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

PROCEEDINGS

01

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EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE 22

Young People's Transition from Education to the Labour Market and Territorial Inequities: Outcomes from INAPP Plus Survey 23
Laura Evangelista 23
Concetta Fonzo 23

Education, Evolution of Welfare Measures and New Inequalities 31
Raffaele Sibilio 31
Paola Buonanno 31
Angelo Falzarano 31

New Welfare and Social Inequalities. The Italian Case of Vocational Education and Training 35
Paola Buonanno 35
Raffaele Sibilio 35
Angelo Falzarano 35

Towards climate justice in education: a transformative change 41
Angelo Falzarano 41
Raffaele Sibilio 41
Paola Buonanno 41

Mapping NEETs in Europe and Italy: poverty, inequality and critical policy roles 48
Mirella Ferrari 48

Social Integration and Inclusion of Students with Special Needs in the Italian Higher Education System: a Case Study 76
Valentina Ghibellini 76

How can educational research assume an intersectional approach? A case study on homelessness in Brescia 85
Monica Amadini 85
Annalisa Pasini 85

New educational paradigms after the pandemic? The challenge of the educational community 93
Francesca Bianchi 93

The participation among young member as an opportunity for social transformation: Social justice within the Italian Cooperative Credit Banks 103
Alba Francesca Canta 103

Juvenile Offenders and Education: Which Tools to Pursue Social Justice? 111
Arianna Monniello 111

Intersections between disability and migratory background in educational contexts: a critical perspective 119
Maria Giulia Pascariello 119
Anna Fausta Scardigno 119

Human Capital and R&D: Unlocking Innovative Entrepreneurship through HEIs in Italy 127
Piero Esposito, 127
Francesco Ferrante 127
Sergio Scicchitano 127

Migrants' Children, Natives and Underemployment: Differences In Involuntary Part-Time Work Across Europe 138
Giorgio Piccitto 138

Educational and economic status differentials: a composition approach to social origin dimensions 146
Federica Rizzi 146
Orazio Giancola 146

Being NEET in Italy in the Post-COVID-19 Era 158
Marialuisa Villani 158
Riccardo Prandini 158

Indigenous Heritage, War Refugees or Language for Academic Purposes: Exploring language centres´ social justice and vulnerable communities empowerment potential 170
Libor Stepanek 170

School Segregation and School Dropout in Public Primary Schools: The Case Study of Bologna 175
Irene Giunchi 175

Territorial Pacts: possible tools to limit social exclusion 184
Bonci Martina 184

Shaping Desires. A Workshop to Give Voice to Children from Popular Schools 192
Giulia Franchi 192

Popular Education: a Bridge to Prevent and Combat Early School Leaving and Juvenile Criminality 199
Angelica Padalino 199

Preventing early school leaving: risk factors, effective interventions and policies 205
Valeria Di Martino 205
Marta Pellegrini 205
Rosa Vegliante 205

Dropout^2: the dropout on school data dropout 211
Arianna Beri 211
Laura Sara Agrati 211
Marco Lazzari 211

Review of Factors Underlying the School Dropout Phenomenon in Instruments Used with Students, Parents, and Teachers 220
Bonaiuti Giovanni 220
De Angelis Marta 220
Marras Arianna 220
Morsanuto Stefania 220

Gamification as a tool for preventing early school leaving:
a possible perspective? 228
Filippo Bruni 228
Livia Petti 228
Marta De Angelis 228

Preventing Early School Leaving:
Objectives and Milestones of a National Project 236
Valeria Di Martino 236
Marta Pellegrini 236
Rosa Vegliante 236

Supporting Students' Motivation: A Key Factor to Reduce Intentions to Drop Out of High School 244
Sara Germani 244

An Investigation About The Risk Factors Of School Dropout In Campania 253
Gragnaniello Deborah 253
Tammaro Rosanna 253
Tiso Maria 253

Peer Feedback as a Lever for Enhancing Reading Comprehension in Primary Schools: An Evidence-Based Experience 262
Antonio Marzano 262
Rossella Luongo 262
Rossella Vaccaro 262

The Role of Teachers in the Framework of Self Determination Theory: A Research Training Project 269
Sergio Miranda 269
Ludovico Vespasiani 269

Early school leaving in Camorra Territories: An Exploratory Research on the Motivation to Study 277
Carmen Lucia Moccia 277
Fausta Sabatano 277
Paola Aiello 277

The interprofessional collaboration between teachers and school social workers for the prevention of school failure and early school leaving. The *Provaci Ancora Sam! project* 284
Paolo Bianchini 284
Francesco Pongiluppi 284

Stepping out of Failure Stories by Stepping in the *Kepler Lab*: a Quasi-Experiment on Affective-Motivational and Instructional Mechanisms of Progressing 292
Marco Spampinato 292
Andrea Conficoni 292

Educational policies and the Neet phenomenon in Campania Region 303
Rosa Vegliante 303
Coppola Margherita 303

The vertical structure of educational inequalities in Italy 311
Adamo Lo Cicero 311
Orazio Giancola 311

Non-Predicted trajectories: educational choices over the reproduction of predicted paths 322
Matteo Bonanni 322
Orazio Giancola 322

Do decentralized campuses promote equality of educational opportunity? The case of the University of Turin 332
Federica Cornali 332
Valentina Goglio 332

I'll Be a Doctor: Medical Specialization Choices from a Gender Perspective 342
Domenico Carbone 342
Joselle Dagnes 342

Emerging Youth, Ideal Ages of Transition to Adulthood and Students' Post-diploma School Choices 351
Giuliana Parente 351

The choice of field of study at the tertiary level: the analytic approach of mapping 2.0 and main results 359
Federica Rizzi 359
Adamo Lo Cicero 359
Orazio Giancola 359

School choice and job expectations of Italian pupils after the covid19 pandemic 373
Marialuisa Villani 373

EPISTEMOLOGIES AND DECOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES 383

Unschooling in Italy: Navigating Idealisations, Constraints, and Decolonising Promises 384
Anna Chinazzi 384
Emilio Ruffolo 384
Angela Biscaldi 384

Critical unschooling: practicing unschooling and a closer look 393
Morena Franzin 393

Free Play And Its Benefits For A Democratic Society 404
Marco Leali 404

Critical Unschooling: an Educational Choice for Self-Determination and a Challenge to the Dominant Concept of Success and Well being 412
Valeria Melloni 412

Critical Unschooling: A Conscious Psychosocial Strategy Against the Influences of Individualism and Neoliberalism And For a More Compassionate Society 420
Elena Piffero 420

Benefits of an Unschooling Experience and the Lack of Unschooling Characters in the Entertainment Media 428
Jacopo Silvestre 428

Critical unschooling for a democratic idea of childhood and adolescence 433
Nunzia Vezzola 433
Carlo Leali 433

Against School Stigmatization: Successes, Conflicts and Main Challenges of the Educational Community of the Pisacane School 441
Adriano Cancellieri 441
Fabrizia Cannella 441

The disciplinary notes and the shaping of student subjectivities 448
Caterina Donattini 448

Beyond Deficit Thinking: From Epistemic Subjugation to the Decolonisation of Thought and Knowledge in the Classroom 456
Paola Dusi 456

Becoming a “Space Defector” or when Inequalities Meet Social Justice in Architectural Education. The Case of the Nantes School of Architecture 464
Bettina Horsch 464
Pauline Ouvrard 464

The overqualification of Eastern EU migrants: A gendered and sectoral approach 479
Montanari Maria Giulia 479

Neuromyth and Gender Stereotypes 488
Valeria Minaldi 488

School dropout and Active Citizenship. A social and sustainable experience in Lombardy. 494
Lisa Sacerdote 494
Annaletizia La Fortuna 494
Nicola Morea 494
Luisa Zecca 494

Inclusion Beyond the Conflict: Perspectives on Inclusive Education in the East-Jerusalem Context 503
Arianna Taddei 503
Tommaso Santilli 503
Samah Halwany 503

NEOLIBERALISM IN/AND EDUCATION 511

Health Promotion and Co-planning of an Affectivity and Sexuality Education Laboratory with Adults with Intellectual Disabilities, Parents and Social 512
Gabriele Buono 512
Carmen Ferraro 512

Democratic Education? Learner Voice and Adult Education in Ireland 520
Thomas Murray 520
Aisling Meyler 520

Abilitating Digital Learning to Innovate VET and Adult Education: Field Practices Supporting Policy Implementation 528
Elena Pacetti 528
Serena Foracchia 528
Alessandro Soriani 528
Laura Zambrini 528

Skills development for social justice?: A critical reading of adult education policies in the European and the Greek context 536
Eleni Prokou 536
Georgios Koulaouzides 536

Radicalization and Post-Critical Perspective 545
Claudio Melacarne 545

Exploring the Normative Assumptions of the “Inclusion Paradigm” through the Lens of Three Social Justice Theories 553
Marie Verhoeven 553
Amandine Bernal Gonzalez 553

An inclusive glance on local heritage: fostering engagement among High School students 561
Marianna Di Rosa 561
Sara Ovidi 561
Nicoletta Zucca 561

Pedagogies of social enquiry for democracies of the commons 566
Jean-François Dupeyron 566

Inclusion and Exclusion through Time? A Commons Perspective on Time 574
Sylvia Jäde 574
Judith von der Heyde 574

Conditions and Potentials for Educational Commons to Promote More Equal and Inclusive Education: A Swedish Case Study 582
Liselott Mariett Olsson 582
Robert Lecusay 582

Children as cultural actors: participation and active citizenship through Heritage Education 589
Ludovica Sebastiano 589
Francesca Berti 589
Simone Seitz 589

Social Investment Strategies in Education.
An Investigation of Italian Case Studies 597
Arianna Montemurro 597

Between Spatial and Social Justice – The Case of Lifelong Learning Policymaking 613
Jozef Zelinka 613
Marcelo Parreira do Amaral 613

Generations, Education and Common Values: a study on five Italian cohort-generations, from the Reconstruction to Gen Z 621
Matteo Bonanni 621

Education and Social Cohesion in Europe: Testing the Post-Modernization Thesis 630
Loris Vergolini 630

University studies and changes in *habitus* 640
Emanuela Susca 640
Elena Gremigni 640

University studies and changes in *habitus*. Exploratory research on first-generation students 644
Elena Gremigni 644

To Leave or Not to Leave: Experiences of University-Student Dropouts in Croatia 652
Iva Odak 652
Nikola Baketa 652
Saša Puzić 652

POLICY AND GOVERNANCE IN EDUCATION 660

Continuing Vocational Training in Italy, Between Unresolved Issues and New Scenarios 661
Roberto Angotti 661

Continuing Vocational Training in Italy: Unresolved Issues and New Scenarios 665
Roberto Angotti 665
Giovanna Campanella 665
Alberto Vergani 665

Key Issues for Continuing Vocational Training Policies in Italy, based on the Results of the Inapp Survey INDACO-Companies 673
Roberto Angotti 673
Luca Dordit 673

The Impact of Smart Working on Reskilling and Upskilling Processes in the Private and Public Sectors in Italy: a First Analysist 681
Giuditta Occhiocupo 681
Alessandra Pedone 681

The Curriculum as a key lever for achieving Equitable, Inclusive, and Accessible Early Childhood Care and Education 689
Eloïse Drure 689

New Quality Assurance Approaches: Outcomes Of An Integrated Peer Review Experimentation In Italian VET Schools And Training Centres 697
Laura Evangelista 697
Concetta Fonzo 697

Beyond Expectations: How Much does the Structure of European education Systems Affects Students' Performance? 705
Iacopo Moreschini 705
Matteo Bonanni 705

Pathways for Transversal Competencies and Orientation (PCTO) as a Device for Developing Personal Resources and Contrasting Scholastic Dispersion 714
Valentina Pagani 714
Elisa Truffelli 714
Barbara Balconi 714
Roberta Biolcati 714
Guido Benvenuto 714
Giulia Gabriella Pastori 714
Elisabetta Nigris 714
Mara Marini 714
Sara Germani 714
Giuliana Viscuso 714
Martina Rossi 714
Giacomo Mancini 714
Irene Stanzione 714

Evidence, Myths and Teaching Practices: The Case of Teaching Reading in Italian Schools 719
Sergio Miranda 719
Antonio Calvani 719
Paola Damiani 719
Lorena Montesano 719
Luciana Ventriglia 719

Proving Impact in Complex Programs. Challenges, Opportunities and Consequences for Practice Using the Example of the Federal Program "Live Democracy!" 729
Alexander Stärck 729

Systematic Review: Quality Assurance Mechanisms And Evidence-Based Approaches in Guidance 736
Concetta Fonzo 736
Enric Serradell López 736

School Communities And Educational Evaluation: Reflections, Experiences, Perspectives 744
Carla Gueli 744
Cristiano Corsini 744

Formative Assessment Practices to "Leave No Student Behind": An Experiment to Enhance Text Comprehension Abilities in the Lower Secondary School 751
Elisa Guasconi 751

Formative Assessment in Preschool for Inclusive Education 761
Iolanda Sara Iannotta 761
Roberta Scarano 761
Alessia Notti 761

The Effectiveness of PCTO on School-To-Work Transition in Italy: the Point of View of External Tutors 769
Alessandra Decataldo 769
Sara Recchi 769
Valentina Pacetti 769

The (re)production of social inequalities through the lens of PCTOs: Micro-macro Mechanisms for Project Adhesion and Evaluation of Experience 778
Antonio Fasanella 778
Veronica Lo Presti 778
Maria Paola Faggiano 778
Orazio Giancola 778
Fiorenzo Parziale 778
Michela Cavagnuolo 778
Maria Dentale 778
Andrea Carlini 788
Francesca Penner 788
Christian Poggi 788

Scuola Diffusa (Widespread School) in Reggio Emilia and its Effect on Teaching Methodologies and Classrooms Relations 797
Michele Campanini 797
Chiara Bertolini 797
Laura Landi 797

Interprofessional experiences to overcome some potential inequalities in learning context 806
Giuseppina Cannella 806

RETI Project: Innovative processes toward educational communities 813
Irene Culcasi 813
Maura Benedetti 813
Marcella Tellini 813
Italo Fiorin 813

For a Sustainable Idea of Scuola Diffusa (Widespread School): Meanings, Practices and Characteristics 821
Paola Damiani 821
Moises Esteban Guitart 821
Edgar Iglesias Vida 821
Laura Landi 821

Bridging the gap: implementing Inner Areas governance in education. A case study of the Territorial Educational Pact of Casentino 830
Luca Grisolini 830
Giovanna Del Gobbo 830
Giulia Biagi 830
Francesco De Maria 830

The Social Contract for Education and Educational Territorial Pacts: Pedagogical Innovation and Territorial Governance. A Multilevel Analysis of the Verona Case 839
Giuseppina Rita Jose Mangione 839
Stefania Chipa 839
Rudi Bartolini 839
Chiara Zanoccoli 839

Examining the Role of Global Citizenship Education in the Context of Unesco's Recent Report and Recommendation 851
Massimiliano Tarozzi 851

Reframing University.
Impact and Relational Value in the Higher Education System 859
Valentina Martino 859
Lucia D'Ambrosi 859
Paolo Brescia 859
Vytautas Beniušis 859

Growing Public Engagement Initiatives Signaling Changing Functions in Italian Universities 868
Barbara Grüning 868

The social mission of a Southern university. Stories worth telling 876
Emanuela Pascuzzi 876
Stefania Chimenti 876

The transformative mission of universities: Personal trajectories and institutional drivers of community engaged scholarship 884
Andrea Vargiu 884
Emanuela Reale 884
Andrea Orazio Spinello 884
Valentina Ghibellini 884

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE EDUCATIONAL FIELD 892

The Experience of School Victimization Among Adolescent Adoptees 893
Laura Ferrari 893
Sonia Ranieri 893
Rosa Rosnati 893
Simona Caravita 893

Open adoption: educational reflections and pedagogical proposals on the recent jurisprudential interpretation of the Constitutional Court (judgment 183/2023) offering new perspectives on the protection of the child 898
Angela Muschitiello 898
Michele Corriero 898

For a culture of foster care 909
Paola Ricchiardi 909

Residential Foster Care Homes as Tools for Social Equity and Empowerment. A Study about Foster Care in a Region of Northern Italy C. Scivoletto 916
Stefania Fucci 916
Matteo Davide Allodi 916
Irene Valotti 916

Adoption and Foster Care: Analysis, Reflections and Best practice on Equality and Social Justice at School and in the Educational System 925
Alessia Tabacchi 925
Anna Guerrieri 925
Caterina Balenzano 925
Monya Ferritti 925

Being Well at School: Equity between Well-Being and Student-Centred Pedagogy 931
Anna Granata 931
Valerio Ferrero 931

Using *Pereživanie* in Autobiographical Memory Activities Within the Class Group 935
Stefano Costantini 935

Bringing Education Back to School: An Action Research Project to Strengthen Teacher Professionalism and Avoid the Medicalisation of Schooling 943
Valerio Ferrero 943
Anna Granata 943

Listening to Silent Voices: An Investigation into the Student Voice Approach to Promote Inclusiveness and Student Well-being 953
Federica Festa 953
Alice Di Leva 953

The *Writing Workshop* as a student-centred approach: strengths and weaknesses 962
Charlotte Kohlloffel 962

The Children of Mixed Couples in the Postdigital Age: When Digital and Intercultural Competences Come Together 979
Stefano Pasta 979
Michele Marangi 979

The Contribution of Complexity Epistemology to a Critical Analysis of the “Child at the Center” Pedagogical Imperative 989
Letizia Rota 989

Equity, Justice, Inclusion at Schools 997
Giorgia Ruzzante 997

Wellbeing at school: Between different languages and family cultures 1001
Silvia Sordella 1001

Adolescents, well-being and media practices: analysis of students' experiences in the Metropolitan City of Bologna. 1011
Paolo Bonafede 1011
Alessandro Soriani 1011
Elena Pacetti 1011

Philosophy for Children, Character Skills and Well-being in the Classroom 1022
Nicolò Valenzano 1022
Federico Zamengo 1022

Design of school contexts and an inclusive curriculum according to the Universal Design for Learning approach: results of the exploratory phase 1029
Maria Antonietta Augenti 1029

Cognitive Disabilities And Personalised Learning: The Case Study Of The Agenzia Formativa Of The Province Of Varese 1037
Francesca Brognoli 1037
Alessandro Curti 1037
Daniela Martarelli 1037

The Individualized Strategy for an Inclusive School 1046
Silvia Fioretti 1046

Participation of students with disabilities in education, training and labour systems: an issue of equal opportunities 1053
Ivana Guzzo 1053

Rethinking Education: A Three-Dimensional Approach in the Context of Contemporary Challenges 1063
Patrizia Lotti 1063

Bridging Theory and Practice: The Role of Training of Trainers in Promoting Inclusive Education 1073
Alessandro Monchietto 1073
Cecilia Marchisio 1073

Decision-Making and Justice: Unraveling the Threads of Social Equity 1081
Teresa Rinaldi 1081
Annalisa Valle 1081

Individual variables influencing successful choices in international work mobility 1087
Diego Boerchi 1087
Teresa Rinaldi 1087

Can The school context foster altruism? Preliminary evidence from children playing the Dictator Game in "Scuola Senza Zaino" method 1097
Ilaria Castelli 1097
Nicole Zanga 1097

Empowering Future Generations: The Crucial Role of Parents in Shaping Financial Decision-Making Skills 1105
Teresa Rinaldi 1105
Annalisa Valle 1105
Antonella Marchetti 1105

Decoding Childhood Prosocial Decision-Making: the Role of Mentalization and Personality Traits in School-Age Children 1111
Annalisa Valle 1111
Elisabetta Lombardi 1111
Cinzia Di Dio 1111
Ilaria Castelli 1111
Davide Massaro 1111
Antonella Marchetti 1111

Comparing Teaching Methodologies for the Development of Financial Literacy in a Primary School: An Explorative and Evidence-Based Study 1119
Giovanna Andreatti 1119
Daniele Morselli 1119
Monica Parricchi 1119
Doris Kofler 1119

Financial Knowledge and Household Vulnerability. Evidence from Italy 1128
Riccardo Grazioli 1128

Financial Education in Italy: Training The Future Teachers 1136
Claudia Maurini 1136
Luca Refrigeri 1136
Carlotta Rossi 1136
Maria Iride Vangelisti 1136

Providing access to 'powerful' financial knowledge: A financial literacy programme for school students 1144
Emanuel Mizzi 1144

The Relation between Experience, Education and AI 1153
Alessio Fabiano 1153
Giuseppe Spadafora 1153

Artificial Intelligence and Language Learning: What Opportunities for Allophone Learners 1159
Marika Calenda 1159

Storytelling with AI. A New Paradigm for the School of the Next Years 1167
Andrea Cirolia 1167

Experience, Theater and Politics for an Inclusive and Democratic School 1173
Vincenza Costantino 1173

Educating Artificial Intelligence to enhance uniqueness 1181
Concetta Ferrantino 1181
Roberta Scarano 1181
Marika Calenda 1181

Education of the Future: an Integrated Approach between John Dewey and Artificial Intelligence. What Perspective for Children with Special Educational Needs? 1189
Carolina Leva 1189

How to Face Artificial Tyranny. How good Thinking saves Democracy in the in the AI Era 1196
Aldo Pisano 1196

Reflexivity: Lights and Shadows of the relationship between technology and education 1203
Maria Sammarro 1203
Silvestro Malara 1203

Added value and school effectiveness for a democratic school 1211
Vincenzo Nunzio Scalcione 1211

Caring Professions in Superdiverse Societies: A Study on Social Work Students with Migration Background 1220
Maria Grazia Galantino 1220
Francesca Messineo 1220

Inclusive societies and equity in education: experiences and opportunities through Service Learning for cultural change 1228
Silvia Guetta 1228
Patrizia Lotti 1228
Lorenza Orlandini 1228

Emotions on stage*:* an International Service-Learning experience in Brazil with children and adolescents, based on a GloCal approach 1233
Nicola Andrian 1233
Giulia Sailis 1233

Enhancing Global Engagement: Insights from the FLY Program in European Interuniversity Service-Learning 1243
Irene Culcasi 1243
Alzbeta Brozmanová Gregorová 1243
Maria Cinque 1243
Milagros Ávila Olías 1243
Aitor Arbaiza Valero 1243

Intersections among Higher Education, Peace Education, Sustainability and Service Learning: civic engagement for the present and the future 1250
Silvia Guetta 1250

The Pensare In Grande/Thinking Big Project:
A Paradigm for Democratic Education 1263
Vanessa Macchia 1263
Stefania Torri 1263
Gianluca Amatori 1263
Silvia Maggiolini 1263
Moira Sannipoli 1263

Integrating Opera Into Service Learning: a multidisciplinary approach in training future teachers 1271
Benedetta Miro 1271
Alessandra La Marca 1271

Educational Innovation for Social Transformation. Building Inclusive Cultures and Professionalism through University Service Learning 1279
Maria Moscato 1279
Francesca Pedone 1279
Cinzia Novara 1279
Gaetano Di Napoli 1279

It is Interprofessional Teamworks in the school context: Service-Learning projects in the Empoli area between formal and nonformal education 1289
Massimiliano Naldini 1289
Patrizia Lotti 1289

The contribution of Service Learning to counter educational poverty. The experiences of the “Avanguardie educative” Movement 1298
Lorenza Orlandini 1298
Massimiliano Naldini 1298

Best practices from the Enhance project 1308
Giorgia Pasquali 1308
Anita Montagna 1308
Andrea Marconi 1308
Sabina Falconi 1308

Empowering Education: Integrating Design for Change and Service-Learning for Socially Committed Learning Experiences 1317
Juan Peña-Martínez 1317
Stefania Falchi 1317
Antioco Luigi Zurru 1317

Service-Learning In Italy and Spain. A Comparative Analysis Of The Two Educational experiences 1324
Jady Safira Silveira 1324

Fostering Active Citizenship and Ethical Professionalism: A Service-Learning Paradigm for Translator Education 1332
Stempniewicz Patrycja Lidia 1332
Bernardini Silvia 1332

Measuring Flexible Furniture Impact on Students’ and Teachers’ Learning Experience 1340
Giuseppina Cannella 1340
Wesley Imms 1340
Silvia Panzavolta 1340

The impact of school furniture on students’ engagement. An international single subject research study 1348
Stefania Chipa 1348
Elena Mosa 1348
Julia Morris 1348

Can innovation and inclusion coexist? 1356
Matteo Di Pietrantonio 1356

The “Student Voice” from “Dante-Carducci” School in Piacenza (Italy). Well-Being, Inclusion and Learning Environments:
What the Students Think, Like and Dislike? 1364
Mariagrazia Francesca Marcarini 1364
Francesca Lunardini 1364
Filippo Rebecchi 1364
Lucia Tagliaferri 1364

Wall-Less Schooling as a Device for Social Justice 1376
Emilio Ruffolo 1376

Doing research with schools, bridging space and education 1384
Beate Christine Weyland 1384
Andrea Zini 1384
Free University of Bozen-Bolzano; University of Modena and Reggio Emilia 1384

Nonviolence in education for social justice 1392
Francesca Ursula Bitetto 1392

Nonviolent Relationships to Change the Culture of Victory and Domination: Experiences and Practices at School 1397
Annabella Coiro 1397

Nonviolent Theory and Practice in Aldo Capitini: The International Seminar on Nonviolent Techniques (Perugia, 1963) 1405
Emanuele Follenti 1405

Civic Education To Support Nonviolence And Democracy 1412
Sabina Langer 1412

School dropout in the perspectives of parents: Insights from a qualitative study in a peripheral neighbourhood in Milan 1421
Anna Chinazzi 1421
Alessandra Mussi 1421

Project Evaluation of “Oltre i confini. Un modello di scuola aperta al territorio” – Against school dropout: an integrated approach 1430
Rebecca Coacci 1430
Walter Moro 1430

Peer tutoring to prevent school dropout. The case of a high school in San Siro 1439
Valeria Cotza 1439

For those who fall behind: Examining Language and Cultural Enhancement Practices in Milan’s extra-school services 1447
Lefterov Petar Vasilev 1447

Strengthen the School-family-services partnership through the implementation of the P.I.P.P.I LEPS 1456
Claudia Marcellan 1456
Paola Milani 1456

Preventing and combating early school leaving since early childhood. Towards a dynamic, situated and eco-systemic approach to promote equality, social cohesion and justice 1464
Luisa Zecca 1464
Chiara Bove 1464

Social Inclusion Through Sport and Physical Education 1469
Luciana Taddei 1469
Luca Bianchi 1469

Social justice and ageing: older learners as active citizens in a complex system 1474
Vanna Boffo 1474
Laura Formenti 1474

Activating the Potential of Older Adults: Education and Active Aging in Italy 1479
Michele Bertani 1479
Donatella Bramanti 1479
Sara Nanetti 1479

Elder Active Citizens and Community Engagement 1488
Giulia Biagi 1488
Giovanna Del Gobbo 1488
Francesco De Maria 1488
Cristina Banchi 1488
Sofia Marconi 1488

Education, Learning and Skills for Active Ageing: an Italian Research on Good Practices 1495
Vanna Boffo 1495
Debora Daddi 1495
Christel Schachter 1495

Empowering Active Aging with Limited Autonomy: a Training Proposal to Enhance the Skills of Home Caregivers for Frail Older People 1504
Elisa Bruni 1504
Elena Luppi 1504
Aurora Ricci 1504

Active Ageing for Cultural Services: focus on Elderly Population in Inland Areas 1512
Giovanna Del Gobbo 1512
Sofia Marconi 1512
Cristina Banchi 1512
Giulia Biagi 1512
Francesco De Maria 1512

Learning in longevity: a critical ecosystemic approach to research and intervention 1520
Laura Formenti 1520
Davide Cino 1520
Francesca Romana Loberto 1520

Active Ageing and the Challenges of Digitalisation. Experiences from the Social Research Active.It 1528
Giulia Melis 1528
Dario Pizzul 1528

Enhancing Well-being and Autonomy in Active Aging: A Montessori Perspective. The case study 'G. Palena' 1536
Patrizia Palmieri 1536
Università di Foggia 1536

Social Participation, Education and Healthy Ageing in Italy 1544
Paolo Pasetti 1544
Loris Vergolini 1544

Developing Age-Friendly Cities for promoting Active Ageing: State of the Art in Europe 1554
Maria Grazia Proli 1554

"Università dell'Età Libera" for Active Ageing. Fostering well-being and social inclusion through language learning in later life 1563
Inmaculada Solís García 1563
Valentina Antonina Pipicella 1563
Davide Bonaiuti 1563

Autobiography and Quality Longevity 1572
Fabio Togni 1572
Vanna Boffo 1572

Social Media Representations of Disability. A Study on Italian Influencers 1579
Antonia Cava 1579
Fabrizia Pasciuto 1579
Maria Angela Galizia 1579

Unleashing potential: exploring the role of non formal education in digital transformation for social inclusion 1588
Nadia Crescenzo 1588

The Triangle P+: A Transmedia Catalyst for Family Inclusion in Parenting Education 1596
Arnau Erta-Majó 1596
Eduard Vaquero 1596
Aida Urrea-Monclús 1596
Maria Àngels Balsells 1596

The diversity challenge for higher education. Barriers and opportunities in updating educational settings to deal with international students and guarantee equal and inclusive multicultural environments 1606
Isabella Pescarmona 1606
Roberta Ricucci 1606
Anna Miglietta 1606

Transforming Initial Teacher Education for Plurilingual Competence: Insights from an Erasmus+ Project in a Heterogeneous School 1611
Luca Angelone 1611

International mobility, resources and inclusion of incoming students: preliminary data from the VAMOS project with Spanish students 1619
Aurelia De Lorenzo 1619
Elga Zedda 1619
Antonio Lucas-Alba 1619
Emanuela Rabaglietti 1619

Addressing Linguistic (In)equality in Higher Education: A Case Study of Social Justice and Multilingualism at the University of Luxembourg 1628
Argyro-Maria Skourmalla 1628

Faculty Development, inclusion and attention for diversity: participants' reflections at the IRIDI START course at the University of Turin 1636
Emanuela Maria Teresa Torre 1636
Federica Emanuel 1636

The educational poverty of minors with a migratory background: experiences, analysis, challenges 1645
Giovanna Filosa 1645
Patrizia Rinaldi 1645

Disability Models in Education: What Fits the B.E.S. Category? 1650
Denis De Almeida Barros 1650

Leisure Time Use and the Third Sector's Role in Combating Educational Poverty of Minors with a Migratory Background 1658
Francesca Gabrielli 1658

Migrant Minors between Discrimination and Educational opportunities. A Research Perspective on Italian contemporaneity 1667
Giulia Gozzelino 1667
Federica Matera 1667

From Integration to Inclusion. The Educational Challenge in Msna Interventions Between Trauma, Learning Disabilities And Inclusive Teaching 1675
Francesca Oggiano 1675

Teaching language through literary texts: a possible didactic strategy for the Italian as a second language classroom 1682
Ilaria Usalla 1682

The Current Value of *Lettera a Una Professoressa* for the Sociology of Education: A Book for Parents 1690
Gian Luca Battilocchi 1690

Don Milani Generative Center. Looking for the present "Barbiana Schools" to promote the idea of Actualization 1698
Viola Davini 1698
Eugenio Pandolfini 1698

'The Word' sets You free: Don Milani's Revolutionary Anti-idealistic and Maieutic Approach 1707
Vanessa Lamattina 1707

The Cronobook of Don Milani's Life: An Intersection of Philology and Criticism in Revitalizing his Legacy 1714
Marco Sbardella 1714

The Topicality of the School of Barbiana on the Centenary of the Birth of don Lorenzo Milani 1723
Marco Sbardella 1723

GENDER AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION 1727

Female Bullying at School. The Multidimensionality of Violence Among Adolescent Girls 1728
Antonia De Vita 1728
Giuseppe Burgio 1728
Francesco Vittori 1728

Lights and Shadows of Adolescence Between Social Stigma and the Need for Recognition: A Phenomenology of Female Bullying 1733
Maria Gabriella Landuzzi 1733
Paola Dusi 1733

Girl-to-Girl Bullying in Irish Schools: a call to intra-action & response-ability 1741
Vanessa Rutherford 1741

A Gender Perspective on Bullying. Findings from a National Survey 1757
Irene D. M. Scierri 1757
Federico Batini 1757

Bridging Gender Gaps in STEM Employment: Insights from La Sapienza University Graduates 1767
Giulio Lucentini 1767
Astrid Favela 1767
Valeria Bruno 1767

A Coding Workshop Against Gender Bias 1776
Scicchitano Emanuela 1776
Del Vecchio Anna 1776

Ensuring gender equity in promoting Computational Thinking in Primary School. A systematic review 1785
Francesco Claudio Ugolini 1785
Panagiotis Kakavas 1785

Gender, Interculture, Educational Perspectives. Analysis and Contrast of Gender and Ethnic-based Violence Dynamics 1794
Carla Roverselli 1794

Scouts and Guides' Experience of Coeducation to Prevent Violence and Build Positive Gender 1799
Paola Dal Toso 1799

Intersectional and Gender Perspectives:
a Research on Trafficked Refugee Women 1806
Gaetana Tiziana Iannone 1806

Alias career and non-binary students in the Italian Educational Institution 1814
Richard Bourelly 1814

Learning about the queer. Deconditioning imaginaries and education 1821
Silvia Nanni 1821

Homosexual sons and daughters:
why we should understand, support and love them 1831
Massimiliano Stramaglia 1831

Stereotyped Social Representations of Gender Violence and Mafia 1839
Sabrina Garofalo 1839

The Role of Italian LGBTQ+ Centres Against Discrimination (CAD) in the Public Sphere. A Case Study 1846
Fabio Mostaccio 1846

Discrimination as a Form of Gender-Based Violence: Consequences of Sexist Stereotypes on the Transgender Community 1854

Social Conflicts and the Public Sphere. The use of gender stereotypes by political parties and movements in Italy 1863
Milena Meo 1863
Antonio Tramontana 1863

Organizing Committee 1872

Volunteer Staff 1873

Scientific Committee 1874

Promoters and Partners 1876

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION, EDUCATION AND HEALTHY AGEING IN ITALY

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In this paper we aim to analyze the relationship between social participation and education among elderly people in Italy. Social participation, that is a key dimension of active ageing, is divided into three sub-dimensions: cultural participation; socio-political participation and social contacts. Our main research question focuses on the role played by education that can be linked to social participation in at least two ways: i) education may directly influence the acquisition of certain lifestyles and cultural tastes that lead individuals to conduct a more active social life; ii) education can also have an indirect effect through economic resources and health condition. To answer these research questions, we analyze ISTAT data (*Aspetti della vita quotidiana*, 2013-2021) by means of regression (OLS and logistic) and mediation models. Our findings corroborate our hypotheses showing that education has a strong influence on social participation and that the mediation effect is particularly relevant only for social contacts.

Italy; Ageing; social participation

INTRODUCTION

It's well-known that the Italian demographic dynamic is characterized by high levels of life expectations at birth (Caselli et al., 2021) and by low fertility (Billari, 2022) that have led to an increase in the share of elderly population. This change poses new challenges in terms of active ageing and healthy ageing. Our work tries to contribute to this literature focusing on social participation – intended as cultural consumption and socio-political participation – and social contacts, that can be considered as possible dimensions of active ageing (WHO, 2002; Principi et al., 2023) as well as social cohesion (Vergolini, 2011). We aim to contribute to this literature focusing on the role played by education trying to estimate its total effect as well as the mediating effect of economic resources

and health status. The paper is organized as follows: the next section presents the hypotheses that will guide our analysis. The second section is devoted to the description of the data and methods used in the analysis which results are presented in section 3. The final section provides concluding remarks.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

The aim of this paper is to identify the role played by education in shaping socio-cultural participation and in reducing social isolation. From a theoretical point of view, education could have an impact on these outcomes in at least two ways. Firstly, it can act through a direct channel: education could push to the acquisition of lifestyles and cultural tastes that lead individuals to conduct a more active social life (Jensen & Skjøtt-Larsen 2021). In fact, highly educated people tend to have higher cultural consumption and are more active in social participation (van Hek and Kraaykamp, 2013). At the same time, having an active social life will also mechanically increase social contacts, thus reducing isolation. From this discussion, we can derive our first hypothesis:

> H1: educational level is directly and positively related to socio-cultural participation and social contacts.

The second channel through which education can work is an indirect one. It has to be taken into account that social participation is a costly activity and people have to invest time and/or money to play an active role in community life (Yang & Konrath 2023). Therefore, education could have an indirect impact through the attainment of remunerative occupations. Another aspect to consider is the state of health. Older adults often devote significant time to leisure activities, like joining organized events and going out, but as people age, chronic health issues tend to increase, often implying a reduction in sustain social engagement (Galenkamp and Deeg, 2016). It is known that education has an impact on health status (Vilhelmsson & Östergren, 2018), that can be attributed to factors like the higher incomes typically associated with higher education and greater general literacy, which enable more educated individuals to make more informed decisions about their health and to be more active in prevention (Braveman et al., 2011). From this discussion, we can derive our second hypothesis:

> H2: the impact of education is moderated by economic resources and health status.

2. DATA, VARIABLES AND METHODS

2.1. Data and variables

The database comprises several waves (2013–2021) of the ISTAT *Aspetti della vita quotidiana* (AVQ) survey, which is conducted annually and is representative at the regional level. This survey examines various aspects of social life among Italian households, covering the entire Italian population across all age groups. For this study, the final dataset was constructed by harmonizing and merging the cross-sectional waves, focusing solely on individuals aged 55 and over. This selection yielded an analytical sample of 113,289 statistical units.[1]

We rely on AVQ survey since it has all the information that we need to test our hypotheses (see Table 1 for the descriptive statistics). As anticipated in the previous section, we are interested in the effect of education on socio-cultural participation and on social contacts. More precisely, our focus is on the following dimensions: cultural consumption, socio-political participation and social contacts. For what concerns cultural consumption, we use a set of items that considers the following activities:

- Going to:
    - theatre.
    - cinema.
    - discotheque or dance hall.
    - classical music concert, going to a concert of another type of music.
- Attending sporting events.
- Visiting a:
    - museum or an art exhibition.
    - monument or an archaeological site.

These items are all measured on a scale of the frequency with which the indicated behaviour was carried out during the last 12 months. This scale ranges from 1 ('never') to 5 ('more than 12 times'). To derive a synthetic index of cultural consumption[2], we employ a factor analysis to compute factor scores.

Socio-political participation is measured according to the following set of items:

1 These are the individuals for those we observe all the variables considered in the analysis.

2 The Cronbach's alpha for these items is 0.607.

- Participation in:
    - political party meetings.
    - trade union meetings.
    - voluntary associations.
    - ecological or civil rights associations.
    - cultural or recreational associations.
    - professional associations.
    - political public speech.
    - political parade.
- Listening to a political debate.

These nine items concern the performance of activities pertaining to the sphere of participation in the political life of one's own community and, more generally, participation in social activities (cultural, civil rights, professional associations, etc.). All these items are dichotomous, taking value '1' when that certain behaviour has occurred in the last 12 months, and value '0' otherwise. Also in this case, we apply a factor analysis to compute a synthetic index of socio-cultural participation.[3]

Tab. 1. Descriptive statistics (N=113,289). Source: Aspetti della vita quotidiana (2013-2021).

Outcomes		
	Mean	Std. dev.
Cultural consumption (standardized)	0.000	1.000
Socio-political participation (standardized)	0.000	1.000
Social contacts (meet)	0.498	0.500
Social contacts (count on)	0.599	0.490

Main independent variables	
Education	%
No title	6.2
Primary	30.1
Lower secondary	28.2
Upper secondary	26.0
Tertiary	9.5

[3] The Cronbach's alpha for these items is 0.794.

Economic resources	%
Good	63.3
Insufficient	36.7
Health status	%
Good	87.6
Bad	12.4

Social contacts are measured exploiting two variables: the frequency of meeting friends and the existence (or not) of friends you can count on. In the first case, the frequency of meeting friends is measured by a scale ranging from 1 ('I meet friends every day') to 7 ('I have no friends'). It has been coded as a dummy variable turning values from 1 to 3 into '1' and values from 4 to 7 into '0'. As far as the variable friends I can count on is concerned, it is basically already dichotomous, except for the possibility of the answer option 'I don't know', which we considered equivalent to the negative answer.

Our main independent variable is the educational level coded in five categories: 'no title', 'primary school', 'lower secondary school', 'upper secondary school', 'tertiary degree'. The other main independent variables are those that could play a mediating role: the economic resources available to the household and the self-perceived health status. Regarding the first variable, it measures the availability of economic resources for the family with reference to the last 12 months, by means of a 4-category scale ranging from 1 ('very good resources') to 4 ('absolutely insufficient resources'). We dichotomised this variable by combining the first two categories (1-2='good economic conditions') and the last two (3-4='bad economic conditions'). Similarly, self-reported health status, initially on a 5-point scale (1='very good' to 5='very bad'), was recoded as dichotomous by merging the first three categories (1-3='good health') and the last two (4-5='poor health').

2.2. Methods

The analytical strategy of the paper is based on a two-step analysis. The first step is the estimation of the total effect of education on the outcomes (i.e., cultural consumption, socio-political participation and social contacts). As for statistical computations, we opted for two different models that relate the educational level to variables with different measurement scales. In the first two cases, those relating, respectively, to the indexes of cultural consumption and

socio-cultural participation we used an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model since these variables are quantitative. In the other two cases, those relating respectively to the variables meeting with friends and friends you can count on, which are dichotomous variables, we used a logit model and to facilitate the comparisons we present average marginal effects (Mood, 2010). We use the same set of control variables that include gender, age, marital status, employment status, citizenship, living alone, size of the city, region and the year the survey was conducted.

The second step of our analysis involves the attempt to identify the mediating role played by economic resources and self-perceived health. To do this we employ structural equation modelling (Cain, 2021) to estimate the indirect effect, that is interpretable as the share of the total effect of education that is mediated by economic resources and health status.

3. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

3.1. Does education matter?

Table 2 shows the results of the first step of our analysis (i.e., the identification of the total effect of education). All the models present average marginal effects using

the tertiary level of education as a reference category.[4] In general, lower levels of education are associated with significant reductions in cultural engagement and socio-political participation, with effect sizes increasing as educational attainment decreases. The effects of education appear more pronounced for Cultural consumption than for Socio-political participation. Across all educational levels below tertiary, the coefficients for cultural consumption are larger in magnitude than those for Socio-political participation, indicating that lower educational attainment has a stronger negative impact on cultural engagement than on socio-political involvement. For example, having only primary education, as opposed to tertiary, is associated with a reduction of 1.034 standard deviations in Cultural consumption, compared to a 0.565 standard deviation reduction in Socio-political participation. This pattern suggests that education level influences cultural engagement more strongly than socio-political participation, potentially highlighting a greater dependency

[4] The first two outcomes are quantitative variables that have been standardized, meaning that the coefficient can be interpreted in terms of standard deviations. The other two outcomes are dichotomous variables, and the coefficients are then interpretable in terms of percentage points (pp) differences.

of cultural activities on educational attainment.

Regarding social contacts, lower education levels are associated with higher social isolation. For example, individuals with no formal education have a 13.7 pp lower probability of meeting friends compared to those with tertiary education, while this reduction amount to 25.2 pp in the likelihood of having someone to count on. Moreover, the emerging pattern suggests that lower educational attainment has a greater negative impact on the availability of reliable social support (count on) compared to simply meeting friends or acquaintances.

All in all, these results bring sound empirical evidence in support of our first hypothesis: education is a strong driver of social participation and help people in maintaining durable social connections.

Tab. 2. OLS (cultural and social participation) and logistic (isolation) regression models to estimate the role played by educational level. Source: Aspetti della vita quotidiana (2013-2021).

	Cultural consumption		Socio-political participation		Social contacts (meet)		Social contacts (count on)	
	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
Tertiary (ref.)								
Upper secondary	-0.572***	0.017	-0.292***	0.014	-0.027***	0.007	-0.070***	0.006
Lower secondary	-0.906***	0.016	-0.493***	0.014	-0.022***	0.007	-0.122***	0.006
Primary	-1.034***	0.016	-0.565***	0.014	-0.058***	0.007	-0.183***	0.006
No title	-1.037***	0.017	-0.590***	0.014	-0.137***	0.010	-0.252***	0.009
N	113,289		113,289		113,289		113,289	
R^2/pseudo-R2	0.194		0.107		0.038		0.038	

3.2. The mediation effect of economic resources and health status

Table 3 reports the mediation effect of economic resources and health status. Our findings show that the mediation effects of both economic resources and health status are relatively modest for both cultural and social participation. This suggests that while economic resources and health do play a role, they are

not major pathways through which education influences participation in cultural and social activities. This might indicate that education's impact on these types of participation is more direct or mediated by other factors, such as personal interests, social norms, or intrinsic motivations related to educational level.

In contrast, economic resources and health status have a far stronger mediating effect on contacts, particularly in the context of meeting with social contacts (38 pp for economic resources and 20.3 pp for health) and, to a lesser extent, on relying on social contacts (14.7 pp for economic resources and 3.5 pp for health). This indicates that economic and health resources are more crucial for maintaining and relying on social contacts, likely because these relationships may demand more resources—both financial (for travel, social activities) and health-related (physical ability to engage socially).

The evidence shown so far only partially corroborates our second hypothesis since a relevant mediating effect is in act only for social contacts.

Tab. 3. Mediation effect of economic resources and health status (N=113,289). Source: Aspetti della vita quotidiana (2013-2021).

	Cultural consumption	Socio-political participation	Social contacts (meet)	Social contacts (count on)
Economic resources	3.7%	2.4%	38.0%	14.7%
Health status	0.7%	0.9%	20.3%	3.5%

4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this paper we have analyzed the role played by education in shaping socio-cultural participation and social contacts of elderly people in Italy. Our results emphasize the positive role of education and show how it is mediated by economic resources and health status. In particular, cultural and social participation appear less dependent on economic and health resources, perhaps because they can be pursued individually or in more accessible, community-based contexts. In contrast, maintaining social contacts, especially face-to-face meetings, relies heavily on the availability of both financial and health resources. This distinction implies that educational attainment might facilitate social integration differently: it promotes cultural and social participation through pathways other than financial and health resources, while it supports social contacts more significantly through these resources.

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