

## **Understanding Social Justice Youth Development Through the Lens of Intersectionality**

### **Theoretical background (6980 caratteri)**

In societies, youth represent the most dynamic and generative group, being the primary potential source of innovation and creativity (Ekka et al., 2022). Nevertheless, young people face intense economic isolation, lack deliberative power, and are often subjected to pervasive social stigma (Ginwrights & James, 2002). In response, in different contexts, youth are mobilizing to demand a voice in public policy to transform institutions to be more accountable to their communities (Braxton, Buford, & Marasigan, 2013). This phenomenon brought about students and collectivities of youth to take a stance for human rights like climate change, civil rights, and reproductive rights (see de Moor et al., 2020; Gasparri et al., 2021; Salman, 2022).

Despite demonstrations of active engagement, in Italy, young people's active engagement is relatively low compared to other European countries (EUROSTAT, 2015). The statistics point to conditions of low opportunity for involvement by young people. Schools should play a pivotal role in providing the opportunity for more effective social justice engagement and inclusive spaces for participation. However, empirical evidence shows that spaces where students feel that their opinions are valued and can contribute to issues that interest them are still limited (Tzankova et al., 2021). Moreover, even though critical thinking is considered an essential outcome of citizenship education (cf. Zani et al. 2022), educational settings still offer limited opportunities for students to practice, addressing contrasting points of view and be encouraged to reflect on human rights like climate change, and civil and reproductive rights.

Building on a social justice youth development (SJYD) framework, Ginwright & James (2002) challenged the traditional approach to working with youth, looking at youth experiences in social-ecological contexts. Five dimensions make up the SJYD approach: (1) analyzing power dynamics within social relationships, (2) making identity central, (3) promoting systemic change, (4) encouraging collective action, and (5) embracing youth culture. The SJYD framework has been primarily applied to the specific experiences of youth of color and low-income youth (Baker & Brookins, 2014), but Ginwright & James (2002) draw links between the systemic oppression faced by youth of color and youth in other identities groups, such as the LGBTQ+ youth. Indeed, intersectionality plays an important role in power dynamics and systemic oppression.

It highlights the importance of attending to multiple, intersecting identities and ascribed social positions (e.g., race, gender identity, sexual orientation, class) along with associated power dynamics,

building on the idea that people are at the same time members of many different social groups and have unique experiences with privilege and disadvantage because of those intersections (Rosenthal, 2016).

In general, SJYD yields different outcomes than traditional youth development, including factors that we would associate with empowerment, such as activism and (social-justice-oriented) civic engagement and the ability to analyze (via critical consciousness) the use and misuse of power in one's life (Diemer & Li, 2011; Wagaman, 2016). Moreover, research found that SJYD is associated with sense of community (Ross, 2011) and support processes connected to personal and community well-being (Wagaman, 2016).

### **Aims and Hypotheses**

This study's aim is threefold:

- a) To explore the relationships between the social justice youth development principles in Ginwright & James' (2002) theoretical framework, particularly community engagement, critical consciousness, and empowerment among youth, with an intersectional approach;
- b) To explore to what extent educational contexts are perceived by young people to support social justice youth development and are attentive to intersectionality;
- c) To explore the relationship between SJYD experiences inside or outside educational contexts and students' well-being and empowerment by adopting an intersectional lens.

Four hypotheses will be tested accordingly to the aims of the study:

1. Students' general perception of Italian educational contexts/schools' engagement in promoting SJYD is low.
2. Students affected by multiple sources of oppression perceive educational contexts/schools as less attentive to SJYD and intersectionality than students who belong to privileged groups.
3. Students affected by multiple sources of oppression have lower levels of well-being in school than those with higher status affiliations/belonging (3a). The level of school attention to intersectional aspects acts as a buffer effect on those students affected by multiple sources of oppression well-being (3b).
4. Students affected by multiple sources of oppression who engage in social justice activities have higher levels of empowerment when compared to their non-engaged peers.

### **Methods – Participants and sample**

The study has a mixed-method design, quantitatively driven with a qualitative supplemental component. For the quantitative component, a questionnaire will be administered to participants; at least 250 participants will be recruited to allow the analyses. For the qualitative component, focus-groups will be conducted with 32 participants affected by multiple sources of oppression, half of whom with SJYD experiences inside or outside educational (the other contests to deepen the understanding of the quantitative findings).

## **Tools**

The questionnaire will be finalized after the review of recent literature. The following measures will be included:

- Sociodemographic and specific self-reported measures (gender, membership to perceived discriminated groups, experience of direct or vicarious discrimination, SES) would be used to allow participants to describe the experience of belonging to multiple groups from their unique intersectional locations.
- Civic Engagement Scale\* (Doolittle & Faul, 2013)
- Cognitive Empowerment Scale\* (Speer, Peterson, Christens & Reid, 2019)
- Social Justice Scale\* (Torres-Hardings, Siers & Olson, 2012).
- Perception of Social Justice Climate at School\* (adaptation of the School Climate for Diversity Scale, Byrd, 2017).
- Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale\* (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009)

\* Translation and adaptation of the instrument will be part of the research project development.

The focus group guide will be finalized after the quantitative component.

## **Procedure**

The questionnaire will be administered to the participants using the online Qualtrics platform. Informed consent will be collected. Participants will be recruited through school collaboration using anonymous online questionnaires. Different upper secondary school tracks in the Emilia Romagna region will be involved, including vocational ones. Participants of the focus groups will be recruited paying attention to adopt a multiple-groups approach to sampling to avoid marginalizing underrepresented groups (cf. Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016)

## **Statistical analyses**

Given the hypotheses, intersectional (multiplier and buffering) effects of demographics/sources of oppression on school climate perception, well-being, and dimensions of social justice youth development (SJYD) will be tested. Measurement invariance between groups will also be tested, including examining internal features of the SJ measures (e.g., assessing reliability or internal consistency, patterns of item-total correlations, and factor structure).

### **Declaration of commitment to request ethical approval**

Ethics approval will be requested within three months from the contractualization of the candidate.

### **Expected results and Implications**

We expect to shed light on the role played by intersectionality in understanding and applying the SJYD approach; we also expect to provide a clear picture of the perception of schools' social justice climate and the role this perception plays in framing youth well-being and engagement within and out of school. In Italy, psychological studies on SJYD are still limited, and there is a paucity of empirical studies adopting an intersectional lens to understand the experience of belonging and engaging in school. As such, we expect to collect empirical data that will help to:

- Improve the measurement of SJ, validating a tool that does not exist in Italian;
- Understanding the experience of SJ engagement of students living in Italy affected by multiple sources of oppression;
- Offer policymakers and school principals recommendations and guidelines to make school and educational settings more attentive to inclusive practices and youth voices and perspectives.

### **Plan of activities** (project activities and training activities, timing of activities and feasibility)

The activities foreseen for the project are the following:

- Review of the literature on SJYD and of the scales that measure SJ; (M1-M4)
- Recruitment of the QNT research sample, design of the final questionnaire (including adaptation, translation, and back translation of instruments that are not validated in Italian), and administration to participants (M4-M6)
- Quantitative Data mining and data analysis (M7-M8)
- Recruitment of the QLT research sample, design of the focus group guidelines, and implementation of the focus groups (M4-M6)
- QLT data analysis (M6-M9)

- Preparation of a manuscript to submit to a Community Psychology Journal (M9-M12) and submission
- Preparation of a press release of the main results and a social impact statement (M12)

The Research fellow will receive training on advanced statistical data analysis methods and social justice theory and research.

### **Feasibility**

The supervisors of the Grant have a close and consolidated collaboration with high schools in Emilia Romagna and also with different organizations in Emilia Romagna that work in the field of marginality.

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