

Empowering Education: An Innovative Strategy to Combat Educational Poverty Through Cultural Care

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The Cultural Care project, supported by the organization *Con i Bambini*, targets vulnerable children and families in Italy, aiming to promote social inclusion through culture as a tool for personal growth. The project aligns with the fight against social inequality by offering educational and cultural initiatives designed to reduce social exclusion, foster intercultural understanding, preserve cultural identity, and support families in improving their well-being. Through this initiative, the project not only helps families facing hardship but also promotes dialogue, respect, and appreciation for cultural diversity, contributing to a more cohesive and aware community. Grounded in the capability approach by Amartya Sen (1999; 1985; 2009) and Martha Nussbaum (2000; 2011), the project goes beyond providing material resources, focusing instead on expanding individuals' capabilities—their genuine opportunities to choose and pursue lives they find meaningful. Cultural Fostering offers access to relational and cultural goods such as educational experiences, museum visits, and participation in cultural events, allowing vulnerable children and families to develop creativity and expression. This approach is also informed by the concept of creative goods as discussed by Scitovschi (1976), who emphasizes creativity not only as an individual process but as a collective good that can foster social integration, enhance well-being, and promote intercultural interaction. The study explores how Cultural Fostering contributes to combating educational poverty, reducing social and economic inequalities (Stiglitz, 2012; Putnam, 2000), and breaking the cycle of poverty passed down through generations. By enhancing cultural capital, stimulating personal growth, and strengthening social bonds, the project supports the development of skills and aspirations while fostering a sense of personal and collective identity. In doing so, it creates opportunities for greater social participation, psychological well-being, and long-term improvements in the quality of life, ultimately promoting a more inclusive society where cultural pluralism is valued and celebrated. Research question: “How does the project contribute to reducing social and economic inequalities and interrupting the cycle of poverty passed down from generation to generation?” This theoretical study is both innovative and original, as it combines the capability approach with cultural nurturing to address educational deprivation and social inequality. The study is grounded in the analysis of a practical case study, which provides real-world insights into the application of these concepts.

Keywords: educational opportunities, cultural diversity, educational empowerment, intergenerational educational poverty, socioeconomic factors in education

Educational Poverty: A Definition

In Italy, educational poverty is a phenomenon that particularly affects minors, especially in the southern

Note: This work represents a provisional version of the research, which remains in progress and should not be considered as definitive. Melania Verde, Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, University of Messina, Messina, Italy.

regions, who live in conditions of absolute poverty. However, in addition to material deprivation, there exists another equally serious and more insidious form of poverty, one that is more challenging to measure: educational poverty. This concept, which emerged in the 1990s, refers to the various conditions that hinder minors' access to quality education necessary for their healthy development. Educational poverty does not solely pertain to access to formal education, but also to the opportunities to develop both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, such as motivation, self-esteem, and social abilities, all of which are essential for balanced growth and collective well-being.

According to Save the Children (2014), educational poverty is defined as the deprivation of children and adolescents' opportunity to learn, experiment, develop, and freely cultivate their abilities, talents, and aspirations. This definition is aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the capability approach theory developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, which posits that true social equality hinges on promoting individual freedom—the opportunity for everyone to pursue their own life projects. This opportunity should be available to all, regardless of economic resources, but also cultural and reflective resources.

Educational poverty manifests in various ways. It results in the deprivation of fundamental cognitive skills needed to navigate a society increasingly characterized by rapid innovation and knowledge. Furthermore, it entails the failure to foster “non-cognitive” skills, such as motivation, self-esteem, communication, cooperation, empathy, and time management—skills that are equally vital for personal development and for contributing to collective well-being.

According to Save the Children (2014), educational poverty can be examined through four operational dimensions:

1. Learning to understand: Acquiring the competencies necessary to engage with and succeed in the contemporary world.
2. Learning to be: Strengthening motivation, self-esteem, aspirations, and the ability to manage difficulties and stress.
3. Learning to live together: Developing interpersonal and social skills, such as cooperation, communication, and empathy.
4. Learning to lead an independent life: Enhancing the ability to live a healthy, safe, and secure life, which is essential for educational development.

A minor is considered to be experiencing educational poverty when their right to learn, develop skills, and cultivate talents and aspirations is compromised. This phenomenon predominantly affects children and adolescents in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts, but it can also occur in families that are not particularly disadvantaged economically, particularly when there are significant educational or relational deficiencies.

The connection between educational poverty and socio-economic inequalities is especially pronounced in Italy, where educational poverty often perpetuates across generations. This phenomenon can be seen as an “inherited disadvantage”, linked to family socio-economic status, geographical location, and other factors such as disability and gender, all of which contribute to disparities in educational opportunities.

Educational Poverty and Cultural Consumption: Some Data for Context

As a complex phenomenon, educational poverty is difficult to measure in a succinct manner. As mentioned earlier, it encompasses several dimensions (cultural opportunities, educational access, social relationships,

formative activities, etc.) that must be considered in relation to each other. However, certain data can help contextualize the phenomenon more effectively. In Italy, 12.5% of minors under the age of 18 live in absolute poverty. This means that over 1.2 million young people reside in families that cannot afford the minimum expenses necessary for an acceptable standard of living. Of these, half a million live in the southern regions. Economic hardship often translates into educational disparity. According to OECD-PISA (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development– Programme for International Student Assessment) data processed by the University of Tor Vergata for Save the Children (2018), children from the poorest families show much lower results in reading and mathematics compared to their peers. A quarter (24%) of children from disadvantaged families fail to meet minimum competencies in math and reading, compared to just 5% of those from wealthier families. This negative phenomenon perpetuates economic, educational, cultural, and social inequalities across generations.

Further data help contextualize the lack of educational, cultural, and sporting opportunities among minors: 53% did not read books in the previous year, 43% did not engage in sports, and 55% did not visit museums or exhibitions. In Italy, 28% of individuals have not participated in any cultural activity over the course of 12 months, having never gone to the cinema, read a book, or attended a museum or concert. For many, contact with culture is limited to radio or television.

Regarding cultural consumption, which includes a range of cultural practices seen as a key factor in countering the phenomenon of educational poverty, Italy ranks among the lowest in Europe. According to data from Eurostat (2015), 17.5% of women and 17.3% of men visited a cultural site in Italy. Eurostat also explored five other categories related to “cultural habits and social relationships”. These results, summarized below, reveal that cultural participation is low:

- Going out with friends (20.8% of women and 20.7% of men);
- Going to the cinema (21.4% of women and 22.9% of men);
- Attending a live performance (17.4% of women and 17.2% of men);
- Attending a sports event (7.7% of women, 14.4% of men);
- Reading a book (18% of women, 20% of men).

The above data refer to the general population in Italy, indicating that cultural practices engage at most 20% of the population. An additional factor to consider is that participation in cultural and leisure activities outside the home is closely tied to education level. It is notably higher among individuals with higher levels of education, particularly those who have participated in four or more activities (42.1% of university graduates compared to 22.4% of high school graduates and 5.6% of those with lower educational qualifications). According to ISTAT (2021), in the population aged 25 and older, 83.2% of those who engaged in at least one leisure activity outside the home were university graduates, compared to 34.9% of those with only a middle school diploma (55% of the total population).

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures implemented to tackle the health emergency further impacted the already discouraging trends in cultural consumption in Italy. As is widely known, one of the key measures to curb the spread of the virus was the closure of cultural venues such as cinemas, theaters, museums, and concert halls for varying periods, in addition to restrictions on cultural events, gatherings, and other social activities during the lockdown, with a subsequent reduction after. The culture and education sectors were profoundly affected by the pandemic, and the negative consequences continue to impact everyone, but especially children and adolescents (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

The Cultural Fostering Project: Between Relationality and Creativity

The scenario described above sets the backdrop for the *Affido culturale* (Cultural Fostering) project by the Pio Monte della Misericordia Association, selected by the social enterprise *Con i Bambini* as part of the Fund for Contrasting Educational Poverty in Minors. As we will see, this project has also expanded to other cities (at the time of writing, Cagliari is the latest addition).

The project begins with a fundamental fact: Children born into poor families often have to contend, from a very young age, with both material deprivation (e.g., they may have to forgo school trips, vacations, etc.) and, just as crucial, emotional, and social exclusion. Children growing up in poverty-stricken families have fewer opportunities for socialization and recreation than their peers. They cannot celebrate special occasions and often miss their own birthdays or those of their friends; in some cases, they cannot even invite friends over or share simple experiences, such as playing a game of soccer or engaging in other activities. These children, from an early age, are marked by the distinctive stamp of their social belonging, experience inequality, and cannot afford goods or services. They are even deprived of simple learning opportunities that other children, their peers, can access. A child in socio-economic disadvantage is often perceived as “different” by their friends and is frequently marginalized and further isolated as a result.

Cultural Fostering attempts to break this cycle, where material and educational poverty feed into one another. The material poverty of the parents contributes to creating fragile situations and a lack of educational opportunities for their children, generating new material poverty and consequently further educational poverty, perpetuating this cycle through successive generations. The underlying idea that gave rise to this project is both simple and highly innovative: A parent who regularly takes their children to the cinema, theater, museums, or bookstores, also takes with them a child—potentially accompanied by a family member of the child—who otherwise would not have access to these spaces for various reasons, such as economic poverty, disinterest, the demanding work schedules of parents with precarious employment, language barriers for migrant children, or physical barriers for children with disabilities. Cultural Fostering ensures a series of shared cultural experiences, through which resource families and beneficiary families form an Educational Pact. The overall goal of the project is to initiate a generalized educational process that, starting from systematic, shared, and supportive cultural experiences, reduces the social and cultural barriers that effectively prevent families in educational poverty from accessing spaces conducive to the development of the individual (a more detailed description of the project can be found in other contributions within this volume).

For the purposes of this essay, we will focus on two key factors: on the one hand, the co-production of genuine relationships, and on the other, the consumption of creative goods. Relationality and creativity are central elements that the Cultural Fostering project nourishes and sustains. In this essay, we will attempt to provide an economic interpretation of these elements.

Cultural Fostering Creates Meeting Points: Relational Goods

When attempting to frame some of the project’s peculiarities in economic terms, several reflections emerge, which, in the author’s opinion, are particularly interesting and will be synthesized in this essay. These reflections also aim to help better understand the effects—or changes—that a project like *Affido culturale* can generate. Let us proceed systematically, starting with the central element in which the project unfolds: guaranteeing a series of “shared” cultural experiences between resource families, who “culturally foster” the beneficiary families, guiding them through the process of cultural participation. The two families establish a continuous relationship, one that

is not limited to the frequent cultural experiences. Cultural Fostering aims to be a positively contagious mechanism. In this sense, going to the cinema or the museum is not necessarily confined to the two families linked by the Educational Pact; it may also involve schoolmates, cousins, neighbors, etc. Thus, the bond between two families can evolve into a true “social network”. Naturally, as is appropriate in any relationship, this opportunity is not an obligation but rather increases the space for positive freedoms.

Cultural Fostering, therefore, facilitates the “meeting” between families and individuals, creating the conditions for genuine, non-instrumental relationships to emerge—relationships that, as both sociologists and economists have previously defined, are invisible, immaterial, relational goods exchanged between individuals and impacting their well-being (Pugno, 2006). It is precisely this last element, the enhancement of individuals’ well-being, that can be considered the ultimate effect of the project—improving the well-being of all involved: fostered and fostering families, both direct and indirect beneficiaries. It aims to nurture freely the capacities, talents, and aspirations of individuals, ensuring happiness, understood in Aristotelian and Senian terms as “human flourishing”, or self-realization through non-goal-oriented interpersonal relationships.

Thus, using the language of game theory, Cultural Fostering is not a zero-sum, non-cooperative game, where the algebraic sum of players’ payoffs cancels out. On the contrary, it is a game where everyone wins. Relationships possess intrinsic value in the eyes of those involved, where the other is not a rival but, on the contrary, a friend. This paradigm shift moves away from the notion of the *Homo Oeconomicus*, self-interested and egoistic, toward the *Homo Reciprocans*, prosocial, motivated not by immediate self-interest but by future expectations (Becchetti, Bruni, & Zamagni, 2010; Zamagni, 2006).

The focus of this section, therefore, is on genuine sociality, that is, on an economic category capable of satisfying non-instrumental relational needs. More specifically, the relational good—or the good of relationality—is a good whose utility to the subject who enjoys it depends not only on its intrinsic and objective characteristics but also on the ways in which it is experienced with others.

The relational good represents a third genus in relation to traditional economic goods, classified as either “public” or “private”. While it exhibits the characteristics of non-rivalry and excludability from consumption, it must also include reciprocity. The concept of the relational good was introduced almost simultaneously into the theoretical debate by economists Benedetto Gui and Carole Uhlaner. Specifically, Uhlaner defines relational goods as “goods that can only be possessed through reciprocal agreements, which come into being after appropriate joint actions taken by one person and others, not arbitrary” (1989, p. 254). Gui, in his pioneering work on the subject, aligns with this view, describing relational goods as “non-material goods, which do not depend on individually consumed services; rather, they are linked to interpersonal relationships” (1987, p. 37).

From Gui’s perspective, the relational good does not coincide with the relationship itself; rather, it is the product of the relationship. In other words, the existence of a relationship does not necessarily imply the existence of a relational good, as the latter depends on the presence of specific outputs. Gui proposes that each form of interaction, whether economic or not, be analyzed as a particular productive process he calls an “encounter”. In an encounter “between a seller and a potential buyer, a doctor and a patient, two colleagues at work, or even two customers in the same store” (Gui, 2002, p. 27), in addition to traditional outputs (such as service provision or task completion), other intangible, relational outputs are also produced (cf. Nappo & Verde, 2010; Verde, 2017).

Gui and Sugden (2005, p. 3) define relational goods as “the emotional components of interpersonal relationships that are generally perceived as having value through their sincerity and genuineness”. In other words,

these are relational dimensions that cannot be produced or consumed by a single individual, as they depend on how interactions with others are conducted and can only be enjoyed when shared in reciprocity.

Lane (2000) attributes a central role to relational goods in determining happiness. Starting from empirical analyses of happiness, particularly from the observation of a decrease in happiness in market democracies, Lane offers his interpretation of the happiness paradox, known as the Easterlin Paradox (Easterlin, 1974). Specifically, he links the “loss of happiness” in advanced economies, where the problem of subsistence is resolved, to the “decrease in genuine interpersonal relationships” and considers companionship the key variable:

We derive happiness primarily from people; it is their affection or displeasure, the good or bad opinions they have of us, their acceptance or rejection that most influences our moods. Income is mainly seen as serving these forms of social esteem. (Lane, 2000, p. 6)

Psychological and experimental studies conducted by the Israeli psychologist and 2004 Nobel Laureate in Economics, Kahneman et al. (2004) also emphasize the value of relational life as a source of happiness.

Cultural Fostering and Goods of Stimulation or Creativity

The Cultural Fostering project has involved a total of 343 children, 442 families, and approximately 2,500 cultural experiences (as of June 30, 2022), including visits to museums, theater performances, educational farm activities, concert participations, and more. Regarding these cultural experiences, several factors were monitored, including the number of experiences, their duration, the type of activity, and other relevant information (for further details, refer to Sara Petricciolo’s essay).

Thus, the fight against educational poverty occurs in a highly unique way by addressing the relational and cultural aspects of educational poverty, which, as mentioned in the first section, is particularly high in contexts with significant socio-cultural and economic hardships—such as the neighborhoods targeted by this project. These include areas in Naples, particularly the historic center, the Pianura and Scampia districts; Rome, specifically in the Quarticciolo-Alessandrino-Centocelle district; Bari, in the historic center and the San Paolo district; and Modena, in the highly immigrant-populated Quartiere 3. In addition to families’ socio-economic conditions, educational poverty is significantly associated with territorial origins and the foreign background of minors.

Cultural Fostering invests in music, art, reading, and other “cultural stimuli” to help children living in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts activate resilience pathways. These are goods that Tibor Scitovsky, in his 1976 work, referred to as “stimulation goods”, which contrast with the classic “comfort goods”—goods that families in hardship often have limited access to or struggle to obtain. Nevertheless, these are the goods that children especially desire, which they would like to access, driven by values typical of consumerist society. This only fuels a sense of dissatisfaction and additional distress. Studies on the subject show that while consuming such comfort goods increases well-being (providing immediate satisfaction), the effect is short-term. The well-being they generate is fleeting, and one returns to the initial state. These goods exhibit diminishing marginal utility, a phenomenon Scitovsky explains in terms of the lack of novelty. On the other hand, creativity goods show increasing marginal utility: As their consumption increases, so does the well-being of those who partake in them.

In his studies, the Hungarian economist focused on why creative consumption seems to be associated with increasing utility returns. To explain this, he referenced the neuropsychological studies of D. E. Berlyne, who posited that with repeated consumption, utility diminishes not because repetition leads to satiety, but because it

moves away from the stimulation of change. Due to their lower access costs and higher exit costs, comfort goods and activities tend to displace stimulating activities—especially those requiring more time and human resource investments. Since the latter are the most productive in terms of enjoyment and happiness, the overall effect of this displacement on social well-being is negative. Society as a whole loses from over-investment in comfort goods and under-investment in stimulating activities. This behavior arises from a lack of awareness of the need for a happier life. This unawareness leads to a decrease in happiness despite the increase in goods.

In summary, Scitovsky, in his seminal work *The Joyless Economy*, asserts that for a “good life”, we need both comfort goods and stimulation goods. The key point is that comfort goods specifically work to eliminate fatigue (consider the increase in comfort due to technological advances), whereas “stimulation” or “creativity” goods, to be enjoyed, require an initial effort because they demand experience. This is what Cultural Fostering offers. Cultural activities, authentic sports practices, classical music, and theater are typical examples of creativity goods: The benefits they provide are directly proportional to the investment in knowledge and time that individuals dedicate to these activities in their lives.

Some authors, such as Pier Luigi Sacco in Italy, have referred to this initial effort as the “activation cost”. To derive gratification from consuming a creativity good, one must first incur activation costs. This is why it is necessary to educate people about beauty, understanding, and togetherness—to perceive both the individual and collective benefits that stimulation goods bring. These are private, individual actions that also have strong public implications (for more on this, refer to Marco Musella’s essay), in contrast to comfort goods, which not only fail to bring external benefits but can even create “external disruptions”.

Brief Conclusive Reflections

In these brief concluding lines, the aim is to close the circle of reflection presented in this essay, centered on the connection between Cultural Fostering, creativity goods, and relational goods.

Cultural experiences expand individual “preferences”, as argued by Mill (1989). Furthermore, if we consider the thesis proposed by Becker and Stigler (1977), we can believe that preferences not only expand but also “modify” in function of the quantities consumed of superior or creativity goods in question. Those who cultivate certain higher needs alter their range of needs and sensitivities. Even Adam Smith, the father of modern economic science, addressed cultural activities (including music and theater), recognizing their ability to civilize populations (positive externalities, as we would call them today). If the Cultural Fostering project could even minimally produce such changes, it would represent a significant step forward in choosing strategies to combat educational poverty that focus on cultural stimuli, but also and above all on genuine relationships—those goods that require collective action even in the act of consumption. As Taylor observes, “Mozart with you is more than Mozart alone”; the additional utility is precisely derived from sharing!

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