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## CHAPTER 12

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# DIGITALIZATION AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

## What Prospects for Building a Truly Inclusive System?

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the issue of digitalization in the education system by examining the potential and criticalities inherent in this transition, also in the light of the elements of reflection that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis also aims to verify the various components that are at the origin of the so-called digital divide, which is not to be traced back to the skills profile alone, or to merely economic factors, but also to the very characteristics of the territories and, therefore, infrastructural data.

Given this key, we proceeded to read the contents of the National Plan for the Digital School, and the impact that the PNRR has had on the context of digitalization, above all using a key of interpretation that aims at to exploit the existing tools, including digitalization, being careful to avoid them becoming an instrument of inequality, rather than a tool aimed at bridging existing inequalities.

## **DIGITAL TRANSITION AND INCLUSION: A POSSIBLE MARRIAGE?**

Any discourse that wishes to address the issue of the digital transition of an inclusive educational system requires that reference be made to a model that necessarily moves away—and it could not be otherwise—from a sphere of inquiry limited to the single reality considered, specifically that of the school, to make way for a necessarily broader vision, in which various coordinates are intercepted, ranging from the preliminary consideration of what should be meant by an inclusive educational system, from a perspective in which inclusion becomes a tool for the realisation of the more general objective of cohesion, to the consideration of transition in a broad dimension in which digitalisation is not, and could not, be considered only with reference to what takes place within the educational system, but in a broader sense, considering the educational system as part of a broader institutional *framework*.

Moving on from the first element mentioned, that of inclusion—understood as a projection of cohesion (economic and, above all, social), in turn an element that underpins sustainability itself, of which, from many sides, we hear multiple declinations—it is clear that we cannot ignore the need to take an overall view in which a relationship of logical presupposition emerges between inclusion, understood as a tool with (necessarily) organisational value, and the realisation of the other two objectives (cohesion and sustainability), in a substantive sense that has, however, struggled to assert itself in the context of ordinary legislation.<sup>1</sup>

School inclusion represents, in fact, only one of the possible declinations in which the macro-category can be understood, and it is based on the recognition of the relevance of full participation in life (at school, but not only, if we consider the school as part of a “network” on which society is based) of all individuals, configuring itself as a process that presupposes the enhancement of individual differences and the facilitation of social participation and learning; a process in which the school, part of a broader organisation, becomes a key player in eliminating the barriers that stand between the individual and the exercise of their fundamental rights.<sup>2</sup>

## **POVERTY AND INCLUSION**

In this context, in order to understand whether, and to what extent, the digital transition can support and promote the achievement of ‘inclusion’, it is necessary to focus on “poverty,”<sup>3</sup> understood in a plural and interconnected declination, from a perspective that certainly cannot be reduced to the merely material or materialistic, and, I would say, reductively economic

dimension. It has to be understood according to a relational point of view that, while not ignoring the merely material dimension mentioned, understands poverty in an overall dimension, referring to “weakness,” understood as a datum that requires the intervention of the public subject in the guise of the implementer of the duty of social solidarity, highlighting, among other things, that multidimensionality that shows the non-bi-univocity of the single poverty-inequality relationship, but, on the contrary, reveals an internal incrementality between poverty and its consequences on inequality, an obstacle to any inclusive process.<sup>4</sup>

And so, especially in the context of defining the focal variable of the survey, i.e., the evaluative space on the basis of which inequalities are to be assessed, following Sen’s teachings, two questions emerge that need to be answered: “equality of what?” and “equality for what?”

Two questions the autonomous relevance of which immediately emerges in the framework of the educational context and, above all, where the profiles related to digitalisation are integrated in it, which, if considered from the content profile (referring to the potential that the implementation of digital tools can present), can mark a qualitative leap in the education sector. A potential that is immediately resized and relativised if we consider the negative potential of the so-called digital divide<sup>5</sup> which, among other things, cannot be linked solely to the capacity-related aspects, but must, as we will see, take into consideration a multiplicity of factors, including the infrastructural data and, therefore, the characteristics of the territorial systems. A context, the one just referred to, in which equality of capacity, referring to the “individual’s freedom to lead a certain type of life rather than another”<sup>6</sup> is referred not only to the space of “capacities,” but also to that of “functioning,” i.e., the states and ways of being and doing that people can acquire in the course of their lives such as, for example, being nourished, enjoying good health, enjoying self-respect, taking part in community life.<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective considered, in which the areas of education and digitalisation are examined from a binary perspective, the answer to the first question cannot be reductively summarised by referring to access to educational processes and, in parallel, to digital systems, understood as components of the pedagogical path.

Starting from the first element, in the context of the education system, rivers of ink have been used, and not only in the legal context, to investigate the instruments aimed at guaranteeing access, first, and then that series of interventions of a substantial nature that have significantly delineated the characteristics of the right to education, or the right to school (recalling in both cases the relevance of training courses),<sup>8</sup> in order to ensure the fulfilment of those duties of solidarity and those obligations imposed by the principle of substantive equality that constitute the essential prerequisite for the full development of the person and, therefore, as a guarantee

of that unswerving, essential and undeniable core of fundamental rights, among which the right to education (which is not understood here from the perspective limited to education) and training is fully included. This same nucleus has as its counterpart the constitutional requirement for public intervention, a requirement the recognition of which has led the Constitutional Court to affirm the balancing of the budget, which cannot in any way be limited to temporary interventions of a welfarist nature, but should be developed in a systemic dimension. A profile that is precisely the main criticality of the public intervention carried out so far.

Following this line of exposition leads to the second question posed at the beginning.

Starting from the current and specific context of the education system, equality cannot be referred to the overall purposes that are enclosed in the multiform concept of the “right to education” correlated to the (guarantee of a) construction of (real) citizenship paths in a democratic system and, therefore the concept itself of inclusion cannot be limited only to those aspects that are of immediate impact related to the hypothesis in which the subject has disabilities or falls into the broad category of BES,<sup>9</sup> but must be understood in a broader sense and must be referred to the individual understood in their complexity from a perspective in which the need cannot be understood in a way that is parcelled out, but as a prismatic projection of different needs that, however, belong to the same subject.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, considering the premises outlined above, it is clear that equality must be referred to the project of building those capabilities<sup>11</sup> that allow the realisation of that substantial equality that enables the individual to express their personality, even in the social formations of which they are part, regardless of their starting conditions. And so, in the relationship between inclusion and diversity, in the context of inclusive processes, it is necessary to shun uniforming dynamics, which in themselves contain the germ of inequality, inherent in the choice of a single reference model, guaranteeing an inclusion that is “sensitive to differences” that, in the words of Habermas, ensures “cultural autonomy, rights relating to certain groups, programmes of legal equalisation, as well as arrangements aimed at effective protection of minorities.”<sup>12</sup>

From this perspective, as mentioned above, the relevance of the issue of poverty emerges in a multifaceted and multidimensional form that finds a positive projection in the construction of inclusive processes with respect to which education clearly plays a central role. Poverty, and specifically educational poverty, should not be understood only in terms of weakness,<sup>13</sup> but should also be examined with a view to enhancing the potential of a digital transition process, in a different dimension, as an evidently broader phenomenon, which refers to a state of vulnerability linked to a level of deprivation that does not guarantee appropriate and just opportunities.

And it is certainly no coincidence that over the years the fight against educational poverty has become a central objective of European, OECD and UN policy, with the intention of considering education and training as key elements for the achievement of economic and social objectives, precisely because of the recognition of the impact that educational poverty itself has on the development and growth of states.

An analysis conducted by Save the Children Italy,<sup>14</sup> on the basis of 14 indicators referring specifically to the digital transition of education systems, reveals less than comforting data on educational poverty, mainly understood as deprivation of the possibility to learn, experiment, freely develop skills, talents and aspirations in the early stages of life, a period in which people is more malleable and receptive.

The highest levels of educational poverty are recorded in the South, both in terms of the supply of services and in terms of participation in cultural and educational activities. And the same regional differentials in educational achievement, in the availability of public services for children, in the incidence of economic and educational poverty, offer the image of a deeply divided country. A country in which regional gaps in human capital, levels and quality of education are not only a symptom of inequality and unequal opportunities, but are insidious ways through which poverty and inequality are transmitted between generations.<sup>15</sup>

It is, indeed, well known that poverty does not only mean a reduced economic sphere, but fewer opportunities that accentuate starting inequalities, contributing to the intergenerational transmission of poverty and the various gaps that are connected to it. And the reduction of inequalities at the outset—moving from early childhood—would not only lead to the achievement of greater social equity,<sup>16</sup> but would also have positive effects on the welfare of the territories, thus having virtuous impacts not only on future education, but also on the reduction of crime rates, on the improvement of productivity at work and on various other social profiles.

## THE PANDEMIC CRISIS AND DIGITAL DIVIDE

The pandemic crisis, which has certainly given a significant boost to digitalisation processes, has revealed the weakness of the reference model, its inability to find resilient formulae, without exacerbating differences, contributing, on the contrary, to increase the distances between the parts of the system.

This trait is particularly evident with regard to digitalisation processes, in respect of which, despite the potential, numerous criticalities have emerged that, in practice, have generated inequalities instead of the inclusion that was intended.

To this end, we need only look at the data on educational poverty, i.e., “the deprivation on the part of children and adolescents of the possibility of learning, experimenting, developing and allowing their capacities, talents and aspirations to flourish freely,” i.e., the impossibility of enjoying effective protection and guarantee of the right to education, understood in an overall dimension, as mentioned, of guaranteeing a path that allows each individual to develop their personality, aptitudes, and therefore a way for building citizenship.

With the pandemic, not only did the risk of material poverty of a part of the citizenry increase, but access to educational tools was precluded, or not properly used, for certain segments of the population, generating a real and substantial loss in terms of cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development. In fact, the difference between those who have internet access and those who do not has been highlighted, a difference that adds to the sources of inequality and social exclusion, revealing one of the most dangerous tendencies of the current economic system: the ability to push those on the margins of society towards the abyss, increasing wealth and poverty, interconnectedness and marginalisation.

The thesis according to which the spread of the internet, together with the digital divide it implies and presupposes, would amplify already existing inequalities within an already highly polarised society such as ours, is usually identified as the stratification thesis. Taking its cue from the so-called St. Matthew effect (those who have will be given and will be in abundance; those who have not will also be deprived of what they have), a part of the doctrine has pointed out that some citizens, enjoying higher cultural and economic status than the rest of the population, would be able to further improve their condition by capitalising on and taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by the net, with the consequence that the digital divide would increase.

In other words, the digital divide stands as the typical, post-modern form of poverty, the source of its own incrementality.<sup>17</sup>

Just a few references to give an idea of the scale of the phenomenon. Consider, for example, the DESI (*Digital Economy and Society Index*), the tool through which the European Commission monitors the digital progress of Member States. There are five dimensions taken into consideration: (i) connectivity (in particular broadband development); (ii) human capital (i.e., the skills and digital inclusion of citizens); (iii) the use of internet services; (iv) digital technology integration (an objective linked to the digitalisation of the economy); and (v) the development of digital public services.

Looking at the data, Italy ranks fourth last in the ranking that assesses connectivity, human capital, internet use, digital technology integration and digital public services.<sup>18</sup>

If we look at the reasons for this huge gap, the causes are multiple, being conditioning elements for the correct access and use of digital tools, which according to the provisions of EU Regulation 2120/2015 is a real right, or rather a fundamental prerogative for the exercise of rights, not only the economic conditions of households, but also the territorial data, highlighting the impact that choices on infrastructure policy have on the issue.

From the analysis conducted by Openopolis<sup>19</sup>—with children on Eurostat data, the criticality of the Italian situation compared to other European countries clearly emerges.

Looking at the percentage of households with internet access at home, Italy ranks fourth last of the countries considered, with 96% of households with minors and around 90% of singles.

This is a critical issue that, examined with specific reference to the Italian territorial context, reveals a strong impact of territorial characteristics and, therefore, not only of economic conditions. Differences that multiply if we look at data relating to inland areas, or to the peripheries of cities, where in 2019 only 79% of households have internet access from home, compared to 80.4% in metropolitan areas.

The critical situation linked to the territorial context is even more evident if we look at the availability of broadband, with respect to which Umbria stands out in the negative, even recording 6.8% of households declaring that they do not have internet precisely because of the absence of broadband, Liguria and Molise. This is certainly a critical situation, also noted by the EU Court of Auditors which, not surprisingly, in its Broadband Report 2018 highlighted how “investment in broadband will also contribute to providing quality education, promote social inclusion and benefit rural and remote regions. Some stakeholders believe that broadband is so important that it should be considered an essential public service, in the same way as other services such as road, water, electricity and gas networks.”

An objective shared by Italy, which laid down the targets set by the European Commission in 2010 (basic broadband (up to 30 Mbps) for all by 2013; fast broadband (at least 30 Mbps or more) for all by 2020; ultrafast broadband (over 100 Mbps) for at least 50% of European households by 2020 in the national digital growth strategy (2014-20) and in the ultra-wide-band strategy. Targets raised by the Commission in 2016 (connectivity of at least one gigabit per second for schools, libraries and public offices to full 5g coverage in urban areas and along major terrestrial transport routes. By that date, the minimum connectivity reached will have to be 100 megabits per second for all European households) and which, as the figures show, are still far from full achievement. In fact, the Italian average number of households reached by the fixed network at 30 Mbps is lower than the European average; in the Val d’Aosta and Molise the quota does not reach the 40 per cent threshold. In the case of Molise, 18 per cent of households

are not reached by the fixed network, compared with the national average of around 5 per cent. Wired network coverage is also low in other regions (Basilicata and Abruzzo 12%, Umbria 11% and Calabria 9%), which are two times lower than the national average, in which the situation as regards educational poverty is further aggravated also because of the economic conditions of the territories.<sup>20</sup>

The overall picture becomes even bleaker if we also consider the structural endowments of educational institutions and families and the digital skills of pupils and families with respect to which Italy ranks third last, with 64% compared to the European average of 83%.

And it is no coincidence, for example, that many of the interventions carried out during the pandemic also concerned the purchase of PCs, tablets and devices for internet connection in schools, and for the digital equipment of students. Think of Lombardy's family package, or the connectivity bonus for students living in Lazio, or even Campania's #conlefamiglie announcement.

### **TOWARDS THE CONSTRUCTION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS**

Already from these brief outlines emerge not only the real critical profiles that exist in the area, and with which the digital transition process has and will have to deal, but also the complexity of the process, in which various interdependent plans are intercepted that cannot but move in parallel, according to a unitary design aimed at the territorial system. A system in which the parts, even if autonomous, cannot but interrelate, generating virtuous paths. An intersection of plans, actors and competences, functional to the construction of a renewed 'educational environment'.

And, thus, the digitalisation process will necessarily have to develop taking into account the infrastructural plan, the organisational plan, referring to the system and to the individual educational institutions and, more generally, to the network institutions, the skills plan (of institutions, families and learners) and the methodologies plan. Plans that in different ways are taken into consideration in the various documents that over the years have addressed the issue of the digitalisation of education systems, which represents a central node of the European Pillar of Social Rights in which, in fact, one of the principles concerns precisely quality and inclusive education and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable full participation in society and successful transitions in the labour market.<sup>21</sup> A dimension, the one embodied in the European Pillar of Social Rights, to which is related the European Agenda for Skills itself, related, in turn, to the European Digital Strategy.

We also think of the positions expressed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which already in 2017<sup>22</sup> defined the characteristics of an ‘innovative learning environment’, an environment defined as an organic whole that embraces the learning experience organised for specific groups of students around a single ‘pedagogical core’ that goes beyond a predefined classroom or programme, including activities and learning outcomes, thus recognising, a central role for teachers.<sup>23</sup>

Significant are the seven principles defined there, which evidently reflect a comprehensive approach, recognising a central role for educational systems in the construction of citizenship processes:

- (i) the learning environment recognises learners as the main participants, encourages their active engagement and develops in them an awareness of their activities as learners;
- (ii) the learning environment is grounded in the social nature of learning and actively encourages properly organised cooperative learning;
- (iii) the learning professionals within the learning environment are fully attuned to both the motivations of learners and the crucial ground that emotions have in achievement;
- (iv) the learning environment is highly sensitive to the individual differences between the students within it, including their prior knowledge;
- (v) the learning environment develops programmes that require constant commitment by putting everyone on the line without causing undue overload
- (vi) the learning environment operates with expectations in mind and implements assessment strategies consistent with those expectations; it also places a strong emphasis on formative feedback to support learning;
- (vii) the learning environment strongly promotes ‘horizontal connection’ between knowledge areas and subjects, as well as with the community and the wider world.

In this context, it is clear that the process does not, and could not, concern only the infrastructure, but must be managed in a systemic manner, involving the organisation that makes use of the infrastructure, as well, to the point of including the pedagogical core of the learning environment itself, projecting the school into a different dimension, as a ‘training organisation’ that places the learner at the centre, embedded in an adaptive system of a technological type so as to improve their learning experiences according to personal characteristics, preferences and progress.

Also in line with this are the positions expressed by the Council of Europe, which, in order to realise Goal 4 on the quality of education in the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda, emphasises the need to build and improve educational facilities that are sensitive to children, disabilities and gender, and that provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

A model also inspired by the *European Schoolnet* within the *Future Classroom Lab* initiative.

But the centrality of an appropriate digitalisation process also emerges in the Council Conclusions on Digital Education in the European Knowledge Societies (2020/C 425/10) in which the need to focus on the competences of teachers and trainers is emphasised, both in the creation of learning environments that promote the critical and creative thinking of each learner, and in the creation of safe, inclusive and high-quality content and learning environments. A conclusion that rests on the knowledge that “well-trained teachers, capable of using digital technologies in a pedagogically appropriate and age- and gender-sensitive manner, are a key factor in achieving digital, inclusive and high-quality education for all.”

In this context, therefore, it is evident how the digital transition of the education system itself acts as an engine for social change, at least in its intentions.

### **PATHS TO THE DIGITALIZATION OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS**

With the pandemic crisis, as mentioned above, the potential, but also the very critical aspects of the digital transition of the education system emerged in all their positivity and drama. Assessments on the first profile are easy, those on the second much more complex for the reasons mentioned. On the one hand, infrastructural inadequacy, on the other, the profile of individual endowments in terms of access to infrastructures and skills have in many cases increased that gap not only between territories but also between population groups, running the risk of transforming a process, that of digital transition, from an engine for the construction of an inclusive and quality system, into a source of inequalities.<sup>24</sup>

It is certainly no coincidence that, for instance, the Council Conclusions on Countering the COVID-19 Crisis in Education and Training (2020/C 212 I/03) are inspired by the need to make further efforts to accelerate the digital transformation of education and training systems, strengthen the digital capacity of education and training institutions and reduce the digital divide, including by further supporting the development of digital skills and competences of teachers and trainers,<sup>25</sup> in order to facilitate the teaching and assessment of the framework of digital learning contexts.

The Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027—Rethinking Education and Training for the Digital Age (Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions<sup>26</sup>) also follows these lines. In it, various measures, coordinated at European level, are envisaged for the construction of a high-quality, inclusive and accessible European digital education system in which the critical issues that emerged during the emergency period are recalled and partially resolved.

The plan presents a vision of comprehensive education aimed at improving digital literacy, competences and skills at all levels of education and training and for all levels of digital competences and, quite significantly, emphasises the need to make education systems ready for the digital age by specifying some basic principles that are also fundamental for improving the quality and inclusiveness of education in Europe:

- a. inclusive, high-quality digital education that respects data protection and ethics;
- b. transforming education for the digital age also through enhanced dialogue and stronger partnerships between educators, the private sector, researchers, municipalities and public authorities;
- c. adequate investment in connectivity, equipment and organisational skills and competences to ensure access to digital education for all. Specifically, the document emphasises that: “education is a fundamental human right and access to it must be guaranteed, regardless of the environment in which it takes place, whether physical, digital or a combination of both. The right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning is the first principle of the European pillar of social rights, while the fifth principle of the pillar gives workers the right to training”;
- d. Digital education should play a central role in enhancing equality and inclusiveness: “Digital skills are essential to be able to develop and implement digitally inclusive and accessible systems. Similarly, due to the lack of digital skills and accessibility, many disadvantaged groups, families and teachers have been unable to continue working and learning during lockdown. This not only increased the risk of poverty and disadvantage, but also widened inequalities in education and training”;
- e. e-skills should be core competences for all educators and training staff and be integrated into all areas of teachers’ professional development, including initial training;
- f. Digital educators play a key role in digital education;
- g. Digital literacy is essential for living in a digitised world;
- h. Basic digital competences should become an integral part of the core transferable competences everyone should have in order to realise their personal development, actively engage in society as a citizen, use public services and exercise fundamental rights;
- i. the centrality of advanced digital skills in transition processes;
- j. there is a need for high-quality educational content to increase the relevance, quality and inclusiveness of European education and training at all levels.

The document identifies priorities (2) and numerous actions (17) to be achieved:

- a. Promote the development of a highly efficient digital education ecosystem, including six actions covering strategic dialogue with Member States, the proposal for a Council Recommendation on blended learning, the European digital education content framework, digital connectivity and equipment for education, digital transformation plans for education and training institutions, the use of artificial intelligence systems in education and, thus, ultra-high-capacity internet connectivity and digital educational content, and digital skills training, including digital teaching methods.<sup>27</sup>
- b. Improve digital competences and skills for the digital transformation (7 actions including (i) common guidelines for teachers and educators to promote digital literacy; (ii) the updating of the European Digital Competence Framework; (iii) the establishment of the European Digital Competence Certificate—EDSC; (iv) the proposal for a Council Recommendation on improving the supply of digital competences in education and training; (v) the transnational collection of data on students' digital competences; (vi) 'Digital Opportunities' placements in higher education in Erasmus+, promoting women's participation in STEM disciplines; (vi) the European eLearning Cluster to support Member States by creating a network of national eLearning advisory services to exchange experiences and good practices on e-inclusion enablers.

Also in the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions,<sup>28</sup> *realization of the European educational area by 2025*, cooperation between states is promoted in order to enrich the quality and inclusiveness of national systems.

### **OUTLINE OF THE NATIONAL DIGITAL SCHOOL PLAN AND THE THRUST OF THE NRP**

Looking at the Italian situation, a recent survey on the degree of digitalisation of facilities placed Italy 20th in the ranking.

With reference to our system, the digital transition process dates back to 2015, the year of implementation of the National Plan for the Digital School, which made it possible to have a unified planning tool that, in synergy with

the structural funds of the 2014-2020 Operational Programme, has been greatly accelerated thanks to the identification of 35 specific actions that have been implemented to different degrees within the country.

The PNSD focused on four areas: that of *connectivity*, which should be seen as the backbone of the entire transformation process, and on this we also have to say thanks to the resources allocated, first for ultra-broadband, and, then, also integrated by the PNRR that have affected a large part of school buildings, with the goal of almost total coverage by 2024, infrastructural problems, which have not been resolved to date, notwithstanding; *that of (digital and innovative) environments and tools* enriched also thanks to European funds; *that of skills and, finally, that of teacher training and support*, which has seen the introduction of the figure of the digital animator flanked as well by the teachers of the Digital Innovation team and supported, for some years now, by the territorial training teams as well.

It is in this context that the PNRR fits in, reflecting the approach of the PNSD, by including several areas in the transition process: that relating to the computerisation of structures, the declared aim of which is to achieve an improvement in the efficiency of the administrative system, also from an organisational point of view; that relating to information technology, understood as technology to support teaching; and the third relating to the teaching of information technology.

With the PNRR, thanks to the new scenarios initiated by the PNSD, we would like to complete the picture but also relaunch some actions.

Specifically, Mission 4 of the NRP is dedicated to education and research, aimed at strengthening the conditions for the development of a knowledge-intensive, competitive and resilient economy, and is divided into 2 components

- M4C1 Strengthening the supply of education services, from kindergartens to universities, divided into 4 action areas (qualitative improvement and quantitative expansion of education and training services; improvement of recruitment processes and teacher training; skills expansion and infrastructure enhancement; reform and enhancement of doctorates), with 9 reforms and 14 investments.
- M4C2 from research to enterprise, broken down into 11 investments, grouped into three lines of action (strengthening research and dissemination of innovative models for basic and applied research conducted in synergy between universities and enterprises; support for innovation processes and technology transfer; strengthening of support conditions for research and innovation).

In particular, the line on broadening skills and upgrading infrastructure includes four investments: (i) new skills and new languages; (ii) school

4.0—innovative schools, new classrooms and laboratories; (iii) school building safety and upgrading plan; (iv) advanced university teaching and skills.

It is in this context that the School 4.0 Plan sees the light, whose inspiring principles, enumerated at the beginning, recall two quotations from Montessori and Malaguzzi, by way of a request for methodological legitimisation for the valorisation of the role of space in the educational process, taking up, at least in its intentions, what had already been envisaged in the document *Teachers as Designers of Learning Environments. The Importance of Innovative Pedagogies* (Center for Educational Research and Innovation, OECD).<sup>29</sup>

The document refers to the ‘learning ecosystem, formed by the intersection of places, times, people, learning activities, tools and resources’, to emphasise that it is not enough ‘only space and technology to create an innovative environment, but training, organisation of time and teaching methodologies are fundamental’.

The Plan is divided into three sections:

- *Background*, defines the context of the intervention, tracing the stages of the educational and digital transformation process in Italian schools and the European reference scenarios;
- *Framework*, divided into two parts aimed at presenting the framework and main guidelines for the design of innovative learning environments (*Next Generation Classrooms*) and laboratories for the digital professions of the future (*Net Generation Labs*);
- *Roadmap*, in which the stages of the implementation of the School 4.0 investment line are outlined.

With specific reference to the School 4.0 Plan, the intention is to overcome the boundary between the physical and the virtual learning environment, ensuring an integration between the two.<sup>30</sup>

This is a measure that intends to transform classrooms into innovative learning environments, turning digitalisation into a pillar of teaching, starting precisely by adapting classrooms understood as infrastructures, first of all by making them flexible and adapted to the new learning methodologies, and secondly by equipping them with advanced technological systems. Physical learning spaces to which virtual spaces will have to be added.

The approach is universalistic, so as to guarantee equal opportunities for all schools, according to the number of classes present, while preserving the autonomy of the schools that are called upon to design this type of intervention.

Alongside the infrastructural and organisational plan is that of skills, the subject of another and, in part autonomous, line of intervention that directly concerns the digital transition of school personnel, leaving the

choice of activities to the autonomy of the schools, entrusted to a planning nucleus that works alongside the school principal to plan interventions in parallel with the adaptation of environments. This is a measure that aims to promote a system for the development of digital teaching and the training of school personnel on the digital transition by developing a national digital education hub for the training of teachers and school personnel and an integrated network of territorial training hubs.

A final measure is the one on new skills and new languages, which aims to ensure equal opportunities and gender equality in terms of teaching and guidance for all school cycles in order to grow scientific culture and the approach to computational thinking in schools and to strengthen internationalisation.<sup>31</sup>

The Decree of the Minister of Education No. 89/2020 introduced the Guidelines on Integrated Digital Education that provided for the adoption, in each institute, of a school plan for integrated digital education within the PTOF, providing specific indications on how it should be organised, and Budget Law 2021, No. 178/2020 increased the staffing of technical assistants in order to ensure the functionality of IT equipment in the various orders and grades. The same law strengthened the territorial information teams to promote actions to train teaching staff and enhance students' skills on innovative teaching methodologies. The teams, pursuant to Article 47 of Decree-Law No 36/2022, provide ongoing support to educational institutions for the implementation of the PNRR investments, with the functional coordination of the PNRR Mission Unit.

In addition to these funding lines, there are also those included in Mission 5, Component 3, Investment 3 of the PNRR to combat educational poverty in the southern regions for which, in the last call for proposals published, were aimed at expanding and enhancing educational and care services for the 0-6 age bracket, in order to strengthen the acquisition of fundamental skills for the wellbeing of children and their families; at promoting the wellbeing and harmonious growth of minors, guaranteeing effective educational opportunities and anticipating, at an early stage, forms of social hardship and educational poverty combating school drop-outs, especially in the 11–17 age group, by promoting not only the improvement of the educational offer, also thanks to the activation of individualised paths, complementary to the traditional ones, functional to the insertion into the world of work, but also by foreseeing joint actions 'inside and outside school' aimed specifically at managing and stemming the phenomenon of school drop-outs.

Law 233/2021, finally, in Art. 24 *bis*, provided for three distinct actions for the development of digital skills in the coming school years: (i) updating of the National Plan for the training of teachers in schools of all levels, which will have to include, among the national priorities, the approach to

the learning of computer programming (coding) and digital didactics, in line with the PNRR investment dedicated to *New skills and new languages*; the updating and integration of computer programming and digital skills in the specific learning objectives and competence targets of the National Indications for the curricula of pre-school and first cycle of education and of the National Indications and Guidelines in force for the educational institutions of the second cycle of education; the development of digital skills, also by fostering the learning of computer programming (coding), within existing teaching. And the Budget Law 2022, in a very significant way, re-confirmed the fund for the fight against child educational poverty, created in 2016, based on a memorandum of understanding for its management between banking foundations and the government, for the two-year period 2023-2024, with the recognition of a contribution, in the form of a tax credit, for the payments made by the fund to the banking foundations which, from 2016 to 2021, have financed numerous innovative projects aimed essentially at meeting the needs of the territories. Leaving aside the huge amount of funding, which to date amounts to 607 million euros, what is relevant for the purposes of this discussion is the method that has proved to be successful, thanks to the bottom-up dynamic of project expression, and which has also been replicated in the Fund for the Digital Republic. The fund is intended 'to support experimental interventions aimed at removing the economic, social and cultural obstacles that prevent minors from fully benefiting from educational processes'. The intervention strategy is based on the role of the 'educating community', which includes the various actors in the network: schools, local authorities, the third sector, families and children. It is a tool that has been valorised by doctrine precisely because of its potential<sup>32</sup> underlined in the recently published guidelines that aim to promote an integrated, replicable and sustainable intervention model, based on the synergic involvement of all the territorial actors.

Without going into the details of the guidelines, which are the result of research carried out in a number of locations, what in my opinion deserves to be emphasised is precisely the role that is acknowledged for the members of the community, which ceases to be a mere container and background context, but becomes an active and capacitating subject capable of stimulating growth and functioning, by emphasising the capabilities of the subjects involved, understood as the internal power of individuals, and as external power, i.e., as the possibility of taking advantage of favourable circumstances and opportunities, enhancing the specificities of the individual and the putting into circulation of each one's skills, with a view to cooperative learning and connected to current events and what happens outside the school. And very significantly, the text emphasises how "*the individualist approach to social and educational issues, even in its most vital version made up of enthusiasm and self-denial, is proving increasingly inadequate to tackle highly*

*complex problems such as school drop-outs and educational poverty,”* and this on both a personal and organisational level. The educating communities are placed at the centre of the processes of building educational and community agreements.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

In this context, if we agree with the main function of education systems, which is to guarantee the effectiveness of the right to education and up-bringing in its value referring to the very existence of the individual, it is indispensable to adopt a system perspective in which the infrastructural and organisational dimension goes hand in hand with the construction of competences.

A necessary integrated vision is essential in order not to dissipate the unrepeatable opportunity offered by the NRP: “to increase productivity, innovation and employment, to ensure wider access to education and culture and to close territorial gaps.”

A unitary dimension that, as mentioned at the outset, is a precondition for guaranteeing the development of a system that is truly inclusive, where inclusion, in the words of Habermas, indicates the way in which belonging to the community, to society, acquires full value: an “intersubjectively shared context of a possible understanding.”<sup>34</sup> A dimension in which inclusion and equality are posited as pathways that allow the boundaries of community to open up.

This is, evidently, an approach that considers otherness, a constitutive condition of any reality, overcoming the opposition with which it would be understood in a non-inclusive dimension, crowning the Hegelian dialectical movement by guaranteeing a synthesis that cannot fail to have an impact on the way of understanding schooling and didactics itself.

In this context, digitalisation undoubtedly has a great deal of potential, but there is no denying the risks linked to the different profiles it covers, from structural deficiencies, which limit access, to inadequacies also in terms of skills. These are all elements that inevitably affect the weaker sections of the population (I am thinking of BES or the disabled) who, as already highlighted in the PNSD, should instead be among the first recipients of those learning environments that, taking advantage of the flexibility of configurations, should adapt to users.

But, if we consider precisely what emerged during the pandemic emergency, digitalisation at present appears more as a source of inequalities and thus as a brake with respect to the effectiveness of the (fundamental) right to education. In this period, in fact, the great distance could be seen between those who had digital tools at their disposal and those who, for

various reasons, did not have such tools, and therefore, the projects, the lines of intervention will have to be oriented in a systemic dimension, in fact, that enhances the multidimensional perspective, a prerequisite for an inclusive process, enhancing, or rather leveraging the autonomies that have to be placed in the conditions to create that organisational and cultural substratum, functional to guarantee the operability of citizenship rights by ensuring, the various actors, a model that guarantees equal opportunities for all, while respecting differences.

## NOTES

1. Cf. Nazareno Panichella, “Diseguaglianze territoriali e stratificazione sociale,” *Il Mulino*, no. 1 (2022): 61-65; in the same issue, Stefania Sabatinelli, “Le disparità nell’accesso ai servizi per l’infanzia,” *Il Mulino*, no. 1 (2022): 78-86.
2. In these terms, Loredana Sciolla, “La classe senza regole,” *Il Mulino*, no. 2 (2008): 259-266.
3. On this point, see the analysis by Claudio Franchini, *L’intervento pubblico di contrasto alla povertà* (Naples: Editoriale scientifica, 2021), 11-41; Larysa Minzyuk and Felice Russo, “La misurazione multidimensionale della povertà in istruzione in Italia. Multidimensional Measurement of Educational Poverty in Italy,” *Politica economica*, no. 1 (2016): 65-122.
4. See the focus by Stefania Baroncelli, “Diritto alle diversità e inclusione nelle scuole. Disabilità, condizioni economico-sociali, background migratorio, genere, e minoranza linguistiche,” *Federalismi*, no. 32 (September 2022): 1-11.
5. Of possible interest, Anna Maria Pinna, “L’economia digital divide,” *Equilibri*, no. 3 (2001): 219-226.
6. Amartya Sen, *La diseguaglianza. Un riesame critico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994), 64.
7. Sen, *La diseguaglianza*, 63-69.
8. Cf. Lucia Valente, “Contrasto alla povertà e promozione del lavoro tra buoni propositi e vecchi vizi,” *Diritto delle relazioni industriali*, no. 4 (2018): 1081-1095.
9. Gisella Decarli, Laura Franchin, Beatrice Bozzetto, Luca Surian, “Un’indagine sulle buone prassi per la didattica online e per l’insegnamento della matematica indicate dagli insegnanti in epoca di COVID-19,” *Psicologia clinica dello sviluppo*, no. 2 (2021): 347-354.
10. On this subject let us refer to Loredana Giani, “Disabilità e diritto all’istruzione: alla ricerca di un difficile equilibrio tra persona e valore economico della prestazione (pubblica),” in *Funzione amministrativa e diritti delle persone con disabilità*, ed. Margherita Interlandi (Naples: Editoriale scientifica, 2022) 139-155; Loredana Giani, “Dalla multilevel governance alla governance reticolare. Esigenze dei territori, capability e appropriatezza degli interventi,” in *Scritti in onore di Aldo Carosi* (Naples: Editoriale Scientifica, 2021): 463-490; Loredana Giani, La normativa in materia di Disturbi Specifici dell’Apprendimento (DSA), in *DSA e didattica inclusiva: dalle neuroscienze agli interventi in classe. L’innovazione didattica a partire dal post Covid 19*, ed. Maria

Vittoria Isidori (Rome: Editoriale Anicia, 2020); Loredana Giani, Ruggiero Dipace, Marina D’Orsogna and Annarita Iacopino, “Coesione e sviluppo territoriale: valorizzazione delle aree interne e prospettiva macroregionale,” in *Diritto e processo amministrativo. Giornate di studio in onore di Enrico Follieri*, vol. I (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2019, 343–359; Loredana Giani, I diritti sociali e le sfide della globalizzazione. Intersystemic competition and regulatory capitalism. Spunti di riflessione sul “nuovo” ruolo dello Stato, in *Discorsi interrotti. Il pensiero di Giovanni Marongiu venti anni dopo* ed. Pierciro Galeone P and Donatella Morana D, (Rome: Luiss Academy, 2014); Loredana Giani, “Effettività del diritto all’istruzione per gli alunni con Disturbi Specifici dell’Apprendimento (DSA),” in *I Disturbi Specifici dell’Apprendimento a scuola* (Rome:Anicia, 2014): 37–55; Loredana Giani, “Il ruolo delle carte di servizi e dell’azione per l’efficienza nella garanzia della effettività dei diritti degli individui-utenti nel settore socio-assistenziale. Il caso dei disturbi specifici dell’apprendimento,” in *I servizi pubblici in Italia e in Argentina*, (Naples: Editoriale Scientifica, 2013); Loredana Giani, “I diritti sociali e la sfida della crisi economica. Equità ed uguaglianza nel diritto all’istruzione dei soggetti diversamente abili,” in *Studi in Onore di Claudio Rosano*, (Naples: Jovene, 2013); Loredana Giani, “Diritti fondamentali, disabilità e prestazioni amministrative. Effettività dei diritti delle persone con problemi cognitivo-comportamentali,” paper at the Conference “Building Design for Autism” organised by the ITACA Department, Sapienza University of Rome, in *Autismo, Protezione sociale e architettura*, Alinea, Florence, 2010.

11. On this point we refer to the theoretical approach of Amartya Sen and Martje Nussbaum, *The quality of life*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Amartya Sen, “The idea of justice,” *Journal of Human Development*, no. 4 (2009): 331-349; Martha Nussbaum, *Creating capabilities: the human development approach*, (Harvard: Harvard Un. Press, 2011).
12. Jürgen Habermas, *L’inclusione dell’altro*, trans. Leonardo Ceppa (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998) 153.
13. See Anna Simonati, “Dal “piano nazionale per l’educazione al rispetto” all’autonomia scolastica: il metodo “reticolare” per l’inclusione e l’integrazione,” *Federalismi*, no. 32 (2022): 35–48.
14. Paolo Calidoni, “Immagini dalle aule. La perdurante predominanza del modello didattico ‘uno-tanti’,” *Scuola democratica*, no. 1 (2016): 23–46.
15. Cf. Ferdinando G. Menga, “Il futuro di cui dobbiamo rispondere. Ciò che la rappresentanza politica può ancora insegnarci sulla giustizia intergenerazionale,” *Rivista filosofia del diritto*, no. 3 (2022): 301–306.
16. The survey by Denis Meuret and Agathe Dirani, *La nozione di equità nelle ricerche sull’educazione*, *Scuola Democratica*, no. 2 (2014): 297–302, 320.
17. Paolo Benanti and Sebastiano Maffettone, “Sostenibilità D, Le conseguenze della rivoluzione digitale nelle nostre vite,” *Il Mulino*, no. 2 (2021): 191-207.
18. See Alessandro Bianchi, *Infrastrutture per la connettività territoriale*, *Rivista giuridica del mezzogiorno*, no. 1 (2018): 59-74.
19. www.openopolis.it
20. See Orazio Giancola and Luca Salmieri, “L’education e l’andamento delle ineguaglianze. Interview with Walter Müller,” *Scuola Democratica*, no. 2 (2014):

- 287–296; Nicola Novacco, “Quantità e qualità di infrastrutture e sviluppo concorrenziale delle aree deboli,” *Rivista economica del mezzogiorno*, no. 4 (2006): 445–451.
21. Reasoning to the contrary, cf. Simona Bodo, “Europa: politiche culturali e sociali a confronto nella lotta all’esclusione,” *Economia della Cultura*, no. 1 (2004): 153–158.
22. OECD, *The OECD handbook for innovative learning environments*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2017.
23. On the need to coordinate European and local actions, cf. Maddalena Colombo, “Il contrastare la dispersione scolastica attraverso le politiche locali: dalla ricerca all’azione di rete,” *Autonomie locali e servizi sociali*, no. 2 (2011): 169–184.
24. Cf. Alessia Forciniti, Emanuela Spanò and Danilo Taglietti, “La digitalizzazione della scuola. Reti, soggetti e idee per una nuova politica dell’educazione,” *Scuola Democratica*, no. 3 (2019): 503–528.
25. See Ida Cortoni, “Il capitale digitale scolastico. Un’indagine sociologica sulle competenze digitali degli insegnanti,” *Scuola Democratica*, no. 1 (2021): 65–85.
26. COM (2020) 624 final of 30 September 2020.
27. On the recent difficulties, Andrea Gavosto, “Scuola, fondi sempre più lontani,” *La Repubblica*, 17 February 2023; Marco Frojo, “Nuovi edifici e classi digitalizzate così la scuola punta forte sul PNRR,” *La Repubblica—Affari & Finanza*, 5 September 2022.
28. COM(2020) 625 final of 30 September 2020.
29. Alejandro Paniagua and David Istance, 9 April 2019; Francesca Di Lascio and Livia Lorenzoni, “Obiettivi e governance dei piani di rilancio nei sistemi europei: un confronto fra cinque Paesi,” *Istituzioni del federalismo*, no. 2 (2022): 325–331.
30. Paolo Bianchi, “Via al Piano Scuola 4.0, aule attrezzate per didattica integrativa,” *Il Sole 24 ore*, 17 June 2022.
31. Themes that have already emerged in recent years, as noted by Caterina Manco, “Qualcosa di nuovo: innovazione e comunità di pratica,” *Scuola Democratica*, no. 3 (2014): 675–680.
32. Vv. Aa., *Facciamo un patto!: i patti educativi di comunità e la partecipazione delle ragazze e dei ragazzi*, ed. V. Meo (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2022)
33. In these terms, already Daniela Luisi, “Imparare dai territori. La pratica dell’educazione tra scuola pubblica e progetti locali,” *Il Mulino*, no. 4 (2020): 902–905.
34. Jürgen Habermas, “Osservazioni su Dieter Grimm,” in *Il futuro della costituzione* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), 373–378; Habermas, “L’inclusione,” 75.

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