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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



PREVENTING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING: OBJECTIVES AND MILESTONES OF A NATIONAL PROJECT

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School dropout is defined as the lack of, incomplete, or irregular access to education and training services for individuals of school age (Authority for Children and Adolescents, 2022). This complex phenomenon negatively impacts the economic and productive growth of a country. Dropping out of school before completing one's studies is a key indicator that identifies individuals aged 18 to 24 who have attained at most a middle school diploma or who have interrupted their educational journey. The European Union aims to reduce the rate of early school leaving to below 9% by 2030. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) also emphasizes the need for strategies to prevent early school leaving in Italy, which has the highest rate of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) among young people. The Evidence 4 Preventing Early School Dropout (E4PED) project is a national research initiative selected under MUR-PRIN 2022 call and funded by the European Union—Next Generation EU, involving three research units from southern regions (Cagliari, Palermo, and Salerno), where school dropout is more prevalent. The project aims to provide education professionals with research evidence and effective practices to address early school leaving. Its objectives include synthesizing international evidence on the effectiveness of educational programs, analyzing the dropout phenomenon in the southern regions, and developing interventions to prevent school dropout in lower secondary schools in the South.

school dropout; early school leaving; evidence-based education; educational policy.

INTRODUCTION

Evidence 4 Preventing Early School Dropout (E4PED) is a project of significant national interest (PRIN 2022, funded by the European Union—Next Generation EU). It involves three universities, specifically Cagliari, Palermo, and Salerno, in conducting research on the phenomenon of school dropout, with particular attention to the realities of Southern Italy. In line with European and Italian guidelines, the project aims to provide education professionals with a reliable source of research evidence and effective practices for addressing early school leaving. Countering school dropout, reducing territorial gaps and educational poverty are some of the main challenges that our country is committed to addressing, as outlined in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR, 2021). In particular, among the different missions indicated, the one relating to education and research defines the interventions to be implemented to support creating a sustainable and inclusive educational system.

In light of the current situation and the actions planned to stem school dropout, the PRIN 2022 project fits fully into the national scenario by developing along two lines: on the one hand, aggregating international evidence and territorial factors to provide updated documentation of reliable knowledge, on the other hand designing an intervention program, calibrated on the main contextual characteristics, to be implemented in lower secondary schools.

1. THE SCHOOL DROPOUT PHENOMENON

The Authority for the Guarantee of Childhood and Adolescence defines school dropout as “the failure, incomplete or irregular use of education and training services by young people of school age” (2022, p. 20). From this statement, we can find the set of conditions attributable to the phenomenon that aggregate within it: non-schooling, definitive interruption from the education and training system (abandonment), repetition, temporary interruption of attendance, and the achievement of insufficient levels of basic skills.

The causes of dropout in primary and secondary schools are often linked to family factors, teaching methods, and the socioeconomic status of the family. In tertiary education, these causes are somewhat similar, but there are additional factors such as the student’s personal choices and the influence of the surrounding environment on their personality (Negut, 2020).

Wanting to recall the terminological change that has characterized the different historical moments, we have moved from conceiving scholastic failure as a variable dependent on socio-family factors of belonging to recognizing the

weight derived from individual factors, typical of the subject in learning and from relational factors that refer to the quality of interactions between teacher and student (Batini & Bartolucci, 2016).

In this regard, some argue that we can speak of different dimensions of dispersion or even of dispersions in the plural, given the variety of expressions and conditions through which it manifests itself. Just think of territorial location, age, and gender.

Dropping out of school, for example, goes beyond simple academic results, it is a process of disengagement on the part of the individual that develops over time and whose risk symptoms can be traced in absenteeism as well as exclusion or repetition (Lyche, 2010).

The expression *Early Leaving from Education and Training* (ELET) refers to young people who leave education and training prematurely, who do not continue their studies, or who are not enrolled in any type of training. This term does not only include early school leaving but all forms of leaving that occur before the end of secondary school. Therefore, in most national documents, early leaving “means not having completed compulsory education and not having completed upper secondary school” (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop, 2014, p. 21). This indicator, used at the international level to measure and monitor progress made about the objectives set at the European level, identifies the category of young people who, between the ages of 18 and 24, complete compulsory schooling at most or leave training prematurely.

In 2023, school dropout in Italy fell to 10.5%, a progressive decline compared to 11.5% in 2022 and 12.7% in 2021. Positive signals also arrived in front of the so-called implicit school dropout, unlike explicit school dropout, which refers to the share of children who do not reach sufficient levels in basic skills (European Commission, 2024; INVALSI, 2023; ISTAT, 2024). Over the past two decades, the adoption of evidence-based educational practices has seen significant growth. Evidence-based education aims to promote effective educational interventions through rigorous evaluations, to determine “what works and in what circumstances” (Calvani, 2012). This approach not only supports the decisions of educational policymakers but also provides valuable help to school professionals (Marzano & Calvani, 2020). According to the European Commission (2017), building a strong evidence base is crucial for enhancing educational systems. Several countries have begun initiatives to connect research, practice, and policy more effectively. Notable examples of this include the Education Endowment Foundation and the What Works

Clearinghouse. In comparison with the international landscape, Italy is falling behind other countries (Pellegrini & Vivanet, 2021).

2. THE PROJECT'S OBJECTIVES

Considering the premises put forward, the project intends to adopt an *evidence-based approach* to capitalize on knowledge of the phenomenon, through a current analysis of international evidence on dropout prevention programs in secondary schools.

In this frame, *Evidence 4 Preventing Early school Dropout (E4PED)* aims, in the two years 2023-2025, to:

- summarise international scientific evidence regarding the effectiveness of educational interventions aimed at curbing the problem;
- trace the phenomenon in Italy with a particular focus on the southern regions and the initiatives already present in the territory;
- develop an intervention program for lower secondary schools to be implemented in the school contexts of Southern Italy.

The project aims to conduct an updated systematic review of the effectiveness of programs designed to prevent early school leaving in secondary schools. This is necessary because there are currently no recent systematic reviews on this topic (Tanner-Smith and Wilson, 2013; Wilson et al., 2011). At the international level, there are very few systematic reviews of programs designed to prevent and tackle school dropout. The most recent are the meta-analyses by Wilson et al. (2011) and Tanner-Smith and Wilson (2013), which include studies from 1985 to 2010. In addition to evaluating program effectiveness, the review will also analyze potential predictors and moderators that may influence the outcomes.

The European Commission (2019) emphasized that identifying predictors of early school leaving can aid in developing and implementing a monitoring framework. This framework, along with associated tools, can help schools recognize the risk of school leaving early on, allowing them to provide timely and effective support programs. Although numerous projects have been implemented in our country in recent years (mainly fragmented experiences or good practices, lacking a systematic evaluation of their impact), a common synthesis of international and national scientific knowledge and data is lacking.

Multidisciplinary research has shown that dropping out of school is a serious manifestation of academic distress, often evident through various predictors. Existing literature (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Hammond et al., 2007;

Rumberger & Lim, 2008) highlights several key factors associated with this problem: 1) family factors, the economic and cultural circumstances of a student's family play a critical role; 2) school factors, aspects such as the quality of teaching, relationships with teachers and the general school environment can significantly influence students' decisions to continue their studies; 3) personal factors, issues related to self-esteem, motivation and learning difficulties can lead students to drop out of school; 4) social factors, the socioeconomic and cultural context of the area in which a student lives can have a profound impact on their academic performance. The context analysis aims to provide a synthesis framework on the main factors that lead to early school leaving starting from the documentation of national and regional policies, from the best practices implemented, and through a concurrent triangulation design (Creswell et al., 2003) the main social actors will be involved. The information obtained will allow the design of a calibrated intervention program. To this end, the project will act as a reliable source of evidence by synthesizing the best international research with an analysis of the Italian context. This will support contextualizing evidence-based strategies and programs in Italian secondary education.

3. THE BREAKDOWN STRUCTURE

The three objectives outlined are organized into six Work Packages (WP). Each WP contains a series of activities to be carried out. Leaving aside WP 1 (coordination) and WP6 (dissemination), a summary of the others is presented as follows. Starting from the conduct of a systematic review on interventions to counteract early school leaving through a meta-multilevel analysis on the effectiveness of early school leaving prevention programs based on experimental data (effect sizes and moderator analysis). Subsequently, based on qualitative data, a framework of the effective characteristics of the programs will be outlined (WP2).

Analysis of policies to combat school dropout adopted at national and regional levels, with particular attention to the Southern regions. In this sense, the adopted strategy will include the investigation of school websites, regional school office databases (USR), the National Operational Program database (PON), as well as Google and Google Scholar sources. Context analysis, through the construction and administration of questionnaires addressed to the main social actors, i.e. students, teachers, and young NEETs (WP3).

The information obtained will be used to define a program for teachers at lower

secondary schools (WP4). We will use the Educational Design Research approach (EDR, McKenney & Reeves, 2014) to develop our intervention. This activity includes the design and development of materials for students and school professionals. The materials and tools will be based on international evidence and the results of the context analysis. Subsequently, quality control will be activated. Academic and school experts in the field of early school leaving will analyze and verify the quality of the program through systematic tools designed by the WP coordination unit. According to the final phase of the EDR, the program will be reviewed by the multidisciplinary team after data has been collected and analyzed during the testing phase (WP5).

CONCLUSIONS

Knowing to prevent and contrast is certainly the main line of direction that the presented project intends to pursue. The objectives, defined and detailed in specific activity packages, aim to increase the knowledge base on school dropout, paying particular attention to the regions of Southern Italy. In this sense, it contributes to updating the existing literature by providing a systematic review examining the effectiveness of programs designed to reduce school dropout rates, to provide a summary framework on international evidence and the characteristics of the Italian school reality. Subsequently, it will be possible to design, implement, and evaluate an intervention program, built ad hoc, also considering the contextual variability, and to be allocated to lower secondary schools. These actions will converge in a single purpose: to formulate guidelines to be addressed to professionals and policymakers, including a monitoring structure to be reserved for school institutions.

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