

Promuovere culture di apprendimento inclusive attraverso azioni educative di successo (SEA): pratiche basate sull'evidenza in contesti formali e non formali in Sicilia

Fostering inclusive learning cultures through Successful Educational Actions (SEAs): evidence-based practices in formal and non-formal settings in Sicily

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how inclusive and democratic learning cultures can be cultivated through the implementation of Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) in both formal and non-formal settings. Grounded in general and social pedagogy, drawing on Flecha's dialogic educational principles (2000) and rooted in the legacy of Freire's critical pedagogy, the contribution examines SEAs as evidence-based, transformative practices capable of reshaping educational environments, enhancing the professional development of teachers and educators, and promoting equity and participation.

After presenting the theoretical foundations, the paper discusses key findings from international literature and empirical data. Particular attention is devoted to Sicilian implementations within the European REFUGE-ED project, highlighting the impact on school climate, student performance, and family and community engagement in multicultural contexts.

Bridging theory and practice, the paper argues that SEAs are powerful tools for rethinking the culture of education, improving academic achievement and transforming professional roles, spatial design, and dialogic relationships.

Questo articolo indaga come promuovere culture educative inclusive e democratiche attraverso l'implementazione delle Azioni Educative di Successo (SEAs) in contesti formali e non formali. Basato sulla pedagogia generale e sociale, ispirato ai principi educativi dialogici di Flecha (2000) e alla pedagogia critica di Freire, il contributo analizza le SEAs come pratiche trasformative basate su evidenze, capaci di migliorare gli ambienti educativi, sostenere lo sviluppo professionale di insegnanti ed educatori e favorire equità e partecipazione.

Dopo aver delineato il quadro teorico, l'articolo presenta risultati tratti dalla letteratura internazionale e da dati empirici, con un focus sulle implementazioni in Sicilia nel progetto europeo REFUGE-ED. I risultati mostrano effetti positivi sul clima scolastico, sugli apprendimenti e sul coinvolgimento di famiglie e comunità nei contesti multiculturali. Mettendo in relazione teoria e pratica, l'articolo evidenzia come le SEAs possano rinnovare la cultura educativa, potenziare gli apprendimenti e trasformare ruoli professionali, spazi e relazioni dialogiche.

Keywords: Successful Education Actions (SEAs), inclusive dialogic intercultural education, evidence-based pedagogy, educators and teachers, REFUGE-ED project

Parole chiave: azioni educative di successo (SEAs), educazione interculturale dialogica inclusiva, pedagogia basata sulle prove, educatori e insegnanti, progetto REFUGE-ED

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Although the scientific work is the result of the authors' joint reflection, Sections 1 and 3 are attributable to Maria Rita Mancaniello, while Section 3 and 4 was written by Tiziana Chiappelli. The introduction and conclusion were jointly developed by both authors.

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Introduction

Over the past decades, the urgency of cultivating inclusive and democratic learning cultures has grown sharper, driven by widening social inequalities, intensifying migratory movements, and persistent educational disparities. Formal institutions such as schools, as well as non-formal learning spaces like community centers and educational services, are increasingly called upon to respond with approaches that go beyond the narrow pursuit of academic achievement. What is required are practices that also nurture participation, equity, and social cohesion. Within this pressing context, Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) have emerged as transformative, research-grounded strategies—capable not only of improving learning outcomes but also of reshaping the very fabric of educational relationships and environments.

Rooted in social and critical pedagogy, and inspired by the dialogic principles elaborated by Freire (1970) and later by Flecha (2000), SEAs offer a participatory model of learning that centers on dialogue, inclusion, and the active engagement of all members of the educational community. SEAs represent more than a methodological innovation; they signal a cultural shift in how education is conceived and practiced—placing interaction, co-construction of meaning, and democratic participation at the heart of the learning process.

This article aims to explore how SEAs are implemented in both formal and non-formal settings in Sicily, focusing on their impact on school climate, student performance, and the involvement of families and local communities. Drawing on theoretical literature and empirical data from European project REFUGE-ED, this contribution highlights the ways in which dialogic and inclusive practices can address structural challenges and contribute to educational transformation.

After outlining the theoretical framework that supports SEAs, the paper describes their main characteristics and evidence base. It then presents the methodology and findings of case studies from Sicilian contexts, illustrating both the benefits and challenges of implementation. Finally, the article reflects on the implications for educator training and offer policy recommendations for fostering inclusive learning cultures.

1. Social and critical pedagogy: dialogic learning toward transformative inclusion and democratic cultures

Paulo Freire's legacy remains pivotal, particularly his view of education as an act of liberation and dialogue. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* proposes that education should be an act of co-creation between teachers and learners, challenging hierarchical power structures and fostering critical consciousness (*conscientização*). Similarly, John Dewey (1916) conceptualized education as a deeply social and participatory process, rooted in experience and community life. Both perspectives align with the goals of SEAs, which view education as a collective endeavor that transcends the transmission of content to embrace transformative interaction and empowerment. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory further supports this view by emphasizing the role of social interaction and mediated learning in cognitive development, thus highlighting the importance of collaborative environments.

The concept of dialogic learning, as elaborated by Flecha (2000), introduces a framework where knowledge is built through egalitarian dialogue. In this view, all participants—students, teachers, families, and community members—contribute meaningfully to the learning process. The principles of dialogic learning, including equality of differences, cultural intelligence, and solidarity, underpin SEAs and distinguish them from traditional instructional models (Flecha, 2000; Valls, Kyriakides, 2013). SEAs such as Interactive Groups and Dialogic Literary Gatherings are concrete applications of dialogic learning that have demonstrated a strong impact on academic and social outcomes across diverse settings. A recent systematic review (Aiello *et alii*, 2025) confirms that dialogic educational practices are not only theoretically grounded but also empirically validated as tools for reducing inequality and improving educational success, particularly among students from marginalized backgrounds.

In line with UNESCO's (2020) global commitment to equity and inclusion—"All means all"—Successful Educational Actions offer a robust, evidence-based model for overcoming structural barriers in ed-

education. Their strength lies not only in promoting academic achievement, but also in creating just and equitable learning environments where all voices are recognized and valued. This theoretical framework provides the basis for the empirical work presented in the following sections. By implementing SEAs in Sicilian schools and non-formal learning spaces, educators are not only applying evidence-based strategies but also reshaping the culture of education itself, contributing to a broader project of democratic and inclusive transformation. SEAs are based on egalitarian dialogue, which provides a foundation for intercultural learning and collective transformation. This is particularly relevant in educational contexts shaped by migration, where dominant narratives often impose fixed cultural categories on learners. Instead, dialogic educational practices invite co-construction of meaning across differences, turning diversity into a resource. As Aiello-Cabrera, Chiappelli, and Troya Porras (2023) argue, participatory methodologies enable a shared construction of knowledge between researchers, educators, and communities—particularly those who are often marginalized in institutional settings. These methodologies “challenge top-down approaches, opening spaces of epistemic justice and recognizing the role of participants not only as informants but as co-creators of meaning and interpretation” (Aiello *et alii*, 2023, p. XIII).

This vision resonates deeply with the ethos of SEAs, which are designed to democratize the learning process through interaction among students, families, and community members. By disrupting hierarchical models of knowledge and valuing lived experience, SEAs promote what Aiello-Cabrera *et alii* call a relational and situated understanding of learning, one that is particularly powerful in multicultural and migrant settings. In this way, SEAs do not merely “include” marginalized learners—they transform the conditions of inclusion by redefining relationships, roles, and the nature of educational knowledge itself. The following sections explore how this transformation unfolds in practice within Sicilian formal and non-formal educational settings

2. Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) core characteristics

Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) are educational practices that have been scientifically validated to produce significant improvements in learning outcomes, social cohesion, and inclusion—particularly among students from vulnerable or marginalized backgrounds. The concept of SEAs was developed within the INCLUD-ED Project (2006–2011), funded by the European Commission under the 6th Framework Programme, and continues to be applied in multiple international contexts, including schools with high rates of migration and socio-economic disadvantage (Flecha, 2000; Aiello *et alii*, 2025).

Far from being generic interventions, SEAs stand out as evidence-based practices that meet three essential criteria:

1. they are grounded in solid scientific research;
2. their effectiveness is consistently replicated in diverse contexts;
3. they contribute to both academic success and social inclusion.

The unifying element of SEAs is their foundation in dialogic learning, where learning takes place through egalitarian dialogue and shared construction of knowledge. In this model, every voice counts, and diversity is seen as a strength rather than a challenge (Flecha, 2000; Valls, Kyriakides, 2013).

Among the SEAs most commonly implemented and studied, three stand out for their proven effectiveness:

- Interactive Groups (IGs): Students are organized into small, heterogeneous groups that work collaboratively on academic tasks. Each group is supported by an adult (often a community volunteer or family member), facilitating interaction and mutual support. Research shows that IGs improve both academic performance and social relationships, especially in multicultural classrooms (Valls, Kyriakides, 2013; Aiello *et alii*, 2025);
- Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs): Participants—students, families, or community members—read and discuss classical works of universal literature. Through open, respectful dialogue, participants de-

velop critical thinking, empathy, and cultural awareness. A recent systematic review found that DLGs significantly contribute to overcoming educational inequalities (Ruiz-Eugenio *et alii*, 2023);

- Dialogic Model of Conflict Prevention and Resolution: Based on community agreements and collective dialogue, this model fosters a peaceful school climate and shared responsibility for behavior management. It empowers students and teachers to jointly construct rules and resolve conflicts through dialogue, rather than punishment or exclusion (Aubert *et alii*, 2017).

These actions are flexible and can be adapted to different age groups, educational levels, and cultural contexts, as long as their core dialogic principles are preserved. The scientific literature supporting SEAs is both extensive and rigorous. A systematic review by Aiello *et alii* (2025) concluded that SEAs consistently produce:

- marked improvements in academic achievement, with notable gains in literacy and mathematics;
- a clear surge in student motivation and active participation;
- significant reductions in school dropout rates;
- stronger and more consistent engagement of families and local communities in education.

These findings are particularly relevant in light of recent evidence highlighting that inclusive, participatory pedagogies - such as SEAs - are among the few interventions to show sustained success for migrant and refugee students (Aiello *et alii*, 2025). The review shows that practices rooted in dialogue and co-construction not only support learning, but also foster a sense of belonging and emotional security in school settings. As SEAs are applied beyond formal schooling—in community centers, afterschool programs, and social services—they also demonstrate a remarkable potential to connect non-formal learning environments with school-based education, creating learning ecosystems that are inclusive, democratic, and culturally responsive.

3. Research design: a dialogic and transformative approach

This study deliberately embraces a qualitative, participatory research design, rooted in the epistemological foundations of dialogic and critical pedagogy. In alignment with the principles of Successful Educational Actions (SEAs), the methodology mirrors the values of inclusion, co-construction, and dialogic engagement (Sordé-Martí *et alii*, 2023). The research is inspired by the dialogic co-creation process developed within the REFUGE-ED project (Sordé-Martí *et alii*, 2023), which challenges extractive and top-down research paradigms. Instead, it proposes an alternative, collaborative model where the voices of participants are central to all phases of knowledge construction.

The dialogic co-creation process ensures that the voices of the children and the stakeholders directly involved in the educational settings are taken into account in every phase of the research process, including problem definition, identification of promising practices, implementation, and evaluation (Sordé-Martí *et alii*, 2023, p. 2).

This methodological approach is supported by broader theoretical reflections on participatory epistemologies in migration research, which emphasize the need to “challenge hierarchical knowledge production and to create inclusive frameworks where migrants are not just studied, but empowered as agents of knowledge” (Aiello-Cabrera, Chiappelli, Troya Porras, 2023, p. XIII). Their work stresses that research with refugee and migrant communities must recognize participants not merely as informants, but as co-protagonists in shaping research questions, interpretations, and outcomes. In this framework, researchers act as facilitators of collective reflection, rather than detached observers. The goal is not only to understand educational practices, but to transform them through joint action, involving schools, communities, and families as equal agents in the process.

The fieldwork was conducted in diverse educational settings in Sicily, all involved in European projects Shar-ed and REFUGE-ED. These included:

- primary and secondary schools in socio-economically and culturally diverse areas;
- non-formal educational spaces such as community centers, libraries, and family support services;
- hybrid contexts where schools collaborate with local associations and NGOs working with migrant and refugee families.

Participants included students (especially minors with migration backgrounds), educators, teachers, school leaders, social workers, family members, and cultural mediators.

The data collection phase was designed not as a unidirectional extraction of information, but as a shared inquiry process, where methods were adapted to local contexts through consultation and collaboration with participants. Techniques included:

- dialogic interviews and focus groups, co-designed to explore collective perceptions and lived experiences;
- observations of SEAs in action, with attention to the dialogic interactions and transformations in classroom dynamics;
- participatory mapping of school and community relations, co-created with educators and families to visualize inclusion processes.

This methodological orientation supports what Sordé-Martí *et alii* (2023) describe as the creation of dialogic spaces that “foster trust, mutual recognition, and solidarity among participants, including researchers, educators, and community members” (Sordé-Martí *et alii*, 2023, p. 5). In line with dialogic ethics, the research upheld principles of informed consent, transparency, confidentiality, and the right to dissent. Particular care was taken when working with minors and refugee children, ensuring that their participation was voluntary, respectful, and empowering. Moreover, the research team engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue, documenting the evolution of assumptions, power relations, and learning throughout the fieldwork. This self-reflection was shared with participants to validate interpretations and co-produce meaning, reinforcing the credibility and ethical grounding of the study.

Data were analyzed using a thematic, dialogic approach, combining inductive coding with iterative discussion among researchers and practitioners. The process followed the co-creation model in which findings are not “discovered” by the researcher alone but jointly constructed through cycles of reflection, discussion, and feedback with the participants.

Co-interpretation allows for richer and more situated understandings of the realities experienced by children and educators, particularly when those realities involve histories of displacement, exclusion, or systemic marginalization” (Sordé-Martí *et alii*, 2023, p. 10).

This collaborative analysis approach ensured that the emerging themes were not only accurate but socially meaningful and actionable within the educational communities involved.

4. Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) in Sicilian contexts

The implementation of Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) in Sicily can only be understood within a broader socio-educational and territorial framework marked by complex challenges and rich intercultural potential. As one of the southernmost regions of Italy—and a key landing point for migration across the Mediterranean—Sicily faces high levels of social vulnerability, but also plays a central role in the European laboratory of inclusion. Many of the schools and educational services involved in this study are situated in urban peripheries or rural areas affected by economic precarity, early school leaving, and limited access to public services. At the same time, these contexts are characterized by dense cultural diversity, with growing communities of children and families from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Eastern Europe.

The educational inequalities generated by this scenario are both structural and relational. They manifest in learning gaps, school disengagement, linguistic barriers, and reduced family-school trust. Yet, they are

also met with innovative responses from educators, community actors, and institutions committed to transforming education through inclusive, evidence-based practices. Within this landscape, the REFUGE-ED project has offered key frameworks for testing and scaling SEAs in both formal and non-formal settings. This initiative has facilitated:

- teacher and educator training in dialogic and intercultural methodologies;
- the creation of collaborative networks among schools, municipalities, and third-sector organizations;
- the emergence of learning communities that bring together students, families, and community members across linguistic and cultural differences.

Sicilian Pilot Sites were located in Palermo, Acate, Vittoria, three very different territories.

The Palermo pilot sites are located in urban contexts situated close to the city center. Despite their centrality, these areas are characterized by deep social fractures and multiple forms of vulnerability. Alongside a growing presence of children and families with migration backgrounds, the schools also serve local populations experiencing significant socio-economic fragilities. This coexistence of migrant and native groups within contexts marked by precarious housing, unemployment, and weak welfare support renders the educational mission particularly complex, yet also rich in intercultural potential.

By contrast, the pilots in Acate and Vittoria are situated in the so-called “Cintura Trasformata”, a rural belt that, over the past decades, has been radically reshaped by the expansion of intensive greenhouse agriculture. The landscape—and with it, the social fabric—has been profoundly reshaped: vast stretches of greenhouses dominate the territory, the coastline is semi-devastated, and daily life is organized around highly demanding agricultural work rhythms, often beginning before dawn. This economy relies heavily on migrant labor, including undocumented workers, generating conditions of social precariousness and educational poverty. Families—particularly women and mothers—often live in isolated farmhouses far from inhabited centers, with limited access to services and mobility. Children from these families face structural barriers in attending school regularly, as many live dispersed within the greenhouse areas and lack adequate means of transportation. In this context, interventions such as school transport services, family support initiatives, and inclusive educational actions respond not only to pedagogical needs but also to urgent basic social necessities, ensuring access, presence, and participation in education.

Table 1: REFUGE-ED SEAs implementations carried out in Sicily across formal and non-formal educational settings

| Pilot site | Main activities (SEAs) | Participants involved | Key outcomes |
|--|--|------------------------------------|--|
| Palermo (multiple schools: E. De Amicis, La Masa, Archimede, Silvio Boccone, IISS Ferrara, IISS Pietro Piazza) | Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLG), Interactive Groups (IG), Conflict-prevention clubs | 175 (teachers, families, students) | Improved student participation, language acquisition, strengthened school–family trust |
| Acate – Primary School Centrale and Addario | Dialogic Literary Gatherings, Family–school assemblies, Community participation | 79 (teachers, families, students) | Reduced school disengagement, improved linguistic inclusion, stronger community–school links |
| Vittoria – IC Vittoria Colonna | Dialogic pedagogy, Family education, Open assemblies | 24 (teachers, families, students) | Enhanced democratic participation, reinforced belonging for migrant-background students |

Due to these deep territorial difference, in the Sicilian pilots several methodological adjustments were necessary to ensure inclusiveness and contextual relevance. In general, language barriers emerged as a major challenge, given the presence of recently arrived migrant families. Informal translation networks and community members (such as parents, or volunteers) and cultural mediators were mobilized to bridge communication gaps. In some cases, training sessions were delivered in Spanish by the expert of the Autonomous University of Barcelona with translation into Italian, and learning materials were translated from English to guarantee accessibility for all the educators and teachers. Flexibility in implementation

was also crucial: Dialogic Literary Gatherings were adapted by selecting shorter texts or organizing collective readings in class, making them more feasible for students with limited language proficiency or scarce time availability. Teachers and educators emphasized the need for context-sensitive training, particularly regarding classroom coexistence and mental health aspects, which were integrated into the SEAs activities. Moreover, in non-formal settings and in schools with limited parental involvement, as in Acate and Vittoria, the notion of the learning community was expanded to include university students, retired citizens, and members of local associations. Finally, the school calendar and daily schedules were adjusted to avoid overburdening staff and learners, while peer-to-peer facilitation in Interactive Groups supported non-Italian-speaking students, strengthening both linguistic acquisition and social cohesion. It is important to underline that, as a direct outcome of the comprehensive involvement of the local community, a school bus service was established for students residing in the rural areas who, lacking private means of transportation, faced significant barriers in accessing educational institutions. This outcome goes beyond evidence-based pedagogical interventions or curricular support, representing instead a concrete transformation of the social environment in which the project was implemented. It constitutes clear evidence of social impact, demonstrating how dialogic and community-driven approaches can generate structural changes that enhance educational accessibility and equity.

5. Conclusions

The evidence gathered across diverse Sicilian territories demonstrates that SEAs are far more than “merely” pedagogical interventions: they are genuine catalysts of systemic and cultural transformation. In both school-based and community-based settings, dialogic practices have redefined educational relationships, enhanced student engagement, and opened new avenues for democratic participation. The Sicilian pilots confirm the potential of SEAs to spark educational and social innovation precisely in those territories most affected by economic vulnerability and intense migration flows. By linking classrooms with communities and turning diversity into a shared resource, these practices reveal how inclusive education can generate lasting change that extends well beyond the school walls. Several transversal findings emerge:

- *community participation as a lever of inclusion*: Open assemblies in Palermo, Acate, and Vittoria demonstrated that when families and community members actively participate in school life, trust is rebuilt, and intercultural dialogue flourishes;
- *improved language acquisition and engagement*: Dialogic Literary Gatherings facilitated not only literacy but also self-esteem, giving migrant children new opportunities for expression and participation;
- *systemic change beyond the classroom*: SEAs promoted a cultural shift within schools, generating democratic and collaborative climates that extended to families and local networks and public bodies.

At the same time, challenges remain, particularly regarding the sustainability of practices in contexts of high students turnover, limited resources, and persistent socio-economic inequalities. Findings from Sicily add to the growing international evidence that SEAs are effective across highly diverse contexts. Even in territories marked by profound differences between urban and rural realities, they have shown measurable impact, reinforcing their global scalability for fostering social cohesion and intercultural education.

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