

Co-thinking and co-building sustainable and inclusive epistemologies to overcome environmental crises and educational inequalities

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Abstract: Based on an analysis of ISTAT and Censis data and the latest international research on the youth life cycle, this contribution critically reflects on the forms of multiple deprivation still affecting the younger generations today, highlighting the fragility of education systems and the delay in public policies in adopting a systemic-ecological approach. Starting from the concept of co-disciplinarity (Blanchard-Laville, 2000), an epistemological paradigm based on the co-construction of knowledge is proposed, in which pedagogy is configured as a science of hope and emancipation (Sirignano, 2019). The ecological crisis, understood as a structural mechanism that intersects educational, economic and cultural inequalities, requires an ethical redefinition of the educational function, oriented towards environmental and educational justice (Nussbaum, 2011). Education for sustainability thus takes on a transformative, dialogical and embodied value (Morin, 2001), in which the learner becomes an interdependent and responsible subject. The training proposal presented, intended for secondary school teachers, integrates autobiographical and digital methodologies — from eco-pedagogical digital storytelling to place-based curricula — to promote agency, ecological citizenship and critical awareness. In this perspective, the teacher acts as an ecological mediator and promoter of meaning, while teaching reaffirms its poetic and transformative role in the service of a humanity capable of inhabiting the world with care and responsibility.

Keywords: Sustainability; Co-disciplinarity; Teacher training



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1. Understanding multiple deprivation among young people through a multi-disciplinary approach for an epistemological rethinking of pedagogy and teaching

An analysis of the latest reports from the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2023) paints a deeply disturbing picture of the educational and social landscape: the condition of young people in Italy, far from being a marginal episode of the contemporary crisis, reflects a structural tension that runs through educational systems, models of citizenship and intergenerational relations. Multi-deprivation, understood as the sum of material, cultural and symbolic vulnerabilities, now takes the form of a systemic syndrome, an indicator of the collapse of processes of integration and social

¹ This contribution is the result of joint work by the authors; however, for the purposes of attributing individual parts, it is divided as follows: Abstract is attributable to the two authors; Francesco Paolo Romeo §§ 1-2; Alessandro Barca §§ 3-4.

recognition (Blatterer, 2007). It manifests itself not only in economic data, but also in emotional disorientation and a rarefaction of meaning, translating into a lack of planning and a tendency to focus solely on the here and now, which affects daily life, school and the community. There is talk of a 'mortified' youth (Romeo, 2024), unable to project itself into the future and trapped in an eternal present that drains its energies of desire. This 'symbolic death of the future' is part of what Bauman (2002) has defined as liquid modernity, in which the linear temporality of promise is replaced by the perpetual instant of consumption and uncertainty. Cavalli and De Lillo (1993) had already observed how the younger generations were experiencing time marked by a radical discontinuity between expectations and real possibilities: a presentism that dissolves historical consciousness and prevents the development of stable life plans.

The deprivation we are talking about is therefore not only material, but also temporal and symbolic: it consists in the loss of the ability to attribute meaning to one's actions, to connect memory to desire, the past to the possible. It is in this perspective that the pedagogy of hope proposed by Sirignano (2019) finds its full meaning: it is not a question of naive optimism, but of the awareness that education is the only space in which possibility can still be generated. However, in order to live up to this generative function, pedagogy must adopt co-disciplinarity as a regulative principle of educational thought, as a form of relational intelligence that intertwines cognitive, affective and value dimensions.

The notion of co-disciplinarity proposed by Blanchard-Laville (2000) reveals its foundational significance here, representing not merely a technique of disciplinary integration, but a cognitive and value-based paradigm that recognises the reciprocity and interdependence of knowledge. Unlike interdisciplinarity, which tends to juxtapose languages, and multidisciplinary, which keeps them parallel, co-disciplinarity establishes a profound dialogue, an act of co-thinking oriented towards the construction of shared meanings.

In this sense, co-disciplinarity takes the form of a hermeneutic and political device: it allows pedagogy to overcome the fragmentation of knowledge produced by extreme specialisation, recomposing the sciences of education as sciences of relationship, connection and limitation. Through this epistemic stance, pedagogy can address multi-deprivation not as a mere emergency, but as a symptom of an anthropological crisis that affects the very possibility of symbolic transmission. The demise of the principle of generative authority — what Recalcati (2011; 2013) and Zoja (2016) have described as the 'crisis of the father' — has in fact produced a broken educational genealogy, in which the younger generations find themselves having to invent their own codes of meaning.

Multi-deprivation, viewed through a co-disciplinary lens, reveals its systemic nature: it arises from the interruption of dialogue between knowledge, between generations, between levels of experience. Only knowledge capable of reconnecting the sciences — from psychology to sociology, from economics to political philosophy — can restore depth to the educational project. From this perspective, the crisis affecting young people is not only social but also epistemic: it is the crisis of a fragmented model of knowledge that has separated knowledge from life, school from community, education from meaning.

Mending this rift means promoting a pedagogy capable of acting as a place of critical convergence, where education becomes a space for the encounter between different languages and a field for the collective elaboration of meaning.

Co-disciplinarity, as a device for thought and as a dialogical practice, allows us to construct a 'pedagogy of connection', which does not isolate but connects, does not classify but intertwines. This is, today, the necessary condition for giving young people back the possibility of thinking about themselves in time and reclaiming the right to plan their own lives, against all forms of symbolic mortification and existential impoverishment.

2. Rethinking school in an era of existential precariousness and suspended transition

In order to be understood in depth and supported in its evolution, the current condition of young people requires an in-depth study of the literature and current constructs. The vision of Youth Studies is interesting, as it has redefined youth as a social category and as an identity process (Woodman and Wyn, 2015; Leccardi, 2009). In this field of research, youth is no longer conceived as a transitional phase towards adulthood, but as an autonomous, fluid and continuously negotiated experiential space. Traditional paradigms of transition — based on the sequence of education-work-family — are now obsolete in the face of fragmented paths and unstable individual biographies (Furlong, 2014).

It is in this context that the concept of New Adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2004; Côté, 2014; 2019) fits in, defining a condition suspended between autonomy and dependence, between the desire for fulfilment and the constraints of precariousness. This deferred adulthood, far from being an anomaly, constitutes the existential paradigm of post-industrial societies, in which identity is constructed not through progressive stages, but through continuous attempts, failures and renegotiations. Young people today live in a horizon of 'risk biography' (Beck, 1992), where uncertainty is no longer the exception but a structural condition. This precariousness is not only economic but also symbolic: it reflects the difficulty of educational and cultural institutions in providing tools for guidance, belonging and meaning. From this perspective, multi-deprivation coincides with the loss of narrative horizons and the reduction of experience to daily survival. Young people experience a form of 'existential precariousness' that translates into a deficit of agency and an erosion of the power to imagine the future. In order to be truly emancipatory, education must therefore become a device for narrative regeneration, a place where biographical continuity can be rebuilt and the subject's ability to understand themselves over time can be restored.

From this point of view, the co-disciplinary perspective offers a theoretical framework capable of bringing together the psychological, social and political dimensions of education. It allows us to read youth transitions not only as individual paths, but as collective phenomena, produced by the intertwining of global structures and local experiences. The most recent Youth Studies (France and Threadgold, 2016) have emphasised the need to overcome the reductive view of young people as 'subjects in training' and recognise them as fully aware and active actors, bearers of situated knowledge and transformative competence. This recognition implies a radical reform of educational policies, which cannot be limited to compensating for hardship but must be oriented towards the creation of spaces for protagonism and active citizenship.

In this sense, school should not only be a place of cognitive learning, but also a laboratory for democratic construction, for comparing differences, and for educating students about complexity (Morin, 2001). The paradigms of service learning and

place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003) appear to be privileged tools for combining learning with territorial and social experience, reconnecting young people to their communities. However, in order to implement this transformation, a profound rethinking of the role of teachers is necessary. Teachers can no longer be neutral transmitters of knowledge, but must take on the role of reflective intellectuals and ecological mediators (Romeo, 2022; 2024), capable of weaving together knowledge and guiding processes of co-construction. The school thus becomes an institution of hope (Giroux, 2011), a symbolic space of care and responsibility where knowledge is transformed into meaningful experience. In order not to be reduced to a mere crisis management centre, schools must reclaim their political dimension: educating means giving humans back the possibility of acting in the world in a conscious and supportive manner (Biesta, 2010; Nussbaum, 2011).

In this context, co-disciplinarity represents the theoretical cornerstone of an ecological education, capable of integrating educational justice and environmental justice, disciplinary knowledge and ethical dimensions. Only knowledge that recognises its interdependence can respond to the precariousness of New Adulthood with truly emancipatory tools, translating deprivation into a learning resource and crisis into an opportunity for transformation. Ultimately, the task of contemporary schooling consists (or should consist) in restoring continuity between education and life, between knowledge and hope. Co-disciplinarity, as a form of dialogical and relational thinking, is not only a method of research but an ethic of responsibility: knowledge that arises from the comparison of knowledge, thinking that becomes relationship, education that becomes care. It is in this epistemic alliance that schools can rediscover their generative mission: to train individuals capable of inhabiting the world with critical awareness, ecological sensitivity and a spirit of community.

3. Co-disciplinarity as the architecture of sustainable teaching

The theoretical elaboration developed thus far finds its most concrete and necessary translation in the educational dimension. If the ecological crisis, understood not only as environmental degradation but as a structural device that intersects educational inequalities, economic marginalisation and cultural desertification, requires a rethinking of pedagogy in its theoretical paradigms, it urges, even more urgently, teaching to reformulate its operational, methodological and reflective structures. Teaching is, in fact, the place where knowledge becomes experience, where epistemology translates into transformative practice and where the educational relationship takes concrete form in embodied knowledge. In this sense, sustainable teaching is not a specialised field; it is not a matter of adding 'environmental issues' to curricula, but rather an epistemic stance that constantly questions its own foundational principles in order to bring the act of education back within the logic of co-responsibility and co-evolution (Morin, 2001).

Ecological crises and educational inequalities are not parallel but converging phenomena: they feed off each other and share the same cultural matrices — extractive, reductionist, performative — that have impoverished the link between knowledge and life. From this perspective, co-disciplinary teaching takes on heuristic and operational value; it takes the form of a device for resistance and renewal: it does not merely coordinate the various fields of study, organise content or prescribe methods, but promotes a culture of complexity in which disciplines cooperate in

developing pluralistic visions of the world and constructing collective responses to real problems (Blanchard-Laville, 2000; Biesta, 2010).

In this vision, the school becomes a 'reflective epistemic community' in which knowledge is co-thought and inclusive and sustainable paths are co-constructed. Sustainable teaching therefore takes on three fundamental dimensions: an 'ecological' dimension, which recognises the network of interdependencies between subjects, environments and knowledge; an 'inclusive' dimension, which transforms diversity into a dialogical and cognitive resource; and a 'poietic' dimension, which links knowledge to action and learning to social generativity (Nussbaum, 2011; Giroux, 2011).

These dimensions form the backbone of an epistemology of teaching that measures itself against complexity and takes on its challenges; it can no longer be conceived as the application of models, but as 'reflective practice' (Schön, 1983), in which teachers and students act as researchers in contexts of uncertainty. It is a political and cultural act that establishes new forms of epistemic citizenship. As Giroux (2011) suggests, teaching today means producing worldviews, not just transmitting information: knowledge is a common good and schools, as public institutions, are called upon to build spaces for dialogue between expert knowledge and lived knowledge.

The principle of co-disciplinarity, translated into teaching terms, thus becomes a principle of co-design and co-research. It is not just a matter of bringing different disciplines into dialogue, but of generating a common method of questioning reality. The school thus becomes an epistemic community (Wenger, 1998), a microcosm of the world in which learning is distributed, dialogical and relational; no longer just a place of transmission but a platform for cultural regeneration, in which knowledge is negotiated, shared and transformative. In this perspective, co-disciplinarity becomes the keystone of a new educational humanism: it breaks down the barriers between knowledge and promotes an ecology of knowledge (Santos, 2018) in which the relationships between individuals and the environment are constitutive of educational processes.

Within this context and according to this vision, the 'sustainable curriculum' is not a prescriptive document, but an open system of intentional and reflective experiences. Disciplines serve as interpretative lenses for addressing authentic problems — energy consumption, climate migration, urban regeneration — through real-world tasks that combine scientific knowledge, argumentative skills and social competences. Place-based teaching (Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2004), service learning (Furco, 1996; Batini & Giusti, 2020) or experiential teaching (Kolb, 1984) allow knowledge and action to be brought together in a single field of experience, where the territory becomes the text and context of learning. Experience becomes the primary source of knowledge, reflection elaborates its meaning, concept structures learning, and action regenerates it. Sustainable teaching is therefore a teaching of relationships, oriented towards the recomposition of fragmented disciplinary ' ' into maps of integrated knowledge, according to a circular and dialogical model that privileges the problem over the programme, the question over the answer, and cooperation over competition. It recognises that knowledge is not neutral, but always situated and ethically oriented; that knowledge is a practice of care and responsibility; and that teaching, if authentically co-disciplinary, can become the architecture of a new educational humanism, capable of uniting thought and action, theory and life.

4. Researching, training and co-constructing knowledge to create inclusive and equitable generations

If sustainable teaching is the operational translation of co-disciplinarity, it finds its most fertile ground in educational action research and teacher training practices oriented towards investigation and transformation. The environmental and social crisis, as a structural device that cuts across education systems, cannot be addressed with transmissive models: it requires teacher-researchers who are capable of critical observation, reflection on practices and innovation in training devices. Teachers, therefore, are no longer mere transmitters of knowledge, but researchers of learning and builders of meaningful contexts, capable of orchestrating experiences that connect the cognitive world, the natural environment and the social fabric (Dewey, 1916; Morin, 2001) and, at the same time, transform the school into a laboratory of civilisation, where one learns not only to know, but to inhabit the world with intelligence, empathy and responsibility.

From this perspective, training takes the form of collective reflective praxis, a form of inquiry that involves teachers, students and communities in processes of shared knowledge construction (Elliott, 1991; Stenhouse, 1981).

To put this vision into practice, it was decided to offer training courses from April to June 2025 to teachers working in primary and secondary schools in the province of Taranto, divided into various training workshops, articulating a training-teaching model capable of combining reflection, research and evaluation, structured around three operational axes.

1. The axis of epistemic reflexivity.

Firstly, it is essential to educate students to reflect on knowledge, sources and the learning processes themselves. Co-disciplinary teaching encourages widespread meta-reflection, which transforms teachers into individuals who are aware of their own teaching methods. Workshops on situated epistemology, narrative practices and reflective writing allow students to explore the 'how' of knowledge as well as the 'what'. Tools such as learning diaries, dialogue journals and hermeneutic interviews promote metacognitive awareness and critical autonomy (Schön, 1983; Brookfield, 1995). This dimension is essential for combating cultural desertification, as it reactivates curiosity as cognitive energy and epistemic consciousness as the ability to think about the complexity of reality.

2. The axis of situated learning and ecological inquiry.

The second dimension concerns the construction of learning environments inspired by the principles of cognitive ecology. Place-based practices, service learning and experiential teaching allow us to redefine the relationship between school and territory, making the context not just a backdrop, but an educational actor (Grune-wald, 2003; Sobel, 2004). Investigating real-world issues such as waste management, urban biodiversity or air quality becomes an opportunity to integrate scientific, historical, linguistic and artistic knowledge, transforming learning into an experience of citizenship and epistemic citizenship. From this perspective, creating truly authentic tasks is the first step towards sustainable teaching: an event that questions, engages and produces change, where assessment is not a final judgement but a device for dialogic and co-constructed feedback (Wiggins, 1998; Biesta, 2010).

3. The axis of digital and ecocritical transformation.

The third axis concerns the conscious integration of digital technologies. Far from being neutral, they can fuel processes of exclusion as well as forms of agency and cognitive democracy. Ecological digital literacy is based on the ability to critically read knowledge infrastructures, recognise the environmental impact of digital technology and use it as a tool for civic participation (Ranieri, 2024). Ecological podcasts, digital storytelling on socio-environmental issues (Barca & Tripaldi, 2025; Barca, Carruba & Mazzini, 2025; Barca & Mazzini, 2025) and collaborative research platforms are practices that intertwine languages, data and narratives, generating a culture of interdependence and care. In this context, the teacher acts as a designer of cognitive ecologies (Jenkins, 2009), capable of transforming digital technology into a territory of investigation and not simply a container.

The research-training structure that supports the model to be presented is of the mixed methods type, based on the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative evidence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). On the one hand, quantitative analysis detects changes in attitudes, skills and behaviours through validated tools such as the New Ecological Paradigm Scale (Dunlap et al., 2000), the Connectedness to Nature Scale (Mayer & Frantz, 2004) and measures of civic-environmental agency (Zeldin et al., 2017). On the other hand, the qualitative approach explores the transformation of meanings and practices through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), reflective journals and photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), field observations and narrative portfolios. The combination of the two approaches allows us to measure and understand transformation, highlighting how sustainable learning processes simultaneously affect knowledge, attitudes, values and teaching practices.

From this perspective, teacher training is never complete but continues over time as ongoing professional research. It promotes the construction of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and collaborative research (Elliott, 1991), where learning is shared and experience becomes collective heritage. Universities, schools and local communities should form a single training infrastructure, where knowledge is built on reciprocity and reflexivity. This represents the crucial node for the construction of sustainable epistemologies. It is not just a matter of transmitting operational skills, but of developing a reflective and systemic mindset, capable of grasping the interconnections between education, the environment and social justice. As Mortari (2017) observes, teachers are called upon to 'think about practice' in a way that is not limited to doing, but is nourished by a continuous questioning of the meanings and effects of educational action. Similarly, Freire (1970) points out that every educator must be both the subject and object of transformation: 'no one educates anyone else, but everyone educates themselves together, in the mediation of the world'.

From this perspective, the school-community unit takes the form of a civic laboratory of sustainability. The school institution opens up to the local area as a space for collective research, transforming teaching into a public act of knowledge (Giroux, 2011). Through co-design with institutions, associations and administrations, schools can become centres of environmental documentation and social innovation, promoting concrete interventions and local micro-policies— for sustainable mobility, actions for the regeneration of spaces, civic information campaigns, artistic and documentary productions. These activities constitute extended learning units, in which disciplinary skills are recomposed into a choral and shared action.

Teaching, therefore, breaks free from the logic of training to become a political space for cognitive emancipation. It builds citizenship, not just knowledge; it shapes active subjects, not mere recipients. Sustainability, from a thematic content, becomes a method and an end of learning, while inclusion is not reduced to an ethical principle but elevated to an epistemic criterion: every cognitive and cultural diversity represents a resource for thinking about the world in a plural and creative way (Nussbaum, 2011; Biesta, 2010).

In this sense, educational research must become an ally of transformation. It is necessary to overcome the divide between university research and teaching practice through permanent action research communities that value professional reflectiveness and the systematic documentation of innovation processes (Elliott, 1991; Stenhouse, 1981). Initial and in-service teacher training must accustom teachers not only to using methods, but also to generating questions; not only to observing results, but also to interpreting processes; not only to managing classes, but also to orchestrating learning ecologies.

From this perspective, sustainable and inclusive teaching is not just one methodology among many, but an epistemic and political horizon: a way of thinking about knowledge as a common good and teaching as an ecological practice of responsibility. It integrates environmental justice, educational equity and cultural pluralism into a single educational project that rejects the separation between cognition and affectivity, between the individual and the collective, between theory and practice.

Co-thinking and co-constructing sustainable epistemologies ultimately means rehabilitating complex thinking as the infrastructure of contemporary teaching. The environmental and educational crises, viewed in their interdependence, reveal the urgent need for knowledge that can be transformed into care, for educational action that becomes both ethical and political. It is in this direction that teaching can become the ecology of thought and coexistence, a place where knowledge returns to being a living experience of the world, a laboratory for the future and an instrument of justice.

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