

Service Learning and Innovation Networks: the proposal of the Avanguardie Educative Movement for Italian schools

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Abstract

This paper presents and discusses the Avanguardie Educative (AE) Movement, an initiative by Indire aimed at transforming the traditional Italian education system. AE seeks to promote educational and organizational innovation in schools by shifting from transmissive teaching models to more flexible, competency-based approaches. It emphasizes a participatory, collaborative framework for educational change, incorporating various actors like regional hubs, leading schools, and adopting schools. The service-learning concept is central to AE's approach, aiming to bridge formal education with community engagement, fostering active student participation and real-world problem solving. AE encourages schools to adopt and adapt service-learning within their curricular activities, evolving it from sporadic, extracurricular projects into a core part of their educational offering. This framework has been particularly relevant in addressing modern challenges, such as the pandemic, environmental crises, and social inequalities. In AE's innovation proposals, service-learning is the frame of reference for activities linking school and territory that allows for the creation of a meaningful relationship between inside and outside the school. AE operates through a network of schools and a series of dissemination activities, including peer-to-peer exchanges, workshops and the development of practical tools such as toolkits and guidelines within which SL represents a proposal for innovation. In recent years, a line of research has been developed to analyse the level of institutionalization of service-learning in Italy with the aim of accompanying schools and developing their self-assessment competences.

Keywords: service-learning, innovation, school system, community engagement.

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Xarxes d'aprenentatge servei i innovació: la proposta del moviment *Avanguardie Educative* per a les escoles italianes

Resum

En aquest article es parla del Moviment Avanguardie Educative (AE), una iniciativa d'Indire destinada a transformar el sistema educatiu tradicional italià. AE pretén promoure la innovació educativa i organitzativa a les escoles passant de models d'ensenyament transmissius a enfocaments més flexibles i basats en competències. Destaca un marc participatiu i col·laboratiu per al canvi educatiu, que incorpora diversos actors com els centres regionals, les escoles líders i les escoles adoptants. El concepte d'aprenentatge servei és fonamental per a l'enfocament d'AE, que té com a objectiu unir l'educació formal amb la participació de la comunitat, fomentant la participació activa dels estudiants i la resolució de problemes del món real. AE anima les escoles a adoptar i adaptar l'aprenentatge servei dins de les seves activitats curriculars, fent-lo evolucionar des de projectes esporàdics i extraescolars a una part fonamental de la seva oferta educativa. Aquest marc ha estat especialment rellevant per abordar els reptes moderns, com ara la pandèmia, les crisis ambientals i les desigualtats socials. En les propostes d'innovació d'AE, l'aprenentatge servei és el marc de referència d'activitats que vinculen escola i territori que permeten crear una relació significativa entre dins i fora de l'escola. AE opera a través d'una xarxa d'escoles i d'una sèrie d'activitats de difusió, que inclouen intercanvis entre iguals, tallers i el desenvolupament d'eines pràctiques com caixes d'eines i directrius dins de les quals l'ApS representa una proposta d'innovació. En els darrers anys s'ha desenvolupat una línia de recerca per analitzar el nivell d'institucionalització de l'aprenentatge servei a Itàlia amb l'objectiu d'acompanyar els centres educatius i desenvolupar les seves competències d'autoavaluació.

Paraules clau: aprenentatge servei, innovació, sistema educatiu, compromís comunitari.

Redes de aprendizaje-servicio e innovación: la propuesta del movimiento *Avanguardie Educative* para las escuelas italianas

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el Movimiento Avanguardie Educative (AE), una iniciativa de Indire destinada a transformar el sistema educativo italiano tradicional. AE busca promover la innovación educativa y organizativa en las escuelas pasando de modelos de enseñanza transmisivos a enfoques más flexibles basados en competencias. Hace hincapié en un marco participativo y colaborativo para el cambio educativo, incorporando varios actores como centros regionales, escuelas líderes y escuelas adoptantes. El concepto de aprendizaje-servicio es central para el enfoque de AE, cuyo objetivo es unir la educación formal con la participación de la comunidad, fomentando la participación activa de los estudiantes y la resolución de problemas del mundo real. AE alienta a las escuelas a adoptar y adaptar el aprendizaje-servicio dentro de sus actividades curriculares, evolucionando desde proyectos extracurriculares esporádicos a una parte central de su oferta educativa. Este marco ha sido particularmente relevante para abordar desafíos modernos, como la pandemia, las crisis ambientales y las desigualdades sociales. En las propuestas de innovación de AE, el aprendizaje-servicio es el marco de referencia para las actividades que vinculan la escuela y el territorio que permiten la creación de una relación significativa entre el interior y el exterior de la escuela. AE opera a través de una red de escuelas y una serie de actividades de difusión, que incluyen intercambios entre pares, talleres y el desarrollo de herramientas prácticas como kits de herramientas y directrices dentro de las cuales el aprendizaje-servicio representa una propuesta de innovación. En los últimos años, se ha desarrollado una línea de investigación para analizar el nivel de institucionalización del aprendizaje-servicio en Italia con el objetivo de acompañar a las escuelas y desarrollar sus competencias de autoevaluación.

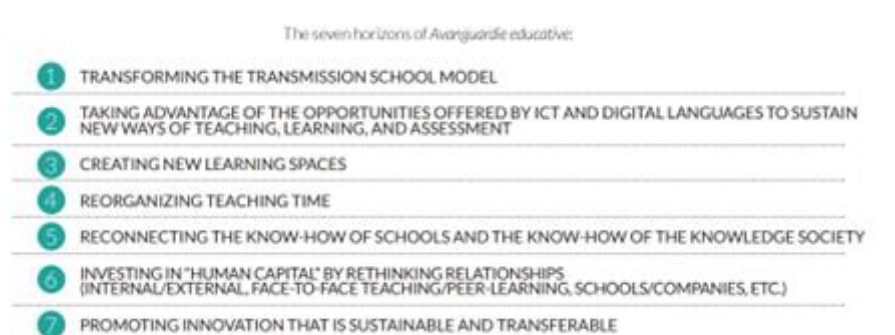
Palabras clave: aprendizaje-servicio, innovación, sistema educativo, compromiso comunitario.

1. Avanguardie educative Movement: a network of Italian schools to support school innovation

Avanguardie educative (AE) is a research project of Indire (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research), which, as a public research organization, deals with supporting and sustaining schools by fostering educational and organizational innovation. AE is configured as a cultural Movement that identifies, describes and disseminates, in the national territory, experiences of didactic and organizational innovation aimed at transforming the traditional model of schooling, based on transmissive teaching, on the classroom as the only learning environment and on a structuring of school time that provides for the performance of equal activities for all students.

The directions of innovation have been identified by AE in the dimensions of didactics, time and space, proposing strategies to support active and laboratory teaching, flexible organization of school time to enable competency-based activities and innovative learning spaces that are differentiated and attentive to welcoming and enhancing the specificities of everyone. AE is an innovation movement open to all Italian schools that aims to create a network by identifying and supporting experiences that can transcend limitations and the inertia within educational, structural and organizational levels.

Fig.1: Manifesto: the seven horizons of Avanguardie Educative



The goal is to contribute to the construction of an idea and student-friendly school and facilitate the transition from the school of teaching to the school of learning (Berlinguer, 2014). AE is configured in the national and international landscape (EU, 2018) as a network of schools aimed at innovation for the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning, through collaboration between schools participating in training activities, mentoring between schools and professional exchange. A humanistic approach (UNESCO, 2019) to the meaning of schooling is proposed by shifting the debate on education beyond its utilitarian role in economic development; where the role of teachers is central to fostering learning by removing obstacles that do not allow the full realization of the person as an active citizen.

The Movement has fostered the meeting of the innovative drive of schools (bottom-up) with the processes of formalization and systematization inherent in educational research (top-down), to facilitate the identification and dissemination of innovation experiences. As highlighted at the European level (Kampylis et al., 2013; Linch et al., 2018), the transformation of the school system implies a shift from a top-down approach to a more contextualized approach based on the analysis of schools' innovative experiences (bottom-up). This is a participatory and collaborative approach, in which all actors have a role in contributing to change and innovation by generating sub-networks of schools that in their innovative performance link to the main Network (the AE Movement).

Today, AE has 38 regional hub schools and 71 leading schools for innovation ideas. The assistance-coaching model is characterized by the participation of teachers from different school contexts and intends to valorize collegial confrontation and the sharing of experiences as conditions that facilitate the recognition, analysis and therefore also the solution of common professional problems, in coherence with the tradition of communities of practice (Wenger, 2006) and in continuity with some principles of Research-Training (Asquini, 2018). The support activities for the member schools involve an organization similar to other national and international innovation networks, with a fluid structuring that makes cooperative relationships between schools and teachers possible, supporting the sharing and solving of common problems.

In the case of AE, the organization involves several actors and instruments:

- The founding schools: these are 22 schools that, together with Indire, founded the Movement.
- The regional hub schools: identified at regional level, they take care of activities to ensure the dissemination of the principles of innovation promoted by the Manifesto of the Movement throughout the territory (also through the organization and delivery of online and in-presence training). They contribute to the identification of new innovation experiences for the 'Ideas for Innovation Gallery' and they promote and provide support for actions to assist the adoption of the Ideas, also with the help of expert trainers.
- The Leading schools: are schools experienced in one or more ideas of the Movement.
- The Adopting schools: they recognize themselves in the principles of the AE. They experiment one or more of the Ideas and/or propose experiences of innovation that could turn into new Ideas. Adopting schools participate in in-presence and online support/coaching processes.

The Movement has developed tools to support the Movement's activities, the Manifesto (Fig.1), which guides, through the seven horizons, the activities proposed, and the experiences identified, and the Innovation Ideas Gallery, which

collects and presents the innovation proposals that the Movement offers to all adopting schools.

2. Service Learning in AE: a network of schools for the dissemination of the approach

One of the Movement's ideas is Inside/Outside the School-Service Learning (Chipa et al., 2021), which proposes an idea of a civic school, as a meeting place between formal and informal knowledge and which proposes different ways of relating between school, territory, local authorities, associations, and the world of work. This relationship is realized through authentic practices, such as the SL, which envisage the realization of experiences aimed at developing meaningful learning processes and promoting the active participation of students. Moreover, to give life to a meaningful relationship between school and territory (De Bartolomeis, 2018), the SL has been assumed as the frame of reference for the design of learning paths that connect the school with the community to overcome the episodic and sporadic characteristics of many experiences, often relegated to being carried out in extra-curricular spaces and times. The SL, on the other hand, is placed within the curriculum, represents a way of doing school and, in some contexts, has become the architecture of the school's educational offer and of its planning with the outside world (Mortari, 2017).

The numerous and diversified emergencies of recent years, from the pandemic to the environmental issue, from war scenarios to the economic crisis, have strengthened the motivations that call for the development of inclusive and innovative educational and training proposals, aimed at making the school a meeting place for knowledge and know-how linked to social and cultural needs. Schools need to rethink themselves as places that are open to the context of reference, through the provision of spaces for the community, of a didactic design that is nourished by the collaboration of external professionals, attentive to the needs of each one, and the integration of multiple services that strengthen and broaden the function of school governance in reference. In this scenario, the OECD (2020) has proposed four scenarios for the school of the future, including the learning hub that identifies educational institutions as headmasters for the community, open to the territory and characterized by learning strategies and approaches that foster civic engagement and social innovation.

Within the idea of Inside/Outside the school, the SL was taken as the frame of reference for this project linking school communities with the local area and within the AE activities, the SL interprets the idea of a school that does not just transmit content, but is open to change, creating connections between knowledge and action, between school and society.

3. Activities of AE Movement for the Dissemination of Service Learning: National and International Perspectives

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A service research approach, which facilitates decision-making processes in educational practice (Mortari, 2017) and involves continuous dialogue between the Indire research group and school communities adhering to the AE movement, enables the development of useful tools for growing and disseminating knowledge about SL. Three processes are carried out to develop the network and its knowledge:

1. Peer exchange and interaction with the research group, involving internal communication within the network among its various nodes - hub schools, lead schools and adopting schools, research group - and attracting new school memberships.
2. Information and self-training, involving the systematization of communication products useful for disseminating knowledge about Service Learning, starting from the documentation of network experiences.
3. Research reflection, curated particularly by the research group and useful for knowledge development in relation to external exchange with other networks and professionals interested in Service Learning.

Each of the three network development processes involves specific action modalities and tools. Regarding the first process, online and in-person activities are carried out, including:

- Online workshops based on moments and needs between the Indire research group and lead schools, and webinars in the cycles launched in Training and Comparing with Avanguardie Educative¹.
- In-person seminars and workshops, both managed by Hub Schools and using specific contexts, particularly Didacta².
- Visiting activities directly managed by Hub Schools and Lead Schools as experts, upon request of new members interested in the innovative ideas developed in the Movement, such as Service Learning.

Regarding the second process, to facilitate self-training for those approaching Service Learning as a reference for didactic and organizational innovation actions in their school, various tools are available on the Inside Outside School-Service Learning idea page of AE³, including:

- Guidelines, collecting theoretical and practical indications on the overall framework and a series of experience documentations from schools in the movement. Their updates have accompanied the development of projects and reflections between schools and the research group over time.
- Indications and suggestions, reporting reflections related to particular aspects of Service-Learning implementation, developed by the research group in synergy with schools.

¹ <https://www.indire.it/formarsi-e-confrontarsi-con-le-ae/>

² <https://fieradidacta.indire.it/en/>

³ <https://innovazione.indire.it/avanguardieeducative/service-learning>

- Toolkits, which constitute practical tools for initiating the design of Service-Learning experiences and can be used during workshops.

Additionally, the synergy with the parallel Small Schools movement (Piccole scuole), which brings together schools located in geographically isolated territories and with a small number of students, has enabled Indire's research group to extend the discussion on Service-Learning to it as well. Given that this movement has chosen to disseminate knowledge through the Notebook, a publishing initiative divided into Stories, Tools and Studies, and created to document the didactic and educational experimentation activities of the schools participating in the movement, the Tools no. 5 and no. 12 were therefore dedicated to Service-Learning⁴.

Regarding the third development process, this is guided by the Indire research group, which collaborates with AE schools while engaging with the national and international scientific community. In recent years, in relation to the Service-Learning experiences of schools in the movement, the themes explored have focused on three aspects:

1. Student learning. Regarding students, the competences for lifelong learning and orientation (Chipa et al., 2022; Lotti, Orlandini & Naldini, 2023a), distance learning and e-SL (Lotti & Orlandini, 2022a) also in relation to cooperative dynamics (Lotti & Orlandini, 2022b), the fight against school drop-out (Lotti & Orlandini, 2022c) were examined in depth.
2. Innovation in teaching in relation to interprofessionalism. Concerning didactic innovation, inter-professional collaboration between teachers and educators from the Third Sector was explored (Lotti & Orlandini, 2022d).
3. Innovation in school organization. In relation to organizational innovation, the relationship with the Third Sector (Lotti & Orlandini, 2023a) and the learning cities (Lotti, Naldini & Orlandini, 2023b) were examined in depth, as well as the institutionalization of the educational approach in relation to teachers' continuous training (Lotti & Orlandini, 2023b) and the construction of the educating community (Giunti & Lotti, 2023).

The research group also fosters the relationship of the AE movement with other national SL dissemination initiatives, starting with the working group established at the Ministry of Education⁵ and the network of Italian universities UNiSL⁶, and with the emerging pan-European network of SL in schools and organizations SLEsoN⁷. This exchange with other thematic networks on Service-Learning facilitates the discovery of new stimuli and solutions to promote didactic and organizational innovation within the framework of this educational approach. In

⁴ <https://piccolescuole.indire.it/en/notebooks/tools/>

⁵ <https://miur.gov.it/service-learning>

⁶ <https://site.unibo.it/servicelearning-labpsicom/it/rete-nazionale>

⁷ <https://www.clayss.org/en/networks-2312/>

addition to supporting the internationalization process of schools adhering to the AE movement, it enables comparison between school communities with diverse experiences and fosters intercultural dialogue among organizations and individuals, which is fundamental to humanistic development.

4. Conclusions

During the AE Movement's activities, the number of schools that have adopted the Inside/Outside School-Service Learning idea has progressively increased, generating an organised network for the support and dissemination of the approach, according to a bottom-up logic. The tools and activities were designed to foster the dissemination and exchange of experiences between teachers for a wider knowledge of the approach. In Italy, unlike other international contexts, SL has spread over the last ten years, thanks to the convergence between the initiatives of schools and Indire (bottom-up process) and those promoted 'from above' by the Ministry (top-down process). In the last two years, Indire has launched two research activities that testify to the growing interest in SL. The first is represented by a nationwide survey on the level of institutionalisation of SL (Furco, 1999, 2007) in schools, through the adaptation to the Italian school context (Bielli et al., 2022a) of the self-assessment rubric developed by Andrew Furco (1999) in the North American higher education context. At present, more than 80 schools of the first and second cycle of education participated in the survey, which made it possible to describe the state of progress of the SL institutionalization process in Italy (Bielli et al., 2022b) by directing schools towards a progressive enhancement of their self-evaluation skills.

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