

Educational Poverty and Participatory Communities: Local Map of Childcare and Local Development¹

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Context

Italy's territory is characterized by a polycentric system where rural areas, urban centers, medium-sized cities and municipalities are linked via a dense and diverse network of relations. Among these, areas able to offer good quality essential services (education, healthcare and transport related services) serve as "hubs" and points of convergence, attracting populations to such supply spots. Distance from these service "hubs" affects the quality of life of their populations, determining people's access to essential services (DPS, 2013).

Mutual linkages among such territories define "functional regions", namely a challenge and an opportunity for each area's future development. While urban spots generally offer adequate quality essential services, rural areas and small municipalities host not enhanced natural assets and human capital. Typical relations between rural and urban areas are linked to demographic aspects, economic transactions, delivery of public services, exchange in amenities and environmental goods (OECD, 2013).

In Italy, in recent years, some territories defined Inner Areas (territories object of the Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne - SNAI)² have experimented innovative experiences and practices of school and care services, through practices of participation and social exchange, to respond to territorial structural deficits (DPS, 2012).

Inner Areas are those territories characterized by: being far from large and medium-sized urban centers able to supply adequate healthcare, education and transport related services; being rich in natural assets (water resources, agricultural systems, forests, natural landscapes) and cultural resources (archaeological settlements, abbeys, small museums, craft centers); having a complex territory shaped by diverse natural phenomena and human settlement processes (enthronization and depopulation) that have modelled them

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² In Italy from September 2012, the Minister of Cohesion began to build a national strategy for the development of "Inner Areas" with the support of a technical Committee of inner areas (for the stated purpose) and, after a phase of dialogue with the representatives of the different Regions, the document on the National Strategy for Internal Areas was prepared: a document that was incorporated into the Partnership Agreement. Inner Areas are, in fact, one of the key territorial dimensions of the 2014-2020 regional policy in Italy.

accordingly (Cersosimo and Donzelli, 2020). Conversely, some of these areas have performed best practices stimulating positive processes and triggering reverse demographic trends (De Rossi, 2018; Barbera and Parisi, 2019).

Objectives

In Italy, Inner Areas cover almost 60% of the whole national territory, hosting nearly 23% of national population (about 13.540 people) and approximately 53% of Italy's municipalities (DPS, 2013).

Inner Areas' population loss. In the last 40 years the Italian population has grown by 10 %, while in several inner area's population has decreased by as much as 30% (DPS, 2013). Generally, in urban areas the variation is higher than the national average, but lower for inner areas. This demographic trend is the result of previous incorrect development policies based on: "place-blind" institutional reforms; an approach in development policy, which passively favored urban centers; public financial transfers as compensation, also in public services and education and welfare policies (Barca, 2019).

We use a "place-based" theoretical framework when and where we find low quality in educational institutions (Barca, 2009). This can break the local conservative existing status quo. The primary objective is to build citizenship rights and public policy based on co-responsibility of citizens and administrations, at both a local and National level.

An important aspect of innovation to reverse demographic trends is to stimulate the return of young people. Regarding young people and couples, it is important to improve different interventions, from pediatric services to kindergartens, from the quality of education to offering training opportunities for both adults and young people.

In order not to leave, the families have had to find solutions together with institutional actors and not. This article wants to present the evidences of educational poverty and innovations experienced in these territories. The school in these areas is at the same time a field of didactic experimentation and innovation (multiclass, nursery school in the forest, horizontal didactic cooperation) and civic center (often school buildings are a shared asset and are also used beyond the teaching) (Luisi and Tantillo, 2019).

The innovations found are distinguished by the ability to bring together not only territories but also different actors- families, students, educators, local administrators, in a word, innovators and activators of social energies (Lo Presti, Luisi, Napoli, 2018). They are practices through which the territory has experienced responses to old or new needs using resources (human, environmental, cultural, historical) and strategies (local, eco and geo-sustainable), which are based on participatory action systems, but at the same time supported by a public actor "fair and impartial spectator" (Barca and Carrosio, 2020).

The reflection aims to analyse main indicators of educational poverty in inner areas related to policy solutions and territorial development projects, to promote a legislative and programmatic framework that has more account of the differences, territorial, social, economic and infrastructure.

Methodology

The methodological measurement of inner areas has two main steps: first, urban areas are identified. They offer fundamental services such as secondary schools, hospitals with emergency services and main train stations. Secondly, the non-urban municipalities are classified by the time distance, which is measured statistically, to these urban centres (peripheral and ultra-peripheral areas occupy one-third of the Italian territory). In the National Strategy for Inner Areas, the innovative approach to education is strongly related to development policy and is fundamental in participative planning (Barca, Casavola, Lucatelli, 2014).

The innovation of a strategy for inner areas is not only related with its geographic dimension, that is, the distance to services, but depends on three issues “place-based”: citizenship, inequality and rights (Barca, 2009). The “place based” approach is built on 3 pillars:

1. Levels of knowledge and innovation of the people who live in these areas must match external competencies.
2. Regarding power relationships, local politicians and administrators are often not in favor of innovation (Acemoglu, 2013; Rodriguez Pose, 2020).
3. The state acts as a «third subject», or an external subject, to foster change.

In all three aspects, the people must have a voice in the decision-making processes. At the same time, in a deliberative context it is important to define local strategies, which needs expected results and indicators.

One of the key challenges in the most rural areas of Italy is educating young people. Very small class sizes, high teacher turnover and a skills shortage amongst teachers endangers the standards of education, creating inequality of opportunity for children in rural areas.

Main education problem in inner areas are the under-dimensioning and fragmentation of the school offer; the mobility of teachers; the participation of young people; training of teaching staff; quality of teaching and pedagogical models; levels of learning and skills; orientation of the training offer to local vocations and people's aspirations (Lo Presti, Luisi, Napoli, 2018).

The Inner Areas Strategy, as a public policy, has covered this through ideas such as introducing new methods and approaches (also in multi-age classes), organisational change and teacher training. Students are involved in practical experiences working and learning in the community. New methods permit to develop more cultural skills, creating links between inner areas and educational quality centres. Schools are built with architectural innovations,

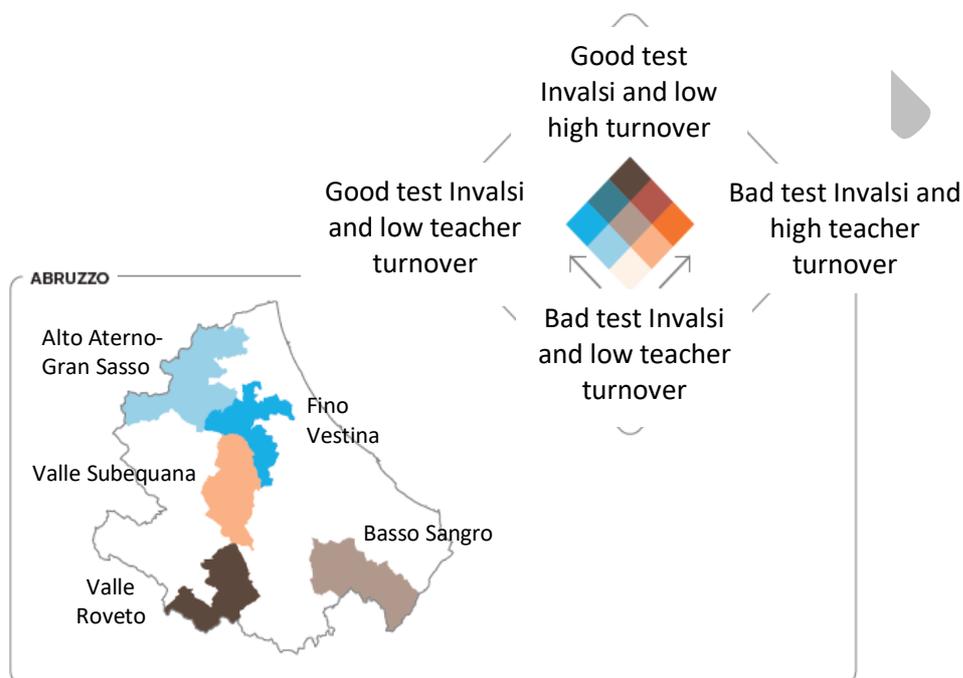
creating spaces that encourage learning. The approach is participative, involving all levels of government: the students ‘have a voice’ and are empowered to make choices (Luisi, 2020).

Results

The Invalsi tests can be considered an indicator (certainly not exhaustive) for the analysis of school learning contexts. If read in an integrated way with other indicators (dropouts and dispersion, mobility of teachers, presence of extended time), they tell us about a territorial fragility that affects the starting conditions of students, often critical compared to their peers who live in urban areas and with values different for educational levels, between individual areas and within the areas themselves.

If we compare the mobility rate of teachers with the scores of the Invalsi tests in the Italian language of lower secondary school, we discover that these two indicators are not correlated with the distance from the main service delivery centers. Figure 2 shows the correlation between the value of the Invalsi tests (high and low) and the mobility rate (high and low) in the Abruzzo and Emilia-Romagna regions.

Figure 2. Test Invalsi scores (Italian language) and teacher turnover in inner areas of Abruzzo Region (2018)



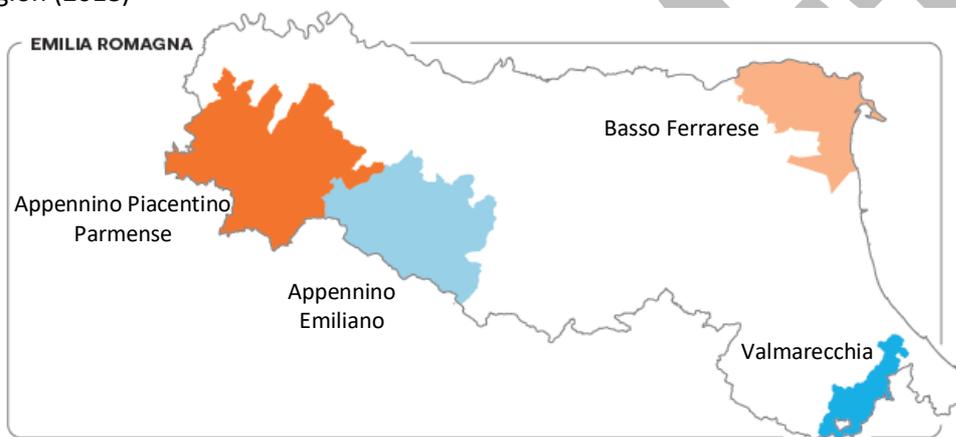
Source: Save the Children

In the Abruzzo Region, for example, we see the “Roveto Valley”, which is near an urban center and has good test score, despite high teacher turnover. In “Fino Vestina Valley” area, it is far from an urban center, but has good test score and low teacher turnover. At the same time, also in the Emilia Romagna Region, in “Appennino Piacentino Parmense”, we see poor

test score and high teacher turnover despite being near urban centers (fig. 3). While in “Appennino Emiliano” they have good Invalsi score and low teacher turnover but are far from urban centers. This means that there is no direct correlation between competences and teacher turnover in inner areas. It also means that only policies with “place awareness” can promote equality in education.

The rate of teacher mobility does not therefore seem to depend on spatial periphery and, above all, the indicators considered do not seem to be correlated with the average distance of the areas from the centers. It is an important result because it reminds us that, despite the “distance” is the factor that marks these territories (since the definition of the SNAI), it can be faced with good services or aggravated by bad services.

Figure 3. Test Invalsi scores (Italian language) and teacher turnover in inner areas of Emilia-Romagna Region (2018)



Source: Save the Children

The policy solutions experienced are different and respond to different expected results:

- Participation of students in local development actions and project experiences in schools or other cultural projects, in terms of adaptation and convergence between teaching activities and the local production system.
- Innovative school centers intended both as an improvement of the school network and overcoming the fragmentation of the educational offer through the construction of new school centers on the model of civic centers, and as innovative school architectures in redeveloped areas, in which the distribution of spaces and the preparation of the classrooms responds to the need to encourage the school / territory encounter.
- Innovation in small schools, networking multi-classes and experimenting horizontal and vertical teaching models also through digital tools, which reduce isolation and enhance teaching methodologies.

- Innovative didactic models through laboratory and cooperative approaches aimed at defining synergistic actions between improvement of key competences and local resources (outdoor education).
- Engagement of schools and educational programs in community building projects, in terms of landscape protection, historical-cultural specificities, the environment and energy reserves, and the fight against climate change.
- Non-formal education, orientation, school-work alternation with a view to enhancing local vocations.

Belonging by birth, is known to deeply mark both the present and the future of children. As Chiara Saraceno points out (2011), there are three main characteristics underlying this assumption: the incidence of poverty is greater among minors than the population in general; most poor children live in families where at least one parent works; the only cause of the poverty of children and minors is their family and territorial belonging (territorial concentration).

We know, furthermore, that inequalities for children begin in the first thousand days of life. The different access to pediatric services and care, in fact, immediately creates differences in the growth of children. Access to pediatric care, the stable and ongoing bond between children and pediatricians, and access to the nursery are therefore a universal right. Furthermore, it is an offer of services that must be designed for children (availability of access, quality of staff and the environment) and considered as a new job demand, especially female.

There are several interventions that will be carried out in inner areas and that have been designed with the support of educators, administrators and families: the network of services for children in the mountains in 'Casentino-Valtiberina' (Tuscany), the promotion of healthy lifestyles in the developmental age in 'Matese' (Molise), the creation of an educational service for children in 'Comelico' (Veneto), or caring actions in the 'Piacenza and Parma Apennines' (Emilia-Romagna): a pediatric service will be activated for all children under 11 residing in the municipalities of the area with visits to schools, every three years and generalized screening for the entire underage school population.

Public policies work to involve residents, teachers, students, and innovators in the decision-making process through open public debate and by implementing their knowledge. The correlation between knowledge and innovation is a first result. We can identify three others relevant results:

1. For change, it is important to involve teachers but also 'external innovators' to create networking, a policy community, quality educational projects and improve their results.
2. Territorial proximity and integration policies are an opportunity when education becomes a tool for stimulating local development and when institutions promote education policies for the specific situation.

3. For better education policies, in inner and rural/mountain areas high quality teachers and school managers are fundamental in order to conceive innovative projects and achieve their goals.

For all education strategies is important to observe the implementation process and their results, especially any unexpected ones. We can see some interesting outcomes:

- We have areas where the relevance of monitoring results inspired civic monitoring actions in the schools.
- The implementation is the real challenge for the strategies, which could be participative involving students and different actors.
- At the same time, evaluation will be important to 'measure' the success of the projects.

In fact, the object is to analyze how the school context impacts on learning. From an evaluation point of view, it will be important to improve evaluation capability, that is, how schools analyze their own problems.

The evaluation of public policy is a research activity that requires specific methods and theories. For example: observation in classes and the analysis of mechanisms of change; the use of action research to evaluate results; student involvement in the design and evaluation of projects. These are aspects for local evaluation, which is an approach designed by and for local coalitions and their residents. Inner areas' educational practices are an important part of a local development policy and stimulate both institutional, citizen action and participation.

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