

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

third international conference  
of the journal *Scuola Democratica*

# education and/for social justice

University of Cagliari  
June 3-6, 2024



# PROCEEDINGS

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02

Cultures, Practices, and Change

Published by



ASSOCIAZIONE PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA  
Via Francesco Satolli, 30  
00165 – Rome  
Italy



Published in Open Access

APA 7<sup>th</sup> citation system:

Scuola democratica (Ed.) (2025). *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola democratica. Education and/or Social Justice. Vol. 2: Cultures, Practices, and Change*. Associazione Per Scuola Democratica.

Please cite your contribution as follows:

Smith, A. (2025). *Closing the Gender Gap in Education. Symmetrical Practices from a Didactical Laboratory in STEM Fields*. In Scuola democratica (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola democratica. Education and/or Social Justice. Vol. 2: Cultures, Practices, and Change* (pp. 72-84). Associazione Per Scuola Democratica.

This book is digitally available at:

<https://www.scuolademocratica-conference.net/conference-proceedings-iii/>

ISBN 979-12-985016-3-8

3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference  
of the journal *Scuola democratica*  
*Education and/or Social Justice*

3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

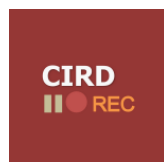
# PROCEEDINGS

Vol. 2

**Cultures,  
Practices,  
and Change**

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# THE DEVELOPMENT OF CITIZENSHIP SKILLS IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT: THE CASE OF PCTO IN THE SAN SIRO DISTRICT (MILAN)

Claudia Fredella

Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca

The PCTO Social Cohesion and Urban Sustainability set in the framework of the MUSA-Spoke 6-Action 3.1.3 “Contrasting and prevention of early school leaving in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods”. The paths aim to develop processes of social inclusion and to enhance cultural diversity. PCTO students have been involved in a team of researchers, professional educators, teachers, pedagogues, volunteers, PhD and university students, with a so-called Community service learning in the afterschool services of the QuBi network in the San Siro area. The research question explores on one hand, the opportunity provided to students by the extracurricular training program to reflect on their own life skills within a multiproblematic and multicultural context and, on the other hand, it examines the development of new skills, both among the students themselves and the children they support through individualized educational tutoring. A diachronic analysis of the student’s diaries maintained throughout the program reveals a development in their approach to the context and an increased awareness of their role in supporting children’s learning processes. This evolution also emerges in the two focus groups conducted by the researcher, midway through and at the end of the program, aimed at fostering a participatory reflection on their educational path.

citizenship education; community service learning; intercultural skills; PCTO; thematic analysis

## INTRODUCTION

The PCTO (Paths for Transversal Competences and Orientation) “Social Cohesion and Urban Sustainability” set in the framework of the MUSA-Spoke 6-Action 3.1.3 “Contrasting and prevention of early school leaving in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods”. The research refers to the urban anthropology model of Learning Cities (Biagioli et al., 2022) to promote social cohesion and the enhancement of differences in a multicultural, multi-problematic, peripheral, and marginalized contexts. The PCTO students have been involved in a so-called Community Service Learning (Zecca, 2024) in the afterschool services of the QuBi network in the San Siro district, a neighbourhood of Milan characterised by an important presence of inhabitants in economic and social fragility, 57% of them have a migrant background. CSL engages students in activities that begin with the identification of problems, however, unlike academic or hypothetical issues, these are real problems identified by the

communities themselves (Gallop, Guthrie & Asante 2023). CSL is aimed at supporting the development of key competences for lifelong learning (European Council, 2018), particularly, given the specificity of the context, intercultural (Nigris, 2015, Tarozzi, 2005) personal and social competences, as well as the ability to learn how to learn (De Vecchi & Carmona Magnaldi, 1999). The paths set also under the wider framework of citizenship education (Santerini, 2010) according to the cosmopolitan approach of Benhabib (2008), which problematises the relationship between person and citizen and bases the idea of citizenship on the very concept of the human being as a bearer of universal rights. It is therefore a matter of redefining the boundaries of the *demos* and overcoming any concept of citizenship linked to territorial or cultural aspects. The formative dimension of the PCTO is also linked with an idea of a school curriculum skills-oriented (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019) and rooted in an agency-based perspective (Pastori, 2022, Sorzio, 2022).

## **2. THE RESEARCH CONTEXT**

The after-school service of the Dolci Primary school (IC Cadorna, in the San Siro district), thanks to a scientific collaboration agreement between IC Cadorna and Bicocca University, hosted 8 high school students in the school year 2023/2024, within the PCTO program “Social cohesion and urban sustainability”. In the running of the service, every Friday from 4.30 p.m. to 6.30 p.m. within the school, actively participate the Cadorna parents’ Association, Social Cooperative Equa (ETS) and some volunteer teachers. The afterschool is also part of the QuBì network, within is active the wider MUSA research project (Fredella & Zecca, 2024), that implement several actions between schools, family and territorial services (European Commission, 2015), embracing a whole school approach to tackling early school leaving. The objectives of several after-school services go beyond just “doing homework” but have a broader educational purpose (Sorzio, 2020). Therefore, the PCTO students had the opportunity to face both with professional competences of teachers and educator who runs educational service, and with researchers that investigate their practice, methodologies and their impact on pupils’ academic results and the implementation of life skills and key citizenship competences.

## **2. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGIES**

The research question explores the opportunity provided to PCTO students by the extracurricular training program to reflect on their own life skills within a multiproblematic and multicultural context and it examines how participation in Community Service Learning activities can support the development of key competencies for lifelong learning (intercultural, personal and social skills and the ability to learn to learn), both among the PCTO students themselves and the children they support through individualized educational tutoring. The PCTO paths have been monitored and assessed with a participatory design of fourth generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) in order to engage high school student in dealing with tools like reflexive diaries and focus groups.

In coherence with the research questions have been chosen an exploratory framework (Mortari, 2007) and the data set analysed for answering the questions consist of the student's diaries, maintained throughout the program (from October 2023 to May 2024), two focus groups conducted by the researcher, midway through (January 2024) and at the end of the program (May 2024), aimed at fostering a participatory reflection on their educational path, and the researcher's participatory observations.

The methodology chosen for analysing the data is reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase approach that Braun and Clarke (2021a) have detailed emphasizing its accessibility, flexibility, and rigor, to guide researchers through the process of identifying and interpreting meaningful patterns within qualitative data.

1. Familiarization with the Data (reading and re-reading the data).
2. Generating Initial Codes (concise labels identifying important features of the data relevant to the research question).
3. Searching for Themes (cluster similar codes into potential broader patterns of meaning).
4. Reviewing Potential Themes (refine and assess themes).
5. Defining and Naming Themes (defined and name themes and eventually sub-themes to highlight nuances within broader patterns).
6. Producing the Report (a compelling narrative that answers the research question).

Reflexive engagement and methodological transparency are key to achieving rigor and quality in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

### 3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The codes have been clustered in three main themes. The first theme is *Teaching/learning processes* over which, as shown in the two quotes in Tab. 1, the students reflect in their diaries and also in the focus groups, starting from the recognition of some children's difficulties, for example in memorizing concepts, in dealing with textbook vocabulary often incomprehensible to them, and in maintaining concentration on exercises that are not meaningful to them. Looking at this topic diachronically in student's diaries is evident how they became more and more confident in proposing alternative methods (i.e. using pictures, multimedia tools, play) to engage pupils and support their learning ("to make them understand, even in a funnier "way" FG2). A second theme is related to *Personal skills* they declare to have discovered or improved during the PCTO, lots of them underline the "patience" they need in the tutoring activity and several of them in the diaries write about efforts and gratifications ("I'd prefer maybe if there was another person to help me more, especially with A. because I have a lot of difficulties with her, she also disturbs when I do the work with the other children, so I can't maybe manage the others well because she's always in the way"; "I am really enjoying having to help someone and being able to help them where they have difficulties is something that makes me feel good" FG1). The third theme, *Key competences*, includes all the

competences students recognise to have achieved or improved. Lots of them in the diaries stress the importance of supporting pupils in literacy and how, especially thanks to an Arabic speaking mate, they have discovered how useful is enhancing the use of their mother tongue. As well in the focus groups emerge the potential of the multicultural context: some of them report the “richness” of meeting and recognizing other cultures (“Children who come from Egypt or Morocco can teach, or at least transfer their culture to other children. And also, the other way around, so it is enriching, an exchange that brings wealth” FG2).

Tab. 1. Codebook

Codes	Themes	Patterns of meaning
Memorizing, Textbook vocabulary, Concentration, Significance (meaningless exercises, abstract concepts), didactic methodologies	Teaching/learning processes	<p>It is very useful to <i>show pictures</i> when we do the exercises and I find that they don't know many things, for example, the meanings of some words or they don't have some concepts. (D4)</p> <p>The children had to learn this nursery rhyme that they absolutely could not remember. It was obvious that they did not like it. They got nervous because they didn't understand the words, the meaning, the words. So it was just like learning sounds to be repeated, to be memorised, I mean, if there's no concept behind <i>it in my opinion there's no point in making them learn it by heart.</i> (FG2)</p>
Empathy, patience, confidence	Personal skills	<p>I also try to <i>convey calm and confidence</i> to the children, because maybe the teachers, I don't know what they are like, but maybe they ask a question if they don't answer they ask someone else, without waiting to hear their answer. (FG1)</p> <p>I am not a very patient person, but I am <i>beginning to notice that I am getting better</i> with this PCTO, let's say because it is something I do at least once a week anyway and this <i>helps me to be more patient in everyday life too.</i> (FG2)</p>
Problem solving, intercultural competences, literacy, learning to learn	Key competences	<p>Maybe with this experience you can find <i>different ways to solve a problem</i>, for example if a child cannot do a task immediately, he cannot understand a certain topic, you have to search for other ways to try to explain it to him. (FG 1)</p> <p>Some brought their Arabic School homework, which I didn't know they did. They do an Arabic school in the afternoons. And I really liked this aspect of being able to <i>immerse oneself in both cultures.</i> (D17)</p>

In the second focus group they were asked also to reflect on a comparison to their own primary school experience and some of them stated that they recognise some

of the pupils' difficulties as similar to the ones they had encountered and this was instrumental in recognising one's own learning style on the one hand, and on the other, it enabled them to better understand which strategies could be most effective.

Another interesting aspect stated in the second focus group is the underline of the professionalism of the educator who "manages to handle even moments of serious confusion". The recognition of the skills necessary to carry out certain jobs is an important aspect since one of the objectives of the PCTO is indeed to provide guidance in order to consciously choose a future educational pathway.

In conclusion the data show how the experience let the students understand the importance of relationship in the learning process and entailed the improvement on interpersonal skills.

The individual tutoring promotes their ability in supporting the children's learning processes ("problem solving"), reflection of their own leaning styles, and led also to questioning the meaningfulness of what is being taught.

In relation to the multicultural theme, they achieved awareness on their initial representations and sometimes prejudices about a socio-cultural context for some of them far away from their own experience, at the same time the acknowledge of its potential if the differences were enhanced and not stigmatized.

#### Acknowledgements

Research conducted within the framework of the MUSA - Multilayered Urban Sustainability Action project, funded by the European Union - NextGenerationEU, PNRR Mission 4, Component 2, Investment Line 1.5: Creation and strengthening of "innovation" ecosystems and the development of "territorial R&D leaders".

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