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DEVELOPING DIGITAL SOFT SKILLS IN THE HYPER-GHETTO: A CASE STUDY OF THE PUNTO LUCE IN CASAL DI PRINCIPE

Digital technologies are not uniformly converted into social resources in hyper-ghetto contexts. This article examines the Punto luce center in Casal di Principe, an area marked by educational deprivation, socio-economic precarity, and persistent territorial stigmatization, to analyze how a local educational service can transform everyday digital practices into social and learning resources. Focusing on the Youth in stem and beyond (Usb) project, we explore how Stem (Science, technology, engineering and mathematics) workshops and media education foster digital competencies and digital soft skills. Grounded in theories of hyper-ghetto, cultural and digital capital, and the digital divide, the article employs an across-method triangulation combining longitudinal surveys and interviews with educators. Findings show strengthened technical abilities and critical media use. The analysis suggests that high-density relational educational ecosystems can partly disrupt mechanisms of marginality reproduction, converting otherwise inert technological access into social capabilities for young people facing structural deprivation and limited future opportunities.

KEYWORDS *Digital Divide, Hyper-ghetto, Digital Capital, Media Education, Educational Inequality.*

1. Introduction

Digital technologies currently occupy a central position in social life, reshaping social relations, communication processes and educational practices

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(Floridi 2015; Ball *et al.* 2022). Their proactive use opens new educational opportunities (Haleem *et al.* 2022); however, these opportunities are not evenly distributed across different social contexts.

In particular, in contexts at high risk of social marginalization, access to digital technologies does not automatically translate into inclusion, as illustrated by the case examined in this study. Following Loïc Wacquant's perspective (2016), such contexts are defined as hyper-ghetto, spaces characterized by persistent poverty, limited availability of public services, infrastructural precariousness and educational fragility. Under these conditions, the digital divide should not be understood merely as a lack of technological devices, but rather as an effect of social marginalization, which renders technologies potentially accessible yet socially unusable due to the absence of adequate cultural capital and digital competences capable of transforming them into resources (Airoldi 2013; Bentivenga 2022).

This article examines the role of the educational service *Punto luce* in Casal di Principe, a municipality near Caserta, in the south of Italy, and highlights how participation in the «Youth in stem and beyond» project can transform digital technologies into resources for empowerment and social participation among the minors involved. The project promotes digital competences through practical and creative workshops oriented towards Stem fields and the conscious use of media and social media, with particular attention to issues of gender and social inclusion.

From a methodological perspective, the study adopts an across-method triangulation that integrates qualitative and quantitative techniques within an interpretive framework. Although the analysis of the findings is guided by a qualitative sociological approach, quantitative tools, such as questionnaires administered across multiple waves, are used to observe changes in the digital competences of the beneficiaries of the educational service. This strategy makes it possible to examine the same phenomenon from different angles, drawing on the strengths of each method to compensate for their limitations and allowing a more robust understanding of the observed processes (Amaturo *et al.* 2016). Accordingly, the aim is not to assess the effectiveness of a programme, but to analyse sociologically how participation in the Usb project contributes to the development of digital competences and capacities for social participation within a hyper-ghetto context.

The research is guided by the following questions: How does a local educational service, based in a hyper-ghetto context, contribute to the development of digital competences among the young people who attend it? How are these competences translated into processes of empowerment and social participation?

The article advances both theoretical reflection and policy implications, positioning itself within a research niche that integrates studies on the digital divide, education in contexts of marginalization and Stem-based socio-educational practices. It engages with an emerging line of research that investigates how digital technologies become effective resources for empowerment only when supported by educational ecosystems capable of transforming technical access into social capacities, an area that remains underexplored in the Italian context and is crucial for understanding processes of digital inclusion in highly vulnerable territories.

The findings show that the acquisition of digital competences is not limited to technical dimensions, but also involves processes of social recognition and participation, highlighting how educational intervention fosters forms of situated citizenship within the hyper-ghetto. The data indicate that beneficiaries who participated in the project's activities strengthened their digital and social competences through play, experimentation and the creative use of technologies. They developed a more conscious use of media and social media and enhanced problem-solving capacities related to the proactive use of digital technologies.

2. The hyper-ghetto of Casal di Principe

The research is situated in Casal di Principe, a municipality in the province of Caserta with approximately 22,000 inhabitants, historically marked by structural conditions of poverty and persistent forms of social exclusion. Over time, these conditions have fostered the spread of organized criminal activities, making the area particularly vulnerable to processes of economic exploitation and social isolation. In this context, the Camorra has played a central role in shaping local socio-economic dynamics and structuring community relations (Berrutti 2017).

From the Seventies onwards, the expansion of the *Casalesi* clan contributed to the consolidation of an informal and criminogenic economy, often tolerated by institutions and residents (Villani *et al.* 2019). This pervasive presence has produced a form of collective identity stigma, whereby the term *casalese*, in its socially shared common meaning among Campania's inhabitants, to use Bourdieu's terminology (1998), does not merely identify residents of the municipality, but also members of the criminal clan. This symbolic ambivalence has intensified processes of territorial stigmatization (Wacquant 2016), legitimized by the deeply rooted criminal history of the area (Maresca 2015).

Over the years, these forms of criminal domination have transformed the local system of expectations and aspirations, reducing socially legitimized opportunities and limiting young people's ability to project themselves towards alternative futures. In this context, the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2013) emerges as a situated form of cultural capital, whose development is hindered by the lack of models, networks and symbolic resources necessary to imagine life trajectories beyond the criminal universe of reference.

This dynamic recalls the notion of the hyper-ghetto elaborated by Wacquant (2016), who describes urban contexts characterized by institutional abandonment, informal economies and social isolation, where stigmatized groups are confined within territorial enclaves defined by marginality and collective infamy. Similarly, Casal di Principe displays features consistent with such forms of spatial and symbolic segregation, including urban decay, distance from major infrastructures, limited public and private investment and high levels of socio-economic distress (Morlicchio *et al.* 2017). The analysis of secondary sources, direct observation and testimonies collected during the research highlights a complex situation marked by educational poverty, economic instability and a lack of territorial welfare services (Fuschi 2023).

Within this context, opportunities for the emancipation of minors are severely constrained. Alongside material deprivation, cultural deprivation undermines social participation and access to socially recognized forms of inclusion. This condition also affects processes of digitalization, as in an increasingly technology-mediated society (Srnicek 2017), digital inequalities accumulate upon pre-existing social constraints.

In hyper-ghetto contexts, the digital divide does not concern access to devices or infrastructures alone, but rather translates into a lack of competences, knowledge and cultural codes required to transform technologies into social resources (Mayo 2009). From this perspective, Bourdieu's framework (1998) offers a useful interpretative lens, particularly when compared with its application to digital devices as proposed by Airoldi (2022). Access to technological resources is insufficient without the possession of adequate cultural capital that enables their effective use. Digitalization therefore risks reproducing and reinforcing existing inequalities. In a contemporary reading, Ragnedda *et al.* (2020) identify digital capital as the capacity to convert the use of technologies into social, economic and cultural resources. This form of capital depends on the interaction between individual competences, available social networks and opportunities provided by the context. Consequently, in marginalized settings, the lack of cultural and relational capital means that digital access remains potential rather than translating into actual social participation.

According to Van Dijk (2020), the digital divide is articulated across three levels: material access, competences and social use of technologies. It is the latter that determines whether technologies are converted into resources or disadvantages. In the case of hyper-ghetto, inequalities primarily affect the levels of competences and social use, rendering technologies potentially accessible yet socially unusable. As a result, digitalization, far from being a neutral factor, may function as an additional vector of inequality, contributing to the perpetuation of mechanisms of social reproduction (Spanò *et al.* 2021; Liotta 2023). For these reasons, educational interventions in marginalized territories should be oriented not only towards overcoming material poverty, but also towards the production of symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu *et al.* 1970).

3. Breaking the cycle of inequality: the Usb project

In recent years, the third sector and public administration have attempted to build and strengthen synergistic alliances to address educational poverty in the territory described above, primarily through the reuse of assets confiscated from organized crime. A significant example of this regenerative synergy is the *Punto luce* project, implemented by Save the children in collaboration with cooperativa Eva since 2017, transforming a space marked by social distress into a place of regeneration and community education. These educational spaces can be interpreted as sites of production of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988), capable of counteracting forms of symbolic and relational deprivation typical of hyper-ghetto contexts.

In order to break cycles of social reproduction and educational poverty, the two organizations established a high-intensity educational centre, open to children, adolescents and their parents, coordinated by educational professionals and supported by volunteers. From Monday to Friday, the centre offers children and adolescents spaces suited to their needs, where they can access opportunities for growth and development by freely participating in study activities, safe use of computers and the internet, reading, artistic, cultural and recreational workshops, physical activities and play. From this perspective, these activities represent practices of accumulation of cultural and relational capital that facilitate access to opportunities and reduce the reproductive effects of territorial marginality (Bourdieu *et al.* 1970).

Cooperativa Eva, which has been engaged in combating gender-based violence for twenty-three years, focuses part of its activities on girls and young women, who are more exposed to cycles of limited opportunities. The initiatives are carried out in synergy with schools and with the broader educational

network that has long been active in territorial development and are embedded in an integrated approach that aims, on the one hand, to strengthen parental competences among adults and, on the other, to provide minors with meaningful support from early childhood. In this perspective, education contributes to the formation of digital citizenship (Mossberger *et al.* 2003), understood as the capacity to use technologies in a conscious, participatory and socially oriented manner.

Among the activities developed by *Punto luce* to address educational poverty and the digital divide is the Usb project, an initiative aimed at supporting children and adolescents in the development of digital and human competences through practical and creative workshops that introduce them to Stem fields, while promoting a conscious and effective use of new media and social media. Digital competences are understood not only as technical and operational skills, but also as critical and social capacities related to the use of technologies (Ragnedda *et al.* 2020; Rivoltella 2018).

Human competences, or digital soft skills, refer to relational, communicative and self-management capacities that enable individuals to transform digital use into opportunities for participation and social recognition. Digital soft skills are conceived as transversal digital competences, rooted in the ability to interact effectively with others in digital environments. They do not derive exclusively from technical instruction, but are closely connected to individuals' cultural background, previous experiences and relational resources. From this perspective, digital soft skills include abilities such as effective communication via chat, digital empathy, collaboration on shared platforms and technological adaptability, as well as more advanced forms of digital literacy, problem solving related to technical issues and knowledge networking, understood as the capacity to extract, select and use online information in a structured manner (Haddon *et al.* 2020).

These competences, which are difficult to quantify within formal educational pathways, operate by converting the use of technologies into social, cognitive, and cultural practices rather than merely technical abilities. This reinforces the idea of digital capital as a socially situated resource, generated through the interaction between individual competences, relational networks and opportunities offered by the educational context (Ragnedda *et al.* 2020).

Within the socio-educational design of the initiative, particular attention was devoted to gender and social inclusion, as well as to ethical considerations, through the implementation of:

- workshops focused on the development of human competences, in which children and adolescents participate in activities aimed at fo-

stering transversal and relational skills, including social competences, positive communication, active listening, teamwork and creativity. These competences intervene on the second and third levels of the digital divide identified by Van Dijk (2020), enabling the use of technologies not only at a technical level, but also as social and relational resources;

- digital storytelling workshops, including graphic design and 3D printing, coding, robotics and tinkering activities, aimed at developing problem solving capacities through the proactive use of technology. These practices act on the transformation of digital capital (Ragnedda *et al.* 2020), allowing minors to convert technological use into forms of recognition, participation and cultural production.

Within this framework, the Stem laboratories of the Usb project do not assume relevance as didactic methodologies itself, but as processes through which minors can transform technologies from potentially available tools into concrete social resources. Through creative design activities, collaborative tinkering and digital production, children and adolescents experience forms of problem solving, educational protagonism and mutual recognition. In a context definable as a hyper-ghetto, these practices contribute to making technological access a form of participation rather than a mere technical possibility, intervening on the levels of competences and social use of technologies identified by Van Dijk (2020) and fostering the generation of digital capital as a relational, cultural and community-based resource.

4. Methodology

The research aims to analyse how participation in the Usb project, promoted by the *Punto luce* centre run by Save the children and cooperativa Eva in Casal di Principe, contributes to the development of digital competences and digital soft skills in an urban context characterised by socio-educational marginality, traceable to the dynamics of the hyper-ghetto (Wacquant 2016). From this perspective, the study does not intend to evaluate the effectiveness of the project in terms of performance or impact, but to understand how the digital practices proposed within the educational service can be transformed into social, cultural and relational resources, fostering processes of empowerment, participation and the production of digital capital (Ragnedda *et al.* 2020; Van Dijk 2020).

The adopted methodology is based on an across-methods triangulation strategy (Amaturo *et al.* 2016), combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. This integration was considered necessary to observe the transformations of minors' competences longitudinally, with particular attention to how these competences are incorporated, exercised and translated into forms of social recognition and participation in the activities of the educational service. The research design included the administration of a structured questionnaire at three moments of observation (t0, t1, t2), alongside a series of semi-structured interviews addressed to educational practitioners, who are here considered privileged witnesses due to their role as mediators of digital practices.

For the selection of the statistical units of analysis, a quota-based sample was adopted (Corbetta 1999), homogeneous in terms of age within the range of 6 to 17 years, with particular care taken to include beneficiaries living in conditions of widespread precarity. Official secondary statistical sources were also consulted, including Istat, Svimez reports, Inps and Ipe data. A questionnaire was administered to the sample of beneficiaries at three different moments of observation, and, during the same period, semi-structured interviews were conducted with service practitioners.

The limited sample size (n = 40) does not allow for inferential or statistically generalisable analyses, but it enables a dense description consistent with the adopted sociological perspective and suitable for capturing the role of technologies in the lives of minors living in a context of educational deprivation and socio-economic vulnerability. The composition of the sample, including the distribution by nationality and gender, is illustrated in Table 1.

Tab. 1. *Contingency table (nationality x gender)*

	Males	**Females**	**Total**
Italian	15	18	33
Other (migrant background)	14	3	7
Total	19	21	40

Source: Researchers' data processing.

In parallel with the quantitative data collection, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with one educational coordinator and five service practitioners. This choice responds to the need to consider educators as central actors in the processes of construction of digital practices and technological socialisation. Their testimonies make it possible to understand not only the technical activities carried out within the laboratories, but above all the mea-

nings attributed to the use of technologies and the transformations observable in the relational, affective and identity dimensions of minors.

As anticipated, the administration of the questionnaire was articulated into three phases. The first survey (t0) concerned the initial conditions of the minors, with particular attention to the frequency of participation in educational activities, familiarity with digital tools, participation in laboratories and the first forms of collaboration with peers and educators. The second survey (t1) made it possible to observe transformations related to participation in digital laboratories, with specific reference to problem solving processes, the use of technologies and the ability to collaborate autonomously in the construction of collective projects. The third survey (t2) documented the outcomes of the activities in terms of self-esteem, confidence in one's own abilities, awareness of technologies and recognition of educators as shared points of reference.

The dimensions investigated through the questionnaire concern frequency of attendance, participation in laboratory activities and study, the ability to collaborate, to ask for help, to support peers, to manage conflict situations, to express one's own point of view and to understand others' emotions. In addition, aspects related to the conscious use of digital tools, awareness of risks present on online platforms and the ability to narrate what has been learned were explored. These dimensions were interpreted within the framework of digital soft skills, understood as transversal and relational competences that enable technologies to be transformed into social and communicative resources rather than merely technical abilities, in line with the arguments advanced by Haddon *et al.* (2020).

The triangulation between quantitative data and qualitative testimonies allowed the processes of transformation of minors' digital competences to be interpreted not in terms of evaluation of project effectiveness, but as a slow and progressive construction of digital capital, manifested in confidence in one's own abilities, in relationships with educators and in the possibility of imagining technologies as tools for participation, recognition and digital citizenship. This perspective is consistent with recent analyses of the digital divide, according to which access to technologies represents only the first level of inequality, while competences and social use constitute the dimensions that are truly decisive in the production of new forms of exclusion and opportunity (Van Dijk 2020).

Within this framework, technologies emerge not only as technical tools, but as social practices that can assume an enabling function, particularly within a fragile social context characterised by educational deprivation.

In addition to the questionnaire, the research included a qualitative component based on semi-structured interviews with six privileged observers,

specifically one coordinator of the educational service and five practitioners involved in the laboratory activities of the Usb project. This methodological choice derives from the need to analyse not only the observable effects of the activities, but also the relational, motivational and symbolic processes that make it possible for digital technologies to be transformed into educational resources within a hyper-ghetto context.

The interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were recorded using a mobile phone following the reading and signing of an informed consent form by the participants. The recordings were transcribed using the voice recognition system integrated into Microsoft word, followed by manual verification and cleaning of the transcripts. The aim of involving privileged observers was not to evaluate the performance of practitioners, but to interpret the relationship between educational practices, the use of technologies and structural conditions of marginality.

The thematic analysis of the data was conducted following the logic of across-methods triangulation (Amaturo *et al.* 2016), in which qualitative evidence does not serve to confirm quantitative results, but rather to deepen and problematise them. In this case, the objective was to investigate the processes through which technologies are transformed into digital and cultural capital. This approach made it possible to examine the material, relational, affective and symbolic conditions that influence the effective acquisition of digital competences by the young people involved, through a critical reading of questionnaire data and of the narratives and perspectives of educators who, as anticipated, played a central role in processes of social and digital mediation.

5. Results section

The thematic analysis of the interviews is summarised in Table 2, which reports the main themes that emerged and their critical interpretation. The identified areas derive from a process of thematic coding that combines categories emerging from the empirical material with theoretically relevant dimensions for the analysis of digitalisation in hyper-ghetto contexts. The table does not aim to capture the full complexity of the collected narratives, but rather provides a structured and synthetic reading of the most significant patterns.

The table should be read sequentially, starting from the general synthetic theme, moving through the summary of the empirical result and culminating in the abductive and hermeneutic interpretation, which brings the empirical data into dialogue with the theoretical framework. This interpretation deve-

lops within a critical perspective capable of holding together both contextual dynamics and the specific features of the intervention.

Tab. 2. *Thematic areas emerging from interviews with educators*

Thematic Area	Summary of Findings	Critical Interpretation of findings
Material access to devices	Limited availability and strong desirability of digital tools	Scarcity of technological resources frames technology as a symbolic asset rather than a routine competence
Use of social media	Unmediated use, exposure to violent or sexualized content	Social media take on compensatory functions due to weak or absent family educational mediation
Basic operational skills	Difficulties with software, keyboards, file saving, 3d printing	Unequal digitalization persists: intensive use does not correspond to the development of technical skills
Educational relational capital	Trust and continuity in the relationship with educators	The educational relationship becomes a crucial infrastructure for meaningful digital access
Digital soft skills	Collaboration, autonomy, problem solving, communication	These transversal skills emerge when educational contexts reorient digital use toward formative purposes
Motivational dimension	High interest driven by the rarity of devices	Motivation is shaped by material deprivation rather than by structured engagement with innovation

Source: Researchers' data processing.

In addition, educators described an extremely complex territorial context, characterised by very low levels of economic and cultural capital, very low household incomes and a level of parental education generally not exceeding lower secondary education. Interaction with families is perceived as the most challenging aspect of educational work, precisely because conditions of economic and cultural marginality intersect with institutional mistrust, employment precarity and, in some cases, family histories marked by violence or exclusion. Within this framework, *Punto luce* emerges as a high relational-density educational space, as also highlighted in Table 2.

Children and adolescents participate in a wide range of activities, including educational support for study, sports workshops, artistic and cultural laboratories, outdoor activities, outings within the local area and, more specifically within the Usb project, digital and Stem laboratories. Analysis of the questionnaire data shows a homogeneous level of participation among beneficiaries across the activities offered by the educational service. Minors take part both in activities perceived as more playful, such as football, outdoor games and outings to swimming pools or parks, and in activities perceived as less recreational, such as educational support for study or language laboratories.

With specific reference to the Usb project, the data indicate a generally high level of appreciation for all the proposed digital and Stem laboratories, including 3d printing, Makey makey, halocode, educational robotics, tinkering, English language activities, circle time and digital storytelling, as shown in Fig.1.

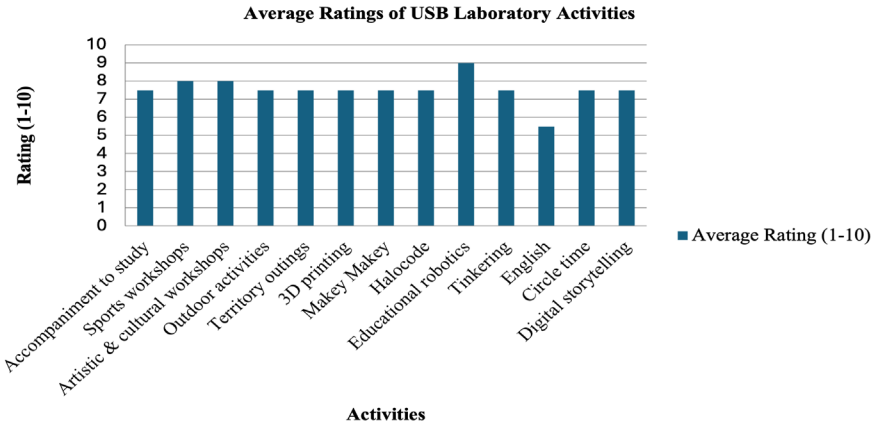

Fig. 1. Average ratings of Usb laboratory activities.
Source: Researchers' data processing.

The laboratory activities of the Usb project receive average evaluations above 7 on a 0–10 scale, with an average below 6 recorded only for the English language laboratory. Among the Usb laboratories, educational robotics achieves the highest level of appreciation and is perceived by participants as a highly engaging activity, oriented towards teamwork, design and experimentation.

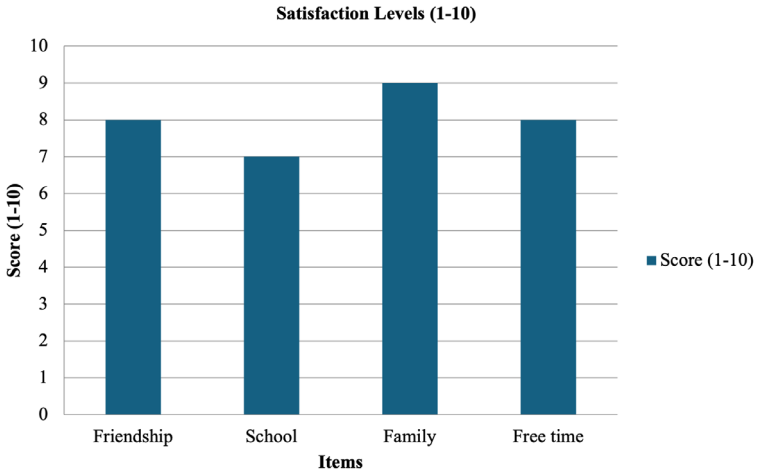

Fig. 2. Satisfaction levels for the workshops.
Source: Researchers' data processing.

Remaining on the topic of satisfaction, it is also relevant to report the perceived level of satisfaction expressed by young participants about selected dimensions of their everyday lives (Fig. 2). The highest scores emerge in relation to family (mean = 9) and friendships (mean = 8), followed by leisure time (mean = 8) and study (mean = 7). These results indicate a generally positive relational framework and a favourable perception of educational processes, albeit with room for improvement in the school-related domain.

Technologies and everyday life

Figure 3 shows the frequency of use of digital devices, measured on a scale ranging from 0, not at all, to 10, very frequently.

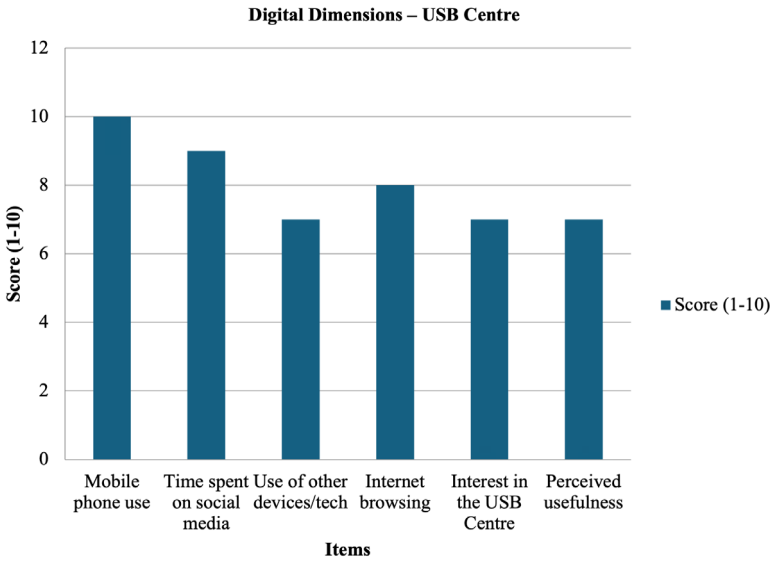

Fig. 3. Frequency of use of digital devices.
Source: Researchers' data processing.

Use of digital technologies and social media

This figure highlights the strong centrality of digital technologies in the everyday lives of the beneficiaries. Ninety-five per cent of the sample report spending most of the day using a smartphone. All beneficiaries who own a phone, including children as young as six years old, report spending a significant amount of time on social media platforms. Tiktok emerges as the most prefer-

red social network, followed by Youtube and Instagram, with markedly lower levels of preference for the latter platforms.

In this regard, educators emphasise a structural ambivalence in the use of technologies. On the one hand, adolescents attending the service appear highly skilled in navigating the internet and using social media platforms. On the other hand, before the implementation of the Usb project, many beneficiaries lacked basic competences in the use of certain digital devices, to the extent that, according to educators, many did not even know how to turn on a computer.

The attention and attraction of beneficiaries towards digital technologies appear to be linked to two main dimensions. The first is a structural dimension, related to processes of digitalisation and advanced digital capitalism, which foster a widespread interest among young people in smartphones and social media platforms, also perceived as potential channels for income generation and social mobility. The second is a material dimension, connected to inequalities in technological endowments. Many minors are strongly attracted to tablets, consoles, robots and other devices made available by the educational service, while their families often lack the economic resources necessary to purchase similar tools.

In the interviews, educators express concern about the intensive use of smartphones, particularly regarding the exposure to sexualised content and representations of violent and misogynistic cultures on Tiktok. In this sense, the Usb project is described as a space for the educational repositioning of technologies, aimed at transforming spontaneous and unmediated uses of digital devices into more conscious and protected practices.

Digital competences and human skills

The joint analysis of quantitative and qualitative data highlights that the Usb project does not merely transfer technical skills but contributes to strengthening a set of human and relational competences that can be associated with the domains of digital soft skills and human skills (Iavarone 2025).

The activities carried out within the project enabled beneficiaries to acquire a range of competences. These include learning digital storytelling by developing the ability to structure a narrative, design a storyboard and define characters, settings and objects; engaging with tinkering, Makey makey, scratch, 3d printing and Lego spike, experimenting with the creation of physical objects through digital design; learning to use 3d printer design software, to plan in a digital environment and to autonomously print their own projects;

and constructing and programming physical elements using Lego spike, integrating manual activity, problem solving and programming.

About competences that are not strictly technical, group activities carried out within the Usb project contributed to the development of self-awareness and positive self-esteem, to the strengthening of the ability to express oneself and recognise one's own emotions, to the exercise of empathy, human connection, respect for diversity and inclusion, and to the enhancement of effective and positive communication based on active listening, teamwork and collaboration.

These dynamics are confirmed by responses to the question, as shown in Fig. 4, «To what extent do the activities carried out at *Punto luce* help you improve the following aspects of your life? ». The results show high average values across almost all the dimensions considered, including family relationships, friendships, study, leisure activities, knowledge of the neighbourhood and the city, use of technologies, language skills, future orientation, self-confidence, trust in others and interest in social activities.

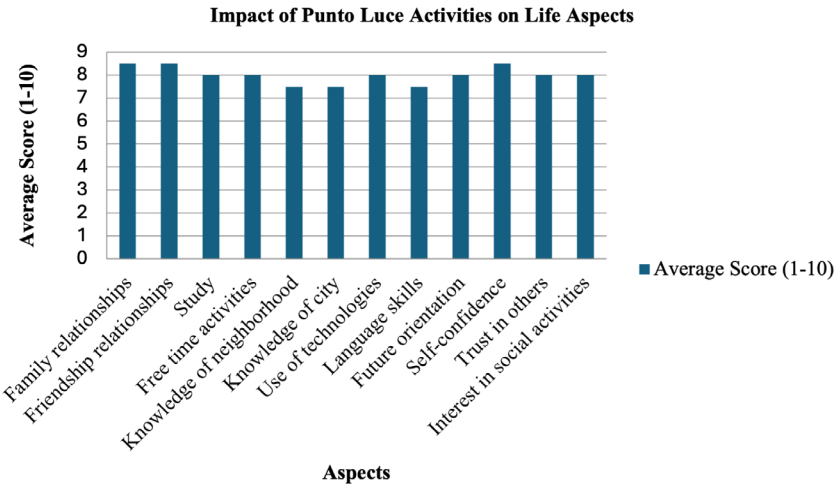

Fig. 4. Impact of *Punto Luce* activities on the younger's life.
Source: Researchers' data processing.

These findings highlight how participation in the activities of *Punto luce* and, more specifically, in the Usb project contributes to integrating digital, territorial and identity-related competences, transforming the relationship with technologies from mere passive consumption into an opportunity for personal and collective growth.

Digital divide, new opportunities for access and awareness

A central dimension concerns the relationship between the Usb project and the digital divide. According to all the interviewed educators, the initiatives implemented within the project contributed to improving beneficiaries' digital competences and to partially reducing the digital divide, particularly with regard to competences and the social use of technologies. Educators emphasise that, before the launch of the project, many beneficiaries were unfamiliar with basic functions related to computer use and that almost all the time spent online was devoted to social networks and entertainment, without educational or reflective mediation.

The Usb project originates from the awareness that avoiding the use of technologies has become increasingly unrealistic and that it is instead necessary to guide young people towards a conscious and critical use of digital tools, both in terms of content, including risk prevention, exposure to violent and sexualised materials and representations of masculinity and femininity, and in terms of practices, such as time management and the instrumental use of technologies for study and education. From this perspective, the playful and laboratory-based introduction of Stem subjects is described by educators as a way to democratise access to content that is usually perceived as elitist or distant. The project aims to offer these opportunities indiscriminately to all participants, with particular attention to those living in conditions of marginality. At the same time, the strengthening of human skills is considered by interviewees to be as important as the acquisition of technical competences, as it enables minors not to play sterilely with science, but to construct pathways of personal growth and expansion of their social possibilities.

Gender gap, the mission of cooperativa Eva and the reduction of inequalities

A cross-cutting objective of particular relevance for the Usb project concerns the reduction of the gender gap and the promotion of girls' engagement with Stem subjects. Educators report that this has been the dimension on which the team has worked most intensively, in coherence with the mission of cooperativa Eva. The statute of cooperativa Eva orients its activities towards combating all forms of violence and denial of rights against women and minors, promoting and protecting the rights of children and adolescents, and valuing gender, cultural and ethnic differences.

Within this framework, the activities focused on gender were generally received with relative ease by beneficiaries, who were already accustomed to

participating in workshops addressing social inclusion and gender differences. These activities aimed to counter stereotypical representations that associate science and technology exclusively with males and worked on group dynamics, conflict management, non-violent language and equal participation in activities. The available evidence indicates that the Usb project functioned as an educational device for rebalancing opportunities, offering girls spaces for experimentation, recognition and protagonism within the technological and scientific domain, an area often characterised by symbolic barriers and differentiated expectations.

6. Discussion

The educational service appears to disrupt the constraints of social reproduction and ghettoisation that persist in these contexts, in line with the analyses developed by Bourdieu *et al.* (1970) and by Loïc Wacquant (2016), to the extent that the notion of the hyper-ghetto remains functional for describing such settings. At the same time, this third-sector organisation attempts, within a context marked by deep-rooted constraints, complexity and historical backwardness, to create opportunities and to regenerate the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2001).

As highlighted by the results, the *Punto luce* centre in Casal di Principe is succeeding in the challenging task theorised by Binetti (2020) and Van Dijck (2020), namely pursuing an educational mission that promotes a use of digital technologies that is not merely instrumental. All the laboratories were designed to increase digital cultural capital, as articulated within the perspective developed by Ragnedda *et al.* (2020).

Moreover, dialogue with educators revealed that the educational service, through the implementation of the Usb project, conceives technologies as relational practices and as tools for strengthening human skills, in continuity with the contributions of Bachmair (2015) and Gui *et al.* (2020). These qualitative findings suggest that, within the relationship of trust established between beneficiaries and educators, a critical reflection is emerging on the ambivalence of the digital environment, particularly with regard to sexist and misogynistic content circulating on Tiktok and to the risks associated with being constantly always on across digital platforms.

The main finding emerging from this research concerns the role of the laboratory-based activities offered by the educational service in guaranteeing material access to more advanced technologies, such as educational robotics, strengthening young people's digital capital and fostering the cultivation of in-

terests within marginalised contexts. The Usb project also holds a strong value connected to the mission of cooperativa Eva. According to educators, the success achieved in promoting gender equity depends precisely on the continuity of this commitment, which has created a fertile ground for awareness-raising also in the digital domain.

Based on the interpretation of the results, the educational service supports the development of digital competences among the young people who attend it, despite their starting from disadvantaged conditions linked to their contextual background and to their popular habitus (Graziano 2025), characterised by limited material and cultural resources. This development is made possible through the contamination of forms of knowledge, the presence of a work team sensitive to these issues and a set of practical, playful and recreational activities that foster awareness of responsible digital practices.

These processes translate into practices of empowerment and social participation. Boys and girls who take part in the activities, by increasing their digital capital in terms of human and soft competences, acquire practical skills that are fundamental in an increasingly digitalised society. This form of empowerment contributes to reducing the stigmatisation associated with the lack of competences produced by contexts of high social marginality and enables more active participation in civic life, associational activities and educational improvement, including within a school system that has become increasingly digital without addressing the other levels of the digital divide.

7. Conclusions

This study represents a relevant contribution to the debate on addressing the digital divide and educational poverty in contexts of urban marginality, particularly in Southern Italy. It offers an in-depth analysis of a virtuous intervention implemented in a peripheral, fragile territory that remains largely underexplored in the scientific literature. Until now, there has been limited knowledge of the concrete effects that digitally mediated educational practices, rooted in local contexts and oriented towards relational dimensions, can generate in settings characterised by social exclusion, stigma and risk of deviance. The empirical findings show that the Usb project, implemented within the *Punto luce* centre in Casal di Principe, does not merely provide instrumental access to technologies, but contributes significantly to the construction of structured and meaningful educational opportunities for minors. In particular, the intervention functions as a space capable of countering educational poverty while simultaneously strengthening digital and human competences

through practices of experiential learning, educational play, digital storytelling and tinkering. These activities foster not only engagement with Stem disciplines, but also processes of self-awareness, self-expression and emotional awareness, which are central elements in developmental trajectories within highly vulnerable contexts. A further relevant aspect concerns the strengthening of human skills, such as empathy, effective communication, active listening and teamwork, which dynamically intertwine with digital skills and contribute to the construction of a situated form of digital capital, deeply anchored in the specificities of the territorial context. Within this framework, *Punto luce* emerges as an environment perceived by minors as safe, reliable and generative of meaningful relationships, in which educators assume a central symbolic and relational role capable of questioning and reorienting the dominant cultural order of the hyper-ghetto. In light of these findings, the Usb project can be interpreted as a laboratory of digital and educational citizenship, in which technologies are not merely tools, but social and cultural devices through which future possibilities, social relations and forms of active participation are reconfigured. In this sense, the analysed intervention not only enriches the understanding of processes of digital inclusion in marginal contexts but can also be considered a pilot action that is replicable and scalable in other areas of Campania and in similar contexts of widespread marginality, contributing to the development of more equitable, territorially grounded and digitally just educational and social policies.

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