Intergenerationality and Social Change through Popular Education in a Neoliberal World: A Case Study of Popular Schools in Rome

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Abstract. This article focuses on popular education as a means of intergenerational education for social transformation against the neocolonial neoliberalism imposed by the "West". The intergenerational nature of popular education has received little attention, yet it is truly relevant, especially today. Indeed, the current political and economic context is witnessing the spread of new political movements in the Global 'North', and even more so in regions like 'Southern' Europe, in which young and older educators develop intercultural relationships with children and adolescents from ethnic minorities, often from working-class backgrounds. The relationship between educators and students can challenge common sense steeped the Neoliberal Ideology, as evidenced by the illustrative example of the popular schools in Rome.

Keywords: popular education, intergenerationality, Southern Europe, Neoliberalism, educational inequalities.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Aim of paper

Our paper focuses on popular education as a means of intergenerational education for social transformation against 'Western' imposed, Neocolonial Neoliberalism. The intergenerational nature of popular education has received little attention, yet it is truly relevant, especially today. Indeed, the current political and economic context is witnessing the spread of new political movements (Della Porta 2020) in the Global 'North', and even more so in regions like 'Southern' Europe (Mayo 2025), in which young and older educators develop intercultural relationships with children and adolescents from

ethnic minorities, often from working-class backgrounds (Parziale 2024).

Our main contention throughout our international, theoretical overview is that popular education, with its context-bound community basis, and its 'majority world' [geographical and not] reference points, is, for the most part, intergenerational. It is a key historical feature of the 'global 'South' ' in that it is more holistic than 'Northern' or ' Western' conceptions of education would have us believe, the latter born out of affluent societies' interests and conditions. In less affluent societies, one has to maximise and make multifunctional community use of resources, not having the wherewithal to afford the formal specialisations one requires. These consist of grassroots ('from below') measures in contrast to imposed 'Western' models promoted by such institutions as, for instance, dictates the World Bank and those that connect with or reflect dictates of the 'Breton Woods' institutions. The latter call the tune of the market-oriented piper, a market which is anything but 'free' as it is conditioned by 'Western'-induced policies and funding agencies (World Bank, EU, IMF) and trumpeted by 'Western'-inflected and directed global media networks.

The aim of our analysis is to understand how popular education, in its intergenerational dimension, may counter neoliberalism nowadays. To this end, we first define what we mean by neoliberalism and popular education, highlighting how intergenerationality is a key feature of the latter. In the second part of the article, we present a case study of the current popular schools in Rome (Parziale, 2024): this popular education occurs in a country at the crossroads between the Global 'North' and the Global 'South' (Mayo 2025). The insights obtained, while not statistically generalizable, typical of interpretative, qualitative research which opts for contextual depth rather than positivist breath, offer very useful information for identifying one of the possible ways in which popular education may counter neoliberalism. It illustrates how it can generate social change from below through mutual learning between adults and minors.

1.2. Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism represents the gradual erosion of state protectionism owing to the emergence of what Klaus Shwab, of the World Economic Forum, calls the Third and Fourth Industrial Revolutions where capital, especially financial capital, travels widely and across national boundaries, and enables production to be dispersed across different time zones, with the various labour segments involved being remunerated differently, according to the region's or individual worker's socio-economic

and political conditions. The whole process is coordinated cybernatically on *real time*. Capitalism has since its inception been global but the techno-induced globalisation of production occurs in a manner distinct from what Marx and Engels (1848/1998) predicted, in *The Communist Manifesto*; this is globalisation occurring on *real time* (Carnoy 1999).

Neoliberalism, however, as other ideologies before it, affects not only the areas of direct production but all areas of social life. It fashions subjectivities. It helps foster personalities in tune with a mindset and *modus operandi* commensurate with the overall economic thinking. People are conceived of as consumers/producers, defined by their position in and with regard to the market (Harvey, 2005). They are not projected as more than two-dimensional beings – production and consumption are interrelated, both sides of the same unidirectional process. Neoliberalism seeks to transform people (happily people can still have agency, as we shall show), institutions and that construct we call the State, which entails, in many ways, an ensemble of regulated social relations.

According to Neoliberalism, the market, through its 'invisible' and 'not so invisible' mechanisms, seeks to replace the Social State, certainly of the post WWII and earlier Rooseveltian 'New Deal' consensus periods, what, in Clement Atlee's Britain, came to be called the 'welfare state'. Technological revolutions in information, production and organisation, have pulled further or threaten to pull further from under industry's feet the *national* ground on which it stands (pace Marx and Engels 1848/1998). The state's double function, in Claus Offe's (1973: 252) formulation, reflected in educational research by Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin's (1985) work, of balancing its need to accumulate capital with satisfying democratic needs, is being eroded, especially insofar as the latter function goes. Money for educational, health and other social programmes becomes 'tight' as the quest remains that of creating incentives to attract and maintain investment, with the constant threat of capital mobility and flight in mind. This situation also significantly reduced the bargaining power of trade unions to obtain such social and educational programmes as, for instance, the seventies' 150 + hours in working class education (Mayo 2025).

Much educational provision, especially but not only in adult and higher education, and in many ways, initial education, is conditioned to sway to this Neoliberal tune. It does so not only at the hands of Right-wing governments but also governments led by parties that were once socialist but, to appeal to a consumerist electorate and possibly bank-rolling lobbying powers, have had their head turned to the Right. Blairism is a case in

point. Suddenly, the 'Western'-oriented, competitively driven Lifelong Learning placing the emphasis on the individual *'responsibilised'* consumer, not social/ community actor, replaces all social and community forms of justice-oriented learning. It is not even *lifelong education*, "Learning to *be* (not to *have*)" which UNESCO once championed in its Soviet Union-presence days. This iteration of Lifelong Education at least foregrounded non-formal popular education rooted in a 'geographically majority world' context. It foregrounded the intergenerational, community-oriented popular education, hence the exaltation of the work of such figures as Paulo Freire. This all-embracing concept of education was holistic in a manner reflecting the exigencies of a 'majority world' context. Nations from this sector, precisely the majority, backed by the vetoing UN superpower that was the Soviet Union, had a say. This all changed after 1990 and the fall of the Berlin Wall; although the Trump administration now wants to pull out of UNESCO. A more Neoliberal-oriented Lifelong *Learning* took root, 'Western'- oriented and individualising in tenor, though looking, from the outside, as 'the innocent flower'. It however it can be 'the serpent under it', to borrow from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (English and Mayo, 2021). Luckily, popular education, outside 'Western'-influenced contexts, provides antidotes in many ways. This applies not just to geographically 'majority world' contexts, where examples are legion, but also to Europe, especially 'Southern' Europe/Mediterranean. Rome with its popular schools is a case in point, as we will show.

1.3. Popular Education

Popular education has different meanings in different contexts with a recurrent leitmotif – grassroots educational provision sometimes dovetailing but often in contrast with the formal, institutional system. It is often characterised by attempts to generate educational initiatives among the disenfranchised, occasionally by the disenfranchised themselves (Torres 1990; Kane 2001). The disenfranchised are the major casualties of the current Neoliberal juggernaut, left destitute by the dismantling of the Social State and the shredding of the 'social contract' (Giroux 2018). A key feature throughout is its intergenerational, not age-conditioned nature, often, though not always, at the furthest remove from the formalised institutional education, public/state-sponsored. Popular Education has been a much bandied about term attributed to different features of education, once again often but not exclusively outside institutional settings. It ranges from the French term, *Education Populaire* to University Extension Education in other countries. In

certain historical moments, it took on the appearance of an anarchist grassroots provision as in Spain before and between dictatorships. Being grassroots-oriented, it would, generally speaking, be conceived of as contrasting with top-down institutional impositions. In Spain's case, they would be central, institutional impositions by what is perceived as *El Estado Español*. In this regard, this feature anticipated and prefigures that form of a popular education that is most heralded in the English language, adult education literature: Nonformal *Educación Popular*. Moreover, precisely in the United Kingdom, popular education also entails appropriation of even formal knowledge by the working class, revealing an attempt to construct a 'proletarian public sphere' (Steele 2007). Even when involving universities, it was not *of* or *in* the University in the formal structural sense. It was as marginalised as the tutors engaged in it (Mcllroy and Westwood 1993).

The Latin American version of Popular Education, based on nonformal learning (La Belle 1986; Tarlau 2019), is arguably the most widely heralded and researched. It is the one version which has contributed to bringing about a paradigmatic shift in our thinking with regard to education. One aspect of its more radical feature is the provision of a network of *learning webs* in accordance with the ideas of Ivan Illich and which finds arguably its best articulation in Chiapas, Mexico and by the Frente Zapatista.

The emphasis here is on learning for regional and group autonomy. Many of these fall under broad networks such as UNITIERRA, escaping what is hegemonically perceived as *education* (Prakash and Esteva 2009; Santos 2017). It is popular and holistic (Freire and Illich 2003).

2. INTERGENERATIONALITY IN POPULAR EDUCATION

2.1. Flexibility and intergenerationality

The common element is that popular education is generally rooted in an epistemology of the 'South' (Santos 2014), in a holistic vision of social transformation that departs from the existential situation of the oppressed. It is meant to be a vehicle for addressing the concerns of peasant communities and other subaltern groups, lacking facilities taken for granted in 'Western' societies. It represents the creative possibilities of people involved in addressing their specific communal needs in a context characterised by (Neo) colonialism and its related discontents such as economic and cultural

dependency and, more recently, Neoliberal-governed hegemonic globalisation – *globalisation from above.*

This bottom-up, not strictly age-conditioned, organization gives popular education a uniquely flexible nature that reinforces the intergenerational dimension of education. In particular, this aspect of popular education concerns learning, as educators and students, in theory, construct knowledge together and learn reciprocally from each other (Freire 2018).

The non-formal approach potentially brings organised education closer to home. People would thus be spared the hassle of, as in parts of Latin America and Africa, walking long distances to reach a school, with all kinds of hazards along the roads. These can be hazards caused by a civil war, as was the case with large swathes of Central America in the 70s and 80s. Popular education allows for ease of transfer of location in situations under siege. It can be of the kind which prevented parents from sending their daughters to don Lorenzo Milani's school at Barbiana, Tuscany, because of the dangers of commuting, as one needed a license to travel to the place by a 'motorino' (motorcycle), the initial motivation for several boys to attend Don Milani's school in the remote locality of Sant' Andrea a Barbiana in Tuscany's Mugello region (informal conversation with Edoardo Martinelli in Salerno 2023).

Flexibility regarding time allows people to work in the fields by day and attend school by night or late evenings, much later than usual in Summer because of Daylight Saving Time. Children, youngsters and older members of the communities can learn together in common popular settings, hence the *intergenerational learning*, aspect.

2.2. Collectively taking charge of education

Popular education, in theory, allows greater opportunities for intergenerational community members to alternate between being educators and educatees. Experience and learning to share with others are key features. One of us came across an unwritten maxim in a 1998 trip to a shaty town outside São Paulo: certain people from Brazil's socio-economically impoverished 'Nord-Este,' feel morally committed to impart the little they have learnt to others. This includes children or youth, exposed to literacy at school or through non-formal means, who teach even older members of the locality. They would eventually take this commitment when migrating for work and settling on the city's periphery (Freire 1994). This attitude and camarderie connects with prison inmates' experiences on say Ustica, in Antonio Gramsci's time there, awaiting trial under Fascist

repression (Gramsci 1996), Robbin Island in South Africa during Nelson Mandela's and Walter Sisulu's imprisonment, and at Ansar III, in the Naqab/Negev, among Palestinian prisoners (Sacco 2002). In Palestine, there are school-age children prisoners whose schooling has been interrupted for long periods for perhaps merely throwing stones during an *Intifada*. The Zionist state spares none when activating its repressive mechanisms. There is potential also for older, formally educated inmates teaching their younger fellow-detained Palestinians, to make up for the latter's loss of precious schooling days through their incarceration. These situations involve communities organising their own collective learning. People prepare material beforehand and later impart it to others. These communities involve people of different educational achievement, as well as ages, studying, teaching/learning cheek by jowl. Without relying on trained teachers, people can collectively take charge of their own learning (see Ranciere 1987).

The ultimate goal is a collective one as indicated by Gramsci when explaining and celebrating the purpose of adults attending classes of workers' education after a long day at work in Turin and the nearby zones (Gramsci 1977). They did so, he intimates, albeit idealistically, not for personal gain but for collective advancement, class consciousness and struggle. This applies also to intergenerational learning in Palestine under siege and other places lacking conventional (read: 'Western') taken-for-granted facilities..

The credentialing pull is always felt, especially in a Neoliberal-driven economy. Once people attain a certain level of education, some will exert pressure to obtain certification for aspired to employment opportunities, namely 'white collar' jobs in service-oriented economies in the cities or coastal zones in countries such as Spain or Portugal. This is where formal and non-formal education intersect and popular education and the state converge, often in non-envisaged ways.

International popular education often takes on the form of learning the tools for rural development in the hinterland, as with the *Plataforma Rural* in Spain (Guimarães *et al.* 2018) or before the time of universal primary education or even among normally secondary school age students (the country could not afford secondary education for all) and adults in Tanzania, as part of 'education for self-reliance', including popular education, under Julius K. Nyerere's Presidency (Nyerere 1968). At the same time, in several 'Western' countries, we witness the rebirth and transformation of political movements (Della Porta 2020), increasingly focused on mutualistic practices aimed at countering neoliberal policies, in

many cases reviving the centuries-old tradition of popular education (Steele 2007).

2.3. Revolutionary Momentum

Popular education was promoted by states for a variety of reasons, including keeping the momentum alive during early revolutionary situations. In Spain, during the Second Republic, in between the Miguel Primo de Rivera and the Francisco Franco dictatorships, popular education played its part in the cultural momentum seeking to raise the literacy and general education levels of a then largely illiterate population (Mayo 2025) with few schools available for everyone.

Nicaragua, after the 1979 revolution, constitutes a classic example of intergenerational popular education: it provided what people wanted, education and health services. Health education is an important feature of popular education (Maria Zuniga, in Borg and Mayo 2007). School age children were sent to the countryside to live with campesinas/os, learn rural skills and engage as *educational brigadistas* in a literacy/ popular education *cruzada*

With many of the countries concerned not having the wherewithal to provide formal education for all, non-formal, intergenerational popular education becomes a viable alternative. This is what must have led UNESCO to promote non-formal and popular education strongly in the 70s as part of its Lifelong Education for everyone, driven, more recently, under the rubric of 'Education for all' (English and Mayo 2021). Lifelong Education then was very social democratic-oriented, subsequently distorted beyond recognition when ideologically morphed by the OECD and the EU into market-driven, Lifelong Learning. Learning, in true Neoliberal fashion, was converted from a social into an individualised concern (English and Mayo 2021).

Even in revolutionary situations, the momentum can get out of control to the extent that the state is required to balance its one-time obligation to respond to the democratic demands of its constituents, at various levels, with the need to address its economic imperatives. This often places the state at odds with popular education as in Portugal during the 'interim period' following the 1974 'Revolution of the Carnations' (Lind and Johnson 1986). The main aspect of this popular education, however, was not to start with a literacy programme, as had been the case with other great revolutions from Russia to Cuba and later Nicaragua. It would have emphasised what people lacked. That would come later. The immediate attempt was to unleash popular creativity and culture (Melo 1985), officially suppressed under periods of totalitarianism/*Salazarismo*. This was the peo-ple's manifestation, intergenerationally, of what Antonio Gramsci would call the "popular creative spirit". It was in the spirit of UNESCO's Lifelong *Education* not modern-day individualising lifelong *learning*. UNESCO was very active in the first years of the 'Carnations Revolution' (Guimarães *et al.* 2018).

Popular education alternatively took the form of academic support for struggling students, an effort to transform the formal school system, as has been seen in the last 15 years in countries like Italy (Zizioli *et al.* 2024) and Brazil via the MST (Tarlau 2019). It is this latter trend that our case study addresses, which is particularly exemplary for exploring a possible connection between the intergenerational dimension of popular education and its capacity to question the social order shaped by Neoliberalism.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND CASE STUDY

To address the question posed in this article, we relied on a case study based on uncovered participant observation regarding the "Rete delle Scuole Popolari di Roma" (henceforth "Roman Network"), made up of political activists from organizations committed to providing free educational support to struggling students.

The first Network meeting was held on January 10, 2020; that year, there were only two meetings owing to the pandemic lockdown. The other meetings we attended were distributed as follows: two in 2021, five in 2022, four in 2023, and one in 2024. We attended 14 out of 16 total meetings organised by activists in the observation period. Each meeting lasted approximately 3-4 hours.

Furthermore, the ethnographic observation concerned the educational practices developed in the individual popular schools of the Roman Network during the afternoons in which 26 in-depth interviews (Bichi 2007) with the activists were carried out. Therefore, in addition to ethnographic notes and backtalks (Cardano 2020), the article draws on information obtained through these interviews, conducted in 2022.

The interviewees were selected through snowball sampling that involved the most engaged people in the nine popular schools of the examined network[1] (Table 1).

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[1] The popular schools examined are the following (the areas of the capital where they are located are indicated in brackets): "Scuola Popolare Carla Verbano" (Tufello, northeast of Rome), "A testa Alta" (San Basilio, northeast of Rome; this popular school closed in 2024); "Scuola Popolare Federica Stiffi" (Centocelle, southeast of Rome); "Scuola Popolare di Tor Bella Monaca" (Tor Bella Monaca, southeast of Rome); "Mammuth" (Rebibbia, east of Rome); "Sciangai" (Tor Marancia, south of Rome); "Nessun Dorma" (Roma 70, south of Rome: this popular school closed in 2023), "Spin Time+" (Esquilino, centre of Rome),

Table 1. Distribution of interviewes.

Number assigned to the interviewee	Gender	Age	Neighbourhood where the popular school is located
1	F	27	San Basilio
2	F	28	San Basilio
3	F	27	San Basilio
4	F	28	Esquilino
5	F	45	Esquilino
6	M	27	Tor Bella Monaca
7	F	30	Tor Bella Monaca
8	M	44	Tor Bella Monaca
9	F	31	Rebibbia
10	M	30	Rebibbia
11	M	34	Rebibbia
12	M	27	Roma 70
13	M	28	Roma 70
14	F	29	Roma 70
15	M	67	Centocelle
16	M	71	Centocelle
17	F	43	Centocelle
18	M	34	Ciampino (municipality in the urban belt of Rome)
19	F	26	Ciampino (municipality in the urban belt of Rome)
20	F	56	Ciampino (municipality in the urban belt of Rome)
21	M	26	Tufello
22	F	64	Tufello
23	M	40	Tufello
24	F	38	Tor Marancia
25	F	32	Tor Marancia
26	F	48	Tor Marancia

The overall analysis of the interviews was conducted as follows: each interview was divided into sections reserved for specific topics, either anticipated in the outline or unexpectedly emerging from the interactions with the interviewees. Once the topics were systematized and classified, we proceeded to a comparative analysis of the interviews for each individual topic.

The Roman Network can be considered a 'collective actor' belonging to the new political and social movements of the last decades (Alteri 2014): activists provide free community services aimed specifically at the working-class (these are made up of a progressively larger fraction of migrants), in order to reduce social inequalities and offset the progressive and radical contraction of

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"Dopòlis", operating in Ciampino, a city in the urban belt of Rome. Over time, another popular school also joined the Roman Network (see Zizioli *et al.*, 2024).

the welfare state by neoliberal policies (Bosi and Zamponi 2020).

While placing themselves in the Italian tradition of initiatives to provide scholastic support for disadvantaged children, the schools we examined represent an exemplary case study to show in particular the intergenerational nature of all popular education experiences. Indeed, although field analysis highlights the political limitations of the initiative studied (Parziale 2024), it is interesting to focus on mutual learning of educators and pupils: this is a significant aspect, given its enormous potential to challenge neoliberal education and its concomitant colonial nature (Kundnani 2021).

4. INTERGENERATIONALITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE. INSIGHTS FROM ROMAN POPULAR SCHOOLS

"No one educates anyone, not even him[*one*]self: men educate themselves in communion, through the mediation of the world" (*sic.*) (Freire 2018: 89). This famous statement by Freire finds fulfillment in the pedagogical approach, albeit often improvised, of the Roman popular schools' activists. Although only a section of the activist-educators (those graduates in social and educational sciences) know Freire's work, and openly refer to him, this approach is quite widespread in the popular schools in question.

In this regard, it must be said that the cultural mediation implemented in the popular schools entails a continuous work of translation that is not limited to linguistic aspects and also its underlying conceptual dimension. Pupils in popular schools predominantly attend primary or lower-secondary schools. Especially when they have to do their homework, these pupils often resort to social media to translate specific concepts of Italian culture (or 'Western' culture, given that many come from Asia, Africa and 'South' America) to their own culture. It is a tiring task, full of pitfalls, but promising.

Activist-educators seem to have grasped this aspect, given that, in several cases, they encourage their students to use the resources, offered by social media, to better understand a word or an expression (this has been a recurring theme of the Network's meetings, such as the ones held on 21st April 2022 and 9th March 2023). All this occurs rather offering students direct answers to the questions posed – an alternative way to surmount difficulties arising from their lack of knowledge of the Italian culture and language. The translation of words by students of popular schools is necessitated, however, not only by linguistic needs or ethnic-cultural differences, but also by lack of that knowledge, skills and abilities

rewarded by the schools. The latter constitute the official culture, an expression of Italian middle class lifestyles. Popular school pupils are instead characterized by what Stuart Hall (1990) terms the 'diasporic condition': these students reveal a particular cultural identity. It derives from the coexistence of different and contrasting norms, beliefs, values, symbols, some deriving from the parents' national (and local) culture of origin, others from the culture of the receiving country. The diasporic condition, therefore, is marked by the stigma of those ensconced in an overall disadvantaged material condition, denied full recognition for a cultural identity perceived above all by Italian adults as 'deviant' from the ideal model of 'normality' or 'hybrid'. Thus, the diasporic condition is an easy target of social and racial prejudice.

In this regard, it is necessary to highlight how our ethnographic observation rests on the continuous work by educators to instil students' self-confidence. This process of cultivating self-esteem is enhanced through popular educators' progressive recognition of their students' competences, skills and knowledge, foregrounded, through a laborious process of mediation and linguistic-cultural translation, especially in the carrying out of homework. Without this work of social recognition and cultivation of self-esteem, struggling students risk continuing to be stereotyped as 'inadequate', 'listless', 'unintelligent'.

In this regard, educators – especially those from working-class backgrounds in a 'contradictory class location' (Wright 1985) – try to enable their students embark on an upward educational (and then social) mobility path similar to the one they themselves experienced. Indeed, educators are well aware of the academic difficulties of working-class students, while also understanding that times have changed; these students are also migrants:

I graduated with a degree in philosophy, and I went to high school in the suburbs, in Aprilia. I hail from the public housing estate in Aprilia... so this is my world!.. and this is what I mean... I grew up in this world. My father was a worker at Olivetti, and then, when he was laid off, he invented a job trying to make ends meet with coffee machines; he was an installer and supplier of coffee machines. So, basically, we have a very working-class status. Young people today have many difficulties, partly because school causes performance-related anxiety that should be addressed. At the same time, young people are foreigners; they face enormous economic difficulties, even greater than mine when I was young. However, we try to build a different idea of education based on exchange of knowledge to break the social selection mechanisms of the school. (Interview no. 8, male, 44 years old, Tor Bella Monaca)

My family never had access to middle class lifestyles! I come from a working-class background, but over time I've learned to discover things: I want to understand them, and, at the same time, at a certain point, I felt the need to share the knowledge I had, because of the need to discover new knowledge; it's truly an exchange! Then I have great insecurity // because the school system is a bit like that, it terrifies you in some way, but why does it do that? Because the point of reference wasn't someone good at sharing knowledge and not just judging you; however, I was lucky enough to have some teachers who were sources of reference in my growth path, and I still feel in touch with some of them (I'm still in contact with them, ed.). Today I try to do the same thing with the younger ones. (Interview no. 1, female, 27 years old, San Basilio)

Here, the intergenerational dimension emerges clearly: educators' previous school experience and their ability to resist the social selection mechanisms of the formal education system become resources to be handed down to younger generations, directing them toward social trajectories opposed to those designed by neoliberal policies for the subaltern classes (Mayo 2015). Furthermore, the good example set by some schoolteachers in the past encourages educators today to do likewise for their students. Nonetheless, educators know well that their pupils face social conditions worse than those of the Italian working class in the past. However, exchange, albeit indirect, of working-class students' school experiences among different generations fosters popular education. This is based not only on the mutual exchange of knowledge, emphasized by activists, but also on comparing the experiences of different generations. And in this sense, young students also furnish their educators with an important lesson: the ability to modify teaching techniques, directing them towards understanding the Other. Knowledge of the Other is central to this case study, given that the relationship between educators and learners highlights the knowledge of individuals belonging to different generations, ethnicities, and social classes.

In this regard, the prolonged observation among educators has shown how the emotional dimension of teaching – encouragement – is not enough, if it is not integrated with the cultivation of the skills that nowadays migrant and working-class students employ, or seek to employ, in their work of linguistic-cultural translation/mediation:

If I had to try to introduce you to our students, I would tell you that they are a nice group, first of all of lively and active children, all very intelligent, basically with a lot of potential and when I talk about potential I mean human potential, of expression (interview no. 6, man, 26 years old, Tor Bella Monaca)

But then we did this work on 'hidden' wars (which are not talked about at school), to discover that one of these two boys knew a lot about it and we didn't imagine it, we didn't imagine it at all // There are guys who have derived great satisfaction; there is another who even failed sixth grade, and now that he is in eighth grade he shines, but he really shines with his own light! (interview no. 20, woman, 56 years old, Ciampino)

These testimonies seem to confirm Raymond Williams' (1958) contention, expressed, almostv 70 years ago, by someone once involved in popular education, that the reproduction of scholastic inequalities between social classes can be prevented through action that would sever the link between official education and middle-class culture. According to Williams (1962), in following individualistic values and favouring social competition, the school provides an education that is to the detriment of working-class children. Therefore, scholastic inequalities can only be removed by rendering education in harmony with the values of popular culture, structurally linked to an equal and truly inclusive conception of human and extra-human relationships. Similar to Williams' approach, activists seek to place their students on a par with others. This necessitates the educators' attempt to adapt the ('Western' and white) official school curriculum to the culture of their pupils:

We educators, militants ask ourselves what sense is there in teaching the "Divine Comedy" to a child who comes from a culture very different from ours. Will it be useful to the child in life? Is it too abstract? However, we also know there are relevant things that the school transmits by having these works studied. So let's try to adapt the " Divine Comedy" to the different culture of these children. More generally, let's start from practical problems and try to understand how the school culture helps to solve them. We have to start from their world otherwise how do they learn to read, write to say the least? (interview no. 21, man, 26 years old, Tufello)

In Williams'(1958) formulation, this would mean making such works connect, also involving problematisation regarding their ethnocentricity (e.g. Dante and Islam: Elsheikh, 1999) with a whole new way of life:

Coming from other cultural contexts, these students struggle to understand the historical mechanisms of the West; the latter are really far from their reality, in short. And so often, in fact, we have found that they ask us for help with history and I am trying to understand this a little more deeply, in short, because in reality it would be a bit of a comparison, a comparison with their original cultures, even historical, and those they encounter living here in Italy. (interview no. 16, man, 71 years old, Centocelle)

The activists try to understand how to adapt to or reinvent the official Italian/ 'Western' culture for students from other areas of the world, establishing a dialogue with and between them. This action has a three-fold purpose: a) to reduce the social distance between the linguistic-cultural code of the school (and of the middle class) and the code of the working class students: most of the pupils examined belong to this last class; b) to point out to the latter that their knowledge and also skills have value, given that school knowledge actually refers to practical problems that students can face if they acquire self-esteem and awareness; c) to trigger through social recognition a love for knowledge, and for school study, so that this can be combined with an emancipatory process.

Regardless of how many students handle official knowledge, it is interesting to note that, in their pedagogical work, activists learn to know their students, to love them by finding skills and abilities typical of this specific fraction of the working class made up of young diasporic foreigners. These students straddle multiple ethnic and class cultures. They do so in an ongoing process of intersectionality marked by the continuous reconstruction of meaning through cultural mediation/translation reflected in the performance of tasks. Through relevant support, the activists would hope to reveal to their students the constant social construction of reality and their underlying power relations – an unveiling of ideology residing in school requirements.

In turn, activists are progressively made aware of the linguistic and cultural richness of their pupils and fully understand that they can learn from them. The evident linguistic-cultural diversity of the students, possibly accentuated by somatic traits different from those prevalent in Italy, stimulates the reflexivity of popular educators. In focus is the dialogue between the middle class milieu to which they belong and that of the working classes, especially their foreign component. This dialogue has its social effects. In fact, activists discover that bourgeois uprooting (unlearning bourgeois privilege) – which Milani urged (Roghi 2023) – represents a precondition for rendering effective both school support for subalterns and the underlying popular education orientation. It would however be naive to assume that this uprooting can be complete; one does not easily 'jump out of one's skin', as argued regarding don Lorenzo Milani (Batini *et al.* 2014)

A prolonged relationship with students over the years can, however, lead activists-educators to strengthen their social commitment to popular schools, questioning the typical middle class ' cultural arbitrary', based on the

rigid separation between work, political-social commitment, public/private life.

In this regard, several activists involved are largely vocational educators, social workers, and teachers (Parziale 2024), i.e. welfare professionals who find in popular education a vehicle to make alternative use of their often bureaucratically debased expertise and 'craft knowledge'. In doing so, many activists-educators satisfy the need to give their work a social purpose, updating it without organisational constraints.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Popular education takes on a strong intergenerational connotation, connecting to the mutual exchange of knowledge. This is an aspect that has rarely been explored in studies in this field. However, it can be found in many past and present experiences, from the Barbiana School in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s to community education of the Sem Terra (MST-Landless Peasants) in Brazil today. Intergenerational exchange is also evident when popular education is nominally aimed at adults, because it still involves cooperation between different generations, for example, between young, more qualified workers and older, more experienced ones, as in community theatre in Mediterranean countries such as Spain in Garcia Lorca's time, literacy classes involving adults and seniors who bring their children and grandchildren with them, popular culture clusters in Portugal post 1974, *medresses* in Muslim centres, mobile classrooms among Bedouin communities, community TV audiences in Alberto Manzi's Italian televised literacy project (Non e' mai troppo tardi – it's never too late)(Mayo 2025), Christan-base community groups in Latin America or between young activists and migrant families, as in many experiences related to new political movements in 'Western' countries (Bosi and Zamponi 2020).

In this article, we have emphasized how intergenerational education can challenge Neoliberalism. The case study examined here appears exemplary in this regard. In popular Roman schools, the educational relationship – decidedly less asymmetrical than what is found in the wider society and official schools – favours the slow reconstruction of skills and social competence owned by students belonging to the subaltern class. It can lead students to discover their value as subjects forced to overcome obstacles deriving from a family cultural capital that is different from that required by the official school (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

The work of social recognition of the skills, identity and knowledge of students, belonging to migrant and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, could represent a first and important step to stimulate a working-class pride in these young people, after decades of devaluation of the working class by neoliberalism (see Harvey 2005). This potential is yet to be fulfilled. For the moment, we have seen a process of 'inverted consciousness' concerning activists as members of the middle class. The pedagogical practice of Roman activists is characterized by the search for a synthesis between what can be learned from the theory of cultural reproduction and what is suggested with regard to the theory of cultural resistance promoted by British Cultural Studies.

Authors such as Bernstein (1971) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) belong to the first perspective: in highlighting how the official school ratifies social inequalities, these scholars have focused attention on the social distance between working class culture and the official culture, the latter part and parcel of the middle class's 'cultural arbitrary' or preferences.

At the same time, British cultural studies have highlighted how the social selectivity of schools stems from the failure to recognize working-class culture. What was highlighted in the past by authors such as Williams (1958, 1962) seems even more valid today, given that neoliberalism tends to exalt white middle-class culture, revealing the colonial nature of capitalism, as highlighted by postcolonial scholars, following Hall (1990). Kundnani's analysis (2021) has revealed how Neoliberalism fosters the belief – well systematised by von Hayek – that freedom, exclusively made possible by the self-regulating market economy, necessitates the assimilation to the white middle-class consumer culture ideology. Experiences like the one explored in our case study appear to challenge neoliberalism precisely on these grounds. This type of counter-hegemonic struggle draws on the resources derived from intergenerational dialogue inherent in the flexible and reciprocal exchange of knowledge in popular education.

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