.

Table 2 Children's associations with the word "environment"

Categories	Description	Examples
Living beings	The children described the environment as composed of plants, animals, and nature.	Plants Trees Nature Animals Jungle Forest
Caring	The children declared that the environment should not be dirtied and damaged but should be cared for.	Do not pollute the environment Pollution Recycle Caring
Space	The children associated the environment with the space around them and where they moved.	Everything around us That there is a place with more space Where we are where we walk

Living beings
Children see the environment as a vibrant web of life, perceiving all living beings, plants, animals and humans, without hierarchical distinctions. This perspective reflects an inclusive and harmonious view in which each species is valued as a vital part of the ecological balance.

Caring
Children understand the importance of caring for the environment, a responsibility that is reflected in their daily actions. They show respect for plants and animals, actively reduce waste and participate in keeping shared spaces clean, demonstrating an early commitment to environmental stewardship.

Space

Children recognise the environment as the physical space around them, where they move, interact and learn. They see it not only as a habitat for various forms of life, but also as a dynamic environment that shapes their daily lives. This awareness underlines their understanding of the environment as a living system and as a common space where bonds are formed and experiences are shared.

Table 3 represents children's open questions divided into two categories: Relationships and Collaboration.

Categories	Description of category	Examples
Relationships	Children recognise that all living beings are interdependent.	In the environment, there are living beings, i.e. an environment is made up of living beings, a typical environment can be a forest is made up of trees, animals and mushrooms. There are bacteria; they are everywhere. We have bacteria inside us. A lake is an environment, and fish live in it and interact with it; quadrupeds drink water from the lake. There is a relationship between plants and living beings.
Collaboration	Children recognise reciprocal and mutualistic help between living beings in the environment	People build things together. Without trees, we wouldn't be here because they give us oxygen. I have many plants at home, and Mum asks me to give them water.

Relationships

Children's innate curiosity helps them recognize the intricate connections between plants and other living beings, understanding their crucial role in maintaining ecosystem balance. They view the natural world as a web of interconnected relationships, where every species, regardless of its size or complexity, contributes to the overall stability of the environment.

Collaboration

Children grasp the importance of cooperation between different species and their surroundings, recognizing it as essential for the survival and evolution of life on Earth. This awareness is often expressed through their acts of care and attention towards the environment, highlighting the significance of mutual relationships between living beings and the spaces they inhabit.

CONCLUSION

The data reveal that children inherently possess systemic thinking when observing the environment and living beings. They are fully aware that they are part of a complex system made up of complicated interdependencies and interrelationships between the different living beings on the planet. This emphasizes the central role of education in promoting practices that foster active listening, experiential learning and the continuous questioning of things (Guerra, 2021). This approach not only facilitates open dialogue, but also nurtures critical thinking (Mortari, 2020), thus empowering educators and policymakers to promote sustainable practices (Bianchi, 2022).

Children naturally develop an ecological mindset, perceiving the environment as a heterogeneous set of life forms, each unique and free of discriminatory patterns. This inclusive perspective allows them to grasp the importance of each living within the ecosystem. They acquire this understanding through experiential learning, listening to traditional knowledge and direct contact with nature and plants. This natural development of their ecological mindset testifies to the wonder and potential of early childhood education in promoting sustainable practices (Barraza, Cuarón, 2010).

In these moments, children understand that caring for the environment is essential for the well-being of all living things and for maintaining ecological balance. Children learn that protecting and preserving the environment are shared responsibilities that require care and respect for all life forms and the physical space around them. This awareness promotes a sustainable and harmonious future for all.

Schools should create opportunities where these experiences can be transformed from simple experiential learning and narrative listening into specific, concrete skills (MIUR, 2018). It is important to stimulate children's interest and work on positive ideas, stimulating their critical thinking and sustainable practices better suited to the planet (Bianchi, 2022).

Teachers have the role of listening to children, building their prior knowledge about the ecological environment. This attentive and profound listening allows everyone to openly express perplexities and doubts, without feeling obliged to provide immediate answers, but encourages the active participation of all children in making common decisions (MIUR, 2012).

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THE URGENCY OF EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CONCERNS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE *LAUDATE DEUM*

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The paper sets out to analyse the apostolic exhortation Laudate Deum, published on 4 October 2023, in which Pope Francis returns to the subject of 'caring for our common home' by drawing attention to the effects of climate change, which is causing a global crisis with a range of consequences that were not even imaginable a century ago. There is an urgent need to go beyond a 'purely ecological approach' and consider the global social problem: what happens in one part of the world affects the whole planet. It is also important to recognise that there can be no lasting change without cultural change: we must overcome the logic of appearing sensitive to the problem and have the courage to radically change the human experience. If there is a cost to taking action now, it will be greater the longer we wait. We must take responsibility for the legacy we leave in this world: it is a matter of social justice. Although the irresponsibility of political sectors and the indifference of the 'powerful' are there for all to see, efforts to change personal habits, efforts to pollute less.

sustainable development, climate change, Laudate Deum

INTRODUCTION

With the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*, published on 4 October 2023, Pope Francis re-proposes and deepens the concerns expressed in the encyclical letter *Laudato si' (*24/5/2015) by returning to share concerns for the care of our common home.

Drawing attention to the impact of climate change that generates a global crisis with a range of effects that probably could not even be imagined a century ago, he issues a cry of alarm for a global crisis that is becoming increasingly serious and at the same time a call for co-responsibility in the face of this emergency, before it is too late.

1. AN INVITATION TO PROTECT THE COMMON HOME

In continuity with *Laudato si'*, eight years later, in the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*, the Holy Father returns to share his concerns for the care of our common home in a heartfelt manner, calling the faithful and the entire world to the impact of

the climate crisis, environmental disasters, the technocratic paradigm and the consequences for mankind.

The Pontiff reinforces what he has already stated in the previous text on integral ecology by launching a call to co-responsibility – before it is too late – in the face of the emergency of climate change, the signs of which are unequivocal: the world may be approaching a critical, breaking point and is not yet reacting sufficiently with an impact destined to increasingly damage the lives of many people and families. According to the Pope, the efforts made so far are insufficient to address one of the principal challenges facing society and the global community (Pope Francis, 2023, 3), while the effects of climate change unless these issues are faced urgently and collectively, they represent existential threats for our human family, for other living beings and for all ecosystems; they are suffered particularly by the most vulnerable and poorest people. The situation is now even more pressing and it is necessary to acknowledge, with courage, what is happening, recognising how the climate crisis is due to irresponsible and blind human behaviour.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* is an invitation to all, believers and non-believers alike, to unite in a common effort and act with determination to protect our common home, preserving creation for future generations. This is a global social issue and one intimately related to the dignity of human life (Pope Francis, 2023, 3).

2. ON THE OCCASION OF THE 28TH UN CLIMATE CONFERENCE

At the origin of the *Laudate Deum* there was also another reason: to strongly urge all those who would attend from 30 November to 12 December 2023 in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates the 28th UN Conference of the Parties on Climate Change, indicated by the abbreviation COP28, to work so that it may be a true turning point in the pursuit of the good of all humanity, in particular the poorest.

According to Pope Francis, although some diagnoses expressed by apocalyptic fundamentalists often seem unreasonable or insufficiently founded, This should not lead us to ignore the real possibility that we are approaching a critical point (Pope Francis, 2023, 17). Therefore, he warns: To say that there is nothing to hope for would be suicidal, for it would mean exposing all humanity, especially the poorest, to the worst impacts of climate change (Pope Francis, 2023, 53). The Holy Father encourages everyone to be hopeful about a positive outcome of COP28 that can be a turning point, stating:

If we are confident in the capacity of human beings to transcend their petty interests and to think in bigger terms, we can keep hoping that COP28 will allow for a decisive acceleration of energy transition, with effective commitments subject to ongoing monitoring (Pope Francis, 2023, 54).

The 28th Conference is an important opportunity to give real impetus to aiming for the common good and the future of humanity. In addressing the environmental challenges of the present, the Pontiff recognises that the most effective solutions will not come from individual efforts alone, but above all from major political

decisions on the national and international level (Pope Francis, 2023, 69).

The call is to break out of the straits of particularism and nationalism that are patterns of the past, while embracing a common alternative vision that can enable ecological conversion.

3. HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

In the current situation, even if too many people still doubt the scientific seriousness of the alarm, the responsibility of human beings is undeniable and cannot be minimised in any way. While the tangible, sometimes irreversible damage caused by anthropogenically induced climate change is verifiable, there are growing risks that such damage will be amplified if our development paradigm does not change. Thus, the *Laudate Deum* is motivated not only by the urgent need to accelerate the transition towards integral ecology, which combines care for the environment with social justice and respect for human dignity, but also by the desire to lay bare resistance and confusion, the maneuvers of those who wish to deny, conceal or relativise the signs of change. As the global climate crisis, whose origin is anthropogenic, rapidly evolves, there are those who deny its importance or ridicule those who speak of global warming. Climate change is an undeniable, incontrovertible fact, just as it is indisputable that it is caused by man. The effects are increasingly evident, and it is verifiable that specific human-induced climate changes are significantly increasing the likelihood of extreme phenomena.

The signs are ever more evident, although attempts are made to deny, hide, dissimulate or relativise them. Pope Francis is very harsh in his judgement of those who dare challenge this evidence based on supposedly scientific data; such objections, also present within the Catholic world, are dismissed as contemptuous and unreasonable by those who deny the climate crisis or ridicule those who speak of global warming. In order to contradict the denialist theories, certain dismissive opinions also present within the Catholic Church, the apostolic exhortation refers to scientific sources. With a view to overcoming an ideological view of the problem, the Holy Father's stance is clear:

> We can no longer doubt that the reason for the unusual rapidity of these dangerous changes is a fact that cannot be concealed: the enormous novelties that have to do with unchecked human intervention on nature in the past two centuries (Pope Francis, 2023, 14).

The Pontiff is moved by the concern for the future of the human family, which is called to a strong and shared assumption of responsibility for the care of creation, in the face of the evidence of a worsening environmental crisis and the pressing questions it raises: the impact of change will have direct effects on the lives of individuals, families and nations.

The Pope emphasises that the concern for the care of our common home and for climate change is a global social issue and one intimately related to the dignity of human life and must challenge the conscience of every woman and man of good

will. The future of us all depends on the present that we now choose. The destruction of the environment a sin that is not only personal but also structural, one that greatly endangers all human beings, especially the most vulnerable in our midst and threatens to unleash a conflict between generations. It is our responsibility to ensure that their future is not denied.

We cannot and must not minimise information and manipulate data, nor deny or ridicule what is happening, the dramatic consequences of which we will feel in terms of health, work, access to resources, housing, forced migration.

The text recalls the weakness of international politics, which fails to 'ensure the realisation of certain inalienable objectives, the uncertain progress of the Climate Conferences, the insufficiency of everyone's commitment to assume a different lifestyle. It is a matter of initiating a cultural change that implies a personal change too.

Even though this does not immediately produce a notable effect from the quantitative standpoint, we are helping to bring about large processes of transformation rising from depth within society (Pope Francis, 2023, 71).

4. A QUESTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

In *Laudate Deum* Pope Francis expresses a pressing invitation to reflect on the serious environmental threats and the urgency of a change of lifestyle, highlighting how the climate crisis is a dramatic threat to social justice. In the face of this emergency, it is necessary to take responsibility for the legacy left to the younger generations.

And closely linked to the environmental crisis are poverty, injustice and inequality.

The first obvious consequence is the disproportionate impact of climate change on the most vulnerable communities. Already disadvantaged populations are often the first to suffer from environmental disasters: from floods to droughts, the poorest and most vulnerable people are often the ones who suffer most from the negative effects of climate change, often left defenceless, deprived of their livelihoods, thus increasing social inequalities. Protecting the environment means protecting the weakest and ensuring a fairer future for all: it is also a matter of social justice.

Moreover, the climate crisis exacerbates social and political tensions, especially in regions where natural resources are unequally distributed. Competition for access to water and arable land can lead to conflict and forced migration, fuelling inequalities and threatening social stability.

The Pontiff recalls that caring for the common home is an integral part of the Church's mission and this includes a commitment to promote social justice. It must be recognised that the communities most affected by the climate crisis are often those that contribute the least to greenhouse gas emissions. This environmental injustice requires an urgent response and a commitment to reducing global inequalities.

Although the unfulfilled responsibilities of the political sectors and the disinterest

of the 'powerful' are there for all to see, efforts to pollute less, reduce waste, consume wisely, even if they do not immediately have a major effect, are creating a new culture. At the same time, we need to strengthen responsible environmental policies and work together to reduce inequalities in the world. Only through concrete commitment can we hope to build a fairer and more viable future for all. Together, we can contribute to a world in which social justice and environmental care go hand in hand, for the good of every human being and the common home.

5. THE EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION

Recognising that systemic change and strong political action are needed to meaningfully address the climate crisis does not absolve us from our responsibility to take steps to live more harmoniously in our common home. Despite the lack of commitment on the part of political sectors and the disinterest of the 'powerful', efforts to pollute less, reduce waste, consume wisely, even if they do not immediately have a major effect, can help create a new culture. It is necessary to drastically change the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model that contributes significantly to polluting the atmosphere. Furthermore, it is a matter of overcoming the logic of appearing sensitive to the problem of climate change and having the courage to make substantial changes in human experience: if the measures we might take now have costs, they will be all the higher the longer we wait.

Ecological awareness, progressively more and more widespread, requires the assumption of responsibility for one's own actions, a commitment to change personal, family and community habits by nourishing a sustainable lifestyle that must be promoted because only widespread change can bring about social convictions capable of transforming culture and society from the inside out. In this regard, the *Laudate Deum* states:

> The mere fact that personal, family and community habits are changing is contributing to greater concern about the unfulfilled responsibilities of the political sectors and indignation at the lack of interest shown by the powerful. Let us realize, then, that even though this does not immediately produce a notable effect from the quantitative standpoint, we are helping to bring about large processes of transformation rising from deep within society (Pope Francis, 2023, 71).

Promoting everyday actions that can reduce environmental impact, such as saving energy, using sustainable transport and reducing waste, can motivate people to change their habits.

But there is an urgent need to go beyond a 'merely ecological approach', considering it a global social problem, which requires the involvement of all citizens who, through their commitment and individual choices, can influence political ones, in the awareness that what happens in any part of the world has repercussions on the entire planet because 'Everything is connected' and 'No one is saved alone' (Pope Francis, 2023, 19). Furthermore, it is necessary to be aware that there are no lasting changes without cultural changes and there are no cultural change without

personal changes.

Political change and cultural change are so closely intertwined that one undoubtedly influences the other. Individual and collective choices to reduce greenhouse gas emissions may have only a small quantitative impact on the overall concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, but they are fundamental to creating a new culture of care for the environment (Muphy, 2023, 593).

The Holy Father insists on the need to create a transgenerational consciousness and the responsibility we have towards future generations to leave them a habitable earth: What is being asked of us is nothing other than a certain responsibility for the legacy we will leave behind, once we pass from this world (Pope Francis, 2023, 18).

CONCLUSIONS

In the current situation, even if too many people still doubt the 'scientific' seriousness of the warning, it is undeniable and in no way can the responsibility of each and every one be minimised.

The data on climate change is worsening year by year, and it is therefore urgent that we consider the increasingly evident implications and initiate an ecological conversion. Through our responsible action, we can contribute to the restoration and preservation of the common home (Gonçalves, 2023, 379), the protection of which constitutes a condition of possibility for life.

With *Laudato si'* and *Laudate Deum*, the Holy Father promotes a Christian civic activism, always based on dialogue and cooperation between people of different social backgrounds and religions (Gonçalves, 2023, 377). With this text of high pedagogical value, he calls for educational action, in any context of life and involving everyone, at any age, overcoming the sense of impotence felt in the face of global challenges.

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EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE AS A PARTICIPATORY CHALLENGE

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The worsening climate and ecological crisis provoke reactions of denial and minimisation of the problem. As highlighted in the IPCC AR6 Synthetic Report (IPCC, 2023), anthropogenic climate change is already underway, posing a persistent threat to the biosphere and the planet. However, the adoption of targeted strategies can still shape a sustainable future. Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 emphasises the pivotal role of education in enhancing individual capacity to address environmental and sustainable development issues. In parallel, public participation emerges as an indispensable component in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in Agenda 2030. In this context, community involvement emerges as a crucial element in the transition towards sustainable cities (Kraas et al., 2016), fulfilling a dual function: dissemination of knowledge and skills and promotion of transgenerational learning. This study will examine the participatory processes initiated as part of the Regional Sustainable Development Strategy as tools for lifelong learning. The analysis will focus on the interconnections between participation and communities of practice, investigating the formative value of participatory experiences in raising awareness of climate change and promoting sustainable lifestyles.

Climate Change; Education for Sustainable Development; Participative Process; Community of practice

1. PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In the field of public policies, citizens are increasingly involved in decision-making processes. Administrations promote participatory initiatives as tools for dialogue and collaboration with citizens, civil society and the business sector, fostering discussion on territorial issues and sharing policymaking. Public participation is linked to the concept of communities of practice, understood as groups of individuals who share an interest and, by interacting regularly, improve their skills and methodologies. This concept is rooted in the social theory of learning (Wenger, 1998).

Such communities considered building blocks of a social learning system (Zucchermaglio and Alby, 2006), function through dynamics that integrate learning and everyday life. However, not all communities can be considered communities of practice. To be so, they must include: mutual engagement, i.e. interactions aimed

at collective learning; common enterprise, which defines shared problems and solutions; shared practice, i.e. tools and methods that convey collective knowledge. From this perspective, participation is fundamental to transforming a community into a community of practice.

For Wenger, for participation to be defined as learning, it must comprise essential components (Lipari, 2010): meaning, the ability to conceive of the world as meaningful; practice, the tools and patterns of engagement; community, the space that attaches value to activities; and identity, the element that connects learning to the construction of the self. Participation, then, is not only about taking action but also about transforming who we are and how we interpret what we do (Wenger E., McDermott R., Snyder W. (2007).

Successful communities of practice integrate various levels of participation, similar to a dynamic city where citizens with different motivations, from personal value to networking or skills enhancement, interact at varying intensities. Although uniform involvement may seem ideal, this is unrealistic. Effective communities adopt strategies to include everyone, building entry steps for marginal members and offering limited leadership opportunities, such as small projects.

A 'coordinator' guides community activities, supported by other members who take on key roles. Successful communities do not force participation but create a 'central focus' that attracts members for the interest and warmth offered. This approach demonstrates that learning does not automatically result from involvement but is an inclusive process that builds identity and nurtures social practices. Participation affects what we do and, at the same time, who we are and how we interpret our actions (Wenger E., McDermott R., Snyder W. (2007).

2. PARTICIPATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Education on climate change and sustainable development must challenge the widespread misconception that humans and the environment are separate. It aims to promote active citizenship and inspire learners to recognize their interconnectedness within global ecosystems (Bourn & Hjelleset, 2020). A key milestone for both climate change education and participatory processes for sustainable development was the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. This United Nations Conference resulted in two essential documents: the Framework Convention on Climate Change, which laid the foundations for the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and the 2015 Paris Agreement (these treaties emphasize the importance of education, training, and participation at all levels to address the climate crisis and specifically the Paris Agreement recognizes climate change as a vital issue for humanity's survival) and, the second document, Agenda 21, is an action programme for the 21st century, focusing on the need to apply the principles of sustainable living at the local level. Agenda 21 also serves as a tool to empower citizens, helping them adopt lifestyles that respect the environment, themselves, and others (UNCED, 1992). We see how in the Earth Summit education on climate change and sustainable development

and public participation are closely linked to implement those processes of transition of territories towards sustainable development. The Summit reaffirmed, the principle of intergenerational justice, already introduced in the Brundtland Report, according to which the climate is to be protected for the benefit of present and future generations, thus recognising the combination of justice and environment, within a framework of education and participation.

Also representative is the 1998 Aarhus Convention where participation in public environmental decision-making is conceived as a right:

> every person has the right to live in an environment adequate to ensure his or her health and well-being and the duty to protect and improve the environment, individually or collectively, in the interest of present and future generations, whereas, to be able to assert this right and fulfil this duty, citizens must have access to information, be allowed to participate in decision-making processes and have access to justice in environmental matters[1]

Subsequently, the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda enshrined the importance of climate change education. Indeed, Goal 4 and Goal 13 recognise the need to implement specific educational pathways for climate change, in particular, Target 4. 7 emphasises that 'all students should acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development through, inter alia, education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and the enhancement of cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development' while Target 13.3 calls for 'improving education, awareness and human and institutional capacity on climate change'. However, the Agenda also emphasises the importance of participatory processes in the transition to a more sustainable way of life as in Goal 16 where we find Target 16.7 which calls for 'Ensuring accountable, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels' and Goal 17 which with Target 17.17 urges to 'Encourage and promote effective partnerships in the public sector, between the public and private sectors and in civil society, building on the experience of partnerships and their capacity to find resources' (UN, 2015).

Tackling ecological problems means investing in education from a multidisciplinary perspective. Pedagogy has the task of contributing to changing the vision of sustainability by modifying the way of living, thinking and acting by considering sustainability as a process by which communities can build and grow together (Bornatici, 2021).

A true transition to a sustainable lifestyle requires focusing on future generations and strengthening connections between school, family, and community. Achieving this involves collaboratively designing shared educational projects that align diverse educational approaches and ensure coherence in actions (Pati 2019, p. 81)

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[1] Italian version available from https://unece.org/DAM/env/pp/documents/cep43ital.pdf

from the perspective of a renewed participatory culture.

Engaging communities through participatory processes can help raise awareness of climate change risks, explain the causes and impacts on communities, and promote understanding of adaptation and mitigation actions implemented by governance to increase community engagement in combating climate change.

3. PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES WITHIN THE REGIONAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY: A LEARNING TOOL

The centrality of education has been emphasised by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which has highlighted the need to educate territories to understand climate change and its impacts to cope with the consequent worsening of living conditions because while cities trigger technological innovation and social mobility, they also cause climate change with environmental, social and economic impacts on their communities (Ministerinnen und Minister der Bundesländer, 2007). On the other hand, planning for the future cannot disregard the recognition of the value of education, its centrality and incisiveness in the public sphere (Malavasi, 2022).

As part of the implementation processes of the 2030 Agenda, in Italy, the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (SNSvS) was approved by CIPE resolution no.108 of 2017[2].

 Created as an update of the National Environmental Action Strategy approved in 2002, the SNSvS broadens the reference paradigm to include all the dimensions of sustainability by formulating strategic choices and national objectives linked, but not coinciding, with the SDGs and characterised by the interaction between several SDGs. It also constitutes the national reference framework for planning, programming and assessment processes of an environmental and territorial nature, implementing the provisions of Art. 34 of Legislative Decree 152/2006 and subsequent amendments[3].

When the first Strategy was approved in 2017, it was planned that the Ministry of the Environment would create a permanent Forum open to civil society and non-state actors. This Forum would ensure participation in implementing, monitoring, and reviewing the SNSvS, becoming a platform for sustainable development engagement. The Forum represents an important participatory arena that has been structured on a national scale and declined on a regional, provincial and metropolitan city level, and its task is 'to guarantee the involvement of civil society, in its various articulations, in the implementation of the SNSvS and in the related three-yearly updating processes'.

In Apulia, the first Regional Forum for Sustainable Development focused on climate change by organising the event 'Acting for the Climate'. The event allowed

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[2] Available from https://www.mase.gov.it/pagina/strategia-nazionale-lo-sviluppo-sostenibile

[3] Available from https://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/deleghe/06152dl.htm

participants to discuss the topic of climate change, not only embracing the purely environmental sphere, but also reasoning on five separate tables: Sustainable Development and Industrial Innovation, Agriculture and Sustainable Use of Resources, Resilient Urban Environments, Lifestyles and Responsible Consumption, and Training, Communication and Partnerships. Participants were able to exchange views, share expertise, and at the same time learn about climate change issues and their impact on the Apulian territory.

The Forum turned out to be an important moment of listening but above all of raising awareness and learning about the Apulian territory. This first event, albeit with its difficulties, paved the way for a succession of actions implemented to approach the territory, involving it in multiple initiatives aimed at both listening but also training and information on issues concerning the environment and sustainable development.

The Apulia Region organised a series of events within the framework of the second Forum in hybrid mode using the Apulia Region's 'Pugliapartecipa' platform, which was attended by around 2000 people. These events were fundamentally aimed at raising awareness, informing and educating all participants on issues such as biodiversity conservation, ecology and gender equality, circular economy and ecological transition, hinging on and taking the form of a non-formal learning process.

As is evident, therefore, participation can be an important learning tool to make the population aware of the importance of climate change, leading to broad and long-term reflections, making them active players in the process of defining but also implementing the strategies and policies of the territory in which they live.

4. CONCLUSION

Sustainability, through participation, is the key to protecting common goods and relational goods (Grassi, 2013). Participation is crucial to make sustainability effective in territories and there is a need for everyone to take responsibility for common goods, whether tangible or intangible, so that future generations can enjoy the same goods (Riva, 2018). Involving communities plays a decisive role in the transition towards sustainable cities (Kraas et al. 2016) and this is why participation is found to play a dual role in the dissemination of knowledge and skills and a tool for transforming communities towards more sustainable lifestyles. Participation enables effective localisation pathways of the 2030 Agenda (Florini,2018) and represents an inclusive tool, based on listening, confrontation and knowledge sharing.

Relevant and coherent policy interventions designed in synergy with the private sector, local communities, universities and civil society are essential to initiate systemic change (UNESCO, 2018). Concomitantly, to be able to initiate social change processes devoted to sustainable development and awareness of our future, it is necessary to educate for change and to do so, it is crucial to activate inclusive processes, open to listening and sharing to be able to build a more sustainable future together because as expressed by the former UN Secretary General in 2015, Ban Ki-Moon 'We are the first generation that can end poverty on earth in our lifetime and

at the same time the last generation that can prevent the worst consequences of global warming'.

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SHARING LESSONS: LEARNING, CHANGING AND ENVISIONING TOGETHER

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The current discourse on ecological transition remains anchored to entrenched paradigms such as the ideology and the growth of the underpinning anthropocentrism. These frameworks result in policies that serve as adaptations rather than a true socio-ecological transformation. To achieve genuine change, we must create new perspectives that challenge conventional approaches and foster a comprehensive socio-ecological transition. This need requires a renewed ecological ethic, promoting shared responsibility for our "common home" and establishing learning spaces that bridge formal, non-formal and informal knowledge, enabling exchanges across generations, genders, groups and between living entities. Drawing on critical consumption and social movements' pedagogical contribution, this work emphasizes the transformative potential of agroecology employed in formal and informal learning contexts. Sustainable consumption and production become actions of ecological citizenship, which aim to cultivate care-based global citizenship, fostering respectful relations across generations, diverse identities, and species. Through such practices, socio-ecological pathways are envisioned and actively prefigured, encouraging the development of a collective and sustainable future. This outcome will be brought out by retracing the contemporary experience of Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement (in Portuguese, *Movimento Sem Terra*).

Ecological transition; social movement organizations; education, critical pedagogy; community of practice.

INTRODUCTION

In the current discourse on ecological transition, several rigid pillars prevail: the ideology of growth, defence of the Western lifestyle, faith in technology and depoliticization, all rooted in anthropocentrism (de Sousa Santos, 2021). Policies fail to drive true socio-ecological transformation within this framework, instead supporting "green" capitalism (Felli, 2021).

To foster genuine change, we must open space for new questions, venture beyond habitual paths, and nurture pedagogical practices for a comprehensive socio-ecological shift. The current ecological crisis and the human-induced degradation of ecosystems (WMO, 2023) demand a new ecological ethic (Mortari, 2020). This essential need requires "sharing lessons" through intergenerational, interdisciplinary exchanges, bridging formal, non-informal and informal knowledge, and engaging

human and non-human entities (Gadotti, 2005; Guerra, 2020). This contribution examines some transformative initiatives, such as the 'agroecological turn' carried on by the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) (Borsatto & Carmo, 2013; da Silva et al., 2018), which offer both direct actions against environmental harm and pedagogical practices that cultivate global ecological citizenship grounded in care for the common home (Mortari, 2020; D'Antone & Parricchi, 2020), fostering harmony across generations, beings and genders (Alessandrini, 2022; Borghi, 2020; De Vita, 2022).

1. THE CONTEXT OF PERMANENT CRISIS

For years, we have witnessed the succession of crises of an economic-social, humanitarian and political nature, from the economic crisis of 2008 to the pandemic, passing through the current climate upheavals. In these two decades, everything has changed: from world geopolitics to us, including our habits, behaviours and our way of being with others. The forced closure of our homes and the conflict between individual freedoms and social rights is part of a broad and multidimensional process (Castells et al., 2012). Our way of acting, living and thinking today unfolds around this permanent crisis we must deal with (Sousa Santos, 2021). In this context, the climate and ecological emergency is undoubtedly among the most urgent crises. It is the catastrophe foretold. The year just ended significantly exceeded all records. This scenario is confirmed by the data published by Copernicus (C3S, 2024) and the extreme events that have devastated Emilia-Romagna and the Valencian Community. 2023 and 2024 were the years of the disappointing COPs in Dubai and Baku, the wave of populism in Europe and the United States, and the rise of climate denialism, reactionary movements that – despite having distant roots – are now striking for their cultural and political penetration (Dunlap, 2013). The research, while showing the causal impact of human beings on the climate (Moore, 2021), is not enough to orient politics – unprepared and ineffective – towards the Paris Agreement.

In the face of such desolation and discouragement, it remains to ask how all of us can contribute to the rooting of new ecological ethics (Mortari, 2020), to train citizens of today and tomorrow and enrich the academic debate to define sustainable and viable eco-social transition paths. What can we do inside and outside universities, schools, training centres, meeting places and all those spaces that we usually frequent to reactivate processes of ecological awareness? How can we contribute to the change of life contexts in this sense? This work intends to provide some food for thought, starting from these crucial questions to collectively rethink and redefine ways of living, producing, consuming and educating for sustainability. The goal is not to propose a universally valid recipe but to share some lessons learned along my path of individual, professional and ethical growth by trying to redefine some pedagogical paths helpful in putting into practice the ambitious transition project. I will try to do this starting from my experience as a secondary school teacher and researcher. I will try to intertwine my experiential baggage with the teachings learned thanks to the research work co-built with the *Movimento Sem Terra* (MST).

2. MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Working as a substitute teacher over the last few years, I have seen how much the school curriculum needs to be updated concerning the ecological crisis regarding content, methodology, and laboratories. The hours of civic education, divided among the various curricular teachings, are experienced as boring by the students, as a ritualistic waste of time on the part of the teachers, and as ineffective in the critical understanding of current events. Probably, my personal experience has been particularly unfortunate. Still, the feeling, shared with many colleagues, is that in Italian schools of all levels, civic (and therefore ecological) education, in practice, was stuck several years ago. The emphasis is on individual behaviours when critical issues and their connections should be investigated from a holistic and genuinely transdisciplinary perspective. Today, it seems that environmentalism and climate justice are something that still does not concern us – even teachers do not believe in it. At the very least, we postpone the trips to the mountains in winter by a few weeks; we plant the garden seeds a little earlier or later to improve the cases. We get a little more frustrated with the wardrobe change, but concretely, we adults limit ourselves to this. The most daring go as far as tirades on *social media* to firmly criticize the activists of Extinction Rebellion, identified in the press as "eco-terrorists". It is no coincidence – in this context – that deniers increase their consensus tenfold precisely based on these contradictions, actual or presumed, between work and material living conditions, on the one hand, and ecology as a luxury that "we cannot afford", on the other. My luck, however, as an academic researcher, European, white, therefore privileged person, was to be able to get to know very closely the direct experience of some social movements, associations and organizations of the solidarity economy and agroecology such as the Budgets of Justice, the Italian Solidarity Economy Networks, the agroecology movements in Brazil and finally the *Movimento Sem Terra* (MST). These research experiences have allowed me to broaden my gaze as a researcher, but above all, as a citizen. Not only have I acquired a lot of knowledge that I would never have thought of acquiring before, but today, I can say that this experiential baggage has allowed me to critically reshape a thought that had already taken root in me for some time and that today takes on new forms and methods that I will try to illustrate.

2.1. The proposal of the Sem Terra (MST)

In 2022, I spent the summer months between the South and North-East of Brazil studying in depth some *in/outdoor educational activities* developed by the MST within their self-managed settlements and popular schools structured for the training of young people and adults to increase the level of critical awareness of the Brazilian agricultural context, facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and technical skills fundamental for the abandonment of the petrochemical industry in agriculture and experimenting with new forms of social organization in harmony with the living according to the principles of agroecology (Vittori, 2023a; 2023b). The transformative horizon of this political-pedagogical proposal completely upset me. I couldn't believe that such a prospect could trigger such radical changes. Knowing

how to read socio-spatial complexities, recognize the impact of industries on the environment, bring out structural injustices and, inequalities, systems of domination starting from early childhood is a virtuous process that lays the foundations for new visions of the future and relocates these citizens – typically excluded – in the world, in history. Agroecology within the schools of the MST leads the movement towards a profound rethinking of producing food, living the territory, and deconstructing the pillars of colonial domination (Borsatto & Carmo, 2013; da Silva et al., 2018). The *expertise* of the MST gained in 40 years of occupation of uncultivated land and latifundia, activism and permanent mobilization for the *Reforma Agraria Popular*, for the *Educação do Campo*, for agroecology and the conservation of primary biomes is something extraordinary.

3. LESSONS LEARNED

What can be drawn from the MST's experience, pedagogical work, and the recent agroecological turn? The MST is a community, a movement's platform that, in an intergenerational and intersectional way, unites different subjects, cultures, traditions and generations for the joint emancipation of all these subjects oppressed and dominated by the patriarchal, colonial and capitalist systems, including nature. One of the lessons I have drawn from this experience is that the knowledge essential to implement and practice sustainable transition paths must be put into dialogue and intertwined, rethinking the ways of transmitting and learning this knowledge (MST, 2021). The agro-eco-pedagogical experience of the MST highlights how the knowledge of transition is essentially a network of knowledge that intersects the knowledge of living, manual knowledge, the knowledge of differences, the knowledge of peace and non-violence, practical knowledge and the circularity of knowledge itself (Borsatto & Carmo, 2013; da Silva et al., 2018). Taking care of the common home, as in the agroecology programs and the daily practices inside and outside the schools of the MST, is an interdisciplinary, intersectional and ecosystem way of doing (MST, 2021). In these pedagogical praxes, knowledge is not hierarchical, there is no technical predominance over critical reflection, and there is no theoretical supremacy over practice. All the knowledge introduces dialogues, influences and contaminates each other. This circularity sanctions the effectiveness of the MST's educational action (Vittori, 2023a; 2023b). The fact that agroecology enters schools as a discipline (in some primary schools) or at an interdisciplinary level (in secondary school) is undoubtedly something innovative compared to our educational training system. However, this is not enough. The children, the young people who carry out the activities in the classroom and the field, or the peasants who collaborate with the popular schools, are repeatedly stimulated to critical reflection since the *soft skills* acquired and the knowledge assimilated induce them to implement the reflective capacity concerning their daily life context. This learning process triggers a continuous and circular meta-reflective process on individual action, the family context and the territory surrounding the life context. In other words, if a student comes home and sees her parents cultivating the home garden – whether it is in Lombardy or the extreme south of Bahia, whether it is the home

garden or the plot of land that the MST community has granted to my family to obtain food and income essential for survival – in both cases, if these actions are implemented without the use of pesticides and chemical and toxic fertilizers, this will help young and old to understand the importance of continuing the path of struggle for food sovereignty and self-sufficiency, protecting the living environment from pollutants and taking care of one's health and the living ecosystem that surrounds one's country, your home, village, neighbourhood and city.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that in Italy and Europe, we cannot import this model *tout court*, both because we do not have differentiated training courses for inland and rural areas as envisaged by the Institute of *Educação do Campo* (Caldart, 2012) and because it is difficult to imagine contemporary social movements so widespread and able – even today – to transfer similar practices and methodologies even to the most remote places of the country. However, the integral approach of the pedagogy of the MST that – with agroecology – is wholly intertwined and mixed with the existence of its militants, showing the essentiality of this circular and reticular form of learning and co-construction of knowledge, on the contrary, could also be encouraged and nurtured in our part of the world. Agroecological education and training are not limited to the school context. It is a continuous process and constant presence in the life of the Sem Terra. Today, it represents the spirit of the time, the *Zeitgeist* of these rural communities that are stubbornly trying to free themselves from the constraints imposed by the agribusiness market and the dominant (and colonial) knowledge that has so far led the peasants to suffer the double constraint of subordination: enjoying what remains and submit to the rules both globally and locally imposed by the big agri-food corporations.

The MST pedagogy in Brazil is making a difference, and perhaps we should start thinking about these terms in our places and contexts, letting different epistemologies shape our eco-social transition paths. Many inland areas of Italy face depopulation and impoverishment due to climate change and overtourism, driven by the desire to showcase nature's "unspoiled beauty" on social media. These unsustainable practices disrupt local life and deepen social inequalities. Probably rethinking the role of formal and informal education to reverse this trend could be decisive.

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EDUCATING IN A MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD: ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

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1. THE ENTANGLEMENT OF EDUCATION, SOCIAL CRISIS AND ECO-CLIMATIC CRISIS

The title we have chosen for the panel is: Educating in a more-than-human world: ecological crisis and social inequalities. It primarily expresses the intention to orient our analysis on the interconnection of education, social crisis and eco-climatic crisis. The basic idea is that it is no longer possible to consider separately the proliferation of socio-economic inequalities on a local and global scale, the issue of ecological degradation, and climate change. It is therefore necessary to think about social justice, environmental justice and climate justice together (Imperatore and Leonardi, 2023). This idea, moreover, seems to us to be widely cleared and shared. We can think of various examples: the declination of sustainability into environmental, social, and economic sustainability in Agenda 2030; Pope Francis' Encyclical Laudato sì, in which the Pontiff insists a great deal on the inseparability of the environmental crisis from the social crisis; the literature that in the humanities deals from different points of view with the relationship between inequality and climate change (Imperatore and Leonardi, 2023); the text The Three Ecologies (Guattari, 1989), that is now a classic of ecological philosophy; but also the various youth protest movements, which show very clearly the connection between the different crises we are referring to. In addition, we can also cite popular terms that are now in common use, such as anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000) or, even better, capitalocene (Moore, 2016), which express well what is at stake in the contemporary historical-cultural scenario. In light of these premises, educating in this *milieu* means learning to combine phenomena that sometimes appear different and distant, constructing critical, complex and problematizing readings (Ferrante, Galimberti and Gambacorti-Passerini, 2022).

Second, the title of the panel is also the result of a specific theoretical positioning, which we could define, in a general sense, as post-humanist and post-anthropocentric (Braidotti, 2013). It is not only about educating having in mind that human society today is marked by the intertwining of multiple crises and is threatened by climate change, but also that these crises take place in a more-than-human world, that is populated not only by people, but also by objects, technologies, artificial intelligences, robots, rocks, lakes, rivers, mountains, oceans, volcanoes, animals, insects, plants, viruses, bacteria, fungi. We are living in a more-than-human world

(Ferrante, Galimberti and Gambacorti-Passerini, 2022; Snaza, Sonu, Truman and Zaliwska, 2016), and this awareness from an ethical-political perspective should lead us to consider a conception of justice that extends across species boundaries, that is a multispecies justice (Haraway, 2016).

All these considerations may perhaps seem trivial and obvious today. However, our experience of living on this planet, even as educational professionals, is often marked by a mental and cultural attitude that leads us not to fully perceive the implications of being part of ecosystems characterized by the interaction between heterogeneous elements (Barone, Cucuzza, and Ferrante, 2024). A deeply anti-ecological attitude that contributes to fuel the crises we are experiencing.

In sum, new and old inequalities are intensified by the convergence of eco-climatic crisis, anthropocentric culture, and neoliberalism, that produces a commodification and oppression of the living, human and non-human, perhaps unprecedented in history. It therefore becomes increasingly urgent to find ways to decentralize ourselves from cognitive, affective, moral habits that are taken for granted and have become all too familiar, as well as to think with theoretical radicality, critical sense and creativity about what it might mean to live and become in a more-than-human world. Consequently, this also means addressing the issue of socio-ecological conflicts in order to redefine the dominant political-economic order. So, which kind of education and which kind of subjectivities we have to promote in order to co-exist peacefully in a more-than-human world, traversed by different forms of injustice (social, environmental, climate, species) and multiple practices of exploitation of the living, operated first and foremost by the international actors of contemporary biocapitalism? If nature, climate, and species have become ethical-political stakes, under what conditions can they truly become stakes in the realm of pedagogical knowledge and educational processes as well?

2. INTERROGATING MAINSTREAM DISCOURSES: A CRITICAL VIEW ON POLICY MAKING

Such exponential change requires considering different social spheres and levels. It involves the educational practices that take place every day in schools and services as well as the mainstream discourses that enter the educational system shaping its underlying assumptions, ideas and orientations. From this perspective, an important field to consider in order to understand concretely how education is positioning itself in relation to the social and eco-climatic crisis is policy making. Indeed, international organizations that explicit their interest in education through policy recommendations have in the last two decades become political arenas in which the meanings and pragmatic orientations of fundamental issues are played out (Milana and Holford, 2014).

The concept of sustainability and education for sustainable development can be traced in various policy documents proposed by UNESCO, OECD, EU (e.g. in the Greencomp Framework proposed by the Joint Research Center, see Bianchi et al., 2022) and at its base there is an interpretation inspired by Our Common Future, an

UN Report dating back 1987. The so called Brundtland report defines sustainable development as a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987, p. 8): this formulation clearly belongs to another historical moment and a tradition based on epistemological and political assumptions considerably distant from what we have asserted in the previous paragraph.

This concept of sustainability, on one hand, clearly addresses new challenges to the dominant neoliberal paradigm by integrating it with an ecosystemic sensibility and by activating an empowerment of all social actors towards the problems generated by the current eco-climate crisis and its possible future evolutions. On the other hand, it risks to represent a slow and inconsistent effort, promoting a gradual change within the same frame and not a radical paradigm shift. Several critical voices are rising towards this kind of approach where it is still possible to act on the environment in order to mitigate the most destructive effects of economic growth, through technologies to get to zero impact (Newell, 2015). A vision that conveys linear and often instrumental attitudes, which calls for developing skills (e.g., complex problem solving) and a sensitivity to effects and feedback of one's own action without grasping and revolutionizing some underlying constructs (e.g. the concept of acting itself, see Barad, 2007).

More generally, it is possible to observe how the policy domain is founded on a vision that is still anthropocentric and does not consider the complex interconnections and entanglements between human and non-human in a radical way (Ferrante, Galimberti and Gambacorti-Passerini, 2022). In this distance between dominant representations of the crisis and instances scattering from theoretical perspectives, research studies, educational and didactic proposals, much of the game on issues related to the social and eco-climatic crisis will be played out in years to come.

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IN TOUCH WITH THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CHILDREN'S LIFEWORLD EXPERIENCES

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The processes of socialization, subjectification, and qualification encompass learning experiences that occur in various contexts, both within and outside educational institutions, through interactions and relationships with other people and with the more-than-human world. This article takes a phenomenological perspective, focusing on children's lifeworld experiences with the more-than-human world. It aims to move beyond cognitive, affective, and moral habits, and to investigate, with theoretical rigor and critical insight, what it might mean for children to live in a more-than-human world and how this world is made manifest in their experiences. To this end, we collected phenomenological vignettes to capture experiences between children and the more-than-human world. These vignettes reveal that a relational quality can develop between children and entities in the more-than-human world, in which it is not only significant what the children do with such entities—treating them as objects of observation, reflection, or manipulation—but also how the children respond to the demands of the more-than-human world.

out-of-school experiences; more-than-human world; children's lifeworld; phenomenological vignettes

INTRODUCTION

Being a child and becoming an adult is a process of socialisation, subjectification and qualification, in which learning experiences take place in different contexts (Biesta, 2014; 2020). The shift towards an institutionalised childhood (Baader, 2014, 442) continues. Children in the western hemisphere are not only beginning to attend public childcare and educational institutions at a younger age, the majority of them are also spending, on average, more time there than ever (Gay, 2015). In general, programmes' attempts to meet children's diverse needs are becoming more sophisticated; however, the more specialised and structured both outdoor and indoor spaces become, and the more they are 'tailored' to children, the fewer opportunities children have to enliven such spaces with their own ideas for play and to overlay, intertwine, or reclaim them with their own meanings (Muchow and

Muchow, 2012, 160). Unlike family or institutional indoor spaces, natural settings offer the opportunity for a wide variety of potential encounters and interactions with people and the more-than-human world: animals, plants, natural phenomena, as well as cultural and natural objects. But how do children experience these natural spaces? What learning experiences do they have? Current research has thus far given their perspective too little consideration (Beck et al., 2022).

This article, therefore, focuses on the out-of-school experiences of pre-school children, emphasising their interactions with the more-than-human world, and the relationships and meanings that emerge from these experiences. To this end, a selected *phenomenological vignette* (Schratz et al., 2012; Zadra and Agostini, 2024) from a broader corpus of vignettes, along with analysis of it—referred to as a *vignette reading* (Schratz et al., 2012)—is used to illustrate how the more-than-human world can be made manifest in children's lifeworld experiences.

1. PHENOMENOLOGICAL VIGNETTES AND THEIR POTENTIAL AS EXEMPLARY DESCRIPTIONS

The phenomenological vignette is a qualitative research tool, which draws on descriptive phenomenology (Husserl, 1973), body phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2005), responsive phenomenology (Waldenfels, 2002; 2011), and phenomenological educational thought (Meyer-Drawe, 2012). It records moments of lived experience in writing, making them accessible for theoretical reflection (Zadra and Mian, 2023). A brief, concise narrative and dense description of experience, a vignette captures not only children's verbal expressions but also their bodily articulations, emphasising the atmosphere and the affective and pathic aspects of the experience (Schratz et al., 2012; Zadra and Agostini, 2024). This enables vignettes to make children's co-experiences visible and tangible, while sensitising vignette readers to bodily articulations, pre-reflective meaning, and potential constructions of meaning emerging from the experiences for participants. Below is an example of a phenomenological vignette collected in the province of Trento during the summer 2023, where kindergartens are closely integrated with the local environment and included in educational activities and out-of-school facilities. In the vignette on *The sand turtle*, the kindergarten children are at the public swimming pool under the supervision of kindergarten teachers, while a small group of children plays independently and freely in a sandbox.

The sand turtle

Huddled on the ground, Claudio and Lorenzo are busy modelling a sand sculpture. «A turtle!» they explain to Lucia, who is watching them motionless at the edge of the sandpit and asks what they are doing. They reply without lifting their heads, their hands still busy beating and shaping the sand with their paddles. Soon afterwards, Lorenzo gets up, picks up a bucket from the ground and starts mixing sand and water with a spatula. Suddenly Lorenzo's gaze pauses on the sand animal that is taking shape, and he tilts his head first to one shoulder, then to the other. "But it's missing

a foot..." he exclaims, putting down the bucket. Claudio raises his head to look at Lorenzo, then jumps up to his feet and stands beside him. "Do it over there," he says, pointing without looking at him. Lorenzo crouches down again and crawls a little further over, beginning to shape the wet sand, while Claudio continues to dig in the sand, gesticulating diligently. Luca approaches the sandpit with slow steps, and stands next to Lucia, who is watching Claudio and Lorenzo without moving. After looking at the sand sculpture, moving his eyes quickly along its contours, he stretches out his foot until it touches it, shakes his head briefly, bursts out laughing and exclaims, "It looks like a robot!" Claudio stops digging, freezes, jumps to his feet, looks in vain for Lorenzo and, after a moment's pause, turns his head to Luca and says, "Then we'll have to make it more like a turtle." He quickly crouches down and gets to work next to Lorenzo, who is kneading wet sand to make another foot. Suddenly, two other children, Veronica and Patrick, approach Luca and all three of them form a team and trot off with plastic buckets to fetch water from the well, amidst commands, laughter and excited shouts. They jostle a little, push each other, bump into each other, laugh and return to Claudio and Lorenzo, splashing water from the buckets all over the place and shouting, "Muuuuud!" Lucia, who had been standing still and concentrating on the sand sculpture, starts stamping her feet and running around the sandpit.

Since "it is not an object, a structure or a concept that is exemplary for other objects, structures and concepts, but the activities and processes from which they emerge" (Buck, 1981, 211), the vignette, which is a linguistic condensation of experience, acts as an exemplar, providing insight into the structures, objects and significance attributed by children to the more-than-human world. As an exemplary description (Lippitz, 1987) and a means of phenomenological exemplification (Brinkmann, 2012), it demonstrates the intersubjectivity of experience by making it comprehensible through the intuitive grasp of a tangible example. Using the vignette cited above, we aim to provide a phenomenological description and illustration of the general within the specific, and to highlight certain aspects that emerge from an initial analysis of the vignette, particularly with regard to the roles that objects assume in their *intra-action* (Lenz-Taguchi, 2010) with children and learning events, as emphasised in posthumanist approaches (Braidotti, 2013; Taylor et al., 2019). Phenomenological analysis will thus highlight shared dimensions with posthumanist approaches.

2. PHENOMENOLOGICAL READINGS: POTENTIAL EXPERIENTIAL SPACES FOR CHILDREN, THEIR RELATIONSHIPS AND THEIR ATTRIBUTIONS OF MEANING IN INTERACTION AND INTRA-ACTION WITH THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

The *phenomenological reading* or vignette reading (Schratz et al., 2012; Agostini et al., 2024) is an analytical approach developed alongside the phenomenological vignette. A reading highlights possible understandings and intentionally refrains from explanations based on predefined theories or models; it is based on epistemological conviction and therefore makes no claim to objectification or

operationalization. Readings do not involve searching for categories or themes guided by a model; instead, they pursue an open and revelatory dialogue, focusing on the example of the specific situation in question and promoting a reflective approach. According to Gadamer (1960), interpretation does not aim to reconstruct the 'truth', as vignette research does not seek to understand how something generally occurs, but rather seeks to point to (Finlay, 2009) the experiential possibilities that the event illustrated by the vignette may hold for the person concerned. Thus, readings aim to reveal and differentiate the fullness and richness of experience (Schratz et al., 2012).

From a phenomenological perspective, since something always appears *as something specific* and always as something *for someone*, nothing can be considered an objective fact; things are always experienced *by* someone, from a particular perspective. Therefore, both the reading and the vignette itself are always dependent on the person and the perspective of the researcher. Given the ambiguity of the experience and the embodied nature of the researcher, they can never be fully clarified. As a result, readings neither aim to nor are able to make general or final statements or draw definitive conclusions.

In the discursive reading of the vignette presented above, the children's connection with the more-than-human world is a responsive event. The children are 'called upon' by the sand, urged to shape it and mix it with water to form a suitable consistency, in order to shape their turtle, which is in the process of evolving. It is clear that things possess fundamental 'prompting qualities' (Waldenfels, 2002, 104), but in very different ways: they do not merely present people with passive objects to be thought about or used; rather, they engage them—things are fundamentally characterised by their ability to stimulate, prompt, and create a mood (Stieve et al., 2023). Individuals' responses to these demands take different forms, transforming meanings and relationships with themselves, others, and things. For example, when Lorenzo and Claudio make a sculpture out of sand, the sand becomes something they must engage with in a particular way, almost as if it were making a claim on them. Afterwards, the resulting turtle and Lucia's motionless gaze and her 'wanting to know' become evident: a claim is being made on the girl, it is something that affects her. The same effect impacts on Luca, and so on.

In the vignette, dynamic movement becomes visible, in a space where actions are taken up, continued and redesigned. The children themselves are in constant motion and express themselves in different, personal ways. The vignette reveals and opens up a relational space, in which the children relate to each other in different ways. A togetherness is created through the emergence and shifting of boundaries. The original relational space, created by Claudia, Lorenzo and the sand sculpture, is continuously expanded—first by Lucia, then by Luca, and finally by Veronica and Patrick. Lucia's novel movement at the end imbues this dynamic relational space with a new quality, and the togetherness generated through the turtle is expressed in a new way, within a boundless shared space. The children are constantly changing, aligning, realigning, separating, connecting and dissolving, creating and

delimiting an ever-expanding relational space. A community, a team, becomes visible and tangible.

The sand, shaped into a turtle by the children, becomes a common and meaningful thing, a shared task, a project to be carried out together, requiring the children to collaborate repeatedly. The children work together to create the turtle, giving themselves over to its claims, giving it meaning, and building relationships with each other, with their turtle, and within their lifeworld (Bollig et al., 2020).

3. CONCLUSION

Traditionally, we view children's experiences primarily in human-centric terms, focusing on their interactions with other people and human-made environments. However, the approaches described in this paper make it possible to widen this perspective to include the more-than-human world and open up spaces of experience such as intermediate events and interactions—between animals, plants, children and pedagogical professionals, encompassing animals, plants, and other non-human entities. This challenges us to consider how these various non-human elements shape children's experiences (Stieve et al., 2023).

The method of the phenomenological vignette prompts a more holistic, inclusive and differentiated understanding of children's lives, recognizing the significant roles that non-human factors play in their development and experiences. By decentralising, moving away from cognitive and moral habits, and bringing radical theory and critical awareness to reflection on what it might mean for children to live in a more-than-human world, we draw attention to children's experiences. This raises the question of how, and as what, they experience the more-than-human world— what spaces of relationship and meaning open up for them, allowing them to encounter themselves, the world and others and revealing different and new meanings for them. In this way, the sand, which had been shaped into the form of a turtle, took on a new meaning for the children as they worked on it, facilitating different relationships and presenting opportunities to experience themselves and the others involved in the experience. The formative processes revealed in this and other vignettes illustrate the differentiation of children's horizons of experience as they *learn in, with and through the more-than-human world*.

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EDUCATING TO GENERATE NEW ECO-CENTRIC WOR(L)DS. PRECARIOUS SCAFFOLDING AND IMPERCEPTIBLE CRACKS

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To continue inhabiting and sustaining its presence on Earth, humankind needs to develop different words, conceptual frameworks, and concrete actions (henceforth referred to as, "wor(l)ds"), to navigate the complex ecosystem shaped by intricate interactions of multiple and agent elements, human and non-human. This is a crucial undertaking at both the individual and collective levels. Educators, in particular, bear the responsibility of contemplating and shaping educational experiences for potential and possible future Earth societies and subjectivities. In light of these considerations, what strategies might be employed, in the field of education, to rethink and enact sustainable and ecological ways of inhabiting the Earth? What changes might be encouraged to provide the well-being of human and nonhuman life on the planet? How might we shift from ego-centric to eco-centric thinking and acting? The paper will show how theories and research approaches that consider a sociomaterial and a non-anthropocentric dimension, challenge traditional ideas about research, education, and subjectivities, in the field of education. Furthermore, they facilitate the exploration of alternative avenues for educational researchers and professionals.

ecological crisis; education; ecocentrism; social justices.

INTRODUCTION

The ecological crisis and the increasingly evident social injustices spreading globally, which we have been witnessing for some time, accentuate the fact that we are still struggling to accept the everyday implications of living in a more-than-human world (Haraway, 2010). Despite this becoming increasingly evident and despite the fact that a number of studies and research projects have been undertaken with the intention of addressing this awareness, we find ourselves in what Haraway (2010) refers to as a "collective accident", where

> surviving humanism is the problem, in both senses. How can we together inherit these pastpresents; how can I, can we, stay with the trouble without the mad solace of yet another exterminism, another fix, perhaps in the tempting form of another right-to-life discourse, another return to amnesia, another disavowal of multispecies mortality and so vulnerable and irreducible responsibility not only for living and dying, but also for killing and breeding? (Haraway, 2010, 55).

For over two decades, scholars from diverse disciplines have observed a conceptual (Nail, 2021) and material-discursive (Barad, 2003) shift that challenges traditional frameworks. Specifically, it compels us to abandon notions of the world as comprised of ordered, separate substances, static essences, or objects over which humans maintain control. Instead, we inhabit uncertain realities—causal and yet non-deterministic outcomes shaped by ongoing and in motion processes, events, and transformations.

To sustain life on Earth—an extraordinarily complex and intricate ecosystem that results from open-ended intra-actions (Barad, 2007) among heterogeneous elements—different wor(l)ds, modes of research, thought, and action, in both professional and private contexts are not only necessary but urgent. This is particularly compelling for educators, who are called to design learning and educational experiences that can foresee possible future Earth societies and subjectivities. As researchers and practitioners, how can we reconceptualize and enact sustainable and ecological ways of inhabiting the Earth? What changes are necessary to ensure the well-being and prosperity of both human and nonhuman life? How can we address the crucial recognition that we are—and have always been—hybrids of natureculture (Haraway, 2003), bodymind, flashtechnology, sociomaterial and matterspirit? Furthermore, how can we translate into actionable concepts the understanding that, like other animals and critters (Haraway, 2010), we are integral components of an eco-system rather than isolated participants in an ego-system? How do we transition from ego-centric to eco-centric ways of thinking and acting?

In this paper, I show how specific theories and research paradigms, notably new materialisms (Cole & Frost, 2010) and sociomaterial approaches such as Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Fenwick & Edwards, 2019), along with the contributions of scholars such as Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti, and Haraway, can facilitate this shift. These approaches, with their respective scaffolds, while maintaining their differences, encourage a reconfiguration of epistemological and methodological approaches to research, educational experiences, and subjectivities within the field of education. Through unusual wor(l)ds, conceptual tools, methodological attentions, and perspectives, educational subjectivities and practices are reinterpreted and enacted as heterogeneous, dynamic assemblages and associations. These are neither inert and static nor pre-existing; they are not merely a matter of human-to-human relations. Rather, they are the emergent outcomes of intra-actions among myriad human and non-human elements (Barad, 2003), resulting from how they combine and ally.

The contemporary challenge, even in education, is not to imagine an entirely new world but to cultivate novel ways of existing within this one—ways that transform human relationships with themselves, other living beings, and the planet into forms that are not only life-sustaining but also life-enhancing (Plotkin, 2021). Achieving this requires a willingness to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway, 2010) in a non-ideological yet radical manner (Braidotti, 2019), and to foreground the sociomaterial entanglements that constitute educational experiences. This involves learning to

navigate through "imperceptible cracks rather than meaningful cuts" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2017, 65, translation modified) and replacing the comfortable and stagnant notions of "progress" with "precarious and pragmatic scaffolding" (Ibid), that can open possibilities.

1. MAKING ODDKIN: FROM DICHOTOMY TO CONNECTION – PASSING THROUGH CONTEMPORARIES' AMBIVALENCE.

As scholars and professionals in the field of education, it is urgent that we begin to shift from ego-centric to eco-centric modes of thinking and acting. This is of particular importance for those who remain unresponsive or struggle to acknowledge that we *are living* in a technologically and globally mediated and rapidly changing world (Rosi Braidotti, 2019, 153). In this sense, the Earth is one that has always been "infected" (Haraway, 2013) and "haunted" (Barad, 2010) by a multitude of "Other "beings that co-exist alongside and with humans.

We find ourselves living on Earth in, confused, unclear and troubled times (Haraway, 2019, 13, translation modified). In these times of tremendous convulsive transformations (that are still creating exclusion and marginalization) Anthropos are susceptible to the allure of utopian aspirations for a more promising high-tech future, yet simultaneously confronted with the grim prospect of upcoming catastrophes (Braidotti, 2019). This ambivalence, if taken as a dichotomy, is likely to structure not only our thinking, but also the words we use to refer to and create reality, and thus the worlds we inhabit.

Braidotti identifies this ambivalence in the "conflict between the urgency of finding innovative and alternative models of political-ethical responsibility and the immobility and self-interest of neo-conservative ideology" (Braidotti, 2019,153, translation modified). In such instances, we are likely either to stand idly by, convinced of our powerlessness, or to believe that we have exhausted all possible courses of action without success. This contradiction, whether unintentional or conscious, can also lead scholars and professionals to engage in thought patterns that oscillate between euphoria and paranoia.

We need an unusual and novel way of thinking, speaking, observing, and acting if we wish to begin transforming a reality in which, as Braidotti (2019, 119, translation modified) has observed "the consumerist and socially dominant belief in the new coexists with the total social rejection of radical change and radical transformations". The question then becomes: how do we transition from this socially dominant belief to radical change and transformation? And why should we undertake this transition?

The answer to the latter question is twofold. Firstly, by moving beyond binary and dichotomized patterns of thought, we might start paying attention to the connections and relationships—what Haraway (2016) calls *Oddkin*—that, as human beings, we have always shared with other human and nonhuman creatures living on this very planet. Secondly, it is imperative to abandon traditional logic, which have historically perpetuated unequal and violent circumstances. By welcoming

different logics, we might initiate transformations that promote the well-being and prosperity of both human and nonhuman life on the Earth we inhabit. Moreover, these transformations would allow us to recognize that we have always been, and continue to be, parts of a larger ecosystem.

In order to begin addressing the question of how we move toward radical transformations— that is to say, how we may move away from a dichotomous way of thinking and acting and instead form alliances and kinship with other species, companion species (Haraway, 2016)—we need to reposition ourselves. This realignment requires: (a) a radical change in the Western scientific paradigms to which we have become so accustomed that we have "naturalized" them, rendering ourselves unable to see them clearly or perceive their effects; (b) re-figuring how we conceptualize and engage with subjectivity. Specifically, we must shift our ways of thinking, training, and creating subjectivities from an ego-centric to an eco-centric perspective.

How, then, can we, as scholars and professionals in the field of education, enact points (a) and (b) to rethink and implement sustainable and ecological ways of inhabiting the Earth, conducting research, and educating?

2. MAKE DIFFERENCE: INVENT, CREATE AND EXPERIMENT UNUSUAL WOR(L)DS

To start addressing these questions, I will also examine the concept of words-worlds – wor(l)ds.

A possible pathway is the one suggested by the theoretical physicist and philosopher Karen Barad (2003) through her theory of *Agential realism*. A fascinating and complex framework in which words and things, discourse and matter, subject and object are not juxtaposed and related due to a dualistic epistemological framework, but rather they are intra-active. Intra-actions are causally constraining nondeterministic enactments through which matter-in-the-process-of-becoming is sedimented out and enfolded in further materializations. Barad (2003, 818) insight that "'concepts' (which are actual physical arrangements) and 'things' do not have determinate boundaries, properties, or meanings apart from their mutual 'intra-actions'". This means that words and worlds/concepts and things, they are not defined by a fixed or pregiven notions but they are "phenomena" and "material-discursive practices" "through which boundaries are constructed" (ibid, 818).

> A phenomenon is a dynamic relationality that is locally determinate in its matter and meaning [...] through specific causal intra-actions. Outside of a particular intra-actions "words" and "things" are indeterminate. Hence the notion of materiality and discursivity must be reworked in a way that acknowledges their mutual entailment. (ibid, 820)

Barad's theory can help us to shift the focus from linguistic concepts to discursive practice (Barad, 2003, 807) and drawing on an agential realist approach help us to understand the relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena. Precisely following Barad's relational ontology, we can overcome our

representationalist fixation on "words" and "things" and the problematic of their relationality, advocating instead a causal relationship between specific exclusionary practices embodied as specific material configurations of the world (i.e., discursive practice, /(con)figurations rather than "words") and specific material phenomena (i.e., relations rather than "things") (ibid, 814).

Barad's agential realism offers a powerful framework to reimagine the interplay between discourse and materiality, word and worlds, moving beyond dualistic paradigms that have traditionally shaped epistemological and ontological thinking in the educational field.

By focusing on intra-actions rather than interactions, this approach emphasizes the co-constitution of meaning and matter within specific phenomena challenging the fixity of boundaries between concepts and things. Such a perspective not only reframes our understanding of material-discursive practices but also provides critical insights into how knowledge production, education, and research can be reoriented toward more dynamic, relational, and entangled approaches, making a difference and crafting unusual wor(l)ds.

Through this approach we can also re-think the embodied subjectivities not as "human individual-individualities" or human subjects preexist as such: "'Humans' are neither pure cause or pure effect but part of the world in its open-end becoming (ibid, 821)".

As researchers and professionals in education, we are call contributing to the construction of words-worlds or *wor(l)ds*, with a narrative intent free of definitional ambition, one that does not aim to produce a standard story to represent everyone, generalizing topics and problems. The emphasis lies not simply on recognizing the significance of material factors alongside discursive ones; instead the focus is on the conjoined material-discursive nature of constraints, conditions, and practices (ibid, 823).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of Barad's agential realism and the broader frameworks of new materialisms and sociomaterial approaches highlights the need to transcend dichotomous thinking and adopt more integrated, dynamic perspectives. By recognizing the intra-active entanglements of matter and meaning, concepts and things, words and worlds, we open pathways for reimagining educational practices, research methodologies, and subjectivities in ways that reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of the world we inhabit. This shift urges us to embrace eco-centric paradigms that foster life-sustaining and life-enhancing practices, challenging entrenched binaries and static notions of existence. It also calls for seeking "an order that the multiplicity really does" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2021, p. 62, translation modified). This is not about inventing or introducing new definitions through the usual "meaningful cuts" (Ibid., 65, translation modified), which

ultimately reinforce linguistic and power hierarchies[1]. Instead, it is about beginning to spread and weave together—to "*become with*" and make kinship (Haraway, 2016), to cartograph (Braidotti, 2017)—a nomadic geography of relationships, composed of assemblages of phrases fragments, hypotheses, doubts, songs, exercises, films, open questions, excerpts of definitions, perspectives, dreams, desires, uncertainties, fears, textures, intensities, bacteria, plants, and so on. It is about learning to weave relationships differently, through pragmatic and precarious scaffolding (Deleuze & Guattari, 2021) that can evoke atmospheres, draft a novel way of questioning, inspire reflection, broaden perspectives, and effect change.

This is not about restoring a totality, for example, new humanity, potentially unified under the banner of shared suffering and fear, only to perpetuate, in fact reproduce, the same discriminatory patterns inherited from certain anthropocentric and patriarchal humanism. Such an approach would merely serve to perpetuate the very problem it seeks to address, namely the continued perpetuation of exclusion and discrimination. Instead, it is about learning to become-other, to diversify and disperse, and to affirm existence through the concatenation of singularities.

Ultimately, the task is not only to think and act differently but also to craft "unusual wor(l)"ds that cultivate differences, transformative and relational ways of being within the intricate web of multispecies and material-discursive entanglements that define our subjectivities and our shared reality. As researchers and educators, we are compelled to consider how we can make a positive/affirmative difference in life, in our job. In this regard, Deleuze (1998) suggests that we should invent, create, and experiment. One potential avenue for exploring uncertain and experiential wor(l)ds is to stop to be concerned about finding solutions, and instead start creating problems in which something novel can be created.

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[1] The philosopher and Professor of Philosophy Miguel De Beistegui observed (2019,19) no matter how formal and scientific – is that they introduce structures of power, and turn a phenomenon – an 'assemblage' – that is essentially fluid and collective into a fixed order and a sedentary hierarchy.

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A MATERIALIST ETHICS AND THE STRANGENESS OF EDUCATIONAL LIFE

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This paper outlines a project regarding ethics without humans, and its implications for education. It also discusses the strangeness of educational life in relation to the split nature of education. On one hand, education is about infinite possibilities for becoming different. On the other hand, as far as its institutionalized nature is concerned, it seeks to constitute the subjectivity for the needs of the apparatus. This paper emphasizes the bidirectional nature of ethics, and discusses the importance of ontological concepts such as 'malfunctioning' and what they bring to a material ethics for education.

Ethics; ontology; speculative realisms; Deleuze; strange

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an introduction to my current book project that invites educators to compose a materialist ethics for education. This book has taken years to plan because of the *bidirectional* nature of ethics itself. What I mean by bidirectional is that ethics in its fullest sense reaches outward toward a collective shared world and simultaneously inward, because ethics is also something personal and lived. There is no way around this double imperative, because if one of these horizons is ignored, either the outward or inward direction, it is to the detriment of both a collective and personal ethics.

Ethics is a fascinating but difficult area of study. First, ethics is infinitely variable: athletic associations, church clergy, and student protests all have their locally varying ethics. It is *as* variable as social and ecological life. One of the main questions of this book involves how ethics exceeds both Eurocentric and anthropocentric ways of understanding the world. Ethics as a concept has a distinctly European origin that mires it the greek terms *ēthika* (neuter plural of adjectival *ēthikós*), which means roughly inquiry into an ethos or a custom, disposition or character (Faubion 2011). It is also, for better or worse, mired in human subjectivity, which is easy to see when one gets free of modern Western modes of thought. For example in the more relational ethics of Indigenous thought, for example the moral-ethical philosophies of the Haudenosaunee scholar John Mohawk, or ethical theories and histories from Asian scholars like Watsuji Tetsuro (Tetsuro 1997).

One of the strange things about all forms of educational life, one of the important terrains for ethics, is that it can be just as experimental as it can be normative. This

tension between normativity and creative experimentation comprises a major context for the exploration of ethics in education. Education is one of the best fields or disciplines to study and teach about ethics, because ethics and education are two sides of the same coin. In the book *An intense calling: How ethics is the essence of education*, I argue that ethics is the core of our discipline (Bazzul 2023). Every kind of education involves enabling a different and better way of being in the world. These ways of being are infinitely variable and inevitably change over time. Furthermore, the study of ethics is different from declaring a normative ethics, although both share the same danger in that a focus on ethics without a focus on politics dangerously depoliticizes ethics, and can make it simply a tool of power and control. One reason philosopher Michel Foucault's (1997) historical analyses into ethics are so compelling is because he recognized that there's a big difference between declaring a preferred ethics and a project that instead seeks to understand the variability of ethics.

How might educators facilitate an ethics that is not so mired in anthropocentrism? In Saskatchewan, Canada students learn that Indigenous peoples have been telling ethical stories that do not centre humans for millennia. But for many non Indigenous peoples the unevenly shared ecological crisis and the sixth mass extinction demonstrate that it is to seek an ethics that exceeds human relations. It is my position that ethics does exceed human relations, since human subjectivity is essentially a 'folding' of the material world and its forces inward towards each other (Bazzul 2023). How might educators enable a more ecologically expansive ethics? It is obviously not so straightforward. Global, Indigenous-led ethical explorations that re-establish relations to nonhuman and nonliving beings is essential. But Modern Western philosophy and education also needs to change as the anthropocentric limitations of ethics are clearly tied to an inability to face environmental destruction. Education offers what Elder Willie Ermine (Sturgeon Lake First Nation) calls ethical space; a liminal space of relationality formed when wholly different ways of being encounter each other (Ermine 2007). Education does not simply inculcate an ethics. It is the space where the conditions are set for previously unthinkable ethical becomings, and our role as educators is to set the conditions for others. Ecological survival is the undeniable *zeitgeist* of ethics today, and the ethics that flows from this context will not quite resemble anything coming before.

DOUBLE ARTICULATION AND THE BIDIRECTIONAL NATURE OF ETHICS

As feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2017) points out, our ethical relation to the world is *bidirectional* in that one direction or plane is cast towards the world in order to make sense of our actual practical lives, while another is pointed inward toward the self to make sense of what it means to be alive. Any collective basis for ethics will always be formulated alongside lived experiences that help cast this trajectory (Faubion 2011). As philosopher of science Karen Barad (2007) insists, ethics emerges together-with and is not separate or apriori from the entities involved. The outward and inward horizons continually differentiate and orient each other.

The number two here is not really important as the planes simply represent a multiplicity where the minimum is two. They are a simplified way to talk about multiple processes and forces co-constitutive of each other. Another way to view this number 'two' is simply as a point of differentiation. So, a collective ethics is also highly personal, and in turn what feels personal has multiple points of connection to a collective ethics. And what these points of connection consist of can be highly variable.

An ethics that follows both outward and inward virtual planes will inevitably change and undergo processes of *double articulation*—a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1988). Double articulation refers to the fact that there are always at least two levels of material organization taking place in phenomena. Again, might seem like a dualism is really a multiplicity, an overall process of differentiation. For Deleuze and Guattari these two organizational levels can be summarized as those related to *content* and those related to *expression*. Any assemblage or system of heterogeneous parts is always doubly articulated in terms of its content and expression. Content involves the material or conceptual elements that give substance to things or what is expressed. Content here could involve the electronic devices and the various minerals needed for expression to happen. *Expression* has to do with sign systems that shape content and bring particular content to a shared reality. Language is perhaps the easiest example of expression to understand, but so is genetic and computer code. Language also has its own content in the form of grammar, paper, etc. It's impossible to fully separate content and expression nor can they be determined beforehand.

Plants, animals, and geological formations are doubly articulated through various levels of organization, and these articulations often involve a sea-change in meaning, structure, or possibility. A qualitative change in how things exist. This might sound quite structural, impersonal, and overly abstract, but the double articulation of systems and beings goes much further and deeper. Double articulation is about a multiplicity of forces continually making things. There can never be a mere singular articulation nor can the forces stop at two or seventy two articulations. It is an eternal dance where the only purpose is creation.

THE SPLIT IN EDUCATIONAL LIFE STRANGE

A central theme of a book on education and ethics must involve how educational life is strange. However, describing educational life, even for a group of people, is a widely varying endeavour. Because there are so many of us that work, teach, and study in educational institutions means there will inevitably be a million descriptions of how educational life is strange. This diversity means the way people experience this strangeness will be as diverse as the people who enter educational institutions. I argue that such an exercise contributes to conversations around justice and education because it helps reveal the underlying aesthetics, affects, and seldom considered material realities underpinning education. Furthermore, such an exercise provides educators with a personal point of entry for discussions of ethics,

justice, and well being.

Institutionalized education is split. On one hand, it is largely under the control of government, religious, or corporate institutions. Education in this regard is only interested in modes of being needed by the apparatus. While this is not a surprise, it is a historically contingent way of orienting life. Educational institutions become strange when we realize that considering questions of being are often antithetical to what institutions require us to be. However, the facilitation of becoming though education exists alongside their prerogative of governing. This split is not accidental, and in modern Western societies was created by the early Christian church. The strangeness of educational life becomes apparent as one traverses this split. If one exists more on one side of the split, education likely feels less strange. A bidirectional ethics is uniquely tied to this split in educational life—an intensive storm that makes our experiences with/in educational institutions quite weird.

For Michel Foucault (1990) an apparatus (*dispositif*) is a coordinated network of structural arrangements and discourses that target the conduct and subjectivity of individuals. Institutions of education are prime examples of apparatuses because their practices are so coordinated and intentional. Anthropologist James Faubion (2011) argues that individuals who freely and self-reflexively take up the incentive or call of an apparatus are automatically cast as ethical subjects. According to Faubion, nobody is ever born an ethical subject. Our relations are necessary for any ethical differentiation to take place.

For Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, the notion of an apparatus goes back to the beginning of Christianity where the early church fathers were trying to solve a theological problem regarding God's tripartite being or the holy trinity (Agamben 2009). The split that resulted was between the divine management of people, summarized by the term *Oikonomia* or 'divine economy of the home', and God's ultimate unitary being. The church fathers assured their opponents that God is indeed one but "as to his oikonomia—that is to say the way in which he administers his home, his life, and the world that he created—he is, rather, triple" (10). Oikonomia was not just a means to introduce the trinity, but a means to introduce the divine governance of the Christian faithful here on earth. Later, when Oikonomia gets translated into Latin, it becomes *dispositio*, which is the etymological root for dispositif or apparatus. The point is that this is a very early instance where questions of 'being' and the organized economy of earthly existence become split, and in some way, set against each other. In the present, we can still view ethics as running more or less along both these planes—being and practical life. We exist within the thick strata of everyday existence, its social relations, institutional demands, and daily tasks; yet, at the same time, we also have a desire to become something different. An ethical life exists along both planes.

EMPLOYING PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS

The basis of a material ethics requires creative speculation ontology or 'how things are'. Some educators do not value philosophy very much when it comes to ethics,

especially if we see ethics as deriving from experience. But all philosophical concepts exist in relation to personal experience, and move at different speeds and with a different consistency than the concepts of other disciplines. Maybe you were like me, and in your teenage years started talking about reality with your friends. Not your parents, because they were too stuck in their ways and views of the world. Not with your teachers, because they were likely to infantilize your questions—though it's possible you had a teacher who listened. The point is that if children think about the nature of reality so should their teachers!

Thinking about the nature of reality today has largely been surrendered to the sciences. There are good reasons for this. Unlike concepts in the arts and philosophy, scientific concepts must have strict referents in the material world. Moreover, there must be empirical data relating to these referents (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). However, the problem with only letting scientific concepts describe reality is that science, using its own methods, doesn't generate salient ethical knowledge about its objects of study or practices of knowledge production. The concepts of philosophy must have internal consistency yet can move at the speed of thought, which helps educators think more 'outside the box' when it comes to ethics. Any ethics that comments on the nature of these things largely comes from ways of thinking and being outside of modern science (Lyotard 1984). A materialist ethics requires something more than science to discern an ethical world where humans are just one entity in a relational universe.

MALFUNCTIONING AND AN ETHICS WITHOUT HUMANS

An exploration of a materialist ethics will also mean an engagement with strange theory. *Malfunctioning* is one of the concepts British American philosopher Timothy Morton (2018) plays with in his quest to bring ecological awareness to everyday life. All things malfunction and it's during these times that we really notice a thing. Whether we're talking about a relationship, an ecosystem, or a bicycle, it will eventually stop working the way it is expected to, and when it does we take notice and/or something consequential happens. The usefulness of this simple yet perplexing ontological concept lies in its implications for ethical ecological relationships. Malfunctioning compels us to think about what it means to live in relation to things that inevitably break down. If everything malfunctions, it means there isn't any one way something is supposed to work for eternity.

An example of a large-scale malfunction can be seen in Earth's climate, where the warming of the earth represents a massive mal-function of atmospheric temperature and equilibrium. It could also be said that human beings as a species, a species that is largely responsible for the Earth's sixth extinction, is also a giant mal-function. A more thorough discussion of malfunctioning would involve its theoretical roots in phenomenology and object oriented ontology. The question arising around malfunctioning are: how do we know what malfunctions are useful? Does this mean humans are not accountable for climate change? How do we assess the ambiguity of Mal-functioning/functioning or evaluate one thing functioning over another? In

the book, I argue that part of the answer can be found in a focus on differentiation, enableness, and a commitment to detail and relationship. Ethics involves processes of becomings.

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BIODIVERSITY AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION. REFLECTIONS FROM A WORKSHOP EXPERIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CATANIA

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Environmental education inherently promotes the recognition of diversity and interconnection, highlighting biodiversity as a vital value to respect and preserve. It emphasizes the importance of ecological balance, fostering awareness of the interrelationships that sustain natural systems. Simultaneously, it supports intercultural relationships by encouraging mutual support and understanding of diverse perspectives. Through this dual focus, environmental education links safeguarding the environment with intellectual growth and the preservation of cultural heritage. Biodiversity serves as a lens to understand the complex relationships between different phenomena, bridging environmental and intercultural education by prioritizing connections and systemic thinking. This connection is explored in a study of 250 students in the "Intercultural Pedagogy with Laboratory" course at the University of Catania. Through activities in the "Green Education Lab", students engaged with biodiversity via photography during visits to the Botanical Garden. The study's thematic analysis revealed strong links between ecological and cultural systems, demonstrating the potential of environmental education to foster systemic and intercultural understanding. This approach emphasizes human-nature connections and highlights environmental education as a pathway for cultivating awareness, resilience, and respect for diversity in both natural and cultural contexts.

Biodiversity, intercultural education, Green Education Lab, sustainability education

INTRODUCTION

Environmental education emphasizes the importance of biodiversity as a core value, highlighting the interdependence of natural systems. Similarly, intercultural education fosters respect for diversity and promotes mutual understanding. Together, these fields converge in emphasizing systemic thinking and relational methodologies (Bridgewater & Rotherham, 2019; Dozza, 2022; Keni, 2002). This study builds on this convergence, exploring how environmental education can act as a bridge for intercultural learning. By engaging with biodiversity, students can reflect on cultural diversity and resilience, fostering new perspectives on inclusivity and

coexistence. The study presented here is grounded in a practical exploration of these ideas.

1. ENVIRONMENTAL AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION: A SHARED PERSPECTIVE

Environmental education and intercultural education intersect in their shared emphasis on diversity, interconnection, and relational thinking. Biodiversity, as a cornerstone of environmental education, exemplifies the systemic relationships that sustain natural ecosystems, offering a powerful metaphor for human societies (Shiva, 1993). Bateson (2002) argued that biodiversity's interdependence reflects a natural balance where each element contributes uniquely to the adaptability of the whole. Similarly, intercultural education fosters an appreciation of cultural diversity as a source of societal strength and innovation, positioning relationships and mutual respect as essential components of coexistence (Persico, Guerra, & Galimberti, 2024). The concept of biocultural diversity deepens this connection, emphasizing the interrelationship between cultural and ecological diversity. Bridgewater and Rotherham (2019) highlighted how preserving biodiversity requires recognizing the value of cultural knowledge systems, especially those rooted in traditional practices.

Incorporating biodiversity into intercultural education fosters an ecological mindset that prioritizes relationships and cooperation (Catarci, 2021). Tomarchio, D'Aprile, and La Rosa (2018) explored this integration through experiential learning, showing how activities that combine ecological and cultural awareness enhance students' understanding of interdependence. Similarly, Sandoval Rivera and Mendoza-Zuany (2017) emphasized the transformative potential of intercultural education initiatives that incorporate sustainability, demonstrating how such approaches empower communities to address global challenges.

Experiential learning has emerged as a critical method for integrating environmental and intercultural education. According to Kolb (1984), experiential learning engages students directly with their environment, fostering deep understanding through reflection and action. Tilbury and Henderson (2003) underscored that experiential learning not only deepens ecological knowledge but also cultivates empathy and inclusivity, essential traits for intercultural competence. These methods align with Lenzi et al.'s (2023) findings that participatory activities, such as those in botanical gardens, provide students with tangible examples of interdependence and diversity.

2. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study aimed to explore the relationship between biodiversity and intercultural education through experiential learning. The research was conducted during the 2022/2023 academic year with 250 students enrolled in the "Intercultural Pedagogy with Laboratory" course at the University of Catania. Participants engaged in a range of educational activities centered on plant biodiversity during a guided visit to the Botanical Garden of Catania. These activities were designed to

foster a deeper understanding of the connections between ecological and cultural systems.

The Botanical Garden (http://ortobotanico.unict.it/), a living repository of global plant species, served as the primary setting for the study. Its diverse flora provided students with tangible examples of ecological interdependence, offering an immersive context to explore the symbolic and educational dimensions of biodiversity. Experiential learning activities were modeled on Kolb's (1984) theory, emphasizing concrete experiences, reflective observation, and active engagement with the environment.

Two primary forms of data were collected: visual and written. Students captured photographs of plant species they found significant, documenting biodiversity as a means of connecting ecological principles to broader intercultural themes. These photographs were accompanied by reflective essays where participants analyzed their observations and drew parallels between biodiversity and human societal dynamics. Reflection is a key element in transformative learning, which helps bridge practical experiences and theoretical concepts (Mezirow, 1997). Participants were encouraged to focus on specific plants that resonated with them, leading to rich, personal interpretations of themes such as interconnectedness and diversity. For example, some students explored the banana tree as a symbol of cultural exchange due to its historical and economic importance in global trade, while others examined water lilies for their symbolism of renewal and growth.

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This method involved six phases: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. Reflections and essays were coded to identify recurring themes related to biodiversity and intercultural education, such as diversity as a resource, the importance of interconnection, and the resilience of natural and cultural systems.

3. FINDINGS

The analysis identified three overarching themes that illustrate the connections between biodiversity and intercultural education: diversity as a value, interconnection and unity, and renewal. These themes reflect the conceptual and practical potential of biodiversity as a framework for understanding and fostering intercultural relationships.

3.1. Diversity as a Value

Biodiversity underscores the inherent value of variety, highlighting how differences contribute to the strength and adaptability of systems. This mirrors the principles of intercultural education, where diversity is regarded as a resource for learning, innovation, and growth. In ecological terms, the coexistence of diverse species within an ecosystem enhances stability, providing a model for embracing cultural diversity. As Bateson (2002) explains, systemic health relies on the inclusion and

interplay of distinct elements, each contributing uniquely to the whole (Bowers, 2011).

3.2. Interconnection and Unity

The concept of interdependence in biodiversity offers a powerful metaphor for the relational dynamics within human societies. Ecological systems thrive through mutual support and cooperation, where every element is interconnected. Similarly, intercultural education emphasizes the importance of building relationships and fostering understanding between cultures. Shiva (1993) highlights how biodiversity exemplifies the interconnectedness of life, encouraging a systemic perspective that values relationships and mutual reliance.

3.3. Resilience and Renewal

Resilience in natural systems serves as a model for cultural and societal sustainability. Ecological cycles of regeneration and adaptation illustrate how systems recover from disturbances and evolve over time. These principles align with intercultural education's emphasis on adaptability, cultural preservation, and the ability to thrive amid change.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal how biodiversity can act as both a metaphorical and practical framework for advancing intercultural education. By emphasizing the value of diversity, interconnection, and resilience, biodiversity provides a systemic lens for understanding human relationships and societal structures. This convergence offers significant pedagogical implications for fostering inclusivity and sustainability.

Diversity as a value is a foundational principle in both ecological and cultural systems. In ecosystems, diversity enhances resilience and ensures stability, as each species contributes uniquely to the overall system. Bowers (2011) argues that diversity is not merely a characteristic of systems but a critical element for their survival. Similarly, intercultural education views cultural diversity as an asset that enriches learning environments and strengthens social cohesion (Elamè, 2002). The parallels between these perspectives underscore the importance of integrating biodiversity into educational frameworks to promote mutual respect and appreciation.

Interconnection emerges as a key theme in biodiversity, reflecting the interdependence that sustains ecosystems. This concept translates effectively into intercultural education, where relational thinking fosters cooperation and understanding across cultural boundaries. Dozza (2022) highlights the interconnected nature of biodiversity, drawing attention to the systemic relationships that bind ecological and human systems. This perspective encourages learners to view cultures as interconnected rather than isolated, promoting a relational approach to diversity. Resilience and renewal in biodiversity demonstrate how natural systems adapt to challenges, providing valuable lessons for societal and cultural sustainability.

Bridgewater and Rotherham (2019) highlight the cyclical processes of regeneration in ecosystems, which serve as a model for preserving cultural traditions and fostering adaptability. These principles align with the goals of intercultural education, which seeks to equip individuals with the tools to navigate and thrive in an ever-changing global context. The integration of biodiversity into intercultural education offers a comprehensive approach to addressing global challenges, such as sustainability, inclusivity, and resilience. By fostering systemic thinking and relational understanding, this approach equips learners to appreciate diversity, build connections, and adapt to evolving circumstances. The findings underscore the transformative potential of aligning ecological and cultural frameworks within educational contexts, creating a pathway for future research and practical implementation.

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LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF *GREENCOMP.* THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SOCIO-MATERIAL PERSPECTIVE IN REVIEWING THE EUROPEAN COMPETENCY FRAME-WORK FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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To implement the environmental sustainability goals of the 2030 Agenda, the European Green Deal identified a framework of competencies defined as *GreenComp*. Although the framework intends to have a systemic approach, its analysis reveals a need to better understand some key concepts such as complexity, values, sustainability, to clarify what they actually refer to and the assumptions that drive them. They, in fact, are not "neutral" categories but need to be contextualized in their specific contexts. Building on these considerations, this paper aims to explore the *GreenComp* framework from a sociomaterial perspective. In fact, this approach highlights the social and material elements considered in the document, reconstructing the concrete dynamics that led to its genesis and offering some insights about its interpretation. The analysis shows that the *GreenComp* framework is indeed rooted in a cultural substrate that is still human-centered presenting criticalities at the onto-epistemological, methodological and ethical-political levels. These considerations invite us to rethink ecological education research and practices by considering the complexity involved in the process. This challenges institutional education to set up concrete experiences that allow people to undergo the connections, to promote the development of an embodied ecological consciousness.

green competencies; sustainability; sociomaterial approaches; ecology; interconnections

INTRODUCTION

The framework of the European Green Deal[1] – aiming to the implementation of the environmental sustainability goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Rieckmann, 2017) – has identified a set of competencies, referred to as *GreenComp* (Bianchi, Pisiotis, & Cabrera Giraldez, 2022), capable to promote the

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[1] In 2020 the European Commission identifies a series of initiatives aimed at achieving climate neutrality in Europe by 2050.

role of communities, and in particular of new generations, in becoming agents of change and contributing individually and collectively to shaping sustainable futures.

The *GreenComp* are proposed as a driver for shared European collaborative action and strategy in sustainability education, in order to understand and be able to intervene in environmental crises, promoting the protagonism of the whole community. To this end, they identify four main areas that are interdependent on each other. The first considers "embodying sustainability values", understood as a proposed meta-competence in order to reflect on and challenge our own personal values and world-views; the second, named "embracing complexity in sustainability", supports the goal of being able to evaluate and make decisions through systemic and critical thinking; the third, "envisioning sustainable futures", describes a dimension of future literacy, to enable youth to visualise alternative future scenarios and identify actions to achieve a sustainable future; finally, the fourth area consists of political action, collective action, and individual action, understanding in the ability to "acting for sustainability" a necessary requirement for sustainable development.

From this point of view, the interest shown by the Commission leans toward a structured vision tracking the issue of green skills development in a systemic and complex manner. At the same time, it represents a policy orientation, identifying a Europe-wide definition of what sustainability as a competence entails and the value categories associated with it. While being aware of the importance of such programmatic sharing, what raises interest are some concepts such as sustainability itself, complexity, values, equity, and justice that seem to be interpreted in a one-sided way, leaving quite a few questions open: what is the sustainability in question? In what terms and by what factors is complexity characterized? How is the value scale detailed and what assumptions underlie it? Equity and justice to whom and what?

Therefore, this paper's primary objective will be to re-read the GreenComp framework to de-construct and problematize some of its premises, using a sociomaterial perspective that is considered effective in tracing complexity. This might offer some insights for rethinking the institutional approach to green education in research and practices.

1. BRINGING A COMPLEX NETWORK TO LIGHT

Attempting to intercept and try to understand complexity, epistemological categories and methodological approaches are needed to trace all the elements that contribute to the production of a given phenomenon and to reconstruct the interactions among them.

In this regard, socio-material approaches (Fenwick, Edwards & Sawchuk, 2011; Ferrante, 2014, 2016) can make an important contribution. They correspond to a very diverse set of theories and research that share an interest in materiality and a conceptualization of reality that does not separate the social from the material.

Among them[2], ANT (Actor-Network Theory) focuses on the theoretical and operational construct of network, highlighting how each phenomenon is the product of a heterogeneous and unstable network of human and non-human elements (spaces, times, bodies, objects, plants, non-human animals, etc.) that through its peculiar materiality produces local and situated effects of formative and transformative character (Ferrante, 2014).

In this view, agency – understood as the potential for action (Mattozzi, 2006) – is not only the prerogative of the human subject but is distributed among human and non-human actors involved in the performance of a specific activity. In other words, the non-human also acts and causes effects, and action is the result of the interaction between social and material components.

The source of agency, thus, lies within broader patterns that perform social action in an ecological sense (Viteritti, 2012; Cucuzza, 2021). Agency, then, is a relational effect and is not attributable to individual network elements.

Starting from these considerations, the sociomaterial perspective is interested in tracing and reconstructing the effects exerted in the network by the human and non-human actors that make up the network, recognizing to both an equal centrality in the process and treating them with the same categories of analysis, according to the principle of symmetry (Ferrante, 2016), that is, not taking for granted that the former play the role of subject and the latter have a purely instrumental function in the action.

In sum, the sociomaterial gaze leads to the problematization and overcoming of a human-centered logic that sees the human being as the undisputed protagonist of courses of action and, by this, the ruler of the planet, in favor of a relational and hybridizing vision that aims to identify the contaminations and connections through which social and material interact in the becoming of the world.

Similarly, it highlights the obsolescence of those disjunctive dualisms and logics that the anthropocentric paradigm brings with it (mind vs. body, nature vs. culture, biological vs. artificial, etc.) as limiting and insufficient to interpret the multiformity of the real, in favor of recognizing the interaction between different dimensions and identifying the connections between them.

Focusing more specifically on the topic of learning – as a process through which acquiring the competencies outlined by the *GreenComp* framework – it cannot be considered as a uniquely human performance but can be traced to the different forms that interaction in the network takes and, therefore, the result of a specific relational pattern (Ferrante, 2016). In this sense what and how the subject knows cannot be defined a priori but is contextual and situated insofar as it is the result of the concatenation of the elements acting in a specific context.

This profoundly changes the image of learning played out solely at the intersubjective level, introducing new factors of complexity that should faced and taken into

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[2] In addition to Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Complexity Theory, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), and Spatiality Theories also belong to the sociomaterial approaches.

consideration by educational design in its various domains and declinations, as will be discussed below.

2. THE SOCIOMATERIAL REINTERPRETATION OF *GREENCOMP*

Analyzing *GreenComp* in a sociomaterial key means, first of all, problematizing the goals and competencies advocated by the programmatic framework, in light of a world that is "more than human" (Ferrante, Galimberti & Gambacorti-Passerini, 2022). Here, the non-human is constituted not only as an external referent – that is, a bearer of interests and a subject to be considered and protected – but also as an internal referent. Indeed, it is an active participant in the areas of action indicated by the framework, and can be an ally or hinder its implementation, depending on the elements considered and the specificity of the situation. In other words, the development and implementation of *GreenComp*, far from being a uniquely human process, sees the involvement of an intricate network of social and material actors who are affected by and influence the process itself, depending on the singularity of the context considered.

At the methodological level, tracking them and considering their role restores transparency to the process and allows reasoning about the different elements involved in the development of *GreenComp* and the interactions between them, so to identify possible constraints and resources that would otherwise remain opaque.

Emerging from the analysis, some tension points seems to complexify the linearity and implementation of the proposed framework, as will be detailed below.

2.1. The points of tension

A first issue concerns the ownership of the agency of the non-human, which does not seem to be recognized in the framework. In fact, the human is presented as the sole guarantor of ecosystem protection: the "promoting nature" competence requires that humans, recognizing themselves as part of nature, respect it in order to restore healthy and resilient ecosystems. The same approach can be seen in the "problem framing" competence in which humans are protagonists and saviors of the biosphere. In this view, the role of nature is not legitimized, being uniquely considered in a passive position, as the recipient of human actions on which its preservation depends. It is therefore considered only as an external referent of the actions that affect it. In both cases to remain in the shadows is the network's agentivity. The point of tension here concerns the agency between human and non-human.

A second issue concerns the process of competence development. The framework in fact implies the presence of a set of predefined values to which human beings must adhere in order to become competent. This aspect emerges from the whole area "Embodying sustainability values". From a pedagogical perspective, however, it is difficult to understand how principles can be embodied without experiencing them. Moreover, the sociomaterial perspective problematizes a transmissive and generalizable approach to knowledge because learning is contextual, situated and inseparable from the network in which it is produced. There is therefore no

knowledge without experience and the process is variable and performed by the actors involved, human and non-human. Raising some problematic issues is the purely cognitive character of learning dynamics detected in several passages of the *GreenComp*, which leaves out the relational, affective and – once again – contextual dimensions of the process itself. The point of tension here concerns the transmission of values and the experiencing of them.

A third and final aspect concerns the dualism between personal values and the values promoted by the framework. The competence "valuing sustainability" is described as the ability to reflect on one's personal values and align them with the values of sustainability. This leads one to perceive a significant disconnection between individual and institution, and to interpret as vertical and one-way a process that should be recursive, shared and participatory. The point of tension here is between the particular and the universal.

2.2. What implications?

Re-reading *GreenComp* from a sociomaterial perspective allows us to highlight critical issues on three closely interconnected levels.

On the ontological side, the agency of the non-human is not recognized and thematized even though, as already pointed out, it actively participates in the construction of reality and of the human subject itself. In particular, nature remains in the framework the object of human attention and protection, intending people to establish their interests deliberately and to act on it without any recognition of its active role and transformative potential.

On the epistemological and methodological sides what could raise some perplexities is the structuring of a "ready-to-use" framework of skills, to be incorporated and transferred to every context. In this way, a gap is created between theory and practice, knowledge and experience: the real risk here is that such an interpretive framework – presenting a quantifiable and generalizable set of knowledge and skills – is insufficient to intercept the complexity of reality, being uprooted from it. Moreover, the purely cognitive approach to knowledge seems to suggest that the promotion of sustainability is played out only through a logical-rational dimension, excluding other dimensions and in particular the important role held by the affective dimension. Indeed, consider the relevance of the latter in, for example, deep ecology (Naess, 1973) or Rifkin's (2022) construct of biophilic consciousness.

Finally, on the ethical-political side, we need to ask what model of sustainability is at issue and what forms of participation find room in it. Moreover, the same forms of participation are interpreted anthropocentrically, excluding the active role of the non-human and, in any case, in reference to a very small portion of the world's population.

CONCLUSIONS

The reinterpretation of *GreenComp* from a sociomaterial perspective highlights the usefulness of a paradigm shift that moves beyond centering on the "*I*", this

"competent" human who alone can define the fate of the Planet, in favor of the "*we*", meaning with it the human-world interconnection. This orients a rethinking of ecological education research and practices.

At the level of research, it is considered essential to thematize the specificity of educational contexts in order to explore how abstract concepts (such as sustainability and its associated values) are not considered absolutes but are embodied in situated practices. To this end we should consider the network as the unit of analysis, tracing the active role of both human and non-human actors who co-produce the practices: this should be considered central in the exploration of ecological education projects deputed to the acquisition of *GreenComp*. By identifying all the elements involved and the interactions among them, the learning effects produced can be analyzed and problematized.

This orients institutions to design sustainability education practices that enhance the role of the non-human not only as an external referent, namely a bearer of interest with respect to the topic, but as an internal referent able to act and influence the practices themselves, favoring or hindering their development. This makes it possible to educate for sustainability in sustainability (Ferrante, Galimberti & Gambacorti-Passerini, 2022), considering educational environments as oriented ecosystems populated by a plurality of elements human and non-human, questioning the formative effects produced by mutual interconnections. The educational process is thus rooted in experience: it is only by experiencing sustainability, in fact, that it is possible to develop skills that promote it.

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THE "WORK THAT RECONNECTS": A COLLECTIVE PROCESS TO CULTIVATE HOPE AND PROMOTE ACTION, FACING THE ECO-CLIMATIC CRISIS

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The eco-climatic crisis is one of the most urgent and enormous issues of our time, the scenarios of ecological and social collapse that loom if we continue with business as usual are of unprecedented magnitude and severity. Today irreversible processes are already underway, yet it is still possible to act towards climate and social justice, and indeed it is critical to do so now more than ever. However, the eco-climatic crisis generates powerful emotional reactions, such as grief, fear, guilt and despair, which can often can block awareness and inhibit action. Therefore, it appears essential to build spaces in which to process these emotions: a proposal that can prove extremely fruitful for developing this kind of elaboration is "The Work That Reconnects". "The Work That Reconnects" is a collective process of emotional sharing, reflection and meditation, which aims to elaborate the most difficult emotions aroused by the eco-climatic crisis and to overcome attitudes of closure, paralysis and despair, in order to cultivate an active and realistically grounded hope, capable of motivating action. It is based on a spiral movement that goes through four steps: coming from gratitude, honouring our pain for the world, seeing with new eyes, going forth.

Active Hope; Environmental Educatio; Climate Activism; Ecopsychology; Environmental Justice

INTRODUCTION

Today we face the realistic prospect of a collapse of the thermo-industrial civilisation (Bendell, 2023; Servigne & Stevens, 2020). We find ourselves in an era in which several interconnected crises are taking place and exacerbating each other: the climate crisis related to rising global temperatures; the ecological crisis related to the sixth mass extinction of living species and the deterioration or collapse of ecosystems worldwide; the energy crisis related to the exaggerated consumption of industrial societies and the inevitable depletion of fossil fuels; the economic crises that periodically recur and will probably be exacerbated by the aforementioned crises. All of these crises are already having severe impacts on our societies, and will have many more in the coming decades, including food and water shortages, mass migrations, and wars over resources.

This perspective appears gloomy and often the first reaction when faced with it is to brand it as 'catastrophist' and deny its legitimacy, in order to avoid seriously confronting such distressing scenarios. However, the scientific consensus on the seriousness of the climate and ecological crises is now overwhelming and cannot be ignored. And the predictions on the social consequences, although they cannot be totally certain (given the intrinsic uncertainty that characterises these issues), are supported by numerous scholars and international institutions (IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2023).

Faced with such a prospect, some questions arise: how to deal with all this? And what can the world of education do? This article assumes that although some of the ecological-climatic and social collapse processes currently taking place are now irreversible, it is still possible to act for climate and social justice, countering the socio-economic dynamics that are leading us to collapse (Stein et al., 2023). But one of the main problems in this respect is that the perspective of eco-climatic collapse generates powerful emotional reactions – such as grief, fear, guilt and despair – which can often block awareness and inhibit action (Dodds, 2011). Therefore, it appears essential to build spaces in which to express and process these emotions: a proposal that can prove extremely fruitful for developing this kind of elaboration is the "Work that Reconnects" (WTR) (Macy & Brown, 2014; Hollis-Walker, 2012; Hathaway, 2017).

1. THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS: A PATH TO FACE THE ECO-CLIMATIC COLLAPSE CULTIVATING ACTIVE HOPE

The WTR is a collective workshop based on emotional sharing, reflection and meditation, which aims to help people around the world discover and experience their innate connections with each other and the self-healing powers of the web of life, transforming despair and overwhelm into inspired, collaborative action (Macy & Brown, 99). The WTR has been conceived by eco-psychologist, scholar and activist Joanna Macy, which, together with a group of collaborators, has practiced and improved this workshop over more than 50 years, in many different contexts around the planet.

1.1 Vision and theoretical foundations

The WTR is based on an approach that does not deny the rawness of reality, but at the same time does not indulge in fatalism, seeking instead ways to fight the ecological devastation and to build sustainable communities. According to Macy and Brown (2014), is possible to identify three main narratives about what is happening to the Earth today:

1. Business As Usual: is the story of the Industrial Growth Society. The defining assumption is that there is little need to change the way we live.
2. The Great Unraveling: it draws attention to the disasters that Business As Usual has caused and continues to create, carrying out a fundamental critical function.

3. The Great Turning: is the story of those who see the Great Unraveling but do not want it to have the last word. It involves the emergence of new and creative human responses that enable the transition from the Industrial Growth Society to a Life-Sustaining Society.

The WTR, while sharing the critical perspective of the second narrative, focuses mainly on highlighting and nurturing the third one: it aims to empower people to find sources of motivation that help them to contribute in the realisation of the Great Turning.

From a theoretical perspective, the WTR is based on four main approaches. Firstly, it draws from the Living Systems Theories a new gaze to observe both organisms, ecosystems and societies (Von Bertalanffy, 1968; Bateson, 1972). The distinctive and crucial characteristic of this theoretical approach consists in analysing systems not by focusing on their constituent elements, understood as separate entities, but on the relationships that connect them. That is, to focus on wholes instead of parts, and on processes instead of substances.

Secondly, the WTR is based on the perspective of Deep Ecology (Næss, 1989). In contrast to reform environmentalism, which treats the symptoms of ecological degradation, Deep Ecology questions fundamental premises of the Industrial Growth Society. In particular, this view advocates the need to abandon an anthropocentric worldview, i.e. one based on the idea that human beings are the ultimate measure of the value of everything, because it underlies a predatory and destructive approach to the planet and other living beings. In contrast, Næss proposes a biocentric perspective, which aims to safeguard and sustain the web of life as a whole, not just human life.

Thirdly, the WTR refers to Gaia Theory, namely hypothesis that presents the entire biosphere of Earth as a self-organizing system, which means a living sistem (Lovelock, 1979). Thanks to this theory, we no longer see Earth as just a rock we live upon, but as a living process in which we participate (Macy & Brown, 2014, 76).

Fourtly, the WTR is based on insights and practices of Tibetan Buddhism (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2021). Macy highlights that this tradition presents some strong convergences with Systems Theory: the idea of the dependent co-arising of all phenomena, and the inclination to experience the world in terms of process rather than in terms of things to grasp or reject. Moreover, she affirms that buddhism can provide concepts and meditation practices that help us to perceive our interconnectedness with the web of life and to act towards change.

1.2 Practicing WTR

The WTR can be practiced with groups of various kinds: it is widely used in environmental activism and has also been experienced successfully in different educational contexts. It is suitable not only for young people, but also and perhaps above all for today's adults, without whose contribution it is unthinkable to succeed in countering the crisis in which we find ourselves. I believe it can be particularly fruitful to practise WTR within groups of adults who have educational responsibilities,

since the current global situation is so unsettling that it appears very difficult for today's educators to deal with it adequately if they do not firstly carry out their own processes of elaboration, both individually and collectively.

The WTR can be practiced in one multi-day session or in separate meetings. In case of multi-day sessions, the length can vary from two days to one month. The handbook written by Macy and Brown (2014) describes the theoretical foundations, offers indications for those who wish to guide the workshop and presents many possible activities. However, the authors specify that before leading such a workshop, it is highly advisable to have first experienced it as a participant and to have undergone facilitator training (online training is available on the website of The Work That Reconnects Network https://workthatreconnects.org/facilitate-the-work/).

2. THE FOUR STEPS OF THE WTR SPIRAL

The WTR can be adapted to different is based on a spiral movement that goes through four steps: coming from gratitude, honouring our pain for the world, seeing with new eyes, going forth.

2.1 Coming from gratitude

The aim of the first step is to offer practices that help us reconnect with gratitude for the gift of life. In times of turmoil and danger, gratitude helps to steady and ground us. Furthermore, focusing our attention on gratitude can help us to live more consciously in the present moment and savour it, despite the dangers, difficulties and worries that surround us. Finally, gratitude can be considered a politically powerful and subversive feeling in a society founded on the imperatives of growth and consumption based on a sensation of continuous dissatisfaction with what one has.

2.2. Honouring our pain for the world

The grounding proposed in the first step serves as a basis to approach the second, which is based on the idea that what we need most to do in defence of life on the planet is to hear within ourselves the sounds of the Earth crying (Thich Nhat Hanh, cited in Macy & Brown, 2014, 137). This step therefore proposes practices that aim to help participants focus their attention on the emotions, feelings and inner processes that are generated within us when faced with the suffering of other living beings, the destruction of the planet and the prospect of the collapse of our societies. This means making room for even the most painful and difficult emotions (such as dread, rage, sorrow, guilt) to surface and be expressed, without shame or apology. These feelings in our societies are usually blocked, for different reasons, including the fear of getting permanently mired in despair or the fear to upset others. Instead, Macy proposes that we consider these feelings as physiological and healthy manifestations, primarily because they perform an essential feedback function within the ecosystems of which we are a part: they inform us that something is wrong and action must be taken to change direction. Furthermore, acknowledging that we feel pain at the destruction of the Earth and the life on it can be considered an extremely

encouraging sign: it means that we are connected and connected to the web of life, that we care about it, and this is a fundamental motivation that can sustain our action. This is why Macy invites to consider our pain for the world as something to be honoured.

2.3. Seeing with new eyes

The third step invites us to look at things with new eyes, to a change of perspective in our conception of the world. This is based on the conviction that 'the various crises that characterise the society of industrial growth are at the root of a crisis of perception' (Macy & Brown, 2014, p. 168): we cannot hope to rely solely on technological solutions, we need a shift in perception. This step therefore proposes activities and meditations that invite us to re-connect with the web of life (Capra, 2017), that is, to perceive the interdependence of all things, the interconnections that link us to other human beings, other living beings, ecosystems, natural cycles and ultimately to the Earth. This also means developing a different conception of power, understood not in a competitive and prevaricating sense (power over), but as a possibility to create and cooperate (power with). Moreover, the third step also aims to reconnect us with past and future generations, recognising that our lives are embedded in a time horizon much larger than our individual existences, which Macy calls deep time.

2.4. Going forth

Finally, the fourth step aims to act as a bridge to the everyday life in which participants will immerse themselves again at the end of the workshop, inviting them to reflect on the role they could play in supporting the web of life. According to Macy, motivation for action, to be authentic and robust, must be based on a sense of interconnectedness with the web of life. For it is in fact ineffective, and sometimes even counterproductive, to try to motivate people to act ecologically through a moral imperative based on the juxtaposition of selfishness/altruism: "don't be selfish, defend the planet!". Indeed, not only does this imperative run the risk of being rejected if it is perceived as an external imposition, but, more profoundly, it is based on anti-ecological premises, i.e. on the idea that we human beings are individuals separate from other living beings and the planet and should altruistically take action to defend something that is other than ourselves. On the contrary, the assumption on which eco-psychology is based is that we can only act with an authentic and deep-rooted motivation if our drive comes from within, that is, from perceiving that we are an integral part of the web of life that needs protecting: the requisite care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves (Seed, 1988, 20).

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"TOXIC BODIES" AND THE ECOLOGY OF BEAUTY IN A RURAL AREA OF SICILY

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This article, starting from an ethnographic study on the "Fascia trasformata of the province of Ragusa", explores how in an area that is deeply compromised from an environmental point of view and subjected to serious forms of isolation and exploitation, education for beauty and social justice can positively affect the lives of the children, boys and girls who live there. The article dwells on the 'toxic bodies' of children, described as places where material and symbolic forces intertwine, bearing signs of social and environmental injustice. In such contexts, education becomes a key tool for rethinking the relationship between human and non-human suggesting that the ecological and social crisis is not irreversible and that there are signs of change through the *agency* of young people.

environmental education, social justice, toxic bodies, beauty, ecology

1. RESILIENT BODIES

 Human beings are increasingly intertwined with many other non-human worlds, to the point that it now seems unthinkable to find anything "natural" that has not been touched by human traces, as Yaeger (2008, p. 332) notes. In the age of the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2005), the influences of human culture penetrate every corner of nature, generating new ways of relating between human and non-human. This entanglement manifests itself particularly in bodies, which Braidotti describes as places of intersection between material and symbolic forces (2009, p. 243), in which one can read the traces of cultural and social structures, power inequalities, and wounds caused by injustice and environmental contamination. Serpil Opperman (2015) speaks of contaminated bodies, considering them as a kind of material textin which cultural practices, economic policies and natural dynamics are intertwined with questions of justice, health and ecology (p. 122). Bodies thus become small ecosystems, often deformed and exploited, embedded in the neoliberal production machine. Our gaze focuses on the bodies of boys and girls living in the agricultural areas of the province of Ragusa, and on the world they tell through their hundred languages (Malaguzzi, 1983). This allows us to reflect on how social and environmental justice are closely interconnected. In the conviction that education is an act of continuous regeneration, the reflection proposed here intends to open

new horizons for a project of anthropopoiesis (Remotti, 2013) that puts the beauty of the places that heal (Inghilleri, 2021) back at the centre, conceiving beauty as the direction of educational meaning (Simone, 2020, p. 580). This approach seeks to cultivate the power of aspirations (Appadurai, 2011) and to promote regenerated and supportive relationships between human and non-human. The reflection takes its cue from the results of an educational research (Bocchieri, 2022; Bocchieri & Bove, 2024), conducted through the ethnographic method (Geertz, 1973; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994) in a rural area in south-eastern Sicily where thousands of foreign workers from Tunisia, Romania and Albania live, together with their families. These labourers work in greenhouses in conditions of severe exploitation, often without access to essential services. It is a kind of "land of fires", where discarded plastic and chemicals are burnt, buried or abandoned in the sea, contributing to environmental devastation. This landscape is marked by plastic factories (Sanò, 2018) immersed in a compromised environment, where "ghosts of natures" inhabit (Van Aken, 2020, p. 17). The bodies of children living in this rural area in the province of Ragusa, where children sometimes work (Bocchieri & Bove, 2024), are an example of how social and environmental justice are connected. The conditions in which these children grow up are marked by the political and economic decisions that have shaped their living and working environments. Opperman's (2015) discussion of toxic bodies (p. 122) as material witnesses to environmental and economic injustices, which are reflected in the health and ecology of the bodies themselves, seems to effectively describe this context. Children, with their placements, offer us a critical look at these processes of exploitation, showing in their bodies and throught them, the sign of a will to resilience and resistance to these forms of segregation and exploitation (Bocchieri, 2022).

2. SHOTS OF BEAUTY

In this periphery of the empire (Sanò, 2018, p. 81), which generates waste and marginality, some associations and local authorities are trying to sow the first signs of change, starting from the concreteness of everyday experiences. One example is the "Ri-Belli" project, promoted by the diocesan Caritas and the "I Tetti Colorati" association (Bocchieri, 2022). As part of the project, a photography course was held that offered children an opportunity to observe their own territory and imagine it cleaner and fairer. Photographs do not just show things, they engage optically, neurologically, intellectually, emotionally and physically, demand careful interpretation, promote ideas, embody values and shape public opinion. Photographs can elicit empathy, have the power to calm and resolve problems or create moments of discomfort towards a distancing from what they represent (Heiferman, 2013). Photography leads to exploration and curiosity, tells and shows new things, allows one to get involved through images, gives a new point of view, and expresses emotions positively or negatively. Expressive arts help to know and express emotions in the best possible way, and photography also gives this possibility, when representing certain situations or through the subjects one wants to represent, one communicates emotions (Salati, 2021). Within the activities proposed by the project,

environmental education initiatives were promoted, such as the involvement of children in guiding adults in the correct management of waste and the construction of compost bins. The photography course, moreover, allowed the children to look with more aware and attentive eyes at the place where they live, in the knowledge that to "educate" to the feeling of beauty one must necessarily go through the experience of aesthetic emotion, surprise, astonishment (Dallari, 2017). Indeed, in order to educate to beauty, it is not enough to teach to distinguish what is beautiful from what is ugly (Simone, 2020, p. 576), but accompaniment is needed to develop the emotional competence (Goleman, 1997) that enables one to enter into connection with beauty (Simone, 2020, p. 576), always striving to keep beauty and truth together (Dallari & Moriggi, 2022).

3. RESILIENCE GUARDIANS

However, observing the context of life is still not enough to generate a vision capable of triggering change. Possible futures, in multi-problem contexts, must necessarily be supported by the presence on the ground of "resilience guardians" (Malaguti, 2020) capable of implementing *advocacy* actions, so that new glances and awareness are not frustrated by the lack of public policies capable, instead, of encouraging these drives towards change. Appadurai (2011), looking at marginalised subjects, calls for policies and interventions that give support, a push, to what he calls the "horizon of aspirations", so that these supports help them to help themselves (p. 25). And it is in this sense that the initiatives and projects promoted in the Transformed Belt are moving (Bocchieri, 2022). Alongside photography, a theatre workshop has been activated, in which the project's educators have cultivated, together with the children, boys and girls, the beauty and heresy (Alves, 2015) of thinking differently, through a pedagogy of desire (Ibid.) that succeeds in generating more equitable and sustainable ways of inhabiting the earth. The theatre can become an effective pedagogical device when, on the one hand, it recognises and solicits the communicative and interpretative capacities of boys and girls, which, starting from the body, involves all languages; and, on the other hand, it produces performances that relate to the child's imaginary, acting as an aesthetic experience (Farnè, 2021). The theatre is a space of suspension from widespread life that triggers reflexivity through material and concrete action. The educational experience is lived first of all in the materiality of the space and the body of the educator, who with his presence creates a space of self-awareness, of "psychic" development that is traversed by a network of practices: it is this space that enables learning (Cappa, 2017, p. 89). Theatre practice is important from a pedagogical point of view because it allows the acquisition of a new familiarity, an art, a conscious presence, a reflexive competence with respect to the duplicity of experience, to its structural ambivalence; it allows access to a plane that on the one hand represents life and, at the same time and in the same space, theatre duplicates life (Ibid.). The involvement of the children was remarkable and highlighted how the actor's relationship with the character helps stimulate the potential for discovery (Oliva, 1999). Children love theatre without knowing that they are "doing theatre", without anyone

teaching them how to "play a part", because representing roles and situations is a spontaneous and natural playful dimension (Farnè, 2021). In order to grasp the essence of theatre, it is necessary for the individual to establish contact with himself, an extreme, sincere, disciplined, precise and total confrontation, not only a confrontation with his thoughts, but a confrontation such as to involve his entire being, from his unconscious instincts and reasons to the stage of his most lucid awareness (Grotowski, 1968, p. 67). The implementation of specific practices, such as those generated by the theatre workshop, and of an elaboration of the elements proper to the relationship make the conditions of possibility of the formative encounter itself visible and recognisable. The practice of the workshop also brings out the possibilities of the subjects involved and the subjects as possibilities, as emergencies, Francisco Varela would say. The image of this emergence shows itself on the reflective surface created by the theatrical device (Cappa, 2017, p. 91). "Serrenentola" is the title of the performance staged. In an area where the diktats of the late-capitalist system impose production at supersonic rates, even the fruits of the earth have to be converted into industrial production; and like the most polluting of factories, greenhouses also absorb large amounts of energy (in terms, above all, of the exploitation of the labourers and their families) and spit out vegetables that are infused with pesticides and waste that is harmful to human health and the environment. Wastes that end up in ash, in toxic clouds that pollute the air of those damned of the earth (Fanon, 2007) who work and live in that no man's land (Leed, 2007). The ending of Serrenentola, who manages to stop working in the greenhouse and study, is an open credit to hope, which comes from awareness and determination for a possible change (Bocchieri, 2022). A hope that is necessary, but not sufficient, as Freire (2014) reminds us, because hope, alone, does not win the battle; without it, however, the struggle weakens and falters. We need critical hope, like fish need unpolluted water! (p. 14). Hope has made its way onto the stage, a hope nourished by aspirations, understood as the bridges that subjects build between the present and the future (Jedlowski, 2012, p. 3). But, as Appadurai warns, those who have fewer opportunities and live in marginalised conditions have a more fragile horizon of aspirations (Appadurai, 2011, p. 23). How to break out of this vicious circle? The Indian-born American anthropologist proposes a way: The goal is to increase the ability to develop a third attitude, that of protest (Ibid., p. 24), with the possibility for the poor to take part in public discussions. Capacity to aspire and capacity to protest, therefore, reinforce each other, opening up access to further capacities, understood as possibilities according to the *Capability approach* (Nussbaum, 2013). The forms of *agency* of those living in multi-problem contexts, if sustained, can trigger new ecological practices, understood as new ways of inhabiting the earth (Cagol & Dato, 2020). The ecological and social crisis afflicting these territories, then, is not irreversible. The signs of change show how it is possible to promote greater collective awareness of waste management, sustainability and environmental justice. Thus, educational practices are transformed into shared and incorporated knowledge, capable of generating a possible change towards that beauty that comes from the harmony between the nature of feelings and the nature of objects

(Franzini, 2012, p. 139). To educate for beauty is to educate emotional competence and sensitivity, it is to form that delicacy of imagination of which Hume speaks. Because the opposite of beauty is not ugliness but cultural crudeness and emotional ignorance. Beauty is therefore in the aesthetic experience and consists in actively participating in the process of the making of forms of beauty in the places and time of their expression, in being able to recognise the invisible behind beauty (Dallari, 2017), towards the construction of new ways of being.

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ECO-LITERACY BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE: FIERI'S EXPERIENCE IN CATANIA

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In an era characterized by urgent environmental challenges, ecology education (*eco-literacy*) emerges as a fundamental area to promote active and responsible citizenship towards the environment. Eco-literacy challenges anthropocentrism, in line with post-human thinking, which criticizes human hegemony and promotes a more inclusive view of ethical action, extending it to non-humans and ecological systems. Both eco-literacy and post-human thinking promote the understanding of more fluid and dynamic identities: this vision encourages greater responsibility towards the environment and an awareness of the complex networks of relationships that define existence on the planet. The study aims to explore the integration between theory and practice in ecological education through the analysis of the theoretical framework of reference and the experience of FIERI (*Fabbrica Interculturale Ecosostenibile del Riuso*, Eco-sustainable Intercultural Factory of Reuse), a project launched in Catania, Sicily, to promote eco-literacy in suburban neighborhoods with its global approach – which integrates the understanding of ecological issues with the development of practical skills and ethical values. Finally, a further objective is to connect the discourse related to eco-literacy with a broader reasoning on educational poverty, defining these as interconnected to any marginalized educational need and form of exclusion.

eco-literacy; environmental education; post-human thinking; educational poverty; sustainable practices

A BRIEF DEFINITION OF ECO-LITERACY AND ITS KEY COMPONENTS

In a time defined by pressing environmental issues, ecology education (*eco-literacy*) aligns with educational theories that emphasize the development of critical thinking, experiential learning, and social responsibility, fostering active and informed citizenship to address environmental issues. Eco-literacy, or ecological literacy, is the ability to understand the natural systems that make life on Earth possible. It involves recognizing the principles of ecological processes, the interdependence of all living organisms, and the impact of human actions on the environment (Kahn, 2010; Strongoli, 2019). Reasoning within this theoretical framework, it is possible to identify the following ones as fundamental components of eco-literacy:

- Knowledge: understanding key ecological concepts such as ecosystems, biodiversity, and sustainability (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Salomone, 2014)).
- Capabilities: developing capabilities to address environmental challenges, including relation through breakdowns and crisis moment, and moreover critical thinking (Nussbaum, 2011).
- Attitudes: fostering a sense of responsibility, stewardship, and ethical consideration towards all forms of life and natural systems (Kahn, 2010).
- Actions: applying knowledge and skills to make informed decisions and take actions that promote ecological health and sustainability (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Kahn, 2010).

Eco-literacy involves education about ecological systems and sustainability. It requires rethinking human identity and role in the face of ecological crises. This shift challenges traditional views and emphasizes the need for an integrated understanding of our relationship with the environment (Tomarchio, D'Aprile, La Rosa, 2019; Strongoli, 2023a; 2023b). The link between eco-literacy and a reflection on the human and the post-human is rooted in the need to rethink the role and identity of man in the era of ecological crisis and growing interaction with a new "history of things". This connection highlights a paradigm shift in how we understand ourselves and our place in the world, prompting a reconsideration of the boundaries between the human, the non-human, and the post-human; in the context of contemporary educational theories in Italy, the interplay between eco-literacy and post-humanist reflection necessitates a re-examination of humanity's role amid ecological crises and the evolving narrative of materiality. This relationship signifies a paradigm shift in self-perception and our position within the world, urging a reassessment of the distinctions between human, non-human, and post-human entities (González-Gaudiano, 2008)

Eco-literacy confronts anthropocentrism — the ideology placing humans at the center of the universe — by advocating for an integrated approach that acknowledges the interdependence of all living beings and systems. This perspective aligns with post-humanist thought, which critiques human dominance and promotes an inclusive ethical framework extending to non-human entities and ecological systems (Pinto Minerva, Gallelli, 2004).

Both eco-literacy and post-humanist perspectives encourage the understanding of fluid and dynamic identities, transcending traditional dichotomies like human/non-human, nature/culture, and physical/virtual. This outlook fosters a heightened environmental responsibility and an awareness of the intricate networks of relationships that define planetary existence. Furthermore, scholars have contributed to the discourse on eco-literacy and post-humanism: for instance, the research conducted by Raffaella Carmen Strongoli on the concept of *Ecodidattica* ("eco-teaching") proposes an ecological education framework that integrates eco-literacy, ecological intelligence, and ecopedagogy, fostering an ecological perspective in teaching practices (Strongoli, 2019; 2023a). Additionally, the studies of Alessandro Ferrante explore the implications of post-humanist perspectives in education,

particularly concerning the crisis of anthropocentrism and the need for a new educational paradigm that acknowledges the role of non-human factors in the learning process (Ferrante, 2014; 2016; Ferrante, Galimberti, Gambacorti Passerini; 2023).

These educational approaches reflect a broader commitment to integrating eco-literacy and post-humanist thought into educational practices, promoting a more inclusive and ecologically aware perspective among people.

From theory to practices: The FIERi Project in Catania as an overview example

Building on this foundation, the integration of theory and practice in ecological education can be examined through the analysis of the underlying theoretical framework and the applied experience of FIERi (*Fabbrica Interculturale Ecosostenibile del Riuso*, "Eco-sustainable Intercultural Factory of Reuse"). FIERi is an innovative project started in 2015 based in the popular suburbs of San Leone in Catania, Italy. It aims to promote eco-literacy and sustainability in suburban neighborhoods through a variety of educational initiatives and community engagement activities. It integrates theoretical principles of eco-literacy with practical educational practices, involving the local community in experiential learning activities (Cutuli, 2021; Di Donato; 2021).

The FIERi project distinguishes itself through its comprehensive approach to environmental education, effectively combining theoretical knowledge of ecological issues with the cultivation of practical skills and ethical values. Central to the initiative were activities such as recycling workshops, educational gardens, and citizen science projects. These experiential learning opportunities enabled participants to engage directly with sustainability practices, fostering both an emotional connection to the environment and a sense of ethical responsibility. This integrative model not only deepens ecological understanding but also empowers individuals to adopt sustainable behaviors and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

The main aim of FIERi is to embraces an intercultural approach by bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds to collaborate on environmental projects. This inclusivity fosters mutual respect, cultural exchange, and a collective commitment to sustainability, enriching the learning experience and strengthening community bonds.

FIERi activities that directly displays the passage from eco-literacies theory to practices include:

- Recycling workshops: participants engage in hands-on workshops that teach the importance of recycling and upcycling materials. These sessions emphasize creative reuse, transforming waste into useful and artistic items, fostering a practical understanding of sustainability.
- Educational gardens: people involved in the informal educational process, and the community members, collaborate to create and maintain educational gardens. These gardens serve as living laboratories where participants learn about organic farming, biodiversity, and the ecological benefits of green spaces (Cutuli, 2021).
- Citizen science projects: FIERi organizes citizen science initiatives that

involve the local community in environmental monitoring and data collection. These projects help participants understand scientific methods and contribute to real-world ecological research, enhancing their connection to the environment (Di Donato, 2021).

- Experiential learning: all activities at FIERi are designed to be experiential, encouraging active participation and direct engagement with ecological concepts. This is strictly connected to the theorical framework of experiential learning (since the theories of Dewey on experience and education to the framework build by David Kolb) approach helps to build a deeper, emotional connection to environmental issues, promoting responsible and informed citizenship (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 2014).

The analysis of the results underscores significant impacts on individuals' perceptions and behaviors regarding sustainability, demonstrating how eco-literacy fosters greater environmental awareness and action. FIERi's experience highlights the critical role of collaboration between associations and local communities in advancing environmental education. Educators serve as key mediators, bridging ecological theory with practice, and facilitating community engagement and the practical application of eco-literacy principles. Moreover, FIERi's experience in Catania presents a replicable model, showcasing how ecological education can translate environmental awareness into actionable practices, ultimately contributing to more sustainable and resilient societies.

AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SET IN ON EDUCATIONAL POVERTY

Adopting an ecological paradigm in education addresses educational poverty by integrating environmental awareness with learning, fostering integrated development. This approach empowers people with the knowledge and capabilities to understand and tackle ecological and social challenges, promoting equity and sustainability. The ecological approach in addressing educational poverty emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals, communities, and environments, aligning closely with contemporary research in the science of education (Tomarchio, D'Aprile, 2018). Educational poverty, defined as the deprivation of access to knowledge, skills, and cultural capital, is not merely a lack of resources but a systemic issue tied to social, environmental, and cultural contexts; on this path, researchers highlight the potential of place-based and ecologically driven educational models to combat this form of deprivation by fostering inclusion, agency, and sustainability (Milani, 2020; Patera; 2023).

An ecological perspective integrates experiential learning (Dewey, 1938 Kolb, 2014), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and relational pedagogy, advocating for global approaches that address both the material and the immaterial dimensions of poverty. Projects like FIERi in Catania illustrate how eco-literacy initiatives can bridge gaps by engaging marginalized communities in meaningful, context-driven learning experiences (Birbes, 2019; Strongoli, 2023b).

This practical-theorical alphabet aligns with research emphasizing the role

of interdisciplinary and collaborative practices in mitigating educational inequities. By integrating ecological education with localized action, educators can dismantle barriers of access and foster resilience, paving the way for sustainable solutions to educational poverty.

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PLAYFUL AND INCLUSIVE SCIENCE COMMUNICATION: TRANSFORMING LISBON BOTANIC GARDEN'S OLD BUTTERFLY HOUSE INTO AN ECO-SENSORY GARDEN

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Science communication is essential in fostering inclusion and social justice, creating a way for a fair and sustainable future for all children, including those from marginalized minority backgrounds (Frost, 2011). Effective science communication challenges stereotypes and breaks social, cultural, or linguistic barriers, promoting equal opportunities for everyone. Inquiry-Based Science Education (IBSE) is recognized as an inclusive and sustainable method for science communication (LA SCUOLA SF, 2023), encouraging playful, evidence-based exploration of scientific concepts (Wan et al., 2021). In this context, a project was initiated to transform the former butterfly greenhouse of Lisbon Botanic Garden (LBG) into an ecological and sensory garden. Previously housing captive native and alien species, the space no longer aligned with the National Museum of Natural History and Science's (MUHNAC) goals. The redesigned garden promotes native biodiversity, featuring plants that attract local Lepidoptera, insects, and birds. It also offers inclusive areas and activities for marginalized groups, such as people with special educational needs, learning disorders, and diverse ethnic backgrounds. Evaluation shows the garden enhances environmental education through interactive sensory structures, stimulating emotions and promoting well-being for visitors of all ages and abilities, thereby supporting accessibility, inclusion, and respect for nature.

Science communication, Inclusion, Accessibility, Playful activities, Social justice

INTRODUCTION

The sensory garden aims to emphasize the critical role of nature in our physical and mental well-being, while conveying the message that we are deeply connected to the natural world and must respect it for a sustainable future.

It was developed for a diverse audience, including people with disabilities, SLD, and varying ages, cultures, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds. Accessible communication is essential for those facing linguistic or cognitive barriers. Fostering inclusion ensures that all individuals, particularly children, feel valued and can reach their potential (Janssens & Zanoni, 2008).

Inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach, the project emphasizes children's developmental potential and their ability to learn through various forms of

communication and relationships (Reggio Children, 2023; Rinaldi, 2021), viewing children as central to shaping a creative and inspired future (Young Victoria & Albert Museum, 2023). Inquiry-Based Science Education (IBSE) promotes inclusive science communication through playful, evidence-based exploration, fostering critical thinking and self-regulated learning (Stem Visions Blog, 2023; Postholm, 2012). Outdoor learning in botanic gardens connects formal and informal education, enhancing engagement with natural sciences (Regan et al., 2014; Tavares et al., 2015), through activities that enable children to explore and learn ecological concepts, boosting intellectual capacity, critical thinking, and visual literacy, promoting a deeper understanding and respect for the environment (Adil, 2022; Mardell et al., 2023). This approach engages students in scientific exploration and inspires enthusiasm for natural sciences (Barata et al., 2017). Museums, as agents of change, must offer inclusive programs that empower marginalized groups, fostering a sense of belonging and value (United Nations, 2016; Icom Museum, 2023; Miller & Katz, 2002). MUHNAC embraces this role by expanding its cultural and educational offerings, creating a socially responsible, inclusive space for all (Brown, 2018).

1. SENSORY GARDENS AS A TOOL TO COMMUNICATE

Interaction with nature plays a crucial role in health and well-being, supporting physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual growth through a process known as "eco-healing" (Bakken, 2018). This relationship encourages individuals, influenced by nature's healing, to protect it (Steele, 2020). Based on Dillon et al.'s (2016) research on outdoor learning, green spaces with natural light, shadows, and colors can induce a reflective state that reduces stress and enhances sensory engagement. Sensory gardens engage the five senses – sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste – promoting mindfulness and environmental awareness. These gardens offer benefits such as stress reduction and mental calm (KEW, 2023) and support visual literacy, helping people with language barriers or learning disorders (Stokes, 2002; Avraam, 2020; Flattley, 1998).

Accessible and inclusive sensory gardens address all ages and abilities, offering therapeutic and educational opportunities (Hussein, 2016). They promote environmental education, supporting the preservation of native flora and fauna. By fostering inclusive spaces that connect people with nature, sensory gardens help overcome inequalities and cultivate respect for cultural diversity while promoting well-being.

2. RENOVATION OF THE SITE

The former butterfly house at Lisbon Botanical Garden was renovated after deterioration during the COVID-19 pandemic. The butterfly nursery no longer aligned with MUHNAC's mission of promoting native biodiversity over the captivity of non-native species. The space was reimagined as a sensory and ecological garden to preserve its ecological value while fostering social inclusion and well-being. The greenhouse doors and roof were removed to allow free access to insects and

birds, improving both accessibility and public engagement. Paths were redesigned with wider, sinuous layouts (1.10m) and stone edging to accommodate wheelchair users and visually impaired visitors. The small lake was restored, maintaining aquatic plants and adding water lilies to enhance the ecosystem. Native plants, particularly host plants for butterflies and nectariferous species, were chosen to attract insects, emphasizing their ecological role (Weisser & Siemann, 2013). Seating areas made from tree trunks were added to encourage rest and interaction with the space's sensory elements. Sensory features, such as Tactile Boxes (Figure 1) and the Barefoot Walking Path (Figure 2), allowed visitors to explore plant life cycles through touch, smell, and sound. Informative boards and an interactive game further enriched the experience.

The garden prioritizes sustainability by recycling and reusing materials; maintenance is managed by LBG gardeners, supported by volunteers, promoting both ecological awareness and well-being (Koss, 2010).

Figure 1. The Tactile boxes.

Figure 2. The Barefoot walking path.

3. ACCESSIBILITY AND EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES

The Sensory Garden was designed to be an accessible space for diverse audiences, promoting inclusion and communicating natural sciences. It welcomes people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds, with particular focus on those with learning disorders or disabilities. Accessibility was prioritized, following EU safety standards and guidance from Acesso Cultura (2023). Informative boards and an educational game were created using Easy To Read (ETR) writing for clarity, catering to those with cognitive impairments or language barriers (ACCAPARLANTE, 2023). These materials, available in Portuguese and English, include a garden map and information on host and nectariferous plants. A 3D tactile map with raised elements helps visually impaired visitors navigate (AUSILI TATTILI, 2023).

To eliminate captivity, an ecosystem representing Mediterranean flora was created to attract common Lepidoptera species in Lisbon, identified in collaboration with Tagis, a Portuguese NGO focused on butterfly preservation (TAGIS, 2023). Informative boards highlight the relationship between butterflies and plants, pairing images of each butterfly with their host and nectariferous plants. Sensory activities, such as the Barefoot Walking Path and Tactile Boxes, allow visitors to explore the plant life cycle through touch, smell, and sound (Hathazi & Bujor, 2013). These activities support sensory learning and benefit individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). An interactive game also encourages participants to identify butterflies and their host plants, making learning fun and educational. The garden aligns with MUHNAC's mission by integrating sustainability, inclusion, and science communication into its design, supporting the cultural program and promoting play-based education.

4. EVALUATION

The garden renovation, completed in May 2022, opened to the public as a pilot phase to collect data on visitor reactions. A brief structured interview was conducted to evaluate its impact and gather improvement suggestions. Evaluation is essential to assess a project's relevance, performance, and success in achieving its goals and contributing to well-being (Moreno-Leguizamon & Spigner, 2011). Data collection occurred over a week with 294 visitors aged 0 to over 65, including 7% with disabilities or specific learning disorders (SLD). The sample represented visitors from 36 countries.

Visitors were asked about their favorite aspects of the garden, with responses categorized into four categories: sensorial, ecological, museological, and architectural. The most appreciated features included the Barefoot Walking Path, Tactile Boxes, the lake, and the connection between plants and butterflies. When asked for suggestions for improvement, many visitors expressed satisfaction, while others suggested adding more natural and sensory elements, additional information, or activities, and emphasized the need for ongoing maintenance. In response to the question asking for a single word to describe the garden (Figure 3), "sensorial" was the most common answer, which led to the official name

"Sensory Garden".

The final question about emotions experienced in the garden yielded positive responses (Figure 4), with visitors frequently mentioning words such as "peace", "relax", "calm", and "tranquility".

Figure 3. Describing word's word cloud.

Figure 4. Experienced emotion's word cloud

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Evaluation results show that the goal of creating an accessible, welcoming space for a diverse audience has been met. Analysis revealed a low percentage of visitors under 21, indicating the need for activities targeted at this demographic. Additionally, 87% of visitors were tourists, suggesting a need for strategies to encourage more local residents to visit. The educational game about the relationship between plants and butterflies was enjoyed by nearly half of the visitors, with positive feedback from both adults and children, confirming its effectiveness.

The Sensory Garden successfully created an inclusive space that connects people

with nature while promoting concepts of natural sciences, ecology, biodiversity, and sustainability. After a three-month trial, the garden officially opened in September 2022 and became a permanent part of the Lisbon Botanic Garden. It is now part of group activities, including guided tours on biodiversity conservation, and is linked to MUHNAC's exhibitions. The garden also serves as an ideal venue for environmental education workshops for children, teenagers, and people with special needs, helping them engage with nature.

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EDUCATING FOR SYMMETRICAL RELATIONALITIES: SOCIO-MATERIALISM AND ECOLOGICAL POST-HUMANISM

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Considering the current fragile state of the planet in which human and non-human beings have to coexist, this essay aims to investigate some of the possible lines of continuity between two different perspectives that define the need to rescale the role of humanity: socio-materialism and post-humanism from the educational point of view. The analysis and identification of the points of contact between socio-materialism and post-humanism in education have led to the proposed design of educational practices and relational learning environments that can foster the connection between human beings and the rest of the world through the primacy of this relationship and interdependence. In particular, the essay defines the contribution that the *ecodidactic* perspective can make to the methodological and didactic shift from *function* to transactional and symmetrical *relationality*.

socio-materialism; ecological post-humanism; eco-didactics; democratic education.

INTRODUCTION

Today's historical, social and cultural context reveals our failure to grasp the extent of the exaggerated anthropocentrism that has resulted in the fact that we now are living in the so-called 'age of humans'. However, it is very different from the one envisioned by the cultural movement of humanism, for we are in the *anthropocene*, that is, an age in which human actions are playing a crucial role in the unfolding ecological disaster of the planet and life forms (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). As philosopher and ethologist Roberto Marchesini states, what we are experiencing is the main consequence of when *anthropos* claims the right to transform the entire planet into a "house-shell" built on the negative cast of its own body and believes that its main task is to domesticate forms of otherness, that is, to convert and mutate their characteristics into anthropomorphic projections that are limited in their diversity (Marchesini, 2018). In this sense, the anthropocentric perspective implements a misrecognition on three levels: minimizing the value of differences among non-human living beings; emphasizing the differences between human and non-human; and erasing the presence of the non-human within the human, who is regarded as a pure and uncontaminated fruit.

To try to curb this arrogance of humans, a significant number of academic studies have aimed to outline epistemological frameworks and everyday practices regarding humans and their relationships with other living beings in a complex and nuanced way.

In particular, it is possible to identify many lines of continuity between the perspectives of socio-materialism (Gamble et al., 2019; Fenwick et al., 2015) and those of post-humanism (Braidotti, 2013; Marchesini, 2022) that contribute to blurring not only the differences between human and non-human, but also the internal differences within the categories that humans have given themselves and that they have held for centuries to define them precisely as such, i.e. man-woman, black-white, dead-alive and human-animal. The literature presents the many possible consequences and declinations in education that require careful examination and scientific research.

1. SOCIO-MATERIALISM AND POST-HUMANISM

From an epistemological perspective, socio-materialism recognizes material elements and the physical environment as an integral part of social practices and human relationships; therefore, it is the interconnection between the cultural and material aspects of everyday life that is fundamental (Fenwick et al., 2015). From an educational perspective, socio-materialism focuses on materiality, which is understood as a set of documents, objects, tools, technologies, spaces, and furnishings; the aims are to investigate the dynamics between human and non-human material aspects that occur within educational contexts and to explore the ways in which knowledge and learning are rooted in action (Ferrante, 2016; Ferrante et al., 2022). In this sense, educational materiality should be understood on at least two levels: it is both an interpretive category – a key concept for decoding educational reality and its relationship with the living worlds – and a constant reference to the concreteness of education in a historically situated sense (Massa, 1992; Barone, 1997).

This set of reflections has implications for educational research and practice as it determines a relativization of the roles of the teacher and the student because, within a socio-materialist perspective, in order to understand and explain the educational process it is not enough to resort to the purposes of human education, but it is also necessary to consider the materiality of things and their interactions with the human. Thus, the focal point from which education begins lies in the syntax of space, time, body and symbol in which education is an individual experience as much as a relational one because it is experienced corporately and symbolically. Therefore, in the socio-materialist perspective in education, it becomes evident that the concept of relationships plays a crucial role in investigating and changing modes of action.

The significance of the category of the relationship also emerges in the contribution of post-humanism especially with reference to the transition from the verticalization of the human, which emerges by purging all otherness, to a perspective of

autopoietic horizontality that arises from a process of hybridization and, therefore, rejects purity (Marchesini, 2018). In this scenario, otherness is outside and inside the human subject; therefore, otherness does not refer to an entity that is distinct from oneself, but to an "other with oneself" (Marchesini, 2014), which represents the basis of being only because humans are "in relation", i.e. connected to everything that surrounds them. Every subjectivity is characterized by a structural relational capacity and a specific degree of potency as an embodied and situated entity, that is, by its openness and closeness to otherness; in this sense, thinking about otherness means reflecting on relationships in order to focus on the educational care of the other. This relational capacity and the various degrees of power comprise a subjectivity that is not centralized and does not have a family tree (Braidotti, 2013). No subjectivity is structured as a tree, but rather every subjectivity is rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980).

The nexus that places the concept of relationship at the centre between socio-materialist and post-human perspectives in education implies a move away from the hypothesis of human exceptionalism and leads towards a rejection of the existence of innate and universal moral values, opening to a recognition of the pivotal role of the educational process. Indeed, daily educational practice is connoted in an extremely significant way by the educational relationships that are established between teachers and students, between students, and between students and contexts. It is educational research that must take on the task of constructing and designing multifaceted educational scenarios that start from situated dimensions to enable direct experimentation with social materiality and progressively broaden the gaze in planetary and ecological terms in a symmetrical sense. Deconstructing normative certainties requires the counterbalance of constructing contexts in which it is possible to experience the symmetrical relationality of subjectivity with all non-human beings.

2. SYMMETRICAL RELATIONALITY AND INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

One element that can support the framework that is being defined is that one of the main categories that post-human materialism brings into the meshes of pedagogical reflection and practice is the recognition of educational processes as constitutions of human and non-human energies that exhibit symmetrical agentivity (Callon & Latour, 1992), since they mutually modify each other by defining relationships and determining the idea of subjectivities no longer as products but as historically situated or established conditions. This aspect leads to the idea that the symmetrical character of relationships makes the spaces allocated to education one of the variables that define the quality of educational experience.

Spaces dedicated to education are a fundamental variable in educational experiences; they are able to significantly increase the involvement of subjects especially in an ecological sense. In particular, within the framework of scientific research conducted in recent years, relational learning environments (Strongoli, 2023) have

been devised in an ecodidactic perspective (2021), the distinctive characteristic of which is that of making the many levels of relationality didactically feasible. In order to be defined as such, relational learning environments must be rich in stimuli in a qualitative sense, that is, they must not only merely enable learners to do many things, but to think in many ways; moreover, in relational learning environments, it is necessary to understand the environment as a practice of situated knowledge. Indeed, in a socio-materialist perspective, the environment is not the gateway to knowledge, nor the mediator but, simultaneously and in a relational sense, the object and subject never stated in already set prescriptions.

The principles of pluralism and transactivity with an ecological and systemic imprint inspire the design of relational learning environments with regard to the realization of *legitimized peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which the most knowledgeable – and therefore central – members have the same decision-making involvement as the less knowledgeable and, therefore, peripheral members. Hence, the relevant teaching practices must in no way feed on control and power but on decentralization, sharing and, once again, on relationality.

The implicit curriculum of such an instructional design takes all forms of shared co-design among all subjects and, moreover, the related collateral learning activated is linked to the recognition of the social practice of learning, which is generated through involvement and membership in a community (Wenger, 1998). In addition, in order for learners to be co-constructors of ecological knowledge, it is necessary to activate a process of deep sharing and recognition of their heuristic and scientific possibilities through the design of the learning communities (Brown, 1997) in which they act: multiple zones of proximal development; legitimized peripheral participation; distributed expertise, which legitimizes differences; reciprocal teaching and peer tutoring; flexibility and interchangeability of roles; variety of scaffolding; cognitive apprenticeship; reflective thinking and orientation toward autonomy (Varisco, 2002); procedurally and purpose challenging pathways; and practices of testing ideas through encountering alternative viewpoints.

In these environments, relationality is not expressed in a linear form of one-to-one communication, i.e. of the human subject with the rest of the living, but by its very nature it encompasses multiple forms precisely because proximity, i.e. exposure to multifaceted environments and problematic situations – which do not provide a single solution, but require creative efforts to restructure and question one's own lenses of observation – encourages the decentralization of the individual in favour of the shared construction of a complex point of view. Moreover, in the socio-materialist sense, such a point of view is no longer intersubjective, since it removes the objectifying logics of knowledge from the human subject who "discovers" nature and, in addition, it makes what we might call a "species leap" from humanism to posthumanism and is therefore plural.

Therefore, the defining aspects of these environments are relationality, action and cooperativism. They require that educational action cannot be dogmatic or even prescriptive; ecodidactic design must be *adhocratic-inspired* (Lipari, 2009), that is,

situational and contingent. The appeal is to that of the community through the shar-ing of material and personal resources; due to its organic nature, the idea of com-munity accommodates the ecodidactic proposal for subjects to act in a construc-tive, ethical, civic engagement, and change direction in a generative sense. In this sense, *relational* learning environments are proposed to be emancipatory in nature in order to break free from the constraints of the notion of a single truth, through the expression of the relationship as the main form of participatory knowledge that is transmitted in terms of community and ecologically oriented cooperative practices.

Designing learning environments that can enable people to experience the rela-tional symmetry between all that is human and non-human means opening up to educational practices that are extremely complex because they aim to deconstruct the very idea of educational asymmetry and the teaching practice inspired by it, seen as an exercise of power that leads to imparting changes from the outside, with-out considering the active engagement of the subjects in training.

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