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Educational Poverty and Educating Communities: Strategies of Welfare Interventions in Italy

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Abstract

The topic of educational poverty has seen an acceleration and deepening in sociological studies in recent years, renewing a theoretical, methodological and pragmatic interest in the humanities and social sciences. In the Italian context of social policies and partnership welfare, we can identify the renewed importance of Public Entities and Third Sector as an activation engine to find planning, economic, social and human resources in order to mobilize and implement the new model of the “educating community”, assuming a shared and participated responsibility among all subjects and actors involved into the protection of children and minors.

The contemporary perspective about educational poverty’s studies is moving towards the recognition of its multidimensional nature; therefore, this work proposes to clue some of these topics, specifically related to social, political and institutional agency that links together family, school, social services and the territory or community, in an attempt to show and explain the emergence and increasingly visible affirmation of a collective strategy of social intervention capable of promoting innovative actions to combat child educational poverty, through the integrated co-design and implementation of public-private welfare services, to optimize the quality of education, to reduce school dropout and abandonment, to support families and institutions involved in the territorial process, to increase the opportunities of the cultural and educational offer of young people.

Keywords – Social Work; Social Policies; Educational Poverty; Educating Community; Partnership Welfare; Third Sector

Paper type – Academic Research Paper

Sommario

Povert  educativa e comunit  educanti: strategie per interventi di welfare in Italia. – Il tema della povert  educativa ha beneficiato, negli anni pi  recenti, di un rinnovato interesse teorico – a livello teorico, metodologico e pragmatico – nelle scienze umane e sociali. Nel contesto italiano delle politiche sociali e del *partnership welfare*,   possibile riconoscere l'importanza strategica della coprogettazione sociale integrata tra Enti Pubblici e di Terzo Settore come motore di attivazione per individuare risorse progettuali, economiche, sociali e umane al fine di mobilitare e implementare il nuovo modello della "comunit  educante", assumendo una responsabilit  condivisa e partecipata tra tutti i soggetti e gli attori coinvolti nella tutela dei bambini e dei minori.

La prospettiva contemporanea degli studi sulla povert  educativa si sta orientando verso il riconoscimento della sua natura multidimensionale; pertanto, questo lavoro si propone di approfondire alcuni di questi temi, specificamente legati all'azione sociale, politica e istituzionale che collega insieme famiglia, scuola, servizi sociali e territorio o comunit , nel tentativo di mostrare e spiegare il progressivo emergere e l'affermazione ormai visibile di una strategia collettiva di intervento sociale, in grado di promuovere azioni innovative per combattere la povert  educativa infantile, attraverso la realizzazione ed attuazione integrata di servizi di *welfare* pubblico-privato, per ottimizzare la qualit  dell'istruzione, ridurre l'abbandono scolastico, sostenere le famiglie e le istituzioni coinvolte nel processo territoriale, aumentare le opportunit  dell'offerta culturale ed educativa dei giovani.

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1 Overall introduction and methodological perspectives

Studies and research conducted so far have observed and verified a close correlation between material poverty and educational poverty, of which the latter in fact represents a particular complementary aspect of the former; moreover (especially in relation to the analysis of family and educational contexts, i.e. levels of education), educational poverty reveals its dynamics of socio-cultural disruption and dysfunction, to the point of raising new questions and research needs at the level of the human and social sciences, such as the famous capacitation theory (Nussbaum, 2014).

Therefore, in order to respond to these socio-political and economic issues raised by the above-mentioned evidence and distributed in the various local criticalities at national and regional level, innovative forms of community action have been developed, tested and implemented with the aim to combat educational poverty and create new opportunities for families and children, as well as to promote the social development of new generations (Cervia, 2015; Gregori & Gui, 2012; Salmieri, 2021 and 2022; Curti & Fornari, 2022; De Gaetano & Grado, 2022; Giancola & Salmieri, 2023). As we will better see further on, the methodological and operational approach regarding these forms of community action has been developed and implemented directly in the territories, where situations of marginalization and social and economic family poverty exist, with the training of personnel resident in the place where the intervention strategies are subsequently implemented, according to a line of innovation that allows the permanence not only of the positive effects, but also and above all of the actors responsible for the direct operation on the territory.

The main research questions arising from the assumption of these challenges, responding to specific methodological approaches of investigation on the territory, as will be reported and documented in this chapter, are the following:

How to reduce the social impact of poverty, especially in its educational dimension to protect the most vulnerable, such as children?

Which chances for action can best correspond to the socio-economic dynamics of the origin and spread of educational poverty, such as combating the phenomenon of early school leaving?

Is it possible to act at a local level, implementing techniques and opportunities for social learning on the part of local actors, so as to promote greater empowerment and improved effectiveness of planned interventions?

At first, the mobilisation of the social actors was not an easy undertaking, as it was necessary for them to overcome their initial physiological mistrust of the professionals and operators involved in the

implementation of the projects, especially with regard to the needs and expectations that did not match the opportunities and possibilities for the emancipation of the subjects, whose knowledge and skills had yet to be built.

Afterwards, through the organisation of meetings and workshops held directly on site in the very territories where the social distress of minors and families was manifested and with their involvement in the intervention strategies, also with the logistical support and relational help of social service professionals and educational institutions, it was possible to observe the birth and gradual development of a participatory, shared and generative social and institutional cooperation between civil society organizations, private social actors and the welfare system, capable of building and achieving even ambitious goals, since it is not tied to exclusively formal or political top-down dynamics, but produced starting from the contexts and from the people who have needs and social rights of citizenship and protection.

All this has strongly favoured the creation of an “educating community”, i.e. a territory that is aware and self-governing in its own characteristics and ambitions for improvement, using a well known methodological approach related to participative and relational social co-programming, as so far widely used in the recent years among the local social planning practice involving both public and private subjects at institutional level, in order to build a responsibly shared governance and an effective result in applying social policies (De Ambrogio & Guidetti, 2016).

At international level, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has also chosen to use, as an internal reference, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), created for the purpose of representing the simultaneous and overlapping experiences of deprivation experienced by people, in the coexistence of various causal factors and the gradual intensity with which the phenomenon of poverty is perceived: in fact, this new multidimensional connotation of poverty does not only entail material deprivation, mainly linked to the lack or scarcity of income-to, but also the onset of various forms of marginalisation and social exclusion, with the consequent impossibility for individuals and family groups to access social services or housing, to adequately protect their health or provide for their education, as in the specific case of educational poverty, both in the form of opportunities and of self-awareness at a personal level: in this case, we speak of relational poverty (Pasotti, 2020; Duflo, 2021).

For such reason, measures to combat poverty represent one of the most important kind of actions for the effectiveness of social and socio-welfare policies, in their preventive and improvement purposes with respect to situations of difficulty and socio-economic hardship of people and families (Bramanti & Carrà, 2021; Saraceno, Morlicchio, & Benassi, 2022), thanks to the identification and provision of community and territorial resources, as well as the tendency towards optimization of services with a

view to the structurality of interventions with respect to the plurality and non-homogeneity of resources and social spending (Ferraresi, 2018; Ranci Ortigosa, 2018), as appropriately recalled in the National Plan for Interventions and Social Services 2021-2023.

These measures represent even specific forms of institutional and professional actions and intervention carried out by social workers, aimed to answer the challenges launched by the issue of poverty; this is the main contribution of Social Work to the fight against multidimensional poverty in formal and informal terms of coping and direct relationship with the users, made up of people in different age groups and life cycles. The topic of the “educating community”, read in its methodological dimension, responds to all these socio-cultural, economic and professional issues seen by those residing in the territories where situations of emergency insist such as to require a structural intervention and not occasional or limited in time, as is usually the case in the context of network services in the system of usual social work, which do not provide for precisely in any case a duration longer than the moment relating to the offer and provision of services and interventions. Therefore, an attempt is made to overcome the extemporaneous logic, in order to obtain a medium-to long-term investment, both at the human-social level and at the socioeconomic level, thanks to the positive lever of activation of local resources set in motion by the strategy of the educating community, capable of building dynamic interactive networks capable of evolving and adapting to the changes that gradually arise in the environmental context of reference.

We can preliminarily define an educating community as a strongly localised network, made up of relations of solidarity, mutual participation and collaboration, created not by outsiders, but by those who reside and live in a specific territory and who identify with its cultural and social dynamics and share them together. Everyone is therefore called upon to make their own contribution, committing themselves to the creation and educational and socio-cultural development of children, young people and families residing in the same context. To this end, the community is always open to supporting and promoting an informal, collaborative, engaging dialogue also with respect to the different ages and generations involved in the project, with the participation of plural actors among which, in addition to families and schools, we can include voluntary associations, sports and religious organisations and, more generally, Third Sector and civic solidarity actors.

According to the Chart of Educating Communities (the outcome of numerous meetings and reflections resulting from the participatory processes of activation, animation and co-design carried out within the project strategy “Fuoricentro: let’s cultivate the peripheries” between 2019 and 2021 in the territories of the Paganella Plateau, Val di Fassa and Valsugana and Tesino in the Italian Trentino-Alto Adige region), the fields of action of the educating community concern the following points:

- making children, girls and boys, adolescents and youths the main actors;

- promoting schools open to the community;
- supporting the leading role of families;
- making the territory alive;
- taking care of the common goods;
- experiencing nature, fostering sport;
- recognising and connecting projects and initiatives.

Each of the above points may constitute a focus element in project practice, if it is understood as a specific type of community action; or it could be intended in a dynamical interaction with the other points of focus, according to an activating and integrated social logic on different levels and dimensions for the best possible result in terms of social integration and development on the territory.

2 Material and educational poverty in Italy: preliminary outlook and renewed approach to the topic

On the occasion of the celebration, on November 20, of the International Day of the Rights of Children and Adolescents, the Italian Fund for the Contrast of Child Educational Poverty promoted and implemented an important public initiative (lasting three days, from November 18 to 20, 2024), on the theme of child educational poverty, specifically dedicated to the forms of adolescent distress and the protagonist drives of the new generations, as can be observed and evaluated in the actions and interventions of the so-called “educating communities”, together with other public and institutional, professional and social private figures involved: a strong signal of presence and willingness to do one’s best to combat situations of marginalization and social exclusion due to educational poverty.

Previously, on April 29, 2016, as a precursor and inspiring event, the Italian Government, in the person of the President of the Council of Ministers, in implementation of Law no. 208 of 28 December 2015, signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the establishment and management of a Fund for the Fight against Child Educational Poverty, together with the Minister of Economy and Finance, the Minister of Labour and Social Policies, the President of ACRI *Associazione di Fondazioni e Casse di Risparmio* (Association of Banking Foundations and Savings Banks), and representatives of the National Third Sector Forum. This Fund, of central importance for the topic we are discussing, will prove essential with respect to the dynamics of implementing interventions for the protection of minors and adolescents, since it has allowed the implementation throughout the national territory of 353 projects, promoted by the Social Enterprise “Con i Bambini” (recipient of the Fund by the ACRI Association), for an initial amount for the three-year period 2016-2018 equal to 360 million euros, then

extended for a further three-year period 2019-2021 with 255 million euros; again, in 2021 it saw the institutions confirm their commitment to a further extension for the two-year period 2022-2023, and finally, in 2022 the Budget Law n. 234/2021 allowed the renewal of the Fund for 2024, for a total value of over 800 million euros. At present time (Budget Law 2025), it does not appear that the Italian Government has extended the agreement. According to the Social Enterprise “Con i Bambini”, over 500,000 children and young people with their families have been involved in their projects, and over 9,500 Third Sector organizations, schools and public and private bodies, in the logic of the “educating community” into the territories.

This premise appears useful to introduce and present the topic that we will address in this chapter, dedicated to the social welfare intervention strategies implemented in Italy to fight against child educational poverty and proactively involve territorial realities at regional and local level into complex projects of a community nature, according to a logic of integrated and participatory systems, made of social and institutional subjects that are part of networks and areas characterized by unity and collective identity, on whose ethical values to leverage to produce an authentic and tangible shared effort to create effective actions of resilience and social creativity, aimed at eliminating or reducing the risks of marginalization and discrimination linked to poverty in both its material and educational dimensions.

In relation to this, the most recent Istat (*Italian National Statistical Institute*) data confirm a dramatic situation: in 2023, the percentage of minors in the 0-17 age group in absolute poverty stood at 13.8%, a figure far higher than the national average of 9.7%, due to particular conditions such as, for example, single-parent families, or those with parents with a low level of education or a single income, or families affected by the Covid19 emergency or by inflation and the increase in consumer prices (+6.5% on an annual basis in 2023). Families in absolute poverty are just over 2.2 million, or 8.4% of the total number of resident families; in detail, we have the highest incidence among families in the South (10.2%), followed by that of families in the North-West (8.0%), and North-East (7.9%), while in the Center we find the lowest values (6.7%). Among the largest families (with 5 or more children), we have an incidence of absolute poverty higher than 20% (20.1%). The situation is even more serious in the South, with a percentage share of 15.5% of minors.

Along with this situation, Istat notes that the percentage of Italian municipalities where the share of low-income people has increased is equal to 19.3%, confirming the general trend of the last 15 years, that is, that as age decreases, the incidence of absolute poverty increases; therefore, minors remain the age group most affected, exceeding the traditional poverty bracket which mainly concerned, at least until the beginning of the first decade of the 2000s, the older people. In general terms, in 2023 almost 1.3 million minors will live in absolute poverty, with an incidence of 14%, with higher values than the national average for both 18-34 year-olds (11.9%) and 35-44 year-olds (11.8%).

Considered on a chronological level in the period 2014-2023, the situation of individual absolute poverty increased by 2.9 percentage points, with an incidence of individual poverty among employed people of 2.7%, going from 4.9 in 2014 to 5.3 in 2019, to reach 7.6% in 2023. Tables 1, 2 and 3 illustrate the above, detailing the breakdown of the regional contexts within which poverty was measured in Italy in the years 2022-2023, according to household, personal and residential indicators with respect to the overall percentage composition, incidence and intensity of poverty measured.

At European level, Eurostat data are not much more encouraging: in 2023, the risk of poverty directly affected 16.2% of the entire European population. In particular, 10 regions showed a risk higher than 30%, with peaks of 38% and 40.6% in Sicily and Calabria respectively (Eurostat, 2024); in 2022, the percentage of minors at risk of poverty or social exclusion stood at around 24.7%, or almost one in four minors, in circumstances related to indigence or material deprivation, as shown in Figure 1.

**Table 1 – Absolute poverty indicators by geographical distribution:
Northern Italy**
(estimates in thousands of units and percentage values)

Categories	North		North-West		North-East	
	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023
Absolute values						
Poor families	939	998	531	585	408	413
Resident families	12,533	12,556	7,337	7,350	5,196	5,206
Poor persons	2,298	2,412	1,259	1,423	1,003	990
Resident persons	27,136	27,165	15,694	15,713	11,442	11,452
Composition (%)						
Poor families	42.9	45.0	24.3	26.4	18.7	18.6
Resident families	47.6	47.6	27.9	27.9	19.7	19.7
Poor persons	40.5	42.4	22.8	25	17.7	17.4
Resident persons	46.4	46.5	26.8	26.9	19.5	19.6
Poverty incidence (%)						
Families	7.5	7.9	7.2	8.0	7.9	7.9
Persons	8.5	8.9	8.2	9.1	8.8	8.6
Poverty intensity (%)						
Families	17.6	18.6	18.5	19.0	16.5	18.0

Source: Istat (2024)

**Table 2 – Absolute poverty indicators by geographical distribution:
Central and Southern Italy**
(estimates in thousands of units and percentage values)

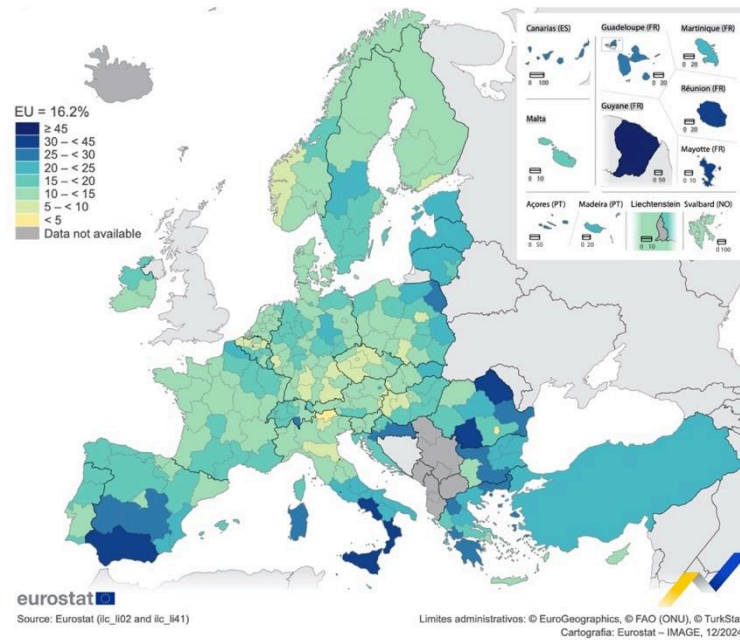
Categories	Central Italy		Mid South		South	
	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023
Absolute values						
Poor families	342	360	906	859	630	572
Resident families	5,349	5,359	8,439	8,446	5,614	5,621
Poor persons	874	918	2,502	2,363	1,780	1,609
Resident persons	11,626	11,617	19,780	19,701	13,408	13,360
Composition (%)						
Poor families	15.6	16.2	41.4	38.7	28.8	25.8
Resident families	20.3	20.3	32.1	32.0	21.3	21.3
Poor persons	15.4	16.1	44.1	41.5	31.4	28.3
Resident persons	19.9	19.9	33.8	33.7	22.9	22.8
Poverty incidence (%)						
Families	6.4	6.7	10.7	10.2	11.2	10.2
Persons	7.5	7.9	12.6	21.0	13.3	12.0
Poverty intensity (%)						
Families	17.1	18.0	19.3	17.8	19.0	18.6

Source: Istat (2024)

**Table 3 – Absolute poverty indicators by geographical distribution:
Islands and total Italy**
(estimates in thousands of units and percentage values)

Categories	Islands		Italy	
	2022	2023	2022	2023
Absolute values				
Poor families	276	287	2,187	2,217.2
Resident families	2,825	2,826	26,320	26,360.8
Poor persons	722	754	5,674	5,693.8
Resident persons	6,372	6,340	58,542	58,482.4
Composition (%)				
Poor families	12.6	12.9	100.0	100.0
Resident families	10.7	10.7	100.0	100.0
Poor persons	12.7	13.2	100.0	100.0
Resident persons	10.9	10.8	100.0	100.0
Poverty incidence (%)				
Families	9.8	10.2	8.3	8.4
Persons	11.3	11.9	9.7	9.7
Poverty intensity (%)				
Families	20.0	16.2	18.2	18.2

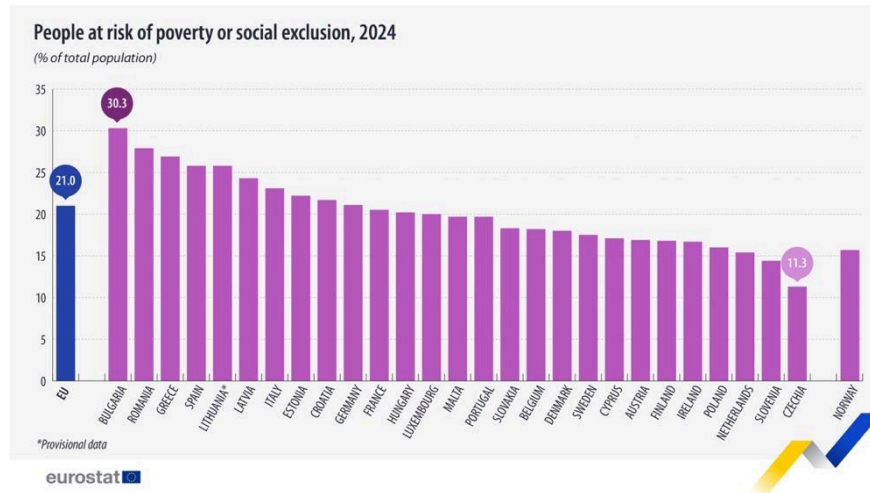
Source: Istat (2024)

Figure 1 – Risk of poverty among European regions

Source: Eurostat (2024)

These elements exist for 28.5% of Italian minors, together with those of Romania (41.5%), Bulgaria (33.9%) and Spain (32.2%). Also in this case, the absolute numbers for the analysis of minors at risk of poverty and social exclusion are not very comforting: the Italians are 2.66 million, the Germans 3.49 million, the French 3.75 million, the Spanish 2.60 million, the Romanians 1.49 million, the Greeks 0.49 million (Eurostat, 2024).

About the nowadays situation, we can read on Eurostat updated data: 93.3 million people in the EU (21.0% of the population) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which means they lived in households experiencing at least 1 of 3 poverty and social exclusion risks: risk of poverty, severe material and social deprivation, and living in a household with very low work intensity. Compared with 2023, there was a slight decrease of 0.3 percentage points (21.3%) of the population, 94.6 million people» (Eurostat, 2024). Below (Figure 2) the related map of poverty / social exclusion's risk distribution is reported.

Figure 2 –People at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Source: Eurostat (2025)

3 Fighting educational poverty: models and actions

The Fund for the Fight against Child Educational Poverty is particularly important in the panorama of organizational innovations and institutional measures, mainly for two reasons.

The first one concerns the topic – which is an integral part of this chapter – of “educating communities”, since it put to center – as a methodological and operational focus of the local context – the relationship between school, families and territory, intended as a guideline for the promotion and activation of formal and informal institutional networks capable of mutually assuming a great participatory responsibility in the development of social projects and interventions. From this point of view, it is plausible to define the same educational communities as structured sets of collaborative networks, nourished from within through the active participation of the inhabitants themselves, in a sort of “residential identity” (Pasotti, 2011) capable of recognizing and protecting interests and rights for the complete realization of the well-being and healthy development of minors and adolescents. This is why, as can be easily seen, local welfare is strongly involved in the process of implementing the educational community, for its morphogenetic strategy of valorization and promotion of community and personal resources and tools.

The second reason officially opens and legitimises – for the purposes of appropriateness and completeness in the analysis of the results and of the effectiveness/efficiency/quality of the actions undertaken within the network interventions – the practice of “impact evaluation”, which represents a fundamental tool for the deep and exhaustive understanding of the complexity of the design and programming elements defined by the projects (Scardigno, 2020). In fact, we can rightly believe that the Fund for the Fight against Child Educational Poverty has undoubtedly contributed, in its dynamics of innovative and participatory planning and programming (according to the partnership welfare model also legitimized by the directives of the European Union), to foster the practice of evaluation, as an instance of analysis and understanding of the objectives and results expected and obtained with respect to the initiatives that are the object of the various funding, with the consequent awareness of the need for a generative and cultural transformation on the theme of social policies under the responsibility of political, socio-economic and social actors involved in various capacities in the realization of an innovative concept of evaluation, intended as a structured and recognizable form of learning and widespread knowledge of common goods, with respect to which citizens and stakeholders in general are called to express themselves.

This awareness is also clear when considering the results of the first round of projects related to the theme of the Fund, namely the 2017 Early Childhood Call, where 80 projects aimed at minors in the 0-6 age group were funded. As the President of the “Con i Bambini” Foundation himself states, in the *Introduction* to the Report:

« (...) the Fund has established, since the very first calls, that each individual project financed should include an evaluation of the impacts produced, ensuring that each impact evaluation was carried out by qualified and competent bodies, suitable for this task. And right from the start the Fund and “Con i Bambini” wanted to involve the entire Italian scientific and impact evaluation community in this challenge, mobilizing over 100 evaluation bodies for the Fund’s projects, from 2016 to today. So much so that now the construction sites activated thanks to the Fund represent the largest evaluation arena beyond public schools. It was and is a powerful innovative challenge whose initial results are positive. In a country, in fact, where evaluation by those who operate struggles to become ordinary and shared, precisely in the areas of great social suffering and often painful exclusion, a real sharing of the “culture of results” by organizations and operators in action in situations of social and educational empowerment is significantly strengthening. Evaluating initiatives to combat educational poverty in its various and complex dimensions has progressively become an “ordinary” dimension of the work of those in the field and the figures of those who evaluate have become part of the scene, which involves sharing a perspective and a working method, a lexicon and co-constructing a common feeling» (Fondazione “Con i Bambini”, 2024).

In recent years, a decisive interest in the study and theoretical exploration of the issue of educational poverty has raised, especially on the part of the humanities and social sciences, due to the new and different meanings and definitions with which this important phenomenon has been investigated (Sen, 1992; Chakravarty & D’Ambrosio, 2006; Gregori & Gui, 2012; Robeyns, 2017; Di Profio, 2020; Chiusaroli, 2021; Curti & Fornari, 2022; Sottocorno, 2022; Saraceno, Benassi, Morlicchio, 2022; Patera, 2022; Salmieri, 2023; Giancola & Salmieri, 2023; Di Genova, 2023; Finetti, 2023; Armenise,

Corlianò, 2024; Morsanuto, Peluso Cassese, 2024; Gabrielli, 2024). These studies have identified and analyzed in detail educational poverty, allowing to highlight its structural connection with economic or material poverty (rightly considered to be dangerous for the new generations, due to the risk of compromising a solid and integral human, personal and social development of minors); this latter aspect is of great relevance for the definition of the complexity of the theme, mainly on issues considered transversal to different humanistic disciplines, such as the theory of capabilities proposed by Sen (1999) and by Nussbaum (2011).

The fight against educational poverty is mainly perceived as a planning tool for the implementation of welfare services and improving the quality of education or cultural offerings; however, educational poverty appears to be an extremely multifaceted and complex concept, especially after the recent revisions and analytical updates carried out by the scientific community that has redefined and expanded its definitions, roles, functions and indicators for the purposes of applied research. Educational poverty constitutes a further “focus” of the theme of poverty, an interesting subject for deeper sociological reflections, along with the definition of the “new poverties” (Bauman, 2018).

It has been possible to identify the value of education as an effective strategy to combat the educational poverty of minors and families (Chiusaroli, 2021), with a view to the promotion of social, relational and affective dimensions adequately developed in the family and community context also from a pedagogical perspective (Gnocchi, Mari 2016). Social services themselves have realised the importance of offering minors and young people in difficulty more and better educational perspectives through an innovative partnership practice introduced and promoted by forms of local collaboration between the public and the private social sector.

The analysis of the characteristics of educational poverty is contextualised starting from the post-industrial era and the season of “transition policies”, aimed at combining educational needs with those of the labour market, in the historical and political space of reference known as the “half-century compromise” (Habermas 1999). A period of contradictions and innovative welfare thrusts, towards the affirmation of the “European Social Model” with its Social Investment Approach and the foundation of a properly European political space (Costa, 2012; Pasotti, 2019), capable of overcoming the welfare state conception, proposing a new “generational pact” thanks to the theses on the social investment approach elaborated, among others, by Esping-Andersen (2010). Reconciliation policies develop a proactive relationship between citizens and institutions: thus, the aim of social services is to promote and apply every social policy oriented to protect citizens, especially when they are in poverty, according to the theory of capability approach intended as a potential tool for combating educational poverty.

The Italian Social Service and Social Work have always represented a valuable protection for communities, citizens and families with difficulty, offering them, within the field of its specific

functions (in addition to interventions and benefits), different types of money transfers and economic support, according to a line that anticipated the practice of minimum incomes implemented in Italy, unfortunately only starting from 2016, initially with the Support for Active Inclusion (*Sostegno per l'Inclusione Attiva*, SIA), subsequently with the Inclusion Income (*Reddito di Inclusione*, ReI) and then with the Citizenship Income (*Reddito di Cittadinanza*, RdC) (Salmieri, 2021). Therefore, these latest measures constitute a further regulatory and socioeconomic evolution of the necessary responses – in terms of sustainability and innovation of social policies – to the challenges represented by new social risks (Bonoli, Natali, 2012).

Factors capable of directly affecting the onset of educational poverty are to be found in the diminished social protection traditionally represented by the family system, due to circles such as demographic ageing and female employment and to the increased economic vulnerability caused by flexibility and job pre-security, a phenomenon exploded within the apparent emancipatory perspectives of the technocratic and global society (Beck, 2000), with increasing numbers of individuals and households falling into temporary, if not permanent, poverty (Saraceno, 2015).

In the field of Italian Social Service and Social Work, the term “generative welfare” is a well known expression, indicating precisely those stimuli and proactive attitudes capable of promoting potentialities, capacities, tools and resources understood as an investment for people, groups, communities and institutions, further emphasising the trifocal value of the “capacitating” reading of the social world. Only a “capacitating” behaviour can positively generate a profit or investment endowed with social value, in an anti-utilitarian perspective, towards the proposal of a well-being understood as the availability of opportunities and capacitations (Nussbaum, 2014) able to provide the person with those “functions” of investing one’s own propensities, with a positive amplification effect due to the simultaneous increase of economic development and social progress (Sen, 1992).

4 Actors and pathways of social innovation against educational poverty in Italy

As can be seen from the previous paragraph, the initiatives and institutional projects produced to combat material and educational poverty constitute a collective and common patrimony of assets, knowledge and skills translated into terms of activation of resources and overall strategies of community mobilisation at the local level. Therefore, we can affirm that, in the context of such realities, there is undoubtedly a specific logic of action, based on the integrated and multi-level participation of different actors and stakeholders, who, in order to optimise the synergy, effectiveness and efficiency of the objectives set by their project interactions place themselves in a relational reciprocity aimed at the

construction and implementation of enlarged partnerships, moreover following a historical Italian and European trend oriented towards the welfare partnership model, capable of exalting and enhancing the dynamics of co-planning and public-private governance (Pasotti, 2017).

In fact, in addition to the national initiatives put in place, starting with the already mentioned Fund for Combating Child Poverty in 2016 and passing through the “Educare in Comune” Notice of the Department for Family Policies to finance intervention projects at municipal level in 2020, and the funding line activated by the Ministry of Education, aimed at projects against school drop-out in schools in 2021, the European Union’s Next Generation EU (called in Italy PNRR, “Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza”, National Recovery and Resilience Plan) also ushers in an era of important investments on the issue of educational poverty, introducing structural intervention logics in southern Italy to support Third Sector Entities, new protagonists on the social and economic scene of the welfare partnership, with calls for projects by the national Territorial Cohesion Agency.

In recent years, the Third Sector has seen the development and affirmation of partnership initiatives for the co-design of services (De Ambrogio & Guidetti, 2016), with a decisive re-evaluation of its importance at the territorial level, committing itself jointly with the professional social service and public institutions in the design of various initiatives in favour of childhood and adolescence, with the development of projects, paths, synergies, along an ideal line of development of policies oriented by a systemic and integrated strategy on the territory. In this way, the Third Sector becomes a true protagonist of innovation in the field of social policies at the local level, redefining and updating the classical expression – formerly argued by Achille Ardigò (1981) – of “intermediate body” or that strategic element of connection between individual civil actors (citizens understood as recipients and beneficiaries of policies) and welfare institutions (mainly public); the latter have developed, after the crisis of the welfare state, various forms of collaboration and interaction with these intermediate bodies, which in the meantime have become institutions of a private nature, but specifically dedicated to the design and implementation of social welfare services and support to public bodies, in a dialogue that is gradually becoming more and more intense and decisive for the destiny of the new Welfare Partnership, now fully acquired as an interactive way of designing and developing networks of services and interventions in the regional territories (Bassanini, Treu, & Vittadini, 2024).

From the perspective of its own reform Law (2016 Act, n. 106/2016), the Third Sector is considered as an engine of innovation for the integrated planning and co-design of services in partnership forms, thus re-evaluating its strategic importance both at the local level and in the public institutional contexts of implementation of welfare policies and social intervention in the territories. A survey carried out by the CNEL, Consiglio Nazionale dell’Economia e del Lavoro (National Economy and Labour Council), with the “Astrid” Foundation and the Foundation for Subsidiarity, about the presence and spread

throughout the Italian territory of Third Sector bodies and actors (Bassanini, Treu, & Vittadini, 2021) made it possible to identify 375.000 territorial entities (social firms, voluntary associations, foundations, etc.), with over 10 million people, involved in various ways in activities directly planned and co-designed by the Third Sector. Approximately 65% of these organisations are involved in sports, cultural and recreational activities. The pandemic would not have prevented, but enhanced instead, and amplified the fundamental role of the Third Sector in Italy, since it has supported, with participatory and partnership strategies and actions, public intervention, especially in particularly relevant fields, such as social assistance and health.

The main purpose of these innovation paths and strategies is appropriately represented by the fight against poverty in its different forms and expressions, including the educational and/or relational one, for the support of which the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies has allocated the measures and amounts set forth in the National Plan for Inclusion and the Fight against Poverty 2021-2027, preceded respectively by the National Plan for Social Interventions and Services or Poverty Plan 2021-2023, and the National Poverty Fund 2018-2020. Beyond the economic-financial aspects, it seems opportune to highlight the operational structure of the 2021-2027 National Plan for Inclusion and the Fight against Poverty, characterised according to four different lines of intervention with specific objectives, namely:

- support for social inclusion and fight against poverty;
- EU Childhood Guarantee;
- fight against material deprivation;
- infrastructural interventions for socio-economic inclusion.

The objectives of the 2021-2027 programming are as follows: a) the widening of the aims of intervention and its specification by target; b) the financing of innovative services and activities; c) coordination and synergic collaboration with social services interventions; d) governance as a form of structural management of interventions. Moreover, the adoption of the *Child Guarantee* by the European Union in 2021 brings together the fight against child poverty – through access to a wide range of educational, nutritional, housing and social services – and the fight against child educational poverty, promoting the realisation of community and national projects with public policies aimed at the identification and multidisciplinary treatment of the phenomenon, with a view to its effective reduction.

A glance at the most recent Italian Budget Law 2025-2027 can help to give some overall hints about the regulatory developments and evolutions and on the economic-financial conditions of the resources allocated to social policies; it therefore represents a litmus test with respect to the consideration of the priorities attributed by the government to the most relevant social and sociomedical urgencies and emergencies, as well as to the role and importance attributed to the Third Sector, for the purposes of

institutional support aimed at promoting and implementing the welfare partnership and maintaining social cohesion.

In particular, we can list, if only by way of example:

- Fund for Non-self-Sufficiency (Law 296/2006), progressively increased especially from 2020 onwards, with an endowment of more than 1 billion euros to cover the needs of this type of citizen, with further regulatory legitimacy thanks to the promulgation of Delegated Law 33 of 2023 and Legislative Decree 29 of 2024 the so-called “Older People Decree”;
- Universal Civil Service Fund (the latter included in a structural manner in the Third Sector Reform Law 106/2016), which saw an increase in its financial endowment to more than double the previous endowment (from 140 to 320 million euros for each year);
- Fund for Third Sector Entities, which suffers a 10% linear cut from its previous allocation, amounting to € 56 million;
- Fund for Fighting Poverty (Law 386/2016), which has undergone several contractions and cuts over time, falling from more than € 1.7 billion in 2017 to just € 617 million for the three-year period covered by the Budget Law. This reduction is mainly to be attributed to the government’s adoption of different instruments and supports than in the past, such as to entail a greater selectivity of the conditions of access and thus a significant decrease in the number of citizens entitled, but this strongly impacts the persistent dramatic socio-economic situation of the population, due to the combined and repeated effects of various emergencies and critical situations, including the Covid-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, and the Russian-Ukrainian war, which, together with the financial reduction, have made it even more difficult for social policies to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable population, with the obvious result of high inequality. Support for Training and Employment (linked to the Poverty Alleviation Fund) also suffers a linear cut from EUR 1.1 billion to just EUR 606 million;
- Child Educational Poverty Contrast Fund (Law 208/2015), which undoubtedly represents the focus of governmental, political and institutional attention towards the issue we are dealing with, fuelled as we have already pointed out at the beginning with resources from foundations of banking origin and managed together with government representatives and delegates of the Third Sector Forum. As mentioned, the implementer of the Fund is the Social Enterprise “Con i Bambini”. This Fund, although so important and strategic, has inexplicably seen a total reset in the last Budget Law 2025-2027.

Alongside government measures to combat poverty, the reform Act of the Third Sector reaffirms its centrality in community and participatory projects and interventions in public-private, markedly solidarity-based and territorial forms. The objective is to harmonise what has been previously legislated,

with the presence on the territories of heterogeneous actors: professionals, volunteers, experts, organised in groups or single individuals, according to a convergence capable of implementing and expanding a key principle of the scientific literature on welfare and social services: the role of empowerment, having as its purpose that of restoring to individuals, groups and organisations the fundamental relational capacitation, implemented through the implicit and explicit dynamics of the helping profession and the relational practice between professional and user.

Regarding empowerment, we can mention the topic of opportunities highlighted in the 5th National Plan of Action and Interventions for the Protection of the Rights and Development of Persons of Evolving Age 2022-2023 (Osservatorio Nazionale per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza, 2022). The Plan identifies empowerment as a real area of participation and intervention, to which actions and policies for its implementation are consequently connected. An element of certain interest is the construction and strengthening of the educating communities, intended as preferential contexts of manifestation, expression, and practice of participatory logics and social and normative integration for the improved and synergic programming of the systems (information, social and health) for the implementation of empowerment. As part of the planning, the National Plan envisages specific experimental strategies for combating child educational poverty, in response to various points and objectives of the UN (1.4 and 10), the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021-2024 (2 and 6) and the European Guarantee for Children (2).

5 The Educating Community in action: the SPOT project against early school leaving and educational poverty in the city of Naples

In Italy, “Con il Sud” Foundation, together with the Social Enterprise “Con i Bambini”, has activated project, economic, structural and human resources over the last few years, in order to mobilise the educating community to a shared responsibility towards the achievement of the well-being of minors. The main intention is to counteract the educational poverty of minors and to foster the social inclusion of young people, at the very least by creating a basis for further possibilities for families and minors in Naples. The project's aim was to invest in deprived neighbourhoods, activating theatre expression courses, sports and school support activities in the afternoon hours, creating a network of actors, whose contribution goes beyond the project commitment and instead becomes a mission: assuming a direct responsibility by the educating community towards the new generations.

The SPOT project – *Sport and Theatre and After-School* for the cultural growth of young people in Naples' disadvantaged neighbourhoods (urban districts of Scampia and Rione Sanità) is co-funded by

“Con il Sud” Foundation and two other funding bodies, with the aim of combating educational poverty and school drop-out. The activities started in 2020, with a three-year duration plan; the responsible entity is the “Alessandro Pavesi Onlus” Foundation, which was established in 2008 and has long been active in identifying activities for young people in cooperation with other local authorities. The aim of the project is to offer opportunities for social and professional emancipation in neighbourhoods where poverty and social hardship create a dangerous alliance with the underworld and criminal organisations: the young people who live there often learn (and are attracted to) life models that create dissonance and dystonias, which the school and sport – understood not only as organisational and physical structures, but also and above all as a dense fabric of strong and binding social relations – attempt to counteract.

The converging principles between school and sport is to make adolescents and young people work and “train” on their fragilities and disidentities in order to overcome them, fomenting new energy and awareness for further chances of social and professional emancipation. The project followed three main lines:

- *sport activities*, with a commitment to the completion of the renovation of a gymnasium in a disused former school in Scampia, and with the presence of other associations in the area;
- *theatrical expression workshops*, conducted by specialised operators, recognised by the MUR (italian University and Research Ministry), in curricular and school activities;
- *daily after-school activities*, conducted in the Sanità district by volunteers.

Overall, the activities involved the inclusion and participation of 530 minors. In fact, in the two territorial realities, the numbers were somewhat higher, since the involvement involved families, school directors and teachers, as well as the proactive role of volunteers and external actors, interested in reading the experiences gained from the project, understood as a focused and circumscribed community work, capable of mobilising the consciences of those who in various ways can contribute to creating a better reality.

The three lines of work conducted in the two Neapolitan neighbourhoods complemented each other perfectly, creating continuity, since sport certainly represented an important “social lever”.

Regarding the first line adopted, the participating minors began to frequent a contextualising place of relational activities in which they experienced and fortified a sense of respect for community, collective and solidarity-based values and the care of shared physical spaces, both of which they felt were assets to be preserved. The age range considered is from four years old up to the age of majority. For some of the participants, opportunities to develop a competitive career have also been created. This specific aspect, has allowed them to participate in sports activities not as a moment of just simple aggregation, but rather as learning opportunities for the construction of new future opportunities, even

of a value-based nature, as in the case of the choice of sports disciplines, among dance or karate, which are characterised in a pronounced way by very marked practices of respect for the adversary.

The second line adopted with the SPOT project are theatre workshops. It should be emphasised that these are the first workshops to take place as part of school curricular activities, recognised by MUR (Ministry of University and Research). In fact, this second line was reinforced with the SPOT project, but it is an action that the Pavesi Foundation had planned and implemented many years before, in collaboration with 10 schools in Naples, becoming over time an indispensable subject for children between the ages of 10 and 13, in view of the fact that minors in this age group are vulnerable. For this reason, efforts are made to work on improving the expressive abilities, self-realisation and affirmation of each individual child, as well as to empower and accustom them to a multicultural vision.

The third line concerns support for compulsory school education through after-school activities in the Sanità district of Naples, where a space has been set up where minors can spend hours studying with volunteers. The aim is to guarantee not only scholastic support but also material support in daily life.

The SPOT project certainly represents an important step towards the refinement of social intervention lines in the field of combating educational poverty among minors, in anticipation of future investment actions by the Alessandro Pavesi Onlus Foundation and the other partners who will eventually decide to take part in it. As things stand, it is not the only project that has focused its social investment on the enhancement of sport; however, the positive impact it has received over the years makes it possible to assess an effective synergy between the main educational agencies, and has made it possible to contribute to combating school drop-out, educational poverty and social exclusion.

6 Final considerations

In conclusion, we would like to emphasise the scientific value of a strategy of action (the one concerning the fight against material and educational poverty) implemented through the construction of an integrated relational approach on the territories, defined as an “educating community”, which has proved to be very effective, despite the financial and economic difficulties due to the contingent socio-historical situation (Covid19, Russian-Ukrainian war) that has compromised the consistency and operativeness of Italian social policies: it is an important innovation in the intervention of the services but also of the territories, in line with a methodology that rediscovers and reactivates community resources and the reciprocal belonging of actors and institutions, according to a pragmatic articulation of aspects and subjects in various capacities involved in a network of shared responsibility and capacitating relations, capable of producing awareness of the dynamics of social and cultural promotion

of the territory, thus functioning as a local lever for overall development and for the protection of environments and people, especially younger ones. In fact, as recalled in the Chart of Educating Communities, and as we have seen about the SPOT project, the real protagonists of the interventions are not the operators and professionals engaged in the field, although fundamental in their formative and relational importance in the context of the project actions and communicative exchange with the resident population: they are the indeed the local citizens and institutions, with their networks, interactions, promotions and activations that embody the essence of conscious change that can only be reasonably guided and oriented in the directions desired by the project by a responsible community.

At this point, we can try and address some final considerations and figure out some theoretical-methodological outcomes to the research questions reported at the beginning of the chapter, where we had wondered if and how it was possible to successfully face the challenges posed by the integrated and participatory design of social intervention projects capable of responding to the dynamics of innovation and emergence of the phenomenon of material and educational poverty, especially when these projects are implemented directly within the territorial contexts of reference and managed not only by external personnel, but also learnt and taken on board by private and public local institutional actors.

In order to be adequately and effectively combated, juvenile educational poverty requires medium to long timeframes, since it is oriented towards the enhancement and strengthening of capacities, aptitudes and social propensities in the light of a long-term vision: in fact, a lever for the success of the projects must be identified precisely in the creative actions of a different and better social reality, built together in an integrated manner by the subjects in the educating community, with the aim to create opportunities for cultural development and socio-economic emancipation for the new generations.

Certainly, one of the most important results with respect to the theme of combating educational poverty is that represented by the social innovation resulting from the assumption of a participative and generative paradigm of local welfare, realised thanks to the involvement of actors and resources external and internal to the socio-geographical area considered by the new social planning of co-projecting. From this perspective, it is evident the achievement of objectives that without it would have remained only on paper: the emancipation of the beneficiaries of protection services and interventions, implemented and empowered through their protagonism in the choice and coordinated management of strategic residential and territorial actions, which allowed for a decisive optimisation of the processes of social integration and subsequent evaluation.

As we could detect and deduce from the experience of the SPOT project in the city of Naples, the synergy between social activities, family and community resilience, knowledge and symbolic-cultural practices of exercising reciprocity and sharing entails a series of positive consequences among minors who grow within a perimeter of values and awareness capable of overcoming degradation and reversing

the course of present and future expectations. Even at the level of values, we can affirm that there is a “cultural welfare”, capable of involving, understanding and welcoming individuals and groups well beyond the separations and segregations imposed by traditional dystopic schemes that instead reproduce inequalities and discrimination: this welfare model may represent a resource to be activated also for the territorial and community social service, to regenerate, innovate and promote new strategies of environmental empowerment and human development.

On the other hand, one of the major limitations highlighted by the experimentation of such educating community processes, lies in the duration and persistence of the development conditions triggered at the time of co-designing, once the latter has become an integral part of the resilience and awareness of the local actors: will these actors be capable of regenerating, renewing and adequately promoting the instances and strategies of inclusion and contrast in a definitive manner? this question can only be answered over time, by means of an adequate feedback and social evaluation process to measure central indicators such as the impact, quality, efficiency and effectiveness of the interventions implemented.

Moreover, complex dynamics such as active involvement, participation, inclusion and integration, and social exchange, which are central to the theory and practice of social service as a safeguard and protection of citizens, are perfectly aligned and harmoniously coincide with the collaborative and participative values and activities of educating communities, with a view to a theoretical and value-based coherence and contingency that effectively promotes individual and collective empowerment for the promotion of psychophysical and social well-being.

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