

EDUCATING FOR EQUALITY AND RESPECT: A SYSTEMIC INTERVENTION MODEL FOR ITALIAN SCHOOLS TOWARDS CULTURAL CHANGE

Maria Teresa Sagri, Daniela Bagattini, Virginia Stefania Bettanin, & Mario Venturella
INDIRE (Italy)

Abstract

This paper presents the framework and initial findings of a major national initiative promoted by INDIRE and the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM), launched in January 2026, thanks to the National Programme *School and skills 2021-2027* financed by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). The project aims to strengthen the school's role in educating for respect and gender equality, fostering a significant cultural change. Addressing the limitations of episodic interventions (as evidenced by a preliminary survey involving over 4,400 institutions) the project proposes a systemic model that integrates gender equality into the structural fabric of the school's three-year educational offer. The intervention adopts a multi-dimensional methodology, supported by a dedicated digital environment and organized into four key phases: *Institutional Self-Reflection*: Utilizing a survey, schools assess their maturity on gender issues. This digital tool is critical for guiding the revision of strategic planning documents and identifying specific areas for improvement; *Targeted Training*: The program offers an incremental training plan that includes both propedeutic modules for the entire school community and specialized paths tailored to the specific needs identified during the self-assessment phase. *Student Voice and Civic Engagement*: Shifting the paradigm, students become active agents of change. Through peer-to-peer education and participatory methodologies focused on identity construction, the project empowers students to challenge stereotypes and engage in civic responsibilities. *Monitoring and Permanent Observatory*: A combined qualitative-quantitative approach transforms schools into "learning organizations." This phase establishes a permanent Observatory to monitor progress, ensuring that educational actions are sustainable and not merely isolated events. Crucially, this contribution will disclose the first results of the self-assessment phase. By analyzing data from the schools survey, the paper will provide a comprehensive overview of the current awareness levels and planning capabilities of Italian schools. It will highlight the strategic shift from confining gender issues solely within Civics Education to adopting a holistic, system-wide approach. The project serves as a significant case study in organizational learning and equity, offering a scalable model for removing cultural obstacles and building a more inclusive society.

Keywords: *Gender equality, systemic change, student voice, teacher training, Institutional Self-Reflection.*

1. Introduction and objectives

In this article we will present the actions developed within the project “Rafforzare il ruolo della scuola per l'educazione al rispetto e alla parità di genere. Un percorso di accompagnamento e monitoraggio per le scuole” B56E25001000001, financed by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) - National Programme 2021- 2027 *School and skills 2021-2027* and entrusted to INDIRE by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM). The project is aligned with Specific Objective ESO4.6 "Promote equal access to and completion of inclusive and quality education and training, particularly for disadvantaged groups, from early childhood education and care, through general and vocational education and training, up to tertiary level and adult education and learning, including by facilitating learning mobility for all and accessibility for people with disabilities (ESF+)". Its main interventions include actions aimed at promoting social inclusion and combating school dropout, in order to ensure inclusive and quality education.

Within this framework and also taking into account the challenges posed by ever-increasing phenomena of social discrimination and gender-based violence, it is urgently necessary to expand and support school education with specific actions aimed at promoting the cultural, ethical, and social growth of young people as a prerequisite for civil coexistence and respect for gender equality. This requires a concrete commitment to education to foster a culture of respect and inclusion from an early age, promoting a vision of school as a space for dialogue, exchange, and participatory learning, capable of developing socio-emotional, relational, and civic skills through dialogue between peers, generations, and cultures, capable of making students aware, inclusive, and respectful of others (Gamberi, Maio, Selmi, 2010).

The project originates from the need to strengthen the capacity of the education system to respond effectively, equitably, and sustainably, to ongoing social, cultural, and technological transformations, as well as to the critical issues that have become more evident in recent years, particularly following periods of systemic disruption. Contemporary educational systems are increasingly challenged by rapid changes in knowledge production, the diffusion of digital technologies, and the growing heterogeneity of student populations, all of which require a rethinking of traditional teaching and organizational models. Within this evolving landscape, schools are called upon not only to ensure the transmission of knowledge, but also to foster complex competences, critical thinking, and adaptability among learners. However, these demands often coexist with persistent structural inequalities, which continue to affect students' access to quality education and their chances of academic success.

A central concern addressed by the project is therefore the persistence of educational disparities, including gaps in learning outcomes, increased risks of early school leaving, and unequal access to meaningful learning opportunities (Biemmi, Leonelli, 2017). The OECD data from Pisa 2023 show that Italy is the country with the highest gender gap in mathematics to the detriment of girls (OECD, 2022).

These challenges are particularly pronounced in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts, where schools may lack adequate resources and support to address students' diverse needs effectively. In this context, the project promotes a systemic approach to school improvement, grounded in data-informed decision-making, continuous monitoring, and pedagogical innovation. Rather than relying on isolated or short-term interventions, it seeks to embed improvement processes within the ordinary functioning of schools, encouraging a culture of evidence-based reflection and long-term development (Bagattini, Miotti, Pedani, Sagri, 2023).

A further key motivation lies in the need to support schools in interpreting and using data in a meaningful and transformative way. Educational data are often available in large quantities but not effectively translated into actionable knowledge. For this reason, the project reframes monitoring as a strategic lever for self-evaluation, organizational learning, and professional development among teachers and school leaders. By enhancing data literacy and analytical competences, schools are better equipped to identify critical issues, set priorities, and design targeted interventions. At the same time, the project addresses the fragmentation that often characterizes educational initiatives, seeking to enhance coherence between different levels of governance, school practices, and learning objectives.

In this perspective, strengthening teachers' and school leaders' digital, methodological, and evaluative competences becomes a crucial lever for innovation. The project recognizes that sustainable improvement depends not only on tools and frameworks, but also on the professional capacity of those who operate within the system. By fostering collaborative practices, reflective teaching, and continuous professional learning, it contributes to the development of more inclusive, flexible, and student-centered learning environments. Ultimately, the project aligns with broader educational goals related to equity, quality, and resilience, aiming to support schools as dynamic organizations capable of adapting to change while ensuring meaningful learning opportunities for all students.

2. Project design

The project is structured as an integrated and multi-level set of actions designed to support schools in processes of monitoring, self-evaluation, and continuous improvement, while fostering a coherent link between data use, pedagogical practices, and organizational development. A first core strand concerns the development and implementation of structured tools for data collection, management, and analysis. These tools are intended to provide schools with timely, reliable, and actionable insights into both educational processes and student outcomes, enabling a more nuanced understanding of strengths and critical areas. Particular attention is given to ensuring that data are accessible and interpretable by school actors, through user-friendly formats and clear reporting systems. To this end, the provision of operational guidelines is complemented by targeted training activities aimed at strengthening data literacy and analytical competences among teachers and school leaders, thereby promoting a more strategic and reflective use of evidence in decision-making processes.

Alongside these technical and methodological components, the project emphasizes the importance of collaboration and professional exchange. It promotes the creation and consolidation of communities of practice among schools, encouraging horizontal learning dynamics and the sharing of experiences, models, and effective practices. These collaborative environments are conceived as spaces for collective reflection, where schools can compare approaches, discuss challenges, and co-construct solutions, thus reducing isolation and fostering a sense of shared responsibility for improvement. The identification and dissemination of good practices and their dissemination across different contexts represents a key mechanism for scaling innovation and supporting system-wide development.

Another central line of action involves the provision of direct and ongoing support to schools through mentoring, tutoring, and consultancy activities. This support is designed to guide schools in the interpretation of data, the identification of priorities, and the design and implementation of targeted improvement interventions that are coherent with their specific contexts and needs. Such support is not prescriptive but adaptive, taking into account the diversity of school environments and promoting locally grounded solutions. In parallel, the project includes the development of educational resources, methodological frameworks, and replicable intervention models that can be flexibly adapted and reused, thereby enhancing both efficiency and sustainability.

Finally, the project incorporates a continuous evaluation and monitoring system aimed at assessing the effectiveness and impact of the actions undertaken. This system not only serves accountability purposes but also functions as a feedback mechanism to inform iterative adjustments and ongoing refinement of strategies. Through the integration of monitoring, support, collaboration, and evaluation, the project contributes to building a sustainable and scalable model of school improvement. Ultimately, its overarching goal is to enhance the quality of education by strengthening the interplay between data-informed practices, professional development, and pedagogical innovation, while ensuring more equitable and meaningful learning opportunities for all students.

3. Student Voice and participatory approaches

A further key dimension of the project design concerns the integration of Student Voice as a strategic lever for educational and organizational transformation. Within this perspective, students are not positioned merely as recipients of educational interventions, but as active agents capable of contributing to the interpretation, negotiation, and co-construction of meaning within the school context (Grion, Cook Sather, 2013; Mitra, 2018).

This approach is grounded in a shift from protection-oriented and often reactive educational practices toward a participatory and reflexive model, in which students' experiences, perceptions, and subjectivities are recognized as legitimate sources of knowledge. In line with international literature on student participation, the project adopts methodologies that foster students' agency and engagement, including peer education, dialogic practices, and structured opportunities for involvement in school life.

Particular attention is given to ensuring that participation is not limited to symbolic forms of expression but translates into meaningful influence on educational processes. In this regard, the project draws on the Lundy model (2007), emphasizing the need to guarantee not only voice and space, but also audience and influence, so that students' contributions can effectively inform decision-making and institutional practices.

Within the broader framework of gender equality education, Student Voice is also understood as a critical tool for addressing the gap between the fluidity of contemporary gender identities and the rigidity of institutional structures. By actively involving students in the co-construction of educational pathways, the project seeks to challenge stereotypical representations, promote non-hegemonic relational models, and support the emergence of more inclusive and reflexive school environments.

Ultimately, this dimension contributes to transforming individual and often fragmented experiences into collective learning processes, reinforcing the school's capacity to operate as a learning organization and to embed gender equality as a structural and everyday component of its educational mission.

4. Project target

The project targets the entire school community, including teachers, school leaders, and non-teaching staff (administrative, technical, and support personnel).

The need to train teachers on these issues is a hotly debated topic in Italy (Burgio, Lopez, 2023; Dello Preite, 2024; Biffi, Vignarelli, 2025), also based on the suggestions of GREVIO (2020), which highlights the lack of structured training on gender issues.

However, teacher training alone does not appear sufficient to ensure systemic change: the role of school management, the driving force of change, is fundamental to this process: the project pays particular attention to them, with a view to a shared leadership approach (Greco, Morini, 2017; Morini, Nencioni, 2022) and considering school a learning organization (Kools, Stoll, 2016).

Another key and often overlooked player is the so-called ATA staff: school assistants, administrative staff, and technical personnel. These professionals, who are not directly involved in teaching, play a crucial role in promoting equality and respect. In studies conducted by INDIRE, which the research group is currently investigating, these professionals are the ones who detect potential violent behavior and difficulties and also gather students' confidences. It is therefore essential to provide them with specific training, focusing on both general issues and intervention methods.

5. Project adjustment in response to emerging contexts

The Project's initial phase was to conduct a self-evaluation of schools, which would serve as a basis for defining the curriculum. However, during the first few months of the year, public attention in our country focused heavily on certain events that had occurred in schools, particularly a stabbing that resulted in the death of a student at the hands of a classmate. This led to the request to bring forward the first part of the training, in order to provide school staff with some initial insights for working on these issues. The training began on April 9th, and at this stage, we can only provide some preliminary data, which will be developed during the event in June.

As of April 23, 2026, 3,828 participants had registered on the platform, representing 2,549 schools. Participation currently appears to be driven primarily by individual engagement, rather than on structured or coordinated participation promoted at the school level, as only 30 schools have more than eight participants.

The platform will be opened to schools in May. From that point, schools—through their head teachers—will be required to complete a self-assessment on equality and respect. This will be an opportunity to understand whether, and to what extent, schools will "lead" the registration of their staff. Updated data will be presented during the conference.

Acknowledgements

This contribution was created within the activities of National Programme *School and skills 2021-2027* “Rafforzare il ruolo della scuola per l'educazione al rispetto e alla parità di genere. Un percorso di accompagnamento e monitoraggio per le scuole” B56E25001000001, Co-financed by the ESF+ and ERDF



References

- Bagattini, D., Miotti, B., Pedani, V., & Sagri, M. T. (Eds.). (2023). *Liberi e libere di essere: Il progetto PARTIME*. Roma: Carocci.
- Biffi, E., & Vignarelli, S. C. (2025). Educare all'affettività e alla sessualità: una proposta per la scuola secondaria. *Cultura pedagogica e scenari educativi*, 3(2), 52-61.
- Biemmi I., & Leonelli S. (2017), *Gabbie di genere. Retaggi sessisti e scelte formative*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier.
- Burgio G., & Lopez A.G. (Eds.) (2023). *La pedagogia di genere. Percorsi di ricerca contemporanei*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Dello Preite, F. (2024). Prevenire la violenza maschile sulle donne. La formazione e le competenze del corpo docente per promuovere relazioni intergenere paritarie. *Annali online della Didattica e della Formazione Docente*, 16(27), 116-132.
- Gamberi C., Maio M. A., & Selmi G. (Eds.). (2010). *Educare al genere. Riflessioni e strumenti per articolare la complessità*, Roma: Carocci.
- Grion, V., & Cook-Sather, A. (2013). *Student Voice. Prospettive internazionali e pratiche emergenti in Italia*. Milano: Guerrini Scientifica.

- Greco S., & Morini E. (2017), Dirigenti scolastici, docenti e consulenti per il miglioramento. Sinergie per una scuola capace di cambiamento. *Rivista dell'istruzione*, 3, 62-66.
- Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) (2020). *GREVIO's (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). ITALY*. Strasbourg: Secretariat of the monitoring mechanism of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence Council of Europe.
- Kools M., & Stoll L. (2016). What Makes a School a Learning Organisation? *OECD Education Working Papers*, 137.
- Lundy, L. (2007). "Voice" is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(6), 927-942
- Mitra, D. (2018) Student voice in secondary schools: The possibility for deeper change. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 56(5), 473-487.
- Morini E., & Nencioni P. (2022), Leadership condivisa per la scuola che apprende. *IUL Research*, 3(5), 6-28.
- OECD (2023a). *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I). The State of Learning and Equity in Education*. PISA, Paris: OECD Publishing.
- OECD (2023b). *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II). Learning During – and From – Disruption*. PISA, Paris: OECD Publishing.