

# Counter-Narrating from the Margin. The Integration of Asylum Seekers and Unaccompanied Minors through the *Hate sW.I.T.C.H.* approach

Sara Gemma <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Università di Macerata, Università degli Studi di Napoli “Parthenope”; s.gemma@unimc.it

**Abstract:** This contribution examines inclusion pathways for asylum seekers and Unaccompanied Foreign Minors through a pedagogy of co-evolution, in which learning is conceived as a relational and embodied process emerging from the interaction between bodies, environments, and technologies. Building on the concepts of the social brain and human neoteny (Iavarone, 2025), as contemporary extensions of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1992), the Hate W.I.T.C.H. approach (Gemma & Girardi, 2024) is discussed through two practices: the use of empathic Artificial Intelligence in vocational training and a narrative-based podcasting laboratory for Italian L2. Both practices rely on embodied cognition and distributed learning, integrating physical and digital dimensions within a ubiquitous learning field. In line with Di Tore (2024) and de Kerckhove, the rise of disembodied intelligence reshapes educational experience, making the development of digital soft skills crucial for supporting vulnerable learners in navigating the tension between corporeality and digitality.

**Keywords:** mediation; social sciences; soft skills; pedagogy; migrations

## 1. Introduction: *Social Humanities*, definition and contexts of application

In the humanities, a major development in recent years has been the development of new integrative fields such as Medical Humanities, Environmental Humanities and Digital Humanities (Pedersen, 2016). In specific fields of complex educational intervention - particularly within reception and integration contexts involving third-country nationals - the Social Humanities approach, grounded in multidisciplinary research teams, has been defined inductively through its diverse fields of application. This has been especially evident in non-formal educational settings addressing adult learners experiencing social exclusion and vulnerability. As Pedersen (2016) argues regarding the necessary integration of the social sciences and the humanities:

In this context, it is important to acknowledge that interdisciplinary collaboration is itself a multi-dimensional phenomenon that involves different scales of collaboration. In the literature, Klein (2010), Stokols et al. (2003) and Wagner et al. (2011) have famously distinguished between multi-, trans- and interdisciplinarity, each of



**Copyright:** © 2026 by the authors.  
Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

which involve different levels of collaboration. Lately, post-, de- and anti-disciplinary modes of research have been added to the list of cross-disciplinary knowledge production. Taken together, there is no uniform definition of interdisciplinary collaboration, and hence no uniform funding scheme for promoting it.

Within this perspective, biological and cultural evolution unfold along interconnected trajectories. Human educability is rooted in biological and neuroscientific foundations, as reflected in the exceptional complexity of the human nervous system. Although humans are genetically more vulnerable than many species, their survival depends largely on phenotypic plasticity shaped through interaction with the environment. Apparent genetic insufficiency is compensated by an implicit bio-educational process (Frauenfelder et al., 2018), through which neural plasticity is continuously trained, enabling long-term adaptation. Contemporary educational practices develop within a context of permanent global transitions (Chabod, 2021), where social, political and cultural changes challenge linear and transmissive pedagogical models. Learning is increasingly understood as a relational and situated process embedded in lived experience (Thompson & Varela, 2001). From this perspective, learning transitions are not predefined stages but disruptive moments that unsettle routines and open spaces for negotiation and reconfiguration (Iavarone, 2025). Educational action thus assumes a generative character, shaped by the dynamic interplay between individuals, environments and social relations. These dynamics are particularly evident in non-formal and community-based educational contexts (Lave & Wenger, 2006) connected to migration and reception practices, where learning emerges through participation in shared activities rather than through the transmission of predefined knowledge. Knowledge is co-constructed as participants engage with everyday challenges, generating meanings and experimenting with alternative forms of action and relationship. Within such settings, education takes on an embodied and relational character, unfolding through multimodal experiences involving language, voice, movement and interaction. This places an ethical and political responsibility on educators to enable participation, recognise experiential knowledge and foster inclusive educational spaces responsive to vulnerability and inequality. In the era of hyperconnectivity and onlife experience, individuals are embedded within complex ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), ranging from everyday microsystems to broader exosystems shaped by social services, territorial organisation and institutional arrangements, extending to macro-level welfare and legislative frameworks (Nosari & Guarcello, 2024). Within these interdependent systems, life skills emerge as a crucial mediating factor (Iavarone, 2025), understood not as discrete abilities but as integrated configurations of attitudes, values and competences that foster agency and social participation.

From an ecological and systemic perspective, learning is not the accumulation of information, but a second-order process shaped by context, relationships and experience (Vygotskij, 1987). Drawing on Bateson's notion of learning and deuto-learning (1976), educational processes are understood as relational and situated, accelerating when embedded in lived environments and social interaction. Bio-educational research further supports this view by highlighting the interplay between neurobiological plasticity and cultural experience (Frauenfelder et al., 2018). Learning thus appears as an adaptive and generative process through which individ-

uals continuously reconfigure their identities in relation to their environments. Cognitive organisation is influenced not only by evolutionary factors but also by socio-cultural and epigenetic conditions, giving rise to the social brain (Brothers, 1990). Social cognition theories emphasise the embodied nature of knowledge, whereby meaning emerges through perception and action (Varela & Rosch, 1991). This framework calls for a shift from an instrumental conception of integration towards the construction of integrative environments capable of engaging reflexively with complex problem spaces. Contemporary challenges such as climate change, food insecurity and migration require open-ended learning processes that address both problems and modes of inquiry, implying ecological transformations in scientific practice (Pedersen, 2016). Within this scenario, two embodied educational practices are presented: the use of artificial intelligence in vocational training to enhance motivation and self-efficacy, and the use of ICTs (Copertari, 2023) through a podcasting workshop for Italian L2 based on biographical and Mediation Education approaches. Both practices rely on embodied cognition, integrating presence and distance through action-oriented learning (Piccardo & North, 2019), role play and mediation, further expanded through empathic artificial intelligence in adult vocational training (Girardi, 2024).

## 2. Educational-Mediation through the (s)W.I.T.C.H. approach

Educational interventions in complex contexts such as migration, characterized by high levels of differentiation and vulnerability, cannot be reduced to episodic or purely emergency-based actions. Rather, they should be governed by principles of continuity and by processes that support the stabilization of individuals within a new cultural system. From this perspective, the research question guiding the design of the two interventions discussed in this section was the following: what role does the construct of Educational Mediation play in migrant contexts in countering marginalization and social exclusion? More specifically, the two laboratories pursued the following objectives:

- to explore how information and communication technologies (ICTs) - in particular podcasting, biographical storytelling, and selected applications of Artificial Intelligence (Empathic AI) - may foster linguistic development, self-efficacy, and group cohesion;
- to examine how the construct of Educational Mediation within non-formal learning environments can enhance second language acquisition while simultaneously strengthening community ties and intercultural dialogue.

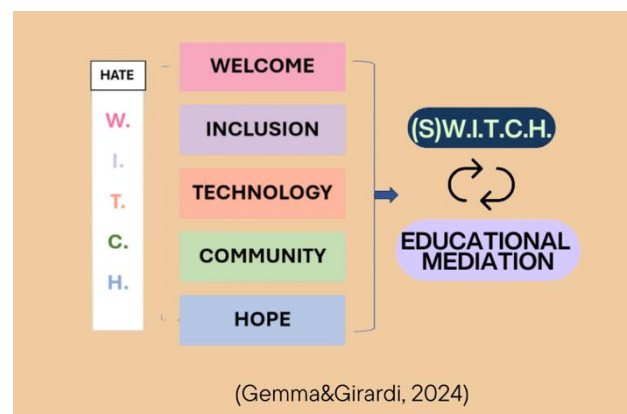
Accordingly, drawing on an ecology of educational interventions and on the personalization of pedagogical planning, especially in complex and multiethnic settings, an approach labelled Hate W.I.T.C.H. (Gemma & Girardi, 2024) was developed over two years of participant observation and qualitative auto-ethnographic research (Biffi, 2025) conducted at the LESS Social Cooperative<sup>1</sup>. This approach is grounded in

---

<sup>1</sup> For 25 years, the cooperative has been engaged in the reception and integration of third-country nationals and in combating social exclusion: <https://www.lessimpresasociale.it/chi-siamo/>

the deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices and in the co-construction of a collective, internally generated counter-narrative within the reception community. Migrants in reception centers display a high degree of super-diversity (Vertovec, 2023), resulting from internal linguistic, religious, and cultural variability. In practice, the ideal of integrated and holistic reception supported by a multidisciplinary team is often difficult to achieve. In the case of minors, for instance, time constraints linked to the proximity of turning eighteen, along with bureaucratic obstacles - such as delays in residence permit regularization and in the activation of legal guardianship - frequently hinder the provision of genuinely personalized pathways. Despite the commitment and expertise of many professionals, standardized practices and pre-packaged solutions often prevail over tailor-made interventions responding to individual needs (Save the Children, 2024). From a pedagogical standpoint, inclusion must be understood as a layered and relational process: it involves the creation of bonds within groups that come to constitute a community, rather than assuming community as a given starting point. For this reason, the proposed approach metaphorically integrates five interconnected phases (Figure 1) within socio-educational support processes. Beginning with Welcome practices of first reception and Inclusion at the socio-material level, it moves through Technology, understood as linguistic and digital literacy aimed at countering dehumanization and marginalization, towards Community building through communities of practice, ultimately aspiring to a pedagogy of Hope. Here, “hope” is conceived not as a romantic or irrational metaphor, but as a concrete cognitive faculty enabling individuals to imagine and project themselves into the future, acting as a catalyst for vectors of change.

**Figure 1:** Modelling the Approach. From *Hate Speech* to *Hate sW.I.T.C.H*



### 2.1 Podcasting as a tool for personal and community empowerment

The opportunity to implement the podcasting laboratory emerged within the framework of the Exit GenerAction project, funded by the Next Generation EU 2021-2027 program, which focuses on socio-educational interventions aimed at combating educational poverty through the involvement of third-sector organizations, schools, and universities operating in Southern Italy. The target group for the

training action consisted of foreign minors - predominantly unaccompanied foreign minors (UFM) enrolled in second-level reception programs - aged between 16 and 18. The design of the intervention was informed by a needs analysis conducted through focus groups involving educational staff from the multidisciplinary teams working within the reception projects hosting the minors. This analysis highlighted significant difficulties among participants in engaging with language literacy activities, particularly about supplementary language learning initiatives delivered outside the formal educational framework of the CPIA system. The need to experiment with alternative, low-cost technologies that were easily accessible to participants, together with the greater ease of engagement offered by spoken narration - which provides a form of protective mediation for individuals in situations of vulnerability and legal protection - guided the instructional design towards the implementation of a podcasting laboratory (Menéndez, 2025) as a potential learning outcome in second language acquisition. The laboratory was hosted at LESS Social Cooperative and involved participants from diverse countries of origin - Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, Mali, Gambia, and Côte d'Ivoire - with French and Arabic as vehicular languages. The program was delivered over a four-month period, with an average frequency of two weekly sessions lasting two hours each, for a total of 60 hours of implementation. The educational setting included a multimedia laboratory and the presence of two media education practitioners alongside a linguistic-cultural mediator. Participant engagement was fostered through thematic discussions, at times triggered by embodied and corporeal elements (Iavarone & Iachini, 2016), such as dance, at other times by cultural differences or by themes related to spirituality. The primary aim of the laboratory was to create a collective self-narrative experience in which individual lived experiences were transformed into a performative diary shared with others through digital storytelling. As an outcome of the Italian language course, a first pilot edition of a podcast was produced and made available on Spotify. The opportunity to narrate oneself contributed to strengthening participants' self-esteem and sense of agency, while also facilitating familiarity with non-violent approaches to engaging with diversity and with hate speech (Grigoletto, 2024), which is at times experienced and internalized within host communities.

## *2.2 Empathic Artificial Intelligence in vocational training pathways for Asylum Seekers*

This application is particularly effective for the acquisition of specialized language and for language learning connected to reskilling and upskilling pathways for migrant construction workers. It is based on a calibrated combination of easily replicable teaching methodologies and low-cost technologies, capable of meeting labor market demands with effective outcomes and reduced training time. Focusing on emerging training needs and recent methodological innovations in education, a non-deferrable paradigmatic shift clearly emerges: the transition from traditional methodological, didactic models toward a teaching methodology that reconceptualizes educational action as a dynamic, cyclical, and reversible process. This approach implies a reconfiguration of roles, temporalities, and practices, oriented toward respect for individual learning rhythms and the centrality of the learner. Within this framework, the Flipped Inclusion (Corona & De Giuseppe, 2017) paradigm integrates

the concept of inclusion as an ecological and systemic developmental process with the principles of flipped pedagogy, understood as a transformative and non-directive alternative to traditional asymmetries of time and authority. Consistent with a simplex logic (Berthoz, 2011), the instructional design adopted a parallel, rather than sequential, development of linguistic empowerment and workplace safety content. Both learning modules were delivered through a low-cost artificial intelligence application, Rask AI<sup>2</sup>, for linguistic translation. The tool enables the production of short, editable videos in over 130 languages, reproducing speech through the sampling of the learner's image and voice. This application proved particularly effective for the acquisition of specialized language and task-oriented linguistic competences. Alongside traditional Italian L2 instruction, learners produced short video clips using their own digital avatars, facilitating self-modeling processes (Iavarone, 2022). These avatars functioned simultaneously as learning tools and benchmarks for communicative effectiveness in job interviews, curricular video presentations, and simulated professional situations. The project was implemented in two editions. The first pilot edition in 2023, involved 20 participants aged 17-32 from Central Africa, the Maghreb, and Egypt (180 hours, face-to-face). The second edition in 2025 included 20 participants aged 20-41 from Tunisia (150 hours, blended learning), with 25 hours dedicated to Italian L2 (A1/A2) and work-related specialized vocabulary. The program was delivered by the training provider accredited by the Campania Region, Idee Insieme, and Formedil within the project Employability between Italy and Tunisia, funded by Nuove Frontiere Lavoro. The training pathway concluded with an intensive 30-hour module on masonry, workplace safety, and labour rights, during which participants produced AI-supported videos. The learning process was grounded in emulative learning mechanisms (Bandura, 2001) and principles of embodied cognition (Araujo, 2020), fostering empathy and active engagement.

### 3. Conclusions

In foreign language teaching, linguistic mediation does not merely correspond to translation or interpreting, but also encompasses a broader range of activities, as highlighted in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2018). Overall, the use of linguistic AI within a participatory didactic framework contributed to reducing cultural heterogeneity gaps among migrant learners and strengthening perceived self-efficacy in learning processes (Girardi, 2024). This short reflection has highlighted how language education in vulnerable settings can be understood as a boundary field of study, located at the crossroads of pedagogy, sociology, anthropology, and sociolinguistics. Drawing on intercultural and intersectional perspectives, Mediation-Education recognizes the legitimacy of multiple forms of knowledge and views education as an open and evolving process rather than a linear one, in which linguistic mediation and digital technologies facilitate the collective construction of social and cultural meanings. Integrating life skills into language teaching also calls for the development of caring and enabling learning environments, where educators can accompany group processes, en-

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://it.rask.ai/ai-video-translator>

courage cooperation, and nurture mutual trust. In this sense, the classroom is conceived not merely as a place for transmitting knowledge, but as a context for inclusion and the cultivation of meaningful relationships.

## References

- Araujo, A. (2020). Memory from a pragmatic point of view: intersections of Merleau-Ponty and Francisco Varela. *Cognitio: Revista de Filosofia*, 21(2), 203-230. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23925/2316-5278.2020v21i2p203-230>
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual review of psychology*, 52(1), 1-26.
- Bateso, G. (1976). *Verso un'ecologia della mente*. Milano: Adelphi.
- Berthoz, A. (2011). *La semplicità*. Torino: Codice.
- Biffi, D. (2025). *Auto-etnografia dell'accoglienza. Lavorare nei servizi per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati*. Bergamo: Edizioni junior.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). Ecological systems theory (1992). In U. Bronfenbrenner (Ed.), *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development* (pp. 106–173). Sage Publications Ltd
- Chabot, P. (2021). *L'epoca delle transizioni. Pensare il mondo a venire*. Roma: Castelvecchi Editore.
- Commun 2, 16036. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.36>
- Copertari, S., Lopes, C. N., & Delmaschio, C. (2023). La techné educativa en pandemia. Diálogos para una educación inclusiva desde la virtualidad. *Revista Científica Educ@ção*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46616/ediorarce-978-65-00-71566-8c>
- Corona, F., & De Giuseppe, T. (2017). La Flipped inclusion, tra impianto teoretico e didattica sperimentale di aula aumentata per una didattica inclusiva. *Pedagogia più didattica*, 3, 1-7.
- Council of Europe (2018), *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*, Council of Europe, Strasbourg: <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>
- Di Tore, P. A. (2024). È possibile un'Intelligenza senza corpo?. n. 0Volume.
- Frauenfelder, E., Santoianni, F., & Ciasullo, A. (2018). Implícito bioeducativo. Emociones y cognición. RELAdEI. *Revista Latinoamericana De Educación Infantil*, 7(1), 42-51. Recuperado a partir de <https://revistas.usc.gal/index.php/reladei/article/view/5258>
- Frauenfelder, E. (2001). *Pedagogia e biologia: una possibile "alleanza"*. Napoli: Liguori

- Gemma, S., & Girardi, F. (2024). Boundaries of language, boundaries of worlds: a reflection on hate speech experienced and internalized among minors from different cultures. *Q-TIMES WEBMAGAZINE*, 16, 285-297. doi: 10.14668/QTimes\_16423
- Girardi, F. (2024). Designing the training of construction workers through the use of ai and augmented reality. *Giornale Italiano di Educazione alla Salute, Sport e Didattica Inclusiva*, 8(2), Edizioni Universitarie Romane. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v8i3.1122>
- Grigoletto, A. (2024). I podcast e la lotta alla violenza di genere: dal racconto alla consapevolezza. Università degli Studi di Padova
- Iavarone, M. L. (2025) (a cura di). Neotenia e plasticità umana. Una prospettiva transdisciplinare per l'educazione. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Iavarone, M. L., & Iachini, S. (2016). A teaching embodied-centred approach: some methodological and professional implications. In *La professionalità degli insegnanti. La ricerca e le pratiche* (pp. 24-25). PensaMultimedia.
- Koch S., Fuchs T. (2011), Embodied arts therapies, in "The Arts in Psychotherapy", 38, pp. 276-280
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (2006). *L'apprendimento situato. Dall'osservazione alla partecipazione attiva nei contesti sociali*. Edizioni Erickson.
- Menéndez, N. M. R., Capa, M. C. C., Pila, J. A. Y., Gonzales, J. C. O., Ortegano, G. N. C., & Orozco, S. E. S. (2025). Uso de Podcast Educativos para la Recuperación de la Memoria Oral en Comunidades Ancestrales del Ecuador.: Use of Educational Podcasts for the Recovery of Oral Memory in Ancestral Communities of Ecuador. *Revista Multidisciplinar de Estudios Generales*, 4(2), 184-200.
- Thompson, E., & Varela, F. J. (2001). Radical embodiment: neural dynamics and consciousness. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 5(10), pp. 418-425. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70577/reg.v4i2.89>
- Nosari, S., & Guarcello, E. (2024). *Quali skills per l'umano? Un contributo al dibattito non cognitivo/cognitivo*. Milano: Mondadori.
- Pedersen, D. B. (2016). *Integrating social sciences and humanities in interdisciplinary research*. Palgrave
- Piccardo, E., & North, B. (2019). *The action-oriented approach: A dynamic vision of language education* (Vol. 72). Multilingual Matters.
- Save the Children. (2024). *Nascosti in piena vista*.  
<https://s3-www.savethechildren.it/public/allegati/nascosti-piena-vista-2024.pdf>
- Varela, F. J., Thompson, E. and Rosch, E. 1991. *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Cambridge: MIT Press
- Vertovec, S. (2023). *Superdiversity: Migration and social complexity* (p. 251). Taylor & Francis.
- Vygotskij L. (1987). *Il processo cognitivo*. Universale Scientifica Boringhieri, Torino.