

Village for the Earth.
An educational challenge to learn how to be together

Il Villaggio per la Terra.
Una sfida educativa per imparare a essere insieme

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OPEN ACCESS

Siped
Società Italiana di Pedagogia

Double blind peer review

Citation: Mazzoli, S. (2024). Village for the Earth. An educational challenge to learn how to be together. *Pedagogia oggi*, 22(2), 258-264. <https://doi.org/10.7346/PO-022024-32>

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Journal Homepage
<https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/siped>

Pensa MultiMedia / ISSN 2611-6561
<https://doi.org/10.7346/PO-022024-32>

ABSTRACT

Do we have the ability to make choices appropriate for the sustainable development goals of the 2030 Agenda? They indicate crucial issues for fostering networks of solidarity relationships and authentically human ways of being in the world. The contribution supports the hypothesis of education as a public good to which everyone is invited to participate, beyond fragmentations and seizing life as a complex web of interconnections for a more fraternal humanity. The essay critically examines an awareness initiative, *Village for the Earth*, which has engaged hundreds of thousands of people in Italy since 2017 on Earth Day. The training, research, and Third Mission project through which the Università Cattolica has supported the Village represents one of the strategic commitments by which universities are dedicated to fostering an inclusive and sustainable culture, in the sign of a *village of education*, where each person is called to *learn how to be together*.

Abbiamo la capacità di compiere scelte adeguate agli obiettivi di sviluppo sostenibile dell'Agenda 2030? Essi indicano questioni cruciali per generare reti di relazioni solidali e forme autenticamente umane dello stare al mondo. Il contributo accredita l'ipotesi dell'educazione come un bene pubblico a cui tutti sono invitati a partecipare, di là dalle frammentazioni e cogliendo la vita quale complessa trama di interconnessioni per un'umanità più fraterna. Il saggio compie una disamina critica su un'iniziativa di sensibilizzazione, *Il Villaggio per la Terra*, che coinvolge in Italia, dal 2017, centinaia di migliaia di persone nel giorno dell'*Earth Day*. Il progetto di formazione, ricerca e Terza Missione con cui l'Università Cattolica ha sostenuto il Villaggio per la Terra identifica uno degli impegni strategici con cui gli atenei sono impegnati nel dare vita ad una cultura inclusiva e sostenibile, nel segno di un *villaggio dell'educazione*, dove ogni giovane è chiamato a *imparare a essere insieme*.

Keywords: education | 2030 Agenda | sustainability | new competences | Village for the earth

Parole chiave: educazione, Agenda 2030, sostenibilità, nuove competenze, Villaggio per la terra

Received: September 1, 2024

Accepted: October 15, 2024

Published: December 20, 2024

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Introduction

Interpreting education as a public good, in which everyone is called to participate, with particular attention to young people who are encouraged to become world citizens, requires a renewed existential perspective capable of understanding and giving meaning to global interconnectedness (Birbes, 2018).

The person, as a biological and historical being, is characterized by their relational capacity as a distinctive mark of the self. A responsible and conscious citizen has a strong inclination to recognize the connections between the various life forms, to respect the rules that enhance the relationships between people and environment (Birbes, Bornatici, 2023), to communicate, to live together and cooperate for the common good with people of all opinions (Federici, 1982).

However, the spread of lifestyles characterized by indifference and individualism, which contribute to difficulties in forming meaningful relationships with others, has led humanity away from its intrinsic relational nature. Particularly, Western culture, with its economic, political, and educational systems, has fostered existences in which individuals find themselves in the world as strangers and loners, unable to engage constructively with their peers (Pati, 1984).

In this context, in recent decades, there has been a growing social need for education centered on personal and community responsibility, understood as responsibility towards oneself, others, and the environment (Birbes, Bornatici, 2023).

The essay, without claiming to be exhaustive, presents the UCSC project that took place between 2018 and 2022 at the *Village for the Earth*. It identifies one of the commitments in training, research, and Third Mission of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore to foster a culture that embraces care and hospitality towards others, in the spirit of a plural and sustainable village, where each young person is able to *know, do, be, and live together with others*.

The public movement sparked by the event envisions a model of education that, beyond a merely technical perspective, can foster the development of talents and help individuals and communities thrive.

1. An Agenda for the education of the future

From a pedagogical perspective, promoting dialogue and reciprocity, while respecting differences, is increasingly valuable given the current global situation marked by growing neglect, indifference, and tensions (Caimi, 2012). In the face of polarization, divisions, and cultural and educational antinomies, pedagogical reflection interprets human and social development as an aspect of interpersonal and interdisciplinary interaction. It urges the connection of peoples and cultures in the pursuit of the common good (Malavasi, 2019), fostering cooperation among institutions involved in shaping global educational policies and practices. Such cooperation should support a diverse, collaborative, and supportive world society (Locatelli, 2020) and train citizens to be active protagonists of the future, benefiting both themselves and the collective.

However, evidence suggests that the path to universal access to peace, justice, and education cannot be considered complete. Wars and global tensions significantly increase all forms of violence and related mortality rates; corruption and abuse of power are on the rise; and many learning environments lack the safety, inclusivity, and sustainability required for meaningful development (United Nations, 2015).

Such concerns are fully addressed by the *Global Agenda for Sustainability* (2015), which identifies lifelong and quality learning as the essential foundation for creating more cohesive and resilient societies through a strong commitment shared by the international community regarding education. In this regard, some goals can no longer be postponed: ensuring equity and quality in the completion of primary and secondary education; eliminating disparities in education; equipping learners worldwide with competences that support a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and an appreciation of cultural diversity; and increasing the number of qualified teachers to provide adequate educational opportunities on a global scale.

In line with the Sustainable Development Goals, where education is a crucial element, the text *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?*, published in 2015 by the United Nations Educa-

tional, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2015), is particularly important. This work, inspired by a humanistic vision of education, advocates for the development of individual talents to serve the community, generating new processes of sharing and active citizenship.

In this regard, the introduction to the Italian edition of the document highlights the need to move beyond viewing education merely as a tool to conform to the demands of the context. Instead, education should be seen as a continuous process that fosters change according to the principle of shared responsibility for a sustainable future (UNESCO, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 2019a).

Pope Francis's Global Educational Alliance (2019a) further supports the notion of education as a public good to which everyone is invited to contribute, with a special focus on younger generations. They need to be educated to appreciate and love every person beyond physical proximity and place of origin (Francis, 2020). This perspective aligns with the fundamental principle of *know yourself* and complements it with the equally important principles of *know your brother* (Francis, 2019b) and *know the creation* (Francis, 2015), all aiming to promote acceptance of others and ethical living through care and responsibility (Gallerani, Birbes, 2020).

In this context, educating for the future means caring for our planet, people, and the relationships that connect us, all within a framework of respect, solidarity, and brotherhood.

2. The educational challenge of *learning to be together*

Although educational opportunities are increasing for everyone worldwide, it is important to remember that schooling and formal learning, while essential, are not sufficient on their own. It is also crucial to focus on the quality and relevance of education, specifically on what children, young people, and adults are actually learning (UNESCO, 2015). In this regard, the aforementioned book *Rethinking Education* aligns with two historic cornerstones of UNESCO's reflection on education: the report *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow* (Faure et alii, 1972), commonly known as the Faure Report, and the text *Learning: The Treasure Within*, the result of the work of the Commission led by Jacques Delors (1996). The first offers a reflection on the concepts of lifelong education and the learning society; the second highlights the characteristics of an education capable of responding to present and future global challenges, provided it encompasses not only theoretical knowledge but also socio-emotional skills. The pillars of education highlighted in the document are summarized below:

- *Learning to know*, i.e. acquire the tools of knowledge with a focus on *learning to learn*;
- *Learning to do*, i.e. engaging in experiential learning processes, that provide the skills¹ necessary to successfully manage contemporary challenges;
- *Learning to be*, i.e. promoting an education in freedom and responsibility, which are fundamental dimensions for human and social growth;
- *Learning how to live together*, fostering participation and collaboration in all human activities, achieving common goals through sharing, respect, and peace.

Although the four pillars of learning remain relevant, they are increasingly threatened by globalization, the intensification of identity politics, and unsustainable development models. For this reason, without neglecting the first three pillars that form the foundation for learning how to live together, the Commission emphasizes the importance of the fourth pillar. It is essential for developing an understanding of others and their history, traditions, and values, as well as the interdependence that binds us, encourage us to view diversity as a resource and an opportunity for growth (Florenzano, Morin, Delors, 1998). Among the skills deemed essential for successfully addressing the challenges of the 21st century, UNESCO has recently introduced the pillar *Learning to Become* (2019b; 2021). This aims to emphasize the ability to reimagine possible futures together, taking into account uncertainty, precariousness, and interconnectedness as defining characteristics of the present and, increasingly, the future.

1 Rather than that of *competence*, the concept of *skill* is still dominant in these UNESCO documents.

The importance of this issue is confirmed by the European competence frameworks designed to address the crises of our time together, *GreenComp* (Bianchi *et alii*, 2022) and *LifeComp* (Sala *et alii*, 2020). These frameworks identify the ability to think holistically and critically, along with empathy and responsible citizenship, as some of the key resources for understanding the emotions, experiences, and values of others, in the spirit of reciprocity.

In this context, relational competences closely associated with the concepts of fraternity, dialogicality, solidarity, and benevolence are crucial. Relational competence involves a personal, ethical, and social attitude of understanding oneself and others, embracing problems and desires that are not necessarily individual in nature, in order to pursue paths toward the common good (Sandrini, 2020). This premise aligns with the etymological origin of the term “competence” (from the Latin *cum* and *petere*, meaning “to go together” or “to converge at the same point”), which evokes human action in a relational context. Central to this is the consideration of a process of personal and social growth. Learning how to live with the others, distancing oneself from selfish and predatory tendencies, thus encourages *learning to be with others*, in the spirit of self-awareness and the relationships that bind us to the Earth and all living beings (Taylor, 1981). It is not merely about being together, but about truly being together, open not only to the otherness of another human being, but also to the otherness of the world (Birbes, 2019a).

In this sense, ecological education (Mortari, 2001) involves reflective, critical, and systemic thinking, requiring a renewed cognitive and existential approach capable of grasping the complex relational fabric of life something that is difficult to develop through a linear training model.

Within this reflective framework, the focus should not be solely on learning instrumental and technical knowledge but on creating spaces where education becomes a human experience, providing shared values such as respect for human dignity, recognition of diversity, and understanding life as an intricate web of interdependencies, with all of us as members of a single living community (Birbes, 2018).

In this regard, it may be useful to reference, without claiming to be exhaustive, the vitality of the scientific debate surrounding the concept of *Transformative Learning*. Although primarily associated with adult education, this concept can also be understood from a lifelong perspective to identify potential generative connections between the acquisition of non-cognitive competences and transformative learning meaning critical and creative learning that is attentive to different forms of human intelligence as well as individual and group differences, committed to interpreting the increasing complexity and interdependence of the contemporary world, which is increasingly imbued with systemic issues (Schon, 1983; Mezirow, 1990; Sterling, 2001; Fabbri, Romano, 2018; Wals, 2019).

3. Youth at the *Village for the Earth*

The current state of the world, marked by various phenomena such as the climate emergency, environmental degradation, land occupation, as well as ongoing conflicts and tensions, reveals a present that is not only troubled in its economic and political processes but, above all, in human relationships (Francesco, 2021). The possibility of outlining a peaceful and inclusive development urges pedagogy to design innovative educational interventions, as we inhabit a glocal and multifaceted temporal vitality (Sandrini, 2020) that disorients us and exposes us to the risk of a dehumanization of civilization. Each of us has the responsibility to make the world more humane, as inequalities grow between social classes, between high-income and low-income countries, in life expectancy and healthcare, in work, and in education (Polenghi, 2020).

While respecting differences and acknowledging the diversity of development paths, it is essential to promote an educational design aimed at a more impactful unification of the planet. This approach should move beyond the notion of a divided world, making room for the potential of sensitive thinking (Mortari, 2017) and providing new resources for teaching what it means to be human (Malavasi, 2020). Designing quality education means creating learning pathways that go beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries, connecting reflection and experience, critical thinking and creativity, people and cultures, all aimed at acquiring new competences to support sustainable development.

In this context, the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, through the project carried out between 2018

and 2022² at the *Village for the Earth*³, identifies one of its commitments to education, research, and Third Mission activities. The goal is to foster a culture that embraces care and openness towards others, in the spirit of a diverse, inclusive, and sustainable village where every young person is an active protagonist of the future.

The initiative, organized by *Earth Day Italia*⁴ in collaboration with the Focolare Movement at the Terazza del Pincio and the Galoppatoio of Villa Borghese, provided a *service-learning* opportunity for students to explore the UN 2030 Agenda. Over five consecutive days, workshops, seminars, events, and exhibitions were held to promote civil and environmental awareness as part of the national *Earth Day* celebrations. The Università Cattolica, through the Alta Scuola per l’Ambiente (ASA), a center of excellence in education, research, and Third Mission activities, was tasked with engaging students (51 selected each year based on an application format developed by UCSC)⁵ at various stages of their university journey, from different faculties and geographical locations, ensuring gender balance, in an educational program focused on the UN 2030 Agenda, encompassing responsibility, knowledge, and social competence. ASA coordinated the experience through several project actions: educating young people on the UN Agenda goals, starting with an assessment of their knowledge of the document; and implementing a *service-learning approach* (Selmo, 2014; Bornatici, 2020) to blend theoretical knowledge with practical activities, where students were actively engaged in providing a service to the community. In this regard, Bornatici (2023) emphasizes that to educate aware and active citizens capable of making decisions for a sustainable future, school curricula must have a practical impact on real-life contexts. Service-learning, now recognized as an effective pedagogical tool for developing active citizenship competences (Beccaria, 2010; Fiorin, 2016), can simultaneously enhance the quality of learning and provide meaningful, solidarity-based responses to social needs. Service to the community, grounded in responsibility and active participation, and the acquisition of new knowledge and key competences for the future are integrated into a single educational activity (Bornatici, 2023). Specifically, the students, guided by facilitator teachers and divided into small working groups each corresponding to one of the sustainable development goals were actively engaged in scientific research, communication activities during the celebration events, and constructive intergenerational dialogue with various stakeholders (institutions, civil society, schools, businesses, children, adults, and families) who participated in the 17 thematic squares of the Village.

Among the students, satisfaction with the multi-year initiative in terms of service-learning, increased knowledge about sustainability, and willingness to repeat the experience, measured through a feedback survey, was notably high. This highlights the benefits gained not only in theoretical knowledge but also in *sustainability competences*, aligning with the direction set by the project. “Teamwork”, “Ability to listen and engage in dialogue with others”, “Interdisciplinarity”, “Relationship building” are some of the resources that the majority respondents declare having improved. Regarding areas for improvement, there is a significant opportunity to incorporate additional “hands-on” experiences into the project, including green volunteering.

Similarly, among the reasons for applying, the centrality of the experiential dimension of the proposal stands out. This highlights the strong willingness of young people to act for the environment and the value placed on “emerging” educational strategies that prioritize the centrality of the person. It underscores the ability of participants to reflect on experiences, which become the main source of knowledge production (Lipari, Scaratti, 2014). From this collaborative work, several creative kits for disseminating the Agenda have emerged, including the Sustainability Passport with games and experiential activities for primary school children (over 3,000 children were engaged by the young students at the Village) and the

2 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, since 2020 a digital version of the event has emerged: the “Villaggio 2.0,” a media marathon streamed live on the RaiPlay platform and the most popular social networks.

3 A format created by the Earth Day Italia Association and produced in collaboration with the Focolare Movement of Rome, United Nations agencies, the Ministry of University and Research, and the Ministry of the Environment.

4 Earth Day Italia is the Italian and European branch of the Earth Day Network in Washington, the international NGO that promotes the United Nations’ World Earth Day. This event engages over one billion people each year through the efforts of more than 22,000 partners in over 190 countries worldwide, making it one of the most impactful environmental awareness events globally. More information can be found at Earth Day Italia (last accessed: August 23, 2024).

5 For an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the sample of candidate students, see Sabino (2024).

pop-up video “Village 2.0 Together for the Planet. UN Agenda 2030”. Additionally, there are a research project on the commitment of Third Sector organizations to the 17 SDGs (Braga, 2020), an international cooperation project in agriculture, facilitated by the interaction between a doctoral student in Agriculture from Burundi and an Italian volunteer at the Village (Sandrini, 2021), and a study on youth training in integral ecology for genuine ecological conversion (Sabino, 2024).

The ability of young people to embrace relationships and their presence as a testament to ethical and civic commitment have paved the way for building an *educational village*. In this village, diversity is embraced, and there is a shared desire to create a network of open, caring human connections (Malavasi, 2019).

In this sense, the Village has become an exercise in solidarity and citizenship, offering highly formative experiences in a context that extends beyond formal educational settings (Bornatici, 2018). The sustainable development goals of the UN 2030 Agenda highlight crucial issues for fostering relationships between people, enabling the integration of diverse worlds, and promoting the development of global citizenship.

A main global challenge, then, lies in building a *sustainable village* that bridges the local and the global, the individual and the community, and the present and future generations, all as members of a single human family (Birbes, 2019b).

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