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Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

PROCEEDINGS

01

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Vol. 1
**Inequality,
Inclusion,
and Governance**

Organizers and partners



PEER TUTORING TO PREVENT SCHOOL DROPOUT. THE CASE OF A HIGH SCHOOL IN SAN SIRO

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In 2023 the University of Milano-Bicocca was a partner in the FAMI project “Reinventing Citizenship. Paths of capacitation of networks and social groups in the neighbourhood of San Siro”. UNIMIB oversaw the WP4, “Key citizenship competencies for the prevention of school dropout and exclusion”, an integrated capacity-building action aimed at teachers from schools in the neighbourhood. The paper presents the results of the experimental action, concerning the strategy of peer tutoring. The peer tutoring activities involved 17 students and were aimed at students in the first-grade classes. The process included initial training of peer tutors, welcoming laboratories, and the opening of a listening and mutual aid space. The research supported these activities with 23 observational reports and 5 focus groups, 3 with tutors, 1 with teachers, and 1 with educators. The focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis. The students’ voices bring out the awareness and skills they acquired in the role as tutors, true reference figures, returning a picture of peer education as a strategy for preventing dropout and social exclusion.

school dropout; capacity-building; peer tutoring; focus groups; thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION. THE FAMI PROJECT “REINVENTING CITIZENSHIP” IN SAN SIRO

The “quadrilateral” of San Siro is one of the largest Public Residential Housing areas in Milan and has a high concentration of fragile population. 48.6% are of foreign origin, with 85 different nationalities and a prevalence of people from Egypt (37.2%), Morocco (10.4%) and the Philippines (9.5%). These communities express discomfort related to difficult intercultural relations and fatigue caused by living in compromised residential and public spaces (Grassi,

2022). Neighbourhood schools are fundamental headmasters in guaranteeing access to education in pathways to citizenship. These schools often suffer from a widespread negative perception of their educational offer linked to the presence of minors of non-Italian origin ranging from 65% to 90%, even though they constitute spaces for combating school drop-out (AGIA, 2022). Here this phenomenon reaches rates of 19.4% of minors dropping out before high school diploma and 4.3% before the end of lower secondary school, percentages twice as high as the city average (ISMU, 2017).

The FAMI project “Reinventing Citizenship. Paths of capacitation of networks and social groups in the neighbourhood of San Siro” (2023) aims at developing a citizenship model in San Siro starting from the valorisation of its endogenous resources within innovative paths of social, educational, and territorial intervention.¹ The University of Milano-Bicocca oversaw the WP4, “Key citizenship competencies for the prevention of school dropout and exclusion”, an integrated capacity-building action addressed to teachers and educators of schools in the neighbourhood (Bove & Zecca, 2024), in order to strengthen: (1) the skills to detect and analyse the needs and resources of young people; (2) the capacity to implement actions to counter school drop-out and exclusion. The research, from an ecological and systemic perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), had a circular course: from a “macro” level, which involved all 12 schools taking part in the project (comprehensive institutes and high schools), it moved on to a “micro” level with two experimental actions, to finally return again to a “macro” level, in a formative perspective for all participating schools.

1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PEER TUTORING ACTION

The methodological approach followed the Professional Development Action-Research (Charlier, 2005; Zecca, 2018) and favoured a qualitative approach of a participative type. After a mapping phase on school drop-out and social exclusion (Cotza & Mussi, 2024), which involved the network of 12 schools in the neighbourhood, two experimental actions (“cantieri di dialogo” and peer tutoring; Mussi et al., 2024) were co-designed and implemented within a pilot

¹ The project, financed by the Asylum and Migration Integration Fund 2014–2020 (FAMI 3867), coordinated by the Prefecture of Milan (contact person: Alessandra Tripodi, coordination: Miria Manzo), involved the scientific coordination of three Universities: Politecnico of Milan (PI: Francesca Cognetti), Bocconi University (PI: Melissa Miedico) and University of Milano-Bicocca (PI: Chiara Bove and Luisa Zecca). The following Third Sector entities were partners: Comunità Nuova, Milano Mediterranea, and Itinerari Paralleli. You can read the complementary paper by A. Chinazzi and A. Mussi, School dropout in the perspectives of parents: Insights from a qualitative study in a peripheral neighbourhood in Milan, which was developed based on the same project.

school, the Galilei-Luxemburg Institute of Upper Secondary Education, finally proceeding to a formative analysis and dissemination of the results at the enlarged network level.

The pilot action that is the subject of this contribution, i.e. the peer tutoring action, was developed in light of the results that emerged from the qualitative mapping, in order to:

- Build a tutoring device to accompany students in “risk” conditions by enhancing their resources and skills;
- Involve teachers to promote the acquisition of know-how of innovative methods for preventing and combating school drop-out and exclusion.

The action was implemented by the Cooperative Comunità Nuova in Milan and was co-designed in collaboration with the teachers and UNIMIB, which supervised the entire process. It was divided into three phases: 1) Co-design; 2) Action; 3) Verification. The first phase consisted of 6 co-design meetings (April-November 2023). The second one comprised:

- Identification of tutors, 17 in all, from the third, fourth and fifth grades;
- Tutor training, with the objective of creating the working group and developing life skills useful for peer tutor work (September 2023);
- Welcome laboratories aimed at 10 first classes, in which activities were proposed that worked on cooperation between classmates by encouraging the creation of a group dimension, to enable students to experience the school environment to the fullest (October-November 2023);
- Implementation of an in-school space for students, called “Galileo Ascolta”, run by the tutors themselves (supervised by at least one adult), which took the form of a space for mutual help, listening and homework help.

During this second phase, 23 observational reports were produced (Cardano, Manocchi, & Venturini, 2011) to document the ongoing process. In the third phase a monitoring and evaluation path was proposed, mediated by qualitative tools: 5 focus groups were conducted (November 2023; Baldry, 2005), 3 with peer tutors (22 participants in total); 1 with 8 teachers of the classes in which the laboratories were held; and 1 with 5 educators from Comunità Nuova.

The focus groups were recorded, transcribed *verbatim* and analysed using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2008), based on the analysis of significant transversal nuclei. The findings presented here are the result of the analysis of focus groups conducted with students and the critical reading of reports.

2. FIRST RESULTS. THE VOICE OF PEER TUTORS

The peer tutoring action was aimed at implementing an educational strategy at school to activate a natural process of passing on knowledge, experiences and emotions from some members of a group to other members of equal status (Antonietti et al., 2003). In fact, peer tutor activities:

can generate positive changes and enable participants to develop aptitude for initiative, goal setting and goal achieving, time and emotion management as well as empathy and the ability to establish relations with others. In particular, tutors indicated the improvement of key skills like the ability to establish relations with peers, to work hard at their goals, to take over responsibility and the ability to manage relations, rights and duties when working with others. (Schir & Basso, 2018, p. 237)

The discussion that developed from the focus groups with the peer tutors made it possible to start a process evaluation of the action, which seems to corroborate what the scientific literature states about the potential of this strategy, which was experienced by the tutors as new, interesting, formative, useful, authentic, curious, nice, unexpected, although at times stressful, demanding and challenging.

2.1. New awareness and skills: The construction of the peer tutor role

According to the tutors, the activities generated in them a greater ability to relate to others and empathise, fostering peer interaction and communication:

Challenge and courage, more like the challenge of standing in front of a group of people, right? *Being able to dialogue with people you don't know* can seem like a challenge anyway, so you must have courage accordingly. And support, because in any case for these classes I have been more or less a support, that is, *I helped them to understand more or less the dynamics they are going to encounter on this path.*

Formative, because I learnt not only how to do group work with more people but also how to talk more, be more open, make myself understood.

It was also very pleasant to have helped some of the guys in the class, because there are some who are shyer than others and *we made sure that they could interact with the rest of the class.*

The activities undertaken enabled them to make use of their individual resources, such as knowledge of a language – e.g. Arabic, the mother tongue of many students in the school – which helped first-year students to feel

understood and accepted:

I did this course for a reason: for the guys in the same course, *I went there to help them with the language as well*. So, it was interesting, because there were a lot of guys in the course who spoke Arabic, there are a few words they don't understand, so I have to speak Arabic.

Interesting, because *I explain to them what they have to do, how to study, why it's important to speak Italian, to learn how to write*.

The development of soft skills was accompanied by a transformative process that led tutors to overcome the anxiety and embarrassment of speaking in front of an audience of students. It was a challenge met with courage:

I'm quite a shy person, so *I was afraid* that I wouldn't be able to call attention to myself, make myself heard, but in the end everything went well because *I took courage*, even seeing that they were actually more embarrassed than I was.

The course seems to have raised a progressive awareness both of their own role and of their own prejudices and preconceptions. Most of them acknowledged that they had stereotyped the school's addresses, coming up against a much more complex reality:

It was interesting to see how the addresses are stereotyped (...). I mean, I liked the graphics class more than the health and social class, usually you think that graphics class is messier than health and social class, but this time, in my experience, it was the opposite.

I had a class of electrics, and I had this very strong stereotype because in our class they are considered the ones who make a mess, who break things... there were also some thefts last year and the first thing they thought was "it was the electrics". Now, I take my blame, and I also realise that I stereotype this a lot.

2.2. Beyond criticality: Peer tutors as reference figures

In general, the tutors were faced with difficult situations, which challenged them and did not always see them recognised in their role as tutors, especially due to young age and communication problems:

I many times did not feel respected as a tutor. Because I was not seen as a tutor, I was seen as the girl in fourth grade, that is, *I was seen as a pupil*, not as someone who can give you something.

Challenging because *I was not always faced with people who were easy to talk to, easy to interface with, easy to understand, but if you put your mind to it, you manage to conclude, to something positive.*

Nevertheless, as is also evident from the previous quotation, the balance of the experience seems to be positive. The intervention of the tutors helped to improve the dynamics of the class group and they were often seen as authoritative figures, guides to be relied upon:

They took us very seriously, I mean in the sense as tutors, even when they needed us they came more to us guys than to C. [educator at Comunità Nuova], so I saw them very keen, I mean to see us as authority figures.

The second meeting we started talking (...) a lot of questions came up, I saw them very engaged and also very concerned about being able to bring a very, very high level to the exam; so, I was very pleased about that.

Carrying out peer education activities seems to have activated important metacognitive skills in the tutors. Indeed, they reflect on their own responsibility towards younger pupils and thus on the importance of assuming the awareness of being reference figures:

We have a responsibility, because we are talking to younger people who may interpret what we say in another way, so we have to have, let's say, an eye on.

Not everyone can do this, because as much as you can understand the teachers' point of view, you still have to keep in mind that we are there to give not an example but a reference figure, and in our class many wanted to do this experience but in my opinion not all of them were adequate, and in fact were not advised by our teacher.

During their focus group, the teachers themselves say that the tutors were able to make the students think – for example, about rules – from another point of view, and add that “it was interesting because it wasn't the professor giving an explanation (...), but an older student”. In addition, the teachers themselves perceived the peer tutor as “intermediary figure” between teachers and pupils, a “link between the adult world and their world”.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES

These first results lead to the drafting of some points that seem crucial for the prevention of school dropout in multicultural and multi-problem contexts:

- Involve students in an active manner, by leveraging their skills, dreams, talents, as well as their vulnerabilities in a democratic citizenship perspective;
- Build heterogeneous groups of students among the different classes to expand the dimension of social relations and exchange beyond all diversity;
- Give students specific roles in a project so that they feel themselves to be social actors, stakeholders, and responsible for the success of the action beyond the logic of power and role asymmetries within the school institution;
- Invest in the transformation of space to foster a sense of belonging to the school, ensuring alternative and protected spaces for the students to allow their freedom of expression and to enable them to participate competently and reflectively in heterogeneous dialogue spaces shared with adults.

Looking ahead, thinking about the development of peer tutoring as a strategy to prevent school dropout, the analysis of focus groups and reports suggests implementing the role of peer tutors as cultural and linguistic mediators, having tutors work in classes that have the same study field as them, and finally, as told by the tutors themselves, devoting more time to debates on sensitive topics for students.

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