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3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

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

PROCEEDINGS

01

Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance

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

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Fondazione
di Sardegna

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
Graganiello Deborah	253
Tammaro Rosanna	253
Tiso Maria	253
Peer Feedback as a Lever for Enhancing Reading Comprehension in Primary Schools: An Evidence-Based Experience	262
Antonio Marzano	262
Rossella Luongo	262
Rossella Vaccaro	262
The Role of Teachers in the Framework of Self Determination Theory: A Research Training Project	269
Sergio Miranda	269
Ludovico Vespasiani	269
Early school leaving in Camorra Territories: An Exploratory Research on the Motivation to Study	277
Carmen Lucia Moccia	277
Fausta Sabatano	277
Paola Aiello	277

The interprofessional collaboration between teachers and school social workers for the prevention of school failure and early school leaving. The <i>Provaci Ancora Sam! project</i>	284
Paolo Bianchini	284
Francesco Pongiluppi	284
Stepping out of Failure Stories by Stepping in the <i>Kepler Lab</i> : a Quasi-Experiment on Affective-Motivational and Instructional Mechanisms of Progressing	292
Marco Spampinato	292
Andrea Conficoni	292
Educational policies and the Neet phenomenon in Campania Region	303
Rosa Vegliante	303
Coppola Margherita	303
The vertical structure of educational inequalities in Italy	311
Adamo Lo Cicero	311
Orazio Giancola	311
Non-Predicted trajectories: educational choices over the reproduction of predicted paths	322
Matteo Bonanni	322
Orazio Giancola	322
Do decentralized campuses promote equality of educational opportunity? The case of the University of Turin	332
Federica Cornali	332
Valentina Goglio	332
I'll Be a Doctor: Medical Specialization Choices from a Gender Perspective	342
Domenico Carbone	342
Joselle Dagnes	342
Emerging Youth, Ideal Ages of Transition to Adulthood and Students' Post-diploma School Choices	351
Giuliana Parente	351
The choice of field of study at the tertiary level: the analytic approach of mapping 2.0 and main results	359
Federica Rizzi	359
Adamo Lo Cicero	359
Orazio Giancola	359
School choice and job expectations of Italian pupils after the covid19 pandemic	373
Marialuisa Villani	373
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 <i>habitus</i>	640
Emanuela Susca	640
Elena Gremigni	640
University studies and changes in <i>habitus</i> . Exploratory research on first-generation students	644
Elena Gremigni	644
To Leave or Not to Leave: Experiences of University-Student Dropouts in Croatia	652
Iva Odak	652
Nikola Baketa	652
Saša Puzić	652
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 Analyst	681
Giuditta Occhiocupo	681
Alessandra Pedone	681

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

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

The transformative mission of universities: Personal trajectories and institutional drivers of community engaged scholarship	884
Andrea Vargiu	884
Emanuela Reale	884
Andrea Orazio Spinello	884
Valentina Ghibellini	884
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 <i>Pereživanie</i> in Autobiographical Memory Activities Within the Class Group	935
Stefano Costantini	935
Bringing Education Back to School: An Action Research Project to Strengthen Teacher Professionalism and Avoid the Medicalisation of Schooling	943
Valerio Ferrero	943
Anna Granata	943
Listening to Silent Voices: An Investigation into the Student Voice Approach to Promote Inclusiveness and Student Well-being	953
Federica Festa	953
Alice Di Leva	953
The <i>Writing Workshop</i> as a student-centred approach: strengths and weaknesses	962
Charlotte Kohlloffel	962
The Children of Mixed Couples in the Postdigital Age: When Digital and Intercultural Competences Come Together	979
Stefano Pasta	979
Michele Marangi	979
The Contribution of Complexity Epistemology to a Critical Analysis of the “Child at the Center” Pedagogical Imperative	989
Letizia Rota	989
Equity, Justice, Inclusion at Schools	997
Giorgia Ruzzante	997
Wellbeing at school: Between different languages and family cultures	1001
Silvia Sordella	1001

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

Financial Knowledge and Household Vulnerability. Evidence from Italy	1128
Riccardo Grazioli	1128
Financial Education in Italy: Training The Future Teachers	1136
Claudia Maurini	1136
Luca Refrigeri	1136
Carlotta Rossi	1136
Maria 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
Moirà 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
Leferov Petar Vasilev	1447
Strengthen the School-family-services partnership through the implementation of the P.I.P.P.I LEPS	1456
Claudia Marcellan	1456
Paola Milani	1456
Preventing and combating early school leaving since early childhood. Towards a dynamic, situated and eco-systemic approach to promote equality, social cohesion and justice	1464
Luisa Zecca	1464
Chiara Bove	1464
Social Inclusion Through Sport and Physical Education	1469
Luciana Taddei	1469
Luca Bianchi	1469
Social justice and ageing: older learners as active citizens in a complex system	1474
Vanna Boffo	1474
Laura Formenti	1474
Activating the Potential of Older Adults: Education and Active Aging in Italy	1479
Michele Bertani	1479
Donatella Bramanti	1479
Sara Nanetti	1479

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

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

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

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

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

Stream G

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE EDUCATIONAL FIELD

EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION. BUILDING INCLUSIVE CULTURES AND PROFESSIONALISM THROUGH UNIVERSITY SERVICE LEARNING

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Promoting universities as hubs for fostering citizenship presents a challenge that balances the development of competencies with the need to nurture democratic attitudes. The Service Learning approach (SL) offers a promising response, providing an innovative, philosophically grounded, and socially responsible methodology aligned with universities' commitment to social responsibility. This paper examines the institutionalisation of SL at the University of Palermo, focusing on developing an evaluative framework and implementing SL initiative within the master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences. Integrating theory and practice, SL enables future pedagogists to engage in community service while reflecting on classroom experiences and fostering civic engagement. In this context, SL represents a "pedagogical formula" that bridges university education with societal needs, emphasising inclusion, participation, democracy, and solidarity. For the master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences, this approach provides a unique opportunity to position the university at the forefront of social progress, promoting inclusive processes and active citizenship.

civic engagement; higher education; inclusive processes; pedagogical professionalism; service learning.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to describe a SL programme implemented within the degree programmes at the University of Palermo during the academic year 2023/2024. The initiative forms part of a two-year university project spearheaded by the Centre for Innovation and Improvement of University Teaching (CIMDU). The

overarching objectives of the project are threefold: (a) to enhance the educational effectiveness of degree courses; (b) to foster active student involvement, thereby increasing motivation and promoting autonomy and self-awareness in their academic journeys; and (c) to support marginalised communities within the local area. SL emerges as an innovative pedagogical strategy that seamlessly integrates academic learning with community engagement. This approach directly connects theoretical knowledge with practical application, allowing students to partake in civic initiatives while cultivating reflective and critical thinking skills.

Particular attention will be given to the multilevel and transversal implemented evaluation system, emphasising its application in the master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences focused on ensuring a robust assessment of student performance, on the one hand, and the broader impacts of the SL initiative, on the other, while simultaneously enriching the students' professional preparation.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The 2021 UNESCO report, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, underscores education's transformative potential. It advocates for a paradigm shift in teaching and learning methodologies, rooted in collaboration, solidarity, and a model centred on care. The report proposes a comprehensive social contract that broadens the concept of citizenship, integrating civil society and fostering interdependence among knowledge systems, societal frameworks, and educational processes (Tarozzi & Milana, 2022). Within this framework, innovative methodologies such as SL play a pivotal role. By linking social and academic competencies, SL fosters active citizenship and addresses educational disparities through cooperative learning practices (Cinque et al., 2021).

In literature, there are more than 200 definitions of SL, each offering a unique nuance to the practice. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) define SL as an educational experience that combines academic learning and community service through a process of critical reflection. This allows students to gain a deeper understanding of disciplinary content, develop civic responsibilities, and appreciate the connection between theory and practice. In this way, the model is recognised for its transformative potential, offering authentic and meaningful learning opportunities that transcend barriers between social classes and cultural contexts. Definitions such as this help distinguish SL from other

experiential learning experiences, focusing on the mutual benefit for both students and communities. Through participatory design, communities become active partners in the educational process, rather than simply recipients of service. As Ferrari and Chapman (2014) point out, SL strengthens students' theoretical understanding by applying it practically, offering a holistic view of learning.

Grounded in experiential learning theories (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), SL fosters the cyclical interplay between concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This dynamic underpins the theoretical frameworks essential for integrating SL into academic curricula, facilitating a holistic development of students' personal, professional, and civic competencies. Additional theoretical lenses, including social-cognitive theory and cultural-historical activity theory, further underscore SL's capacity to merge pedagogical goals with societal needs (Carson & Raguse, 2014).

The multifaceted benefits of SL are evident across its key stakeholders:

- Communities benefit from enhanced social cohesion, targeted interventions, and sustainable problem-solving practices.
- Students develop critical thinking, teamwork, and professional skills, along with a heightened awareness of social responsibility.
- Academic staff and institutions gain opportunities to innovate teaching practices, engage in interdisciplinary research, and strengthen community-university partnerships (Salam et al., 2017).

2. REASONS FOR IMPLEMENTING SL AT THE MASTER'S DEGREE IN PEDAGOGICAL SCIENCES

At the University of Palermo, SL represents a cornerstone of academic innovation, redefining the pedagogical relationship between universities and local communities. This approach is more than an instructional method; it is a transformative framework that reimagines curricula to align with the university's mission of fostering democratic citizenship and addressing societal challenges. Through SL, the university cultivates an environment of empowerment, encouraging students and educators to collaboratively engage in community-driven projects. It answers the call of the University that regards social responsibility as an integral part of its mission. SL, therefore, becomes a reflective practice for all involved, as immersion in the field is guided by an ongoing feedback loop of thought and action. This allows participants to see

themselves as part of a complex and interconnected reality.

This highlights the value dimension of SL, which does not merely interpret the university's third mission as a reciprocal relationship of service but enriches it by creating contexts that foster empowerment and the development of truly democratic cultures and practices.

Specifically for the degrees in Pedagogical Sciences, the literature emphasises the need to train professionals capable of exercising critical judgment and decision-making through complex processes: associating ideas, revisiting perspectives, reframing problems, and changing attitudes or behaviours. In this sense, educational action is always a *praxis*, a transformative knowledge-action aimed at fostering change through the creative implementation of purpose (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1978). This underscores the importance for professional pedagogists to develop reflective and creative competence, allowing them to question their assumptions and modify their approach in an informed and deliberate manner. From this perspective, it is crucial to avoid performance-driven approaches focused solely on technical rationality in the design, management, coordination, and monitoring of university training programmes for pedagogists. Instead, training should be grounded in solid epistemological, theoretical, and methodological foundations that respect the educational nature of their role. This entails moving away from what Biesta (2006) calls *learnification*, which reduces education to an individualistic process focused on producing performers within a competitive system, rather than fostering mutual recognition and promoting an inclusive, democratic society. From this perspective, the question of competence becomes central. Competence, understood as the ability to independently and responsibly manage one's knowledge and skills, must empower pedagogists to think of themselves as true professionals (Fioretti et al., 2023).

The University of Palermo's master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences SL, grounded in the rediscovery of ideas that have shaped pedagogical culture and its core values, offered an opportunity to place the university at the heart of pedagogical services and policies aimed at promoting social progress. It involved teachers and students in a teaching and learning process that challenges academic knowledge, making it more relevant and effective in addressing critical community needs: on the one hand, it integrated the theoretical and practical dimensions of learning through activities closely aligned with disciplinary content; on the other, it addressed a structural gap in the programme, which, in 2023-2024, lacked a mandatory curricular internship.

Fig. 1. An overview of the SL programme for the master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences

Subject	Target	Partner
Special Pedagogy for Inclusion (Prof. F. Pedone)	Design and implementation of socio-pedagogical services and interventions aimed at vulnerable people and those at high risk of marginalisation, especially children and young people with socio-cultural disadvantage, unaccompanied foreign minors and people with disabilities	Social Cooperative 'Libera... mente' (PA) Foudation 'MondoAltro' (AG)
Foundation of educational research (Proff. G. D'Addelfio, L. Romano, F. Alba)	Design and implementation of socio-pedagogical services and interventions aimed at non-EU immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers	'Centro Astalli' (PA)
Teaching Methodology (Prof. A. La Marca)	Design and implementation of services and interventions for the prevention of early school leaving and is aimed at students in schools of the first cycle of disadvantaged neighbourhoods	'Scuole a rischio' (PA)
Family Psychology: Marginality and Deviance (Prof. C. Novara)	Actions in support of the Family Space concerning the tasks of information/education/orientation of the couple to the services of the territory. The beneficiaries are the partners who apply to the court to initiate separation proceedings, to prevent the climate of tensions between the partners, which would also have repercussions on the children.	'Spazio Famiglie', (born from the Agreement between the SPPEFF Department and the Court of Palermo)
Theories, Strategies and Systems of Education (Prof. E. Mignosi)	Reading of picture books in the paediatrics wards of the Polyclinic and the Children's Hospital. hospitalised children between the ages of 2 and 10 who are not long-term patients	Paediatrics departments of the Polyclinic and Children's Hospital UNIPA Library Service

To ensure comprehensive SL implementation, it was adopted Musa and collaborators (2017) three-phase model:

- Project Planning, engaging stakeholders in co-creating objectives and methodologies.
- Service Delivery, facilitating hands-on, community-centred activities aligned with disciplinary content.
- Evaluation and Reflection, employing rigorous assessment tools to measure impact and facilitate continuous improvement.

During the 2023/2024 academic year, the programme encompassed the involvement of 120 students, five academic subjects, and six community stakeholders, underscoring the initiative's collaborative ethos.

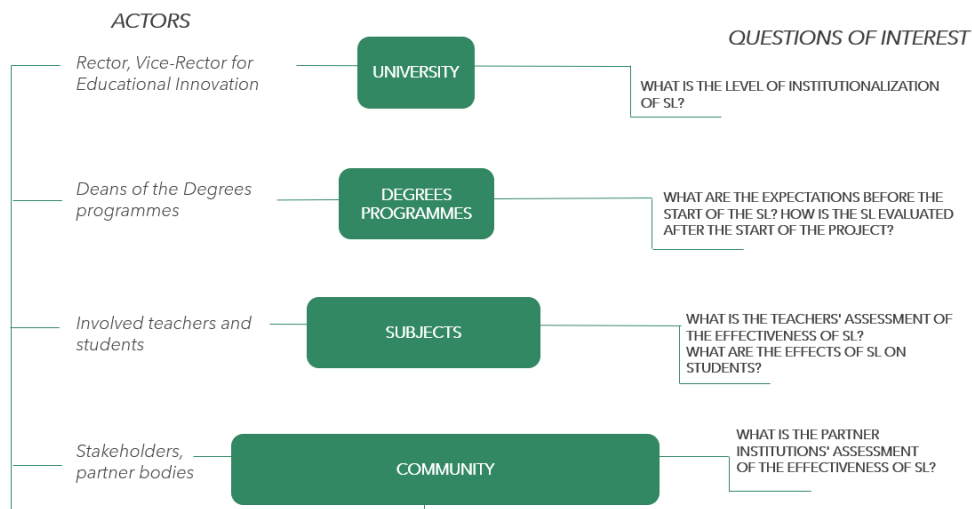
3. THE EVALUATION SYSTEM

To position SL as a “new model of excellence” in higher education (Zlotkowski, 1998), it must be fully integrated into the university's evaluation processes. The evaluation of SL is crucial in ensuring its meaningful impact, both in terms of achieving learning objectives and contributing to educational innovation and the well-being of the involved communities.

Over two decades of research have shown that high-quality SL enhances student learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler et al., 2001). It is recognised that significant evaluation helps integrate SL into the debate about the quality of university education. It responds to concerns that universities do not adequately focus on skills that guarantee success beyond academia, such as critical thinking, real-world problem-solving, or the ability to transfer theoretical knowledge into practice. Substantial scientific evidence indicates that engaging in effective and rigorous reflection is key to enhancing the impact of SL. Reflections provide valuable insights into what students are learning, the depth of their learning, and how critically they engage with their experiences.

The evaluation system adopted for the entire project is multilevel and transversal: multilevel, as it applies simultaneously to the university, individual degree programmes, professors, students, and community partners; transversal, as it involves and monitors eight SL projects across eight different degree programmes over two years.

Fig. 2. The multilevel evaluation system and its questions of interest



The multilevel and transversal evaluation system employed in this project addresses the complexities of SL integration. At the institutional level, the SL Level Self-Assessment rubric (Furco, 1996) provided a structured analysis across five dimensions, facilitating continuous assessment of SL's institutionalisation:

- Philosophy and Mission of SL.
- Faculty Support and Engagement in SL.
- Student Support and Engagement in SL.
- Community Participation and Partnerships.
- Institutional Support for SL.

For academic staff, reflective journals and narrative notebooks served as tools for documenting pedagogical practices and identifying areas for improvement. Student evaluations combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Core tools included:

- Self-assessment protocols, encompassing the Soft Skills Scale (Lucisano & Rubat du Merac, 2019), the Self-Efficacy Scale (Di Nuovo & Magnano, 2013), and the Civic Commitment Scale (Doolittle & Faul, 2013).
- Reflective reports, guided by the DEAL model (Ash & Clayton, 2009), that structure critical reflection into descriptive, analytical, and interpretive phases.

- Logbooks, optional self-reflection tools facilitating introspection on activities, methodologies, and interpersonal dynamics.

For community partners, semi-structured interviews and collective self-efficacy scales provided insights into the SL initiative's broader impacts.

Collaborative efforts with organisations such as Rai per il Sociale further amplify the initiative's reach, developing a learning machine tool to analyse video reels that students shared on the University's social media to document their experience.

4. IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS

The analysis of data from the first year of the project is ongoing. The aim is to collect feedback that will improve the quality of SL and enhance student learning. Increasing SL evaluation is expected to focus attention on assessments that better measure competencies needed for success outside the academic environment.

To foster interdisciplinary collaboration and community partner engagement, a SL Working Group (G.L.S.L.) has been established. This group aims to:

- Strengthen communication between project participants and local communities.
- Implement advanced monitoring and evaluation tools.
- Promote interdisciplinary collaboration across different degree programmes.

The G.L.S.L. also aims to create a stable network of community partners and integrate digital technologies for documenting and sharing experiences, facilitating real-time feedback and creating digital archives of activities.

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e sociali**

Established in 2012, the **Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Cagliari** is bearer of a tradition of studies and research characterized by interdisciplinarity. The Department of Political and Social Sciences promotes and coordinates research and teaching in social, communicative economic-statistical, legal, historical-political-international.

