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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

Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance

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

Organizers and partners



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PATHWAYS FOR TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCIES AND ORIENTATION (PCTO) AS A DEVICE FOR DEVELOPING PERSONAL RESOURCES AND CONTRASTING SCHOOLISTIC DISPERSION

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PCTOs (Pathways for Transversal Competencies and Orientation) are a strategic initiative in the Italian education system designed to foster the holistic development of upper secondary school students and support their educational and career choices. This PRIN 2022-funded project aims to analyze PCTOs' characteristics and evaluate their impact on personal resources, student dispersion, and orientation outcomes. The research is structured into three studies. The first examines the inclusion and objectives of PCTOs within the Three-Year Training Offer Plans (PTOF) of 200 schools, assessing adherence to ministerial standards through document analysis. The second involves five case studies in Lazio, Lombardy, and Emilia-Romagna, gathering data from institutions, teachers, and students to explore factors influencing PCTO planning and outcomes. The third study surveys first-year university students to assess the long-term impact of PCTOs on career decisions and well-being. The project will culminate in an open-access digital platform to help schools self-evaluate and enhance their PCTOs. By integrating theoretical, educational, and technological insights, the project seeks to inform educational policies, improve practices, and foster collaboration within the academic community.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Italian education system is undergoing significant transformation to address challenges such as high dropout rates, territorial disparities, and the need for a workforce equipped with interdisciplinary and practical skills. In response, Pathways for Transversal Competencies and Orientation (PCTO) have emerged as a cornerstone of educational reform. These pathways aim to develop students' transversal competencies, preparing them for complex global challenges while fostering autonomy in their educational and career decisions.

Since their redefinition in the 2019 Budget Law, PCTOs have been mandatory in upper secondary education and integrated into the Three-Year Training Offer Plans (PTOF) of each institution. However, the implementation and effectiveness of PCTOs vary significantly across regions and schools, reflecting systemic disparities.

Moreover, while studies on PCTOs, especially those on larger samples, seem to privilege highlighting governance models, criticalities, and success factors (Giancola & Salmieri, 2021), surveys aimed at giving voice to students' experiences and detecting the effects of such pathways on their resources, levels of well-being, and, ultimately, on their educational and professional choices seem rare.

This paper investigates these dynamics through a research project funded by PRIN 2022, which explores the characteristics and impact of PCTOs in fostering personal resources, reducing student dispersion, and supporting informed decision-making in education and careers.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The project, still ongoing, aims to provide a multi-dimensional analysis of PCTOs. It adopts a mixed-methods approach and it's structured into three interconnected studies, each addressing distinct but complementary aspects of these pathways.

2.1. Study 1: Document Analysis

The first study investigates how PCTOs are conceptualized and implemented within the Three-Year Training Offer Plans (PTOF) of 200 schools, selected to represent diverse geographical and institutional contexts. Using thematic and lexicometric analyses (Bianquin et al., 2018; Bolasco, 2021), this phase examines the alignment of PCTOs with ministerial guidelines and identifies variations in their objectives, content, organization, and evaluation mechanisms.

2.2. Study 2: Multiple Case Studies

The second study explores the lived experiences of PCTO stakeholders through five case studies conducted in Lazio, Lombardy, and Emilia-Romagna. Employing the Training Research methodology (Asquini, 2018), data collection spans multiple levels, including institutional practices, teacher perspectives, and student experiences. This comprehensive approach aims to identify both enabling and inhibiting factors in the design and implementation of PCTOs, while assessing their impact on students' educational trajectories and career choices.

A key objective of this study is to contextualize the role of PCTOs in cultivating personal resources and competencies, as well as in guiding students' decision-making at the conclusion of secondary education. Adopting a participatory framework, this study positions students as key informants, enabling them to provide valuable feedback on their PCTO experiences (Pastori, Pagani & Sarcinelli, 2020).

The insights gathered through student surveys and focus group interviews serve as a foundation for engaging teachers in each school in a collaborative Training Research process. This iterative dialogue between students and educators aims to refine PCTO practices, fostering an environment of shared responsibility and continuous improvement.

2.3. Study 3: Retrospective Survey

The third phase consists of a retrospective survey targeting first-year university students to assess the long-term impact of PCTOs on career choices and individual well-being. This phase offers insights into the role of PCTOs during key transition periods, providing a broader understanding of their effectiveness in shaping students' educational and professional trajectories.

2.4. Digital Platform

A key outcome of this research is the development of an open-access digital platform designed to support schools in self-evaluating and enhancing their PCTOs. This platform will provide tools for benchmarking practices, sharing best practices, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. By addressing gaps in implementation and standardization, the platform aims to reduce disparities and ensure that all students benefit from high-quality educational pathways.

3. EXPECTED IMPACTS

This project promises significant contributions across theoretical, pedagogical, and technological domains, leveraging an extensive dataset and comprehensive analyses derived from its diverse research methodologies. By offering a detailed examination of PCTO practices, it adopts an integrated approach that highlights the diversity of implementations and educational strategies across institutions.

The use of a “multi-level” methodology provides a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play, directly engaging institutions, teachers, and students to evaluate the tangible effects of PCTOs on students’ life trajectories. The active involvement of students and teachers, a hallmark of the Training Research methodology, ensures a participatory process that facilitates in-depth data collection while identifying critical barriers and enablers in the design and implementation of PCTOs.

A key innovation lies in the project’s focus on the long-term impacts of PCTOs. The retrospective survey offers a unique longitudinal perspective on how these pathways influence students’ career decisions and life trajectories, generating insights rarely captured in existing research.

Furthermore, the development of an open-access digital platform marks a significant advance in applied outcomes. This platform not only disseminates the project’s findings but also provides schools with a practical tool for self-assessment and improvement. By fostering continuous evaluation and iterative enhancements, it supports the sustained development of effective and equitable educational practices.

In conclusion, this project bridges theoretical insights and practical applications, translating research findings into actionable tools that can inform educational policies and advance school practices. By doing so, it seeks to elevate the quality and equity of student learning experiences, ensuring that the

educational system effectively meets the needs of a diverse and evolving society.

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