

PROCEEDINGS

Cultures, Practices,
and Change 02



third international conference
of the journal *Scuola Democratica*

education
and/
social justice
University of Cagliari
June 3-6, 2024

Education never stands still—it moves, adapts, and transform in response to new realities, while reshaping society in turn. This collection explores some forces defining learning today: digital tools, intercultural dialogue, artistic expression, and the call for ecological responsibility. At its core, education remains a space for negotiation and reinvention.

Published by



ASSOCIAZIONE PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA
Via Francesco Satolli, 30
00165 – Rome
Italy



Published in Open Access

APA 7th citation system:

Scuola democratica (Ed.) (2025). *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola democratica. Education and/or Social Justice. Vol. 2: Cultures, Practices, and Change*. Associazione Per Scuola Democratica.

Please cite your contribution as follows:

Smith, A. (2025). *Closing the Gender Gap in Education. Symmetrical Practices from a Didactical Laboratory in STEM Fields*. In Scuola democratica (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola democratica. Education and/or Social Justice. Vol. 2: Cultures, Practices, and Change* (pp. 72-84). Associazione Per Scuola Democratica.

This book is digitally available at:

<https://www.scuolademocratica-conference.net/conference-proceedings-iii/>

ISBN 979-12-985016-3-8

3rd International Conference
of the journal *Scuola democratica*
Education and/or Social Justice

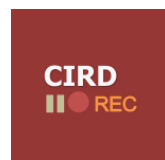
3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

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Vol. 2

**Cultures,
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Organizers and partners



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WORKING AT SCHOOL. CAREER PATHWAYS, PROFESSIONAL DEONTOLOGY, PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITIES IN THE FACE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to elaborate further and refine the theoretical framework that inspired the panel Working at School: Career Pathways, Professional Deontology, Professional Relationships, and Identities in the Face of Social Justice, clarifying the goals pursued during the debates held in Cagliari. First, the panel aimed to promote a multidisciplinary dialogue among the various fields studying work in schools—sociology, anthropology, pedagogy, and psychology—by involving researchers from different professional backgrounds. Secondly, it sought to strengthen the dialogue within sociology itself, particularly between the sociology of education and the sociology of labour and professions. Furthermore, it is essential to adopt a comparative and international perspective to situate the transformations of the teaching profession, highlighting the specificities and commonalities of different national contexts, such as Italy and France. Finally, the panel aimed to broaden the analysis to include all the actors involved in schools, going beyond the study of teaching to emphasize how teachers work alongside other professionals—such as educators, pedagogists, psychologists, and auxiliary staff—and to explore the specificities of their work.

1. THE TEACHING PROFESSION: TRANSFORMATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Classical sociological studies on the teaching profession have provided a theoretical framework that is still useful today. These studies underscore the importance of considering the historical, cultural, and educational contexts that shape a profession characterized by cognitive, emotional, and relational labour. For instance, Willard Waller (1932), a pioneer in the sociology of education, argued that schools should be understood as social systems deeply influenced by their relationships with local communities, particularly in the United States. As a social system, each school develops its own rules, dynamics, and rituals—in essence, its culture. Waller also highlighted a crucial aspect of teaching: the ambivalence between an “authoritative” institutional role marked by a power asymmetry—further accentuated by the generational differences between teachers and students—and the relational

dimension of teaching, which requires emotional and affective resources alongside cognitive ones. This theme, further developed by interactionist literature on professions, remains central to contemporary discussions.

In the 1970s, Dan C. Lortie advanced these themes in *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (1975). Drawing on theories from the sociology of work and professions, Lortie delineated the specificities of teaching through a historical analysis of its evolution. His work examined recruitment, motivations, professional recognition, career paths, classroom management, and daily tasks, illustrating how teaching is less autonomous and prestigious than professions like medicine or law—professions extensively analysed in sociological studies of professional groups. Despite its fundamental social mission, teaching operates within a bureaucratic framework that regulates working conditions, career progression, and remuneration—typically lower than those in more prestigious fields. Consequently, teachers' careers often lack upward mobility and are marked by strategies aimed at horizontal mobility, such as moving to less demanding or more prestigious schools (Becker, 1952). While teaching does allow for creativity in lesson planning and instructional delivery, it offers limited professional autonomy. Both Waller and Lortie emphasized the institutional constraints shaping teachers' professional experiences, contributions that remain highly relevant.

The sociology of teaching has developed into a distinct field that reflects the profound transformations in educational, social, and cultural contexts (Abbiati, 2014). Teachers occupy a central position in school systems, acting as agents of cultural transmission, mediators of knowledge, and key figures in shaping the skills and values of younger generations. However, their role has never been static, undergoing continuous redefinition in response to structural societal changes. This dynamic is evident in the tensions between normative expectations and professional practices, as well as between the idealization of education and the often-frustrating realities of daily work.

To fully understand the complexity of teaching, as Waller and Lortie suggested, it is crucial to examine its historical, institutional, and cultural dimensions. Historically, the institutionalization of compulsory education positioned teachers at the core of a social project aimed at shaping modern citizens. From the 19th century onward, as national education systems expanded, teachers were tasked with not only transmitting knowledge but also instilling norms, values, and behaviours deemed essential for social integration. However, in recent decades, their role has been restructured amid growing concerns about professional training (Busemeyer, Trampusch, 2012; Pinna, Pitzalis, 2024) and a decline in social recognition and pay as education became a universal right and thus a less exclusive practice.

Educational sociology, particularly since the 1960s and 1970s, has challenged the notion of teachers as neutral and apolitical figures, highlighting their role in social reproduction. Scholars such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1964, 1970) demonstrated how schools perpetuate social inequalities by privileging the cultural capital of dominant classes. The teaching profession faces increasing demands and growing

complexity as schools evolve into spaces not only for education but also for inclusion and professional training. Teachers are increasingly called upon to engage in diverse projects and build meaningful relationships with students, colleagues, and families—an essential competence for professional success (Durler, Losego, 2019). Concurrently, education policies emphasizing standardization and accountability have intensified the focus on teaching effectiveness (Argentin, 2018), reshaping the profession and raising new questions about balancing institutional requirements with professional autonomy.

Contemporary studies revisit and expand upon the classical themes of the sociology of teachers' work (Barrère, 2003), focusing on relational dynamics within classrooms, teacher motivation, the sociodemographic characteristics of the profession, and its progressive feminization (Cavalli, Argentin, 2010). These studies also address issues such as teacher malaise and the declining prestige of the institution and the profession in a context marked by numerous organizational and structural reforms aimed at transforming pedagogy, improving school inclusivity, and, most notably, bridging the gap between education and the labour market.

Among the topics warranting closer attention, teacher malaise has recently been enriched by discussions about the declining attractiveness of the profession (Barrère, 2017). This trend is evident internationally in countries such as the United States, Great Britain, and, more recently, France, with an increasing focus on the factors driving teacher resignations (Burrow et al., 2020; Garcia, 2023). Additionally, a strand of the literature has concentrated on the precarization of the teaching profession (Bertron et al., 2024), particularly pronounced in contexts like Italy, where structural issues related to turnover management and permanent appointments persist. Many teachers are compelled to endure prolonged periods of precarious employment. These studies have deeply analysed the evolution of the teacher labour market, which is increasingly characterized by segmentation and dualization.

Moreover, expanding sociological inquiry to other school professionals—such as psychologists, educators, and speech therapists—highlights the collaborative nature of contemporary educational work (Bois, Jacquot, 2022; Durler, Losego, 2019). These reflections highlight the enduring relevance of the observations made by classical scholars such as Wallard and Lortie. Their insights underscore the necessity of continuing research on the work conducted within schools, grounded in a detailed reconstruction of the historical and social contexts in which such work is embedded.

2. THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF TEACHING: FROM MASS SCHOOLING TO NEO-LIBERAL EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

The ethical dimension of teaching gives broader and higher goals to professional competencies and practices, encouraging the pursuit of values – such as social justice, equity, and social inclusion – in an independent spirit. Teachers act within an institution that professes equal opportunities, and intellectual and moral

emancipation of citizens. These progressive ideas that, in public representation, are associated with the vocation to teach appear fragile today in relation to certain transformations of the educational system.

Educational sciences have long since highlighted the “paradoxes of mass schooling” (Dubet, Duru-Bellat, 2020). The founding principle of mass schooling is that education is a collective good that everyone can access. However, it has been seen how the diversity of students' starting conditions easily turns into an inequality of educational success opportunities. Faced with the heterogeneity of the school population, the appeal to the meritocracy device has reinforced mechanisms of social segregation in the democratic mass school (van Zanten, 2021). The mass school system, by postulating the formal equality of all and recognising differences in terms of ‘individual merit’ (and not as a consequence of social and cultural asymmetries of origin), exposes itself to the risk of reproducing inequalities. Since the 1950s, in the wake of a critique of the functionalist perspective of meritocratic resource allocation, sociological research has focused on the relationship between social origin and educational success (Besozzi, 2017). This relationship has not only been analysed as a conditioning of the social and cultural context of families on their children's educational success. In this respect, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron (1970) shifted the investigation to the ideology of the ‘*école libératrice*’ and its dramatic failure. The two authors focus on the arbitrariness of teachers' pedagogical action and the “false neutrality of the school” concerning the mechanisms of reproduction of the social order (Bonichi, 2010). In other words, the official mission of imparting knowledge in an equitable manner, which the teaching profession ascribes to itself, appears hard to achieve in complete autonomy from the processes of social selection. On the other hand, mass education has produced “a politicisation of the debate on education”, thanks also to cultural initiatives by groups of teachers, who have questioned the social reproduction function of school knowledge (Bonichi, 2010, 247). In Italy, for example, we can cite movements, such as the Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa inspired by Célestin Freinet's popular education, which although not structurally widespread, have at least proposed alternative and critical visions of the pedagogical relationship. In recent decades, the only progressive turn recognised for the mass school seems to be the one driven by an emphasis - started from the socio-constructivism paradigm - on learning. In this contemporary educational discourse, which focuses on the needs, interests, abilities, and learning styles of students, the teacher's role is often diminished to that of an enabler of learning (Biesta, 2005, 2022).

International research has shown that this new approach does not overturn the traditional asymmetries in the construction of knowledge. Instead, the doxa of learning seems to be supported by educational policies focused on lifelong and adaptable learning in relation to the needs of the global neoliberal economy. As a result, the student is shaped as one who chooses whether or not to actualize their desires and knowledge, independently of the conditions of possibility—a “dis-embedded” subject, as Agnes van Zanten (2009) puts it—upon whom the full

responsibility for success or failure rests (Kelly, 2001). The teacher, on the other hand, is reduced to a mere “facilitating” factor for achieving measurable learning outcomes (Biesta, 2022).

Neoliberal educational policies, in particular, have had a significant impact not only on the purpose of educational action as a public good but also on the working conditions of teachers (as well as other school professionals) and their recruitment and career paths. Educational actors are increasingly “mobilized” within political agendas that value education in relation to the labor market or as an investment to monetize resources useful for individual success (Ball 2010; Pitzalis, 2016; De Feo, Pitzalis 2019). At the same time, the gradual introduction of market logic into education has changed the criteria for organizing teachers’ work. While the values of equality and social justice still play an important role in the rhetorical defense of public education (van Zanten, 2021, 47), the theme of economic efficiency is becoming just as central to school realities. The decentralization policies of education, dominated by the self-managing school and new public management (Ball 1990, 2010; Newman & Clarke 1994), required teachers to take on middle management functions. Teachers are thus mobilized in the accountability processes of their schools, which have a significant impact on the orientations and goals of their work (Barrère 2017).

This brief overview of some of the current critical issues in the teaching profession should not make us forget that teaching as a profession is a plural and differentiated universe, due to the heterogeneity of professional training, institutional contexts, and discipline-specific fields. For this reason, with this panel, we wanted to open a space for discussion that highlights the various facets of the teaching profession in an international framework, as will emerge in the interesting contributions that follow in this section.

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