

## **Mapping public policies for contrasting educational poverty in Italy: Geographical distribution, characteristics, and contextual drivers**

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Despite the growing attention paid to the multidimensional concept of educational poverty (Save the Children 2014), few studies have been conducted on interventions to counteract this phenomenon. As it stands, there are only general guidelines and a number of separate empirical studies, each focusing on a single aspect of educational poverty (European Commission 2013; Van Praag et al. 2018; Pandolfi 2017). This lack of systematization of the existing practices adopted by national and local governments, third sector organizations and civil society associations leads to a lack of systematic knowledge about the practices that policymakers can implement to address educational poverty, resulting in a delay in the regulatory and implementation process. Given the relevance of the issue, this study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by analysing the public policies aimed at combating educational poverty in Italy. The Italian context is a strategic case study since it is characterized by comparatively higher levels of early school leaving, higher incidence of low performing students in international standardized assessments and strong geographical heterogeneity in these phenomena (Bratti et al. 2007; Borgna & Struffolino 2017).

Specifically, we aim to understand the main practices implemented in Italy to tackle educational poverty, and whether they correspond to currently available scientific recommendations and recognized institutional practices. We also investigate in which contexts these practices are adopted and the main contextual drivers of their adoption. We focus on two main dimensions of contextual factors: educational poverty in a municipality (Need), corresponding to "High-Intensity Educational areas," which in most cases reflect the "Inner areas," and the social capital endowments in the municipalities.

The research is based on an original dataset in which municipalities are the units of analysis. It was created from an original data collection and information coding work from the "Impresa Sociale Con i Bambini" website, and then complemented with data on the contextual characteristics of Italian municipalities. Complementary information comes from the Invalsi questionnaires to 5th grade students in the 2014/2015 school year, the ISTAT-Atlante Statistico dei Comuni, and the INEQUALITREES Project. We use these data sources respectively to measure

educational poverty across municipalities, build a proxy for social capital, and retrieve further municipal contextual characteristics.

To answer our research questions, we followed two steps. First, we develop a classification of the practices put in place by the analysed projects. The study revealed 180 different practices adopted by the analysed projects: a relevant number is consistent with interventions already known in the literature, but we also identify some "innovative" interventions. In the second part of the analysis, we develop a cross-sectional spatial regression model (Ward & Gleditsch 2018) to investigate the relationship between contextual features and the probability of adopting a project contrasting educational poverty at the municipal level. Interestingly, the examined projects are mainly found in areas where there is a high provision of services, the "Poles", which suggests that such areas may already have less severe educational poverty. In addition, inequalities between the North and the South were identified, reflecting the geographical gap already identified by previous studies on public policies in various sectors.

The empirical results show that the condition of educational poverty does not seem to be the driving factor for the implementation of projects to tackle the phenomenon. Instead, in line with previous literature, the factor that more strongly affects the likelihood of adopting policies against educational poverty is the social capital endowment.

The study contributes to the literature in several ways: first, it produces one of the first taxonomies of interventions to tackle educational poverty in Italy. Contrasting it with interventions described in the previous literature opens up spaces for reflections about the most widespread policies and to identify possible new interventions that could prove effective and efficient. Second, by examining the contextual roots of the adoption of anti-educational poverty interventions, it provides valuable information to the etiology of educational policies with a strong social and welfare component. Furthermore, the study further corroborates claims in the social policy literature about possible adverse selection in the adoption of anti-poverty measures at the local level and the positive effect of social capital and institutional capacity as drivers of the adoption and implementation of local interventions to improve the educational and social conditions of marginalized youths.

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