

Educational poverty in Italy. How to counter a silent issue that prevents girls and boys from freely blossoming talents and aspirations

October 20, 2025

The risk of dropping out of school is fifteen times higher for students from families with low educational attainment than for those from graduate families, while their likelihood of earning a degree is five times lower. On the occasion of "Didacta Italia - Trentino Edition" 2025, we interviewed FBK-IRVAPP researcher Davide Azzolini

How can educational poverty be defined and who is most affected in Italy?

Educational poverty means the deprivation, for children and adolescents, of the opportunity to learn, experiment, develop, and freely flourish in skills, talents, and aspirations.

Although the concept of educational poverty is relatively recent, it addresses an issue that is anything but new and has, in fact, been recognized for a long time: the Italian Constitution, in Article 34, states that "school is open to all" and that "the capable and deserving, even if without means, have the right to reach the highest levels of study."

However, every year, the statistical data show that this noble goal is largely disregarded. Family conditions affect the educational poverty of children. Just to give a few examples: the risk of dropping out of school is 15 times higher for those who come from families with low levels of education than for those who come from families of graduates, and the likelihood of obtaining a degree is 5 times lower. On the learning front, there are also critical issues related to the decline in average levels of learning after the Covid-19 pandemic and the persistence of the effect of individual economic conditions and the school context on educational outcomes. But educational poverty is not limited to these "formal" outcomes; it also manifests in other dimensions, such as participation in extracurricular activities, which have a significant impact on the aspirations and future expectations of young people.

Can the impact assessment of public policies – an area in which FBK-IRVAPP is a national benchmark – be a strategic tool to promote equity and quality in the education system?

Article 34 of the Constitution does not limit itself to making explicit the right to education, but also attributes a mandate to the institutions: “The Republic makes this right effective with scholarships, family allowances, and other provisions.”

It is precisely on that adjective “effective,” and therefore on the concept of effectiveness, that evaluation comes into play. Impact assessment aims to understand what is effective and what is not. It aims to identify interventions that work from those that do not, to understand which interventions are most effective for which subgroups of beneficiaries and in which contexts. In this way, it helps policymakers, technicians, and professionals to make informed decisions based on evidence, directing resources toward what really contributes to reducing educational poverty.

What are the main studies and projects you are working on in this area?

As an FBK center, we have been involved in evaluative research projects on programs to combat educational poverty for at least ten years.

Among the topics we address are studies on the effectiveness of innovative interventions in the field of the **right to school and college education**, in particular programs that encourage family savings as a lever to promote the continuation of studies. As FBK, we are committed to producing empirical evidence on multiple programs carried out in Italy by philanthropic foundations and Third Sector organizations. Overall, [the results emerging from the evaluations are encouraging](#).

Another area of research concerns **learning losses**, and in particular the way in which these affect the most vulnerable individuals more intensely during periods when schools are closed, both for emergency causes (such as during the Covid-19 pandemic) and for structural causes (for example, summer break). In this context, we analyzed the effects of intervention programs aimed at counteracting such losses, both during the summer months (as in the [Educational Archipelago](#) project) and in extracurricular time during the year (for example, afternoon support and tutoring programs, “[Compiti@casa](#)”).

What are the future prospects?

It seems to me that progress is being made, both on the front of the growing attention in the public debate on the issue of educational poverty and on the importance of the production and use of empirical evidence to make informed decisions.

It is discussed, I believe, with increasing awareness and from multiple perspectives, no longer as the prerogative of one party or the other, but as a topic shared and recognized in its collective relevance. Whether this will lead to something good, I do not know. Certainly, it is a common responsibility — of researchers, evaluators, decision-makers and technicians — to continue working so that educational policies and practices be based on solid evidence.

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<https://magazine.fbk.eu/en/news/educational-poverty-in-italy-how-to-counter-a-silent-issue-that-prevents-girls-and-boys-from-freely-blossoming-talents-and-aspirations/>

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