



Educating communities: From the epistemology  
of educational research to the case of adult learning centres in Italy  
**Comunità educanti: Dall'epistemologia  
della ricerca educativa al caso dei CPIA in Italia**

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**ABSTRACT**

In this multi-voice essay, the authors will endeavour to prove a point on the epistemology of educational research and show its consequences for a specific case. *Section 1* introduces the notion of educational research as a practical science belonging to the Greater Humanities paradigm. Hence, *Section 2* uses discourse analysis to reconstruct the hermeneutic framework surrounding the *Scienze della formazione* educational research programme, which is currently trending in the Italian academic debate. In the ‘discourse’, communities emerge as the key players in achieving welfare goals notwithstanding the socioeconomical and environmental challenges they face. Drawing on participant observation and policy analysis, *Section 3* shows how the above understanding is validated by the case of the Italian Provincial Centres for Adult Education. These work as networks rather than monolithic institutions and cater for the welfare of communities by interacting with their stakeholders. *Section 4* draws the conclusions: the *Scienze della formazione* research programme is fertile grounds for ecopedagogy, which is corroborated by the case of CPIAs. This paper constitutes one of the research outputs of the *SIREF Summer School 2021*.

Il presente saggio, scritto a più mani, illustra una posizione epistemologica riguardante la ricerca educativa e ne mostrerà le ricadute in un caso specifico. La *Sezione 1* introduce la nozione di ricerca educativa come scienza

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pratica che appartiene al paradigma delle *Greater Humanities*. Quindi, la *Sezione 2* utilizza l'analisi del discorso per ricostruire il quadro di riferimento ermeneutico che circonda il programma di ricerca denominato *Scienze della formazione*, attualmente diffuso nello scenario accademico italiano. Nel "discorso", le comunità emergono come attori-chiave per il raggiungimento degli obiettivi di benessere condiviso – nonostante le sfide socioeconomiche ed ambientali. Basandosi sull'analisi delle *policy* e sull'osservazione partecipante, la *Sezione 3* mostra come il quadro interpretativo di cui sopra sia confermato dal caso dei Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti (CPIA). Questi ultimi funzionano come network anziché istituzioni monolitiche e incrementano il welfare delle comunità interagendo con le parti sociali di maggior rilievo educativo. La *Sezione 4* conclude: il programma di ricerca delle *Scienze della formazione* è terreno fertile per l'ecopedagogia e il caso dei CPIA corrobora tale convinzione. Questo contributo costituisce uno degli *output* della *SIREF Summer School 2021*.

#### KEYWORDS

Adult learning, Common good, Community education, Education sciences in Italy, Welfare.

Formazione degli adulti, Bene comune, Educazione di comunità, Scienze della formazione in Italia, Welfare.

## 1. Introduction

*Scienze della formazione* is an Italian research programme<sup>1</sup> that aims to overcome both the epistemic and the pragmatic hindrances of top-down policies approaches (such as the *Scienze dell'Educazione* approach). The latter focus on curriculum and schooling, at the expense of informal education practices and at the expense of a reflection on the role of ideology within the domain of educational decision-making and action (Minello & Margiotta, 2011). As Marcelli argued (2020), such programme meets Burawoy's requirements for a "provincialization" of social science (2005). It does also match Clifford's programmatic points (2013) for the renewal of humanities through the lenses of the *Greater Humanities* approach: brief, we dwell within the *Greater Humanities* whenever we engage in a scientific approach that is (a) empirically realist, (b) grounded on historical data, and (c) mindful of the way subjects interpretively affect data collection and processes. Additionally, Clifford demands (d) ethical commitment: this latter requirement is a pivotal issue for education because it means a science of education cannot be detached from the ethics of education. But since ethical issues cannot be always solved empirically (see, e.g., Ayer, 1946), it follows educational research must be a practical science, where empirical inquiry works in parallel with political and normative concerns. In fact, epistemologists of educational research converge on said tenet: for example, Elliott (2006) agrees educational research falls under the category of democratic rationality.

However, notwithstanding such epistemological 'accreditation', it is paramount to show how the four dimensions of the *Greater Humanities* interact within the

1 For a formal definition of "research programme", see Lakatos (1976).

*Scienze della formazione* research community. Hence, this paper will work on the connection between the ethical-political commitment of this research programme and the type of data elicited by current policies.

The underlying assumption is twofold. On the one hand, it is required to establish what kind of normative commitment is argued for by both the proponents of the *Scienze della formazione* paradigm and those who belong to the same discursive space. On the other hand, a realist approach to policies is required because even if policies belong to the domain of decision-making, they are pivotal in constructing the educational ecosystem in which communities thrive (Niemi, 2021). As such, policies constitute an element of the landscape no more and no less than other negotiable aspects of society (Levinson et al., 2009).

Hence, the first part of such effort (*section §2*) will require a Foucault-inspired reconstruction of the space set forth by the participants to the *Scienze della formazione* debate. As a result, a deontic framework will emerge. Subsequently, the following part (*section §3*) will be concerned with a so-called “positivity”, that is, the appreciation of the empirical reality that the deontic framework could apply to. Finally, conclusions will be drawn (*section §4*) concerning the attrition between the *ought* and *is* of educational practice.

## 2. Epistemological discourse: educating an educating community

Woolgar (1986) maintains ‘discourse’ is understood by Foucault to be a collection of positive instances, which include not just statements of the language, but actions as well. Conversely, he says, the Anglo-Saxon usage of ‘discourse’ is limited to language instances. Such distinction poses an epistemic challenge for the purpose of this paper: if we abide by the former approach, we ought to assume that the pedagogues’ statements overlap with actions and intentions; if we abide by the latter, we run the risk of studying language as a shallow emergent reality that clouds the presumably deeper structure of things. Our choice leans towards the continental view promoted by Foucault: firstly, because—as anticipated in *section §1*—education science is bound to take upon itself the practical aspects jointly with the theoretical ones; secondly, because statements are speech acts and, as such, they rank among the core constituents of social reality.

The first step of the discourse analysed here belongs to Dozza and Ulivieri (2016), whose contribution is subsequent to Margiotta’s *Teoria della formazione* (2015)—that is, one of the manifestos of the *Scienze della formazione* research programme. Dozza and Ulivieri contend education science should not just focus on studying education in a descriptive fashion but also promote human development in a lifelong perspective and in all domains of experience. This entails an investigation of the meaning and educational opportunities engendered by human action—which, in turn, is grounded on the understanding of the anthropological tenets of society. In their view, societies that provide opportunities for growth are societies where the following happens: an authentic dialogue between cultures, the appreciation of different values, and an overall tailoring of educational intervention on human beings.

Building on that, Annacontini et al. (2021) talk of the transformative aspect of education:

“[In order to understand] how much and to what extent educational action might be identified with a transformative vector, it is necessary to measure how educational practices might trigger processes of change and transfor-

mation that open new perspectives and scenario both on individual life and on that of the communities that harbour individuals, as well as the society they all belong to" (p. 180).

This means that the educational focus, when concerned with opportunities for growth, should shift from individuals to communities, in order to understand the causes behind their cohesion and the ways they tackle welfare, quality of life, and the common good in general.

Such claims are mirrored by the fact the construction of a common *ethos* might supersede the attainment of optimal decision-making on behalf of individuals (e.g., Wiener, 1993). Such *ethos*, which is based on the common good, could act as grounds for civil (and civic) coexistence and the construction of resilient communities: that is, the fabric of a well-developed and value-driven society (see Colazzo & Manfreda, 2019). This way, several issues are tackled at once: the economy, the environment, and other social conundrums. For instance, the indiscriminate exploitation of Earth's resources is causing serious damage to all life on Earth, thus threatening the survival of humanity itself—and this is why authors such as Malavasi (2020) believe education should forge communities that are more resilient than ever.

Del Gottardo (2016) abides by a similar argument and maintains it is advisable to reflect upon the role of education as the staple of communities, since they are always *educating* communities. Trivial as it might sound, the pun is intended: not all educating communities focus on education, but they have education as one of its effects—either as a by-product of ideology or because of its general processes of expansion, upkeep, and survival (Zamengo & Valenzano, 2018). When focus is placed on education, the threads of common good are pulled, together with those of sustainability and the management of shared resources. That is, because all dimensions of community life should be taken into account, since it is the "social capital" that, in a society, "informs us of the degree of civic cohesion, the nature of inter-institutional relations and collaborations, the breadth and depth of solidarity bonds" (Malavasi, 2017, p. 9).

The Italian *Scienze della formazione* discourse is thus in agreement with the fact it is paramount to change cultures and lifestyles to develop awareness and commitment towards the social and natural environment, therefore developing a sensitivity for individual and collective responsibility through the means of education. Those are the essential requirements for growth in harmony with the environment. As Loiodice puts it:

*"Formazione* is the category that, in a semantic perspective, better defines educational know-how, which leans teleologically towards the construction of a planet-wide humanism that is able to welcome and respect global and local (*glocal*) values, emotions, and knowledge, albeit with cross-contamination between them. Such glocal elements are thought of and practiced in contexts that are micro, macro, formal, informal, and non-formal, and act as the cornerstone of individuals and characters that know how to be, at the same time, world citizens and protagonists of the local territory they belong to" (Loiodice, 2022, p. 20).

To create an educating community means to give value to the development of human resources. Such action is linked to "reflexivity, transformation, the centrality of the subject, the attribution of meaning, and the role in sociocultural contexts (Margiotta, 2015, p. 251). Nowadays, it is demanded that education science interpret and anticipate the future among the diversity of values and educational in-

tentionality, to enliven the encounter of individuals, cultures, natural resources, and social contexts. Minello claims such action should be driven by the goal of cohabitation dictated by a shared project that is, at the same time, democratic, growth-oriented, and sustainable:

“Education is seen as indispensable to legitimize and perpetuate a society that is change-ready in social terms (change of consciousness); this happens in parallel with educational change: the society changes education, and education, in turn, changes society (maybe rarely?)” (Minello, 2021, p. x).

Hence, for such transformation to be ecosystemic, it is argued investment should be made to promote the integration of solidarity-oriented human relations. This means action should be taken in both an intra- and inter-generational perspective; additionally, it should give value to the creative potential of individuals and communities, as well as to the resilient management of their resources.

The human outlook that emerges from such approach is that of an individual whose ontology lies with its relations with others. Relations are the grounds for educating communities able to re-define the rational and targets of knowledge by drawing on an axiological framework of reference. Such possibility is explored by Giovanazzi (2021b), who reveals that it is such value-driven frames of reference that enable subjects to make informed choices within the scope of the now-occurring ecological transition. Thus, knowledge is understood as the condition for human development, because “[where] there is knowledge, there are relatedness and growth; not just of other individuals but also of the territorial setting and of the community where the flows of knowledge and learning take place” (Alessandrini, 2015, p. 29; 2019).

To build networks able to generate a solidarity-oriented humanism—which is characterized by co-belonging and co-evolution—it is necessary to reform lifestyles and resource management. The relational dimension is the basis of this; as Giovanazzi maintains: “Educational planning cannot be based on aprioristic schemes and protocols to be implemented, and, since it is historically contextualized and situated, it keeps rebuilding in relation to the complexity and the issues of society” (2021a, p. 132). In such an expanse speckled with new existential scenarios, educating communities trigger the adoption of hermeneutic criteria, which aid to recover the authentic meaning of life. Positive contributions are identified to support the historical belonging of man as a member of communities and of a society. Such an educational path needs to fuel a new solidarity that enables its practitioners to face current and future challenges with critical awareness, openness to dialogue, and giving value to everyone’s differences—especially the youths and future generations.

In sum, the *Scienze della formazione* discourse appears to state the following: that educational research should concern itself with normative issues (Dozza, 2016; Dozza & Ulivieri, 2016); that such worry paves the way for an understanding of how educating communities work (Alessandrini, 2016; Annacontini et al., 2021; Del Gottardo, 2016; Giovanazzi, 2021b; Zamengo & Valenzano, 2018); that the resilience of such communities is intertwined with their awareness in terms of values and educational processes (Colazzo & Manfreda, 2019; Malavasi, 2020; Minello, 2021); and that relevant educational action could only be multi-layered (Loiodice, 2022) and grounded on the historical and environmental context (Giovanazzi, 2021a).

### 3. The case: Provincial Centres for Adult Education

The above considerations are loaded with consequences. On the one hand, they pave the road for future implementations, whereas, on the other hand, they draw their theoretical framework on already existing educational experiences that range from the most informal ones to those that have been heavily subjected to institutionalization. In this light, this section investigates *Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti* [Provincial Centres for Adult Education] (short: CPIAs), inasmuch they constitute a representative case of educational networks that have benefitted from policy-driven directions to attain general welfare and community-oriented goals. The aim will be to show what has already been achieved and also what the future of CPIAs could be according to the *Scienze della formazione* paradigm outlined above (see *Section §2*). The resultant case is based on both available policies and participant observation on behalf of an inquirer with professional experience in the field (Di Pinto, 2020), whose reflections are summarized here.

CPIAs were created in 2012 as a type of territorial networks that provide adult learners with an educational offer to attain basic literacy or to obtain primary and secondary education certificates and diplomas (D.P.R. 263/2012). Drawing on their territorial networks, CPIAs could promote integrated projects focusing on vocational education and training (VET). By doing so, they would match the requirements for an authentic experience participatory democracy and bring about a reduction of social inequalities.

Notwithstanding the above opportunities, the decade-long history of CPIAs proved riddled with obstacles. Measures for the containment of Sars-CoV-2 pandemic, although praiseworthy in most respects, had the effect of freezing all the fertile and much-needed human relations that are at the core of each educational process. This meant a steady decline in all those scenarios and contexts, which educators had built over time to provide learners with stimulating sensorial settings. In fact, social distancing, which had been imposed through a series of Decrees issued by the Italian Prime Minister over the course of 2020 and 2021, though aimed at the protection of social communities, ended up first damaging them and, subsequently, forcing them to rethink their *modus operandi* to attain some 'semblance of educational venue'. On the one hand, this was an act of resilience, while, on the other hand, it resulted in a series of constrained actions, whose effects are yet to be properly measured.

Such apocalyptic scenery is characterized by uncertainty and a sense of isolation. In this regard, CPIAs suffered a halt since they could not pull the threads of their territorial networks. This resulted in a lack of means to provide continuing education at a time in which the demand for customized educational plans was increasing—which is baffling, since formal learning settings could have exploited their territorial networks to provide extensive continuing education services and become a kind of 'innovative educational workshops'.

Conversely, what would a felicitous scenario be like? Two defining aspects were identified via direct observation, which could promote the integration of formal educational settings and territorial networks: (a) an adequate interpretation of local educational needs; (b) an outline of which adult profile could serve the local needs and the job market.

CPIAs work at their best when organized in a 'consortium'. Consortia are participated by different stakeholders, which define their strategies, agreements, and thresholds for educational success. This is a way of managing the common good and, as such, was also reflected in settings other than that of the CPIAs—namely,

public and charter school in the year 2020–2021. In fact, cooperation with local stakeholders was called for by the Ministry of Education (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2020).

Interpreting the territory means valuing the cultural and professional heritage as something that belongs to the individual—since all individuals have a life-story. The new Adult Education System [*Sistema di Istruzione degli Adulti*] stresses on such individual aspect, in accordance with article No. 4 of L. n. 92/2012. But how could the attention to the individual and the self be consistent with attempts to overcome the societal tensions between rampant individualism and structural conformism? A challenge is the fact the rate of societal change has increased over time, and this makes competences quickly obsolete. Therefore, policies are required to enable adults to become resilient subjects, which shape themselves in different ways in order to face ensuing challenges. Such is a form of empowerment that requires self-awareness, as well as awareness of one's strengths and external opportunities. As Brusciaglioni (2007) maintains, this is how adult subjects could win the adaptive challenges the (current) environment forces them to face.

Environment, network, and territory appear to be the different faces of the same coin. How do CPIAs interact with each of these dimensions? Firstly, CPIAs work as networks, which deliver educational services to adults (as per L. n. 92/2012). Secondly, it is an environment where new realities could be pioneered and experimented—that is, a safe space to promote innovativeness in education. Thirdly, it mirrors the needs of the territory, so that it could be said no single CPIA is like the others.

Networks like CPIAs are means to an end. They strive to include disadvantaged and fragile minorities (such as NEETs, inmates, and refugees) and to provide them with education to boost their opportunities of self-fulfilment. However, in a sense, such goals enjoy a tactical dimension. The strategic level lies in the background and is that of managing the common good to attain welfare objectives—that is, care for each other.

Welfare cannot be attained by CPIAs whose educational offer is outdated, obsolete, reduced, and devoid of ties with the local needs. When this happens, CPIAs are far from being a utopia and determine dropout from education. Such leaving is exponential, since it risks being a dropout on behalf of individuals that are already, in a sense, either leavers or marginalized. Such trend could be subsumed in the following statement: the leaver leaves again.

Given the current scenario, an authentic educational reform would not just “do, but [be] a type of doing that, as its action unfolds, creates new ways of doing” (Margiotta, 2018, p. 181). Hence, CPIAs should follow in the footsteps of

“an ecopedagogy imbued with relationships, solidarity, communication, and cooperation (intergenerational, intercultural, interprofessional), [as well as] foundational and civil critique, aimed at the overcoming of functionalist reductionism and inequalities [in general]. [That is, an ecopedagogy] that could guide and support the school's intentions to break free from classrooms and become able to redraw the educational spaces of the informal [dimension]” (Dozza, 2021).

All adult education professionals shall become aware of the fact catering to a particular target of users is to territorial network what andragogy is to the genetic makeup of the CPIAs (Di Pinto, 2021). If such call is answered, policy demands would be fulfilled: transforming a CPIA into a “functional place for the development of a triangle of knowledge (education, research, innovation) that has way often been recalled by European policymakers” (Rete Nazionale CPIA - Centri Regionali di Ricerca, Sperimentazione e Sviluppo, 2018, p. 3).

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Policymakers occasionally struggle to transfer science into practice. However, the experience of CPIAs in Italy demonstrates that adult learning centres are most efficient when they are left free to work with a network of stakeholders. Moreover, they answer the issue of how the common good could be achieved: the strength of CPIAs lies with their intrinsic participatory nature. By eliciting a web of stakeholders, the most successful CPIAs are able to provide an educational offer that is truly tailored to the local needs. Thus, CPIAs contribute to the common good in two ways: firstly, because of the basic educational services they provide to adult learners (e.g., literacy courses); secondly, because they constitute a representative case of community-wide education, which is supported by appropriate policies and yet is not bound by formal tenets and is able to blur into the informal realm of education as it delivers its services in harmony with other social parties.

The case of CPIAs bounces us back to the initial part of the article (*Sections §1 and §2*), which outlined the ‘discourse’ (in the Foucauldian sense of the term) that surrounds educational research in the Italian academia: that is, a renewed perspective on communities *qua* educating communities, whose self-awareness enables them to pursue supra-individual goals. As society faces socioeconomical and environmental challenges, shared values and meanings take over individualism and pave the way for a road of mutual understanding. Such hermeneutic framework, which has its roots in the tenets of ecopedagogy, is not devoid of practice: because it is mirrored by current nation-wide experiences (such as CPIAs) and because it is itself a practice of self-definition and identification with goals that would not have come to the attention of society without an epistemologically valid ‘discourse’ capable of spreading and justifying them.

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