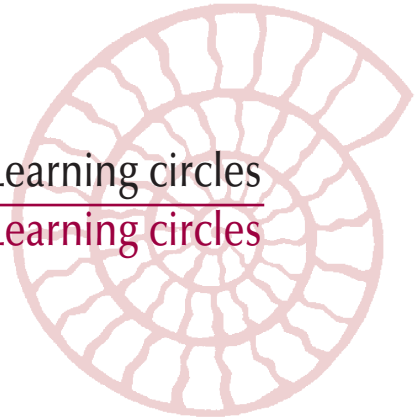


Learning circles  
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Modelling Bottom-up Territorial Development within the Framework of Sustainable Educational Research: A 'Multi-Voice' contribution concerning transformative, innovative, and participatory processes facing local sociocultural demands and special needs

Modellizzare lo sviluppo territoriale “dal basso” entro il quadro della ricerca educativa sostenibile: Un contributo a più voci riguardo ai processi trasformativi, innovativi e partecipativi che rispondono a esigenze socioculturali di tipo locale e ai bisogni speciali

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Vito Balzano

Università di Bari “Aldo Moro” – vito.balzano@uniba.it

Antonella Cuppari

Università degli Studi “Milano-Bicocca” - a.cuppari@campus.unimib.it

Riccarda Michelotti

Freie Universität Bozen - riccarda.michelotti@education.unibz.it

Andrea Mattia Marcelli

Freie Universität Bozen - andrea.marcelli@education.unibz.it

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper joins together different educational research approaches, which highlight the relevance of educational research as a stimulus to bottom-up transformative processes, and as a tool to make them valuable at the local (territorial) and global (national, European) level. Each approach is dedicated to a single region or administrative district of Italy, within which their cases unfold (namely: Apulia, Lombardy, and Trento). Moreover, as made apparent by the joint diagram, they all share assumptions with regards to the ontology of the macrolevel, which constitute the bases for their comparability. The final section subsumes individual results by projecting them against a theoretical background that stresses on the role of bottom-up processes as fosterers of transformative resilience; the latter allows for adaptation without depletion of contextual elements, nor the avoidance of selective pressures. As such, educational research qualifies as one of the cornerstones of sustainable development.

Questo articolo unisce differenti approcci per la ricerca educativa che sottolineano la rilevanza della stessa come stimolo per i processi trasformativi *bottom-up* e, parimenti, come strumento per valorizzarli a livello locale (territorio) e globale (nazione, UE). Ciascun approccio è dedicato a una singola regione o suddivisione amministrativa italiana, entro cui hanno luogo i casi studiati (Lombardia, Puglia, Trento). Inoltre, come si può evincere dallo schema collettivo, condividono tutti e tre degli assunti di base sulla suddivisione ontologica del macrolivello di analisi: tale elemento condiviso costi-

tuisce il fondamento della loro comparabilità. La sezione finale riassume i risultati individuali ponendoli nel contesto teorico dell'importanza dei processi *bottom-up* come chiavi della resilienza trasformativa; quest'ultima, infatti, risulta da un processo di adattamento che non esaurisce gli elementi contestuali né evita di misurarsi con le pressioni selettive. In quanto tale, la ricerca educativa si qualifica come uno dei capisaldi dello sviluppo sostenibile.

#### KEYWORDS

Bottom-up processes, Education, Territory, Transformative learning, Welfare. Processi *bottom-up*, Educazione, Territorio, Apprendimento trasformativo, Welfare.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Bringing together the work of different investigators—each with her own approach, skillset, and preferences—is no easy task. However, it is thanks to cooperative work—be it a round table, a seminar, or a joint research project—that different views are joined together and become able to attain a vantage point with regards to the issues at hand.

The following contributions are the result of mutual efforts with regards to the interdisciplinary dimension of education sciences, and, in particular, their ties with economics. Trivial as it might sound, the *ánthropos* [ ≠ ] is pivotal to these disciplinary fields, and yet—way less trivially—both economics and education have developed their own ways of addressing it, inasmuch the *ánthropos* plays the shapeshifting role of object, subject, agent, and end-user. Therefore, the first task of the collective endeavor is that of finding a theoretical framework that, although compliant with the fields of economics and human geography, is not oblivious of the transformative role of individual and shared agency: namely, the phenomenon of education broadly construed—that is, as an overarching identity-making process that unfolds at different levels of a stratified society.<sup>2</sup>

The dice is cast when the *scienze della formazione* paradigm of education meets *development studies*, and, in particular, the *bottom-up developmental frameworks*. The former is understood as a scientific movement aimed at overcoming the narrow view of education *qua* schooling (Marcelli, 2020), whereas the latter is cradled within broader systems of asymmetric interaction, such as the one described by Adamski and Gorch: “A [side by side usage of] internal resources, unique for a particular community, and external resources, offered by the state,

1 Attribution of parts: *Section 1* and *Section 5* are the result of a joint effort by all authors. *Section 2* belongs to Riccarda Michelotti, *Section 3* to Antonella Cuppari, and *Section 4* to Vito Balzano. Translator: Andrea Mattia Marcelli.

2 Acknowledgment: the authors would like to acknowledge the essential support of Professor Stefano De Rubertis and Pier Giuseppe Ellerani.

non-governmental organizations and supranational institutions and organizations" (2007, p. 481).<sup>3</sup>

By viewing innovation in education as a bottom-up developmental process, it is finally possible to set formal and informal educational processes against a background informed by geography and economics. In fact, such perspective assumes the asymmetry between institutions and individual agents is not a disparity to be leveled, but a difference in height that might be exploited to power a virtuous social engine.

Consistently with such framework of understanding, Michelotti (*Section 2*) wonders how it is possible to reinterpret the practice of school planning—as sanctioned by the Province of Trento. The resulting analysis tells a tale of distributed leadership, in which an administrative and legislative unit such as the Autonomous Provincial Council enables schools to effect their own planning, thus bringing about the capabilities of individual teachers, families, and students. A particular case is that of entrepreneurship education, which appears to benefit from the joint forces of the European Union, the local administrative boards, and communities related to specific schools: among all the key competences involved in life-long learning practices, entrepreneurship enjoys a special role, inasmuch its cultivation unlocks the agent's ability to undertake bottom-up actions and effect changes in their own territory.

Steering away from school settings, Cuppari (*Section 3*) is able to show how bottom-up processes of development, together with the feedback they trigger, can unfold so that single individuals could make the difference at the macro-level of interaction. Her very project is multilevel. On the one hand, she carried out ethnographic surveys, interviews, and focus groups in order to gather data on the way social workers reacted to the Covid-19 emergency. The survey had to balance individual and collective moments provided with epistemic value. As a result, a set of guidelines was sent to the Regional Council, which obliged by transforming the grassroot document into a policy file. However, the results of the ethnographic survey appear to be more far-reaching than anticipated: the entire system of interaction between individuals located at different levels in the administrative chain has now become an apparatus through which novel inputs are gathered and funneled straight to the top-management. Therefore, the whole experience cannot be understood solely in terms of clues and tips provided by workers to the Regional Council thanks to the mediation of an ethnographer: in fact, in addition to this, it ought to be remarked that the entire working community triggered a movement of self-renovation, which can indeed be understood as a case of community education in the most literal sense of the expression—the community acting both teacher and learner at the same time.

With reference to another region of Italy, Apulia, Balzano (*Section 4*) investigates the way economic conditions affect the ability of families to see their educational needs fulfilled. The scenario painted by the Italian Bureau of Statistics is rather bleak: all progress made in the fight against poverty has been reversed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The most interesting interdisciplinary facet emerges when families are surveyed for their self-perception: their educational needs go unfulfilled not just because of the lack of money, but also the lack of appropriate integrated services. Thus, the Apulian approach to development comes into prominence, given it does not entail the indiscriminate spreading of subsidies

3 Translator's note: direct quotes have been translated into English only when no English text or official translation was available (as per reference list).

but, rather, the construction of systems that might boost the public service where and when its assistance is needed. All in all, Balzano concludes, the access to top-down resources is a universal right—and such remark is profoundly consistent with the aforementioned framework of analysis, given it vows not to overlook the need for broad governmentality when it comes to fostering local development.

*Figure 1* puts these three contributions side by side. All investigations share a common ontology at the international, national, and top-administrative level; conversely, each of them offers a diversified view of the low-level actors that constitute the ‘territory’, broadly construed. For each dyad of proximal levels, top-down and bottom-up processes are represented by an arrow. When specific interactions are triggered by a research project, they are numbered sequentially, so that the reader may follow each step of the investigative path. In particular, Michelotti’s project covers A1–A6 of the leftmost part of the chart; straight bi-directional arrows highlight direct dependency relationships, whereas the external arrows are meant to denote the trickling of multi-level interactions. Cuppari’s project covers B1–B7 of the central part, under the assumption some steps can be skipped upon due consideration of the multi-directional relationships that take place between each level of the swimlanes, which are ‘populated’ by different classes of actors. Balzano’s project involves the entirety of the rightmost part – in fact, beginning from Apulia, the author developed a general framework meant to be adapted to all cases within the country, so that the right column could be understood also as a categorization of all horizontal swimlanes.

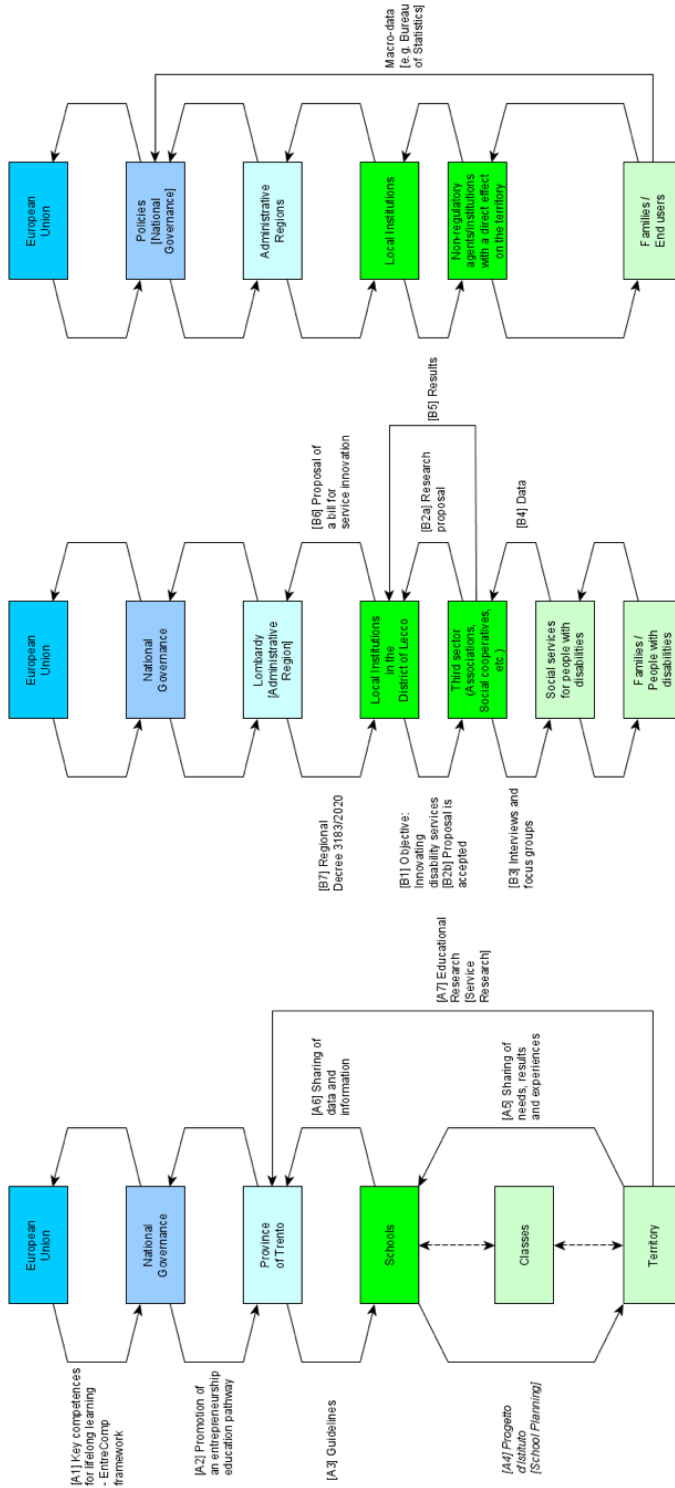


Figure 1 – See Section 1 for a detailed description.

## 2. Entrepreneurship education: school and territory for value creation (Trento)

Bottom-up processes that entail the need for a *return to the territory* can be understood as demands for sustainability on behalf of social agents (Dematteis and Magnaghi, 2018). In relation to said phenomenon, we may wonder what role is played by schools and how they can contribute to the enhancement of participative approaches and territorial synergies.

For this purpose, it is hereby proposed a diagram that charts the relations between scholastic institution and the territories in which they are embedded, with particular focus on the development of entrepreneurship. The latter is one of life-long learning's eight fundamental key competences, and it is defined as follows:

“Entrepreneurship competence refers to the capacity to act upon opportunities and ideas, and to transform them into values for others. It is founded upon creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, taking initiative and perseverance and the ability to work collaboratively in order to plan and manage projects that are of cultural, social or financial value” (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 11).

Moreover, in 2016, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) developed *The Entrepreneurship Competence Framework* (Bacigalupo et al., 2016). Resulting from a lengthy survey process—involving literature review, case studies, and meetings with stakeholders—such framework is divided into three areas: “ideas and opportunities”, “resources”, and “into action”. Each of said areas is divided into respective subsets of competences. Among them, “ethical and sustainable thinking” is a prominent one and is addressed by the following indicator: “Assess[ment of] the consequences of ideas that bring value and the effect of entrepreneurial action on the target community, the market, society and the environment” (Bacigalupo et al., 2016, p. 12).

These European push for entrepreneurship is mirrored by the Italian executive context. In fact, in 2018, the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MIUR) issued a cable that promoted the creation of career pathways based on “entrepreneurship education” within the secondary school system (MIUR, 2018). The document stressed on the importance of the “seventh competence” (i.e., entrepreneurship), as well as its width, which supposedly supports the link between entrepreneurship, sustainability, and innovation.

The above definitions are compliant with the understanding of entrepreneurship not just *qua* ability to set up and run an enterprise, but also to exploit and enhance one's own capabilities (Costa and Morselli, 2019), thus constituting a transformative competence.

Given the above considerations, it can be seen how the development of entrepreneurship within educational settings is closely tied to the development of active and responsible citizenship; the latter state of affairs is achieved by promoting experiential educational practices (Jones and Iredale, 2010; Morselli, 2016; 2019) and by means of consolidating the bonds between schools, their territories, and external stakeholders.

From the perspective of bottom-up models of development, entrepreneurship-oriented schools shall seal an alliance with the communities they cater to—especially by taking into account that the very territory they inhabit is ‘resource-full’ and might serve as a basis for the teaching practice. In unison with such valuing of the local territory, participative, collaborative, and sustainable practices can be promoted, which eventually become resources *for* the territory itself, as a consequence of a virtuous feedback cycle.

By investigating the micro-context of classroom interactions and teaching practices, an interesting idea emerges (Ellerani, 2017): *service-learning* constitutes the type of framework that enacts a strong interaction between schools and their territory by rejoining community service with learning processes (Ellerani & Colazzo, 2018; Fiorin, 2015; Mortari, 2017a).

A noteworthy case is that of the Province of Trento. There, the synergy between schools, communities, and the territory finds its expression through the *Progetto d'Istituto* [School planning], which is a document each educational institution is bound to write in order to plan the implementation of its teaching autonomy. 'Autonomy' is a long-lasting theme of Italian educational policies, inasmuch it mirrors the government-sanctioned need for the devolution of powers, in order to avert the hegemonic outcomes of centralized State authorities. In the case of the Province of Trento, 'autonomy' is redoubled: firstly, since the Province itself enjoys a special status among the Italian administrative regions, thus allowing it for a greater deal of self-government and legislation; secondly, because the Province itself stimulates the autonomy of its schools. According to Article 18 of the *Provincial Law n. 5–Aug 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006*, a *Progetto d'Istituto* is defined as a document aimed at "making it explicit the cultural and innovation-oriented identity of institutions, and mirrors the needs of the cultural, social, and economic context of local realities."

What about bottom-up processes, then? In our perspective, they are as essential as the top-down ones. Setting aside the mere legislative issuances of the Province of Trento, it is still possible to tackle the diverse levels of responsibility posited by the developmental framework. Each level entertains relationships with the other ones, and, like all relationships, a dimension of duty and responsibility is elicited (e.g.: of Europe towards the country, of the country towards the province, etc.). However, responsibility alone is not sufficient to account for development, if bottom-up pushes are wanting: only through the direct action of end-users and stakeholders change is effected, given *in vivo* relationships are hardly unidirectional and usually entail the ability of low-level actors to influence top-level ones.

With regards to the need of an intertwining between top-down and bottom-up processes, educational research itself displays such duality: if it is understood as *service research*, it can be carried out *qua* "research that is capable of servicing (i.e., attending to) educational settings" (Mortari, 2017b, p. 29). In this way, educational research can act to bring out good teaching practices aimed at creating value for the territory, to detect needs and demands and to guide decision-making processes.

### **3. Multidirectionality of social innovation processes: an exploratory inquiry in a system of social services (Lombardy)**

Social work takes place within contexts that are characterized by historical, geographical, normative, cultural, and political constraints, as well as multidirectional and multidimensional processes—both top-down and bottom-up. The relationship between the whole and its parts is thus a complex one: it is entangled and results from a thriving, articulate, and provisional flux of events (Formenti, 2018).

In order to illustrate such point, reference will be made to the case of the territorial Welfare System of a province located in Northern Italy—Lecco. Lecco's Welfare System strives to renew its offer in terms of support to disability and spe-



cial needs (B1). The need is that of placing stakeholders at the center of its policies of intervention, given they do all contribute to the construction of the welfare system. The so-called “third sector” (i.e., associations, NGOs, social cooperatives, volunteers) encompasses experiences which, when appropriately supported by social planning, keep searching for new ways to intervene in favor of their clients’ needs—that is, families and other territorial agents. It is precisely among the “third sector” that pioneering experiments take place, in order to renovate the offer people with special needs can benefit from.

Covid-19 was (is) global in scope, but local in its outcomes. In the case of Lecco, the entire welfare system had to be repurposed, and a change of mindset was required in order to ameliorate the educational relationship that tied services with end-users and receiving families. Thus, some entities belonging to the “third sector” expressed the need to carry out an exploratory survey (B2), with the goal of investigating what was going on at the level of service supply. Such survey has given a voice to social workers.

Thus, thanks to the ethnographic approach, it became possible to hold together the two horns of an epistemic conundrum: on the one hand, the need for an observation, a description, and an interpretation of the culture of participating subjects (Bove, 2009); on the other hand, the push for action, participation, learning, and innovation (Gherardi et al., 2016). Hence, interpretive analysis aimed to grasp the presence, among the many data collected, of clues that could suggest the occurrence of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Such clues could serve as the bottom-up guidelines for a rethinking of professional practices. Although the investigation is biased towards bottom-up processes, it organized the observational setting so to keep alive the interaction between micro-, meso-, and macro-dimensions—namely, intrasubjectivity, intersubjectivity, and transsubjectivity: for example, investigators organized individual interviews (moments of divergence), and collective work such as focus groups and workshops (moments of convergence). Such activities involved not just social workers, but policymakers as well (B3, B4, B5).

In this way, the researcher’s gaze has become a constituent of the developmental process for the improvement of services, as well as the evolutionary process that features the so-called “observer/project/territory meta-system,” which results from “developmental narratives” (De Rubertis, 2013, pp. 41–42).

The results of the project got eventually included in a document ‘edited by the territory’ and sent to Regione Lombardia, that is, the administrative region that includes the District of Lecco (B6). In its turn, Regione Lombardia responded by issuing a set of guidelines inspired by the research it had received, gathered under the *Regional Decree 3183/2020* on the restart of welfare services during the phase No. 3 of the Covid-19 emergency (7).

More than being action-research, the investigation outlined above constituted an apparatus of education-research, which pairs processes of transformative change with feedback processes of reflection (Formenti, 2017). Practices born out of a social and healthcare emergency have now become the new standard: this is evidence of how bottom-up processes can be valued by institutions, thus empowering the agents that developed them in first place. Moreover, the apparatus itself, once set into motion, might become a medium in which distant entities encounter each other and interact in a productive way: that is, the investigative apparatus thusly arranged brings about connections between internal and external elements, possible and real states of affairs, constraints, and opportunities—namely, it renews the scopes of meaning (Cepollaro & Varchetta, 2014).

#### 4. New educational scarcity in the post Covid-19 scenario: towards sustainable welfare (Apulia)

Studies concerning the topic of the educational relationships (Calaprice, 2016; Corsi, 2014; Elia, 2016) and the professional field of education and learning (Alessandrini, 2017; Costa, 2016; Iori, 2018; Margiotta, 2015) do constitute now the ever-growing subject of national and European workshops. The attention they pay to the economic dimension of issues at hand, when paired with widespread and ongoing signs of crisis as well as the liquefaction of human relatedness, calls for a further reflection upon the link between education sciences and politics. In particular, it raises the question as per how it is possible to support the coexistence between economic factors and educational needs. Such concern is tantamount to asking how it is possible to enact education in a sustainable way. The Covid-19 pandemic gave further prominence to such inquiry, given the difficulties encountered by learners and educators, who report a loss of direction in the way educational relationships are experienced—considering how essential they are within a framework of solidarity and active citizenship (Balzano, 2020a, 2020b).

In order to clarify the multilevel nature of this type of inquiry, I hereby propose a simplified model of the vectors entailed by relational processes. The focus is the European familiar context, as exemplified by the literature on Italian families with regards to their economic and educational needs. In this model, institutions play a prominent role, but processes of this kind are hardly unidirectional, and result from the co-existence of bottom-up and bottom-down transformative forces; the analysis thereof indicates the degree of asymmetry between agents located at different ontological levels—such as the aforementioned institutions or individuals.

As suggested by Jonas (1990), the greater burden in this sense is carried by local administrative units, such as regions, city councils, and other institutions that entertain regular contacts with the public they cater to. Their responsibility is great (*ibid.*), and their actions have immediate and sensible effects on individuals and families alike. In fact, families are located at the bottom of the graph. Such placement does not reflect a lack of priority, but rather the asymmetry between familial units and overarching agentive entities.

This simplified model could be used to understand the circumstances of local educational needs while, at the same time, attention be paid to general processes, whose repercussions impact on families in a mediated way. In order to demonstrate its effectiveness notwithstanding its simplicity, I will apply it to the case of Apulia—an administrative region located in the South-East of the Italian Peninsula.

Since 2006, Apulia has pioneered territorial welfare policies; as the paradigm changed, strategies shifted from basic payments to more advanced systems of support, which benefits families (Balzano, 2017). Today, Apulia faces not only the challenge of providing equitable financial resources to its citizens, but also that of spreading principles and developing collective goods, such as “dignity” (Chionna, 2007). Such policies unfold as the country registers an unprecedented fall in families’ self-perception concerning their access to basic resources and overall social stability. As illustrated by the data processed by the National Bureau of Statistics, pre-Covid-19 Italy was experiencing its first steady improvement in a 4-year time span: 6.4% of the families were living in absolute poverty, *contra* 7.0% in 2018. This meant 4.6 million individuals were suffering from such condition, that is, 7.7% of the resident population—a promising figure, if one consider that, between 2018 and 2019, 0.7% of the resident population had come out of poverty.

Early 2020 projections foreshadowed a double figure for the incoming year (De Martino & Cutillo, 2020). To keep this trend steady, when Covid-19 struck Apulia allocated 11.5 million Euros to provide subsidies to families in distress. The innovative element is that said figure is not just a lump sum returned to the public, but contributed to the enhancement of support networks, that is, the mid-level and low-level management of public services and assistance. Such commendable approach had the merit of involving stakeholders rather than excluding them.

Given the pragmatic concerns outlined above, it is apparent the educational crisis cannot be addressed without due attention being paid to welfare rights: that is, all subsidies in times of need, notwithstanding the income level of the families involved, are a universal right whose care is delegated to institutions (Marshall, 1964). When Welfare works as a kind of social investment, rather than just being seen as a profit-making apparatus, is consistent with educational tenets; of course, it might require long-term planning, intergenerational reach—but it guarantees positive outcomes for the public in the long run. The call for human dignity, understood as a bottom-up push, is tantamount to the ability to recognize the Self and the Other(s) as citizens of the World (Ellerani, 2015). Only by recognizing all types of otherness as dignified in their own right, it is possible to lay the foundations of social policies and collective rebirth. Thus, education sciences are bound to accept their essential intertwining with the realm of social policies, which result in shared agency that caters for the needs of current and future generations of citizens.

## 5. Conclusions

Social pedagogy includes responsibility as one of its main learning goals. To achieve it, an investigative apparatus is needed, so that essential elements are identified, which can be targeted by political action and educational guidance. This way, the relationship between institutions and social agents is newly defined as an arena in which collective goals are achieved over time via the exercise of personal responsibility, yet without forgetting the value of individuals *qua* autonomous entities. The resulting continuum is the “I am” of a community, which can be identified not just through its current manifestations, but also thanks to the traces of all the practices it has embraced over the course of history.

However, such continuum can turn out to be a coarse and bumpy road. Therefore, the above-mentioned identity-making process faces challenges in the way environmental and contextual constraints put stress on it—thus demanding for steady adaptation. And yet, survival does not equate with the denial of context, nor for preservation *in spite of* changing pressures. Hence, the quest for adaptation is first and foremostly a quest for sustainability.

Concerning sustainability, ASviS Report [*Alleanza Italiana per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile*] highlights how the Covid-19 pandemics has hindered the road to the fulfilment of nine sustainable development goals (SDGs) out of seventeen. Crisis has struck the healthcare system, the education system, gender equality, poor strata of the population, agriculture, and social justice. By reflecting upon the field of education, the link between sustainability goals and developmental ones becomes apparent: namely, Giovannini—ASviS president—proposed “transformative resilience” as the feature that might enable a “leap forward” (ASviS, 2020). The intertwining between resilience and sustainability might find in educational research one of its cornerstones, inasmuch such type of research is particularly

equipped to make bottom-up processes emerge and be relevant. In fact, educational research might harbor pedagogical proposals, which elicit bottom-up thinking, reflection, critique, questions, and changes, thus instituting a dialogue between different dimensions, levels, and territories.

In this sense, the first task of educational research is that of reaching out to territories, with special attention paid to those “discourses” about development, which are typical of each given territory (De Rubertis, 2013). The three investigations outlined in this paper aimed to do so and proved capable of transforming both processes and goals—for instance, by triggering legislative action or by ameliorating the way services are provided. If anything, this is evidence of the fact educational projects, no matter the region where they take place, enjoy the intrinsic capability of transforming the identity of given territorial districts by acting upon the processes they host and the developmental goals they entertain. The ensuing overcoming of crisis-induced hindrances qualifies educational research as “resilient”, whereas its ability to change local and general worldviews qualifies it as “transformative”: thus, new forms of learning offer solutions such as the ones anticipated by Giovannini—in the field of social service, entrepreneurship, or by reducing educational scarcity among families in distress.

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